

To the Prime Minister
The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA

Tuesday 16 November 2021

Dear Prime Minister,

The UK is facing an epidemic of scam adverts. Every day, criminals are scamming innocent people out of life-changing amounts of money or risking their health by selling them fake health cures. Consumers are being targeted on a scale we have never seen before.

One of the most common online scammers' tricks is misusing the names and faces of well-known, trusted public figures – our names and faces – to give them a false legitimacy. All the signatories of this letter have been used in scammers' adverts online, some thousands of times. We are writing to ask you to urgently include regulation of paid-for scam adverts within the Online Safety Bill.

Many of us have had victims get in touch and have heard their tears after losing their life savings – sometimes hundreds of thousands of pounds – because they trusted what they thought was us. This cannot continue. It devastates lives.

We can't protect the public from these criminals, but you can. Near inaction by big technology firms means things are getting worse, not better – so we are pleading with you to step up and help in this fight to protect people.

Our current advertising rules were set up to police the likes of soap manufacturers making false claims about how white they can clean sheets – not to tackle sophisticated, psychologically adept, digital organised crime, based around the world. This leaves many scammers untraced, uninvestigated, and unpunished.

There are little powers out there to prevent online scam adverts or get recourse for victims. Regulators have few meaningful tools to punish platforms that get paid to publish them. It is therefore distressing that while your Government has, thankfully, chosen to include user-generated scams in the Online Safety Bill, it has excluded paid-for scam adverts.

The distinction between user-generated content and adverts is blurred in our digital age. This would result in the law covering someone making a scam post, but not if they pay to promote the same content. It seems a strange system.

Your Government has said it wants to eventually tackle scam adverts through changing advertising regulation – but this will have to go through a lengthy process of legislating in the face of fierce opposition from a powerful advertising industry.

Meanwhile, huge swathes of people will continue to see their financial, physical and mental health destroyed after falling victim to one of these scams. Instead, it could

be tackled quite simply by being treated just like user-generated online scams in the Online Safety Bill that's already going through Parliament.

Scammers' ability to reach the public must be cut off. If you are serious about the concrete commitment you've made to deal with online fraud, please, let's speedily start protecting the victims of scam adverts from the wolves – saving livelihoods and possibly also lives.

Yours faithfully,

Martin Lewis OBE
Duncan Bannatyne OBE
Sir Richard Branson
Deborah Meaden
Rob Brydon MBE
Dawn French
Bear Grylls OBE

Peter Jones CBE
Lorraine Kelly CBE
Davina McCall
Phillip Schofield
Bradley Walsh
Robbie Williams
Holly Willoughby