

Ticket fraud all too common, expert says after Bieber fans scammed

BY CHERYL CHAN, THE PROVINCE MARCH 13, 2016



Justin Bieber performs at Rogers Arena in Vancouver on Friday. Some concertgoers bought fraudulent tickets.

Photograph by: RICHARD LAM, PNG

The tales of heartbreak and frustration from Justin Bieber fans after finding out they were victims of fraudulent ticket scams were, sadly, all too common, said a Vancouver ticketing expert.

On the weekend, numerous stories surfaced on social media of Beliebers shelling out hundreds of dollars on what they thought were legitimate tickets to the pop superstar's concert Friday night at Rogers Arena only to be denied entry.

Such scams are a growing problem, especially for "high-demand talent" such as Bieber, Taylor Swift, Katy Perry or major sporting events like the Super Bowl or the Stanley Cup final, said Chris Stairs, former director of ticket sales for the Vancouver Olympics.

"People get desperate and they do desperate things and that's when criminals take advantage of you," he said.

Stairs cited U.K. and U.S. figures that peg the amount of ticket fraud at more than \$1 billion a year worldwide, victimizing about five million consumers.

The advent of global online commerce makes the ticketing industry difficult to police, he said. Aside from fake tickets, the industry also faces problems of software or bots that automatically gobble up tickets which later show up at secondary resellers with inflated markups.

Cindy Kwak, 16, and her bestfriend Dazzling Catoto had tried buying tickets for the show on Ticketmaster when they first went on sale, but had no luck; the tickets were gone in less than 20 minutes. So the pair turned to Craigslist and bought tickets from a man for \$180 each. The tickets turned out to be fake.

"We were very disappointed," said Kwak. "We wanted to go as a bestfriend thing, and Bieber barely comes to Vancouver. We cried."

Kwak was able to take a photograph of the alleged scammer's ID, which she has posted on Facebook. She has also reported the incident to Vancouver police.

In another instance, Maria Falcao, a 15-year-old Brazilian teen, bought a \$600 ticket from Vivid Seats only to be turned away at the gate.

"It's stressful, I don't know why this one is not working and I travel like 15 hours from Brazil to here to go to this concert ... this was the best opportunity that I had and now my ticket's fake. I couldn't get in," a tearful Falcao told Global B.C.

Another Bieber fan, Amber Sekhon, also got scammed by a man selling tickets at Oakridge mall. She put up a photo of the alleged scammer on Facebook, which has been shared more than 2,800 times.

It is common for scammers to print out paper tickets, photocopy them, and then sell it to multiple buyers, said Stairs.

"Then it becomes a race to the gate," he said. "The reality is that bar code is legitimate for anybody

until that bar code gets scanned.”

Sophisticated criminal organizations are also able to replicate souvenir paper tickets you can buy at the box office, he said. Even secondary resellers aren't immune. Legitimate companies like StubHub and Vivid Seats can still sell tickets that turn out to be fake.

“The challenge for the consumer is, you really don't know,” said Stairs. “There needs to be a new standard.” Ticket sales “should be regulated, no different from what you would see in the stock market. The challenge is how you go about doing that.”

Stairs works at a Vancouver startup that has created a platform called authenTICKET, which aims to curb ticket fraud by linking a ticket bar code to a buyer's ID, such as a driver's license, credit card or mobile phone.

The third-party verification system still allows ticket holders to sell their tickets, but requires them to transfer ownership on an authorized seller's website, enabling the system to keep track of who the rightful owner is, even in the secondary market.

The platform is currently being used in a pilot project with True North Sports and Entertainment, owners of the Winnipeg Jets. It also was used in pilots for three musical shows.

For now, Stairs said the best way for consumers to protect themselves is to buy directly from authorized sellers. Anything else and you're introducing risk, he said.

Sgt. Randy Fincham said Vancouver police see cases of fraudulent tickets in the majority of large-scale events in the city.

“[Buyers] should be careful when purchasing tickets from resale sites, and always obtain valid identification from the seller so they have some recourse, should the tickets be invalid,” he said in an emailed statement.

chchan@theprovince.com

twitter.com/cherylchan

© Copyright (c) The Province