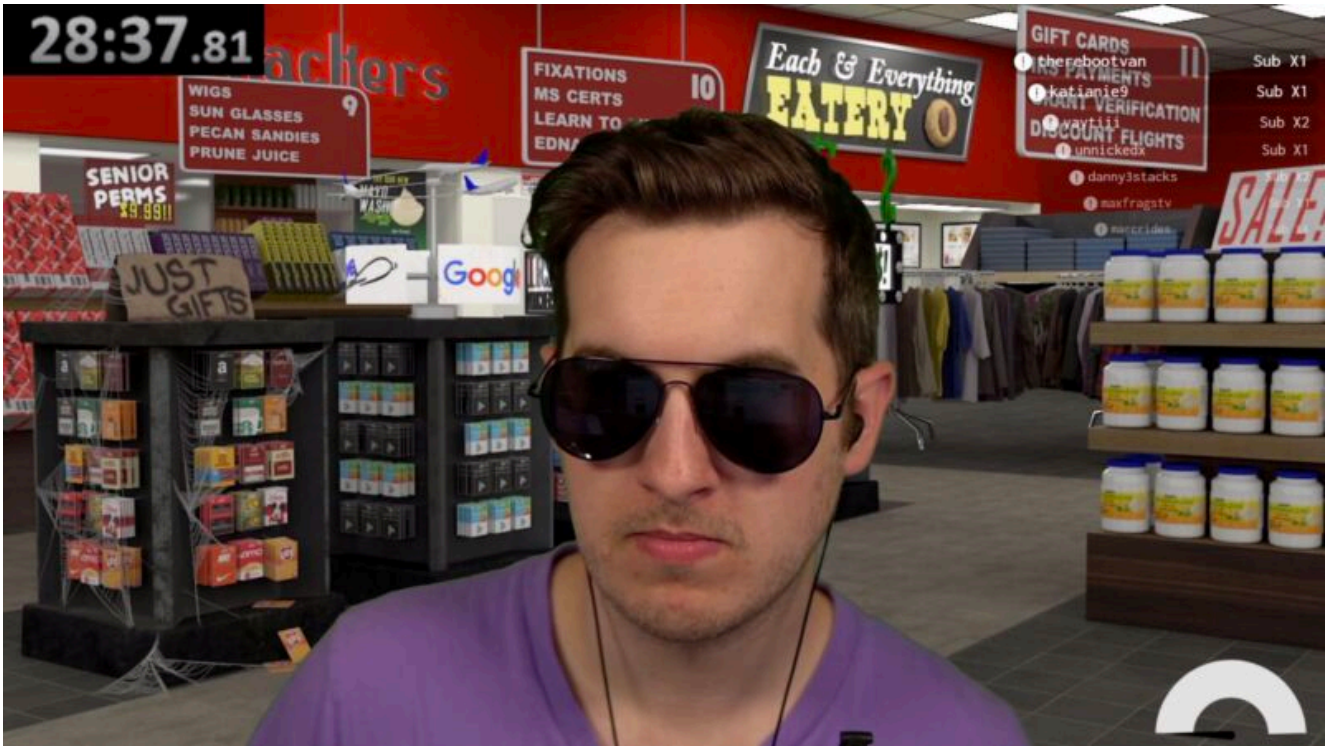
A Twitch streamer is exposing coronavirus scams live



Enlarge / Kitboga getting ready to out some scammers on Twitch.

reader comments

79 with 64 posters participating

Share this story

Earlier this week, live on Twitch, the streamer Kitboga attempted to place a wholesale order for an essential oil that, the woman on the phone implied to him, cured COVID-19.

There is, of course, no cure for COVID-19, the disease that has infected hundreds of thousands of people internationally since January. If there were, it wouldn’t consist of oregano oil, cinnamon, clove bud, and eucalyptus essential oils. Kitboga was on the phone with a scammer. Eleven thousand live viewers were watching him expose her.

Using a voice modulator, Kitboga assumed a persona called Barbara “Barbie” Kendal, explaining that he wanted to place a wholesale order for essential oils and distribute it to the Mayo Clinic in Arizona. Kitboga continued to press her for details about the product—*How many people has it cured? Can I keep the cure on the countertop? Can I pour the cure into a hot bath after my bridge game?*—which she readily answered, never correcting his terminology. The scammer, who said her name was Anne, took down the hospital’s address.

“They should call you Saint Anne,” said Kitboga, eliding the words into the sound of “satan.”

WIRED

You’d be hard-pressed to find someone who interacts with scam artists more often than Kitboga. Several times a week, Kitboga goes live on Twitch, where an average of 7,000 viewers watch him mercilessly troll the sort of people who tell old ladies in nursing homes that they owe the IRS thousands of dollars—and get their MasterCard number. Under the guise of grandma Edna or valley girl Navaeh, Kitboga might let a scammer posing as an antivirus software salesperson install ransomware onto a computer or explain ad nauseum how to transfer bitcoin to India. Weaving absurd narratives out of these interactions, Kitboga frustrates as much of the scammers’ time as possible before the big reveal: he’s not Barbie, Edna, or Navaeh, and he thinks these people are scumbags.

“You are a liar and a thief. You should be locked up,” he told a COVID-19 scammer earlier this week. Viewers spammed happy alarm bells to his stream’s accompanying chat.

Earlier this month, the Federal Trade Commission issued a notice about coronavirus scams that referenced new robocalls and online offers advertising coronavirus treatments and at-

home test kits. Noting that “there currently are no vaccines, pills, potions, lotions, lozenges, or other prescription or over-the-counter products available to treat or cure coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)—online or in stores,” the FTC warned consumers to be on high alert for con artists. Over the last couple of months, digital marketplaces like Amazon have struggled to remove bogus listings for miracle nasal sprays and canine testing kits.

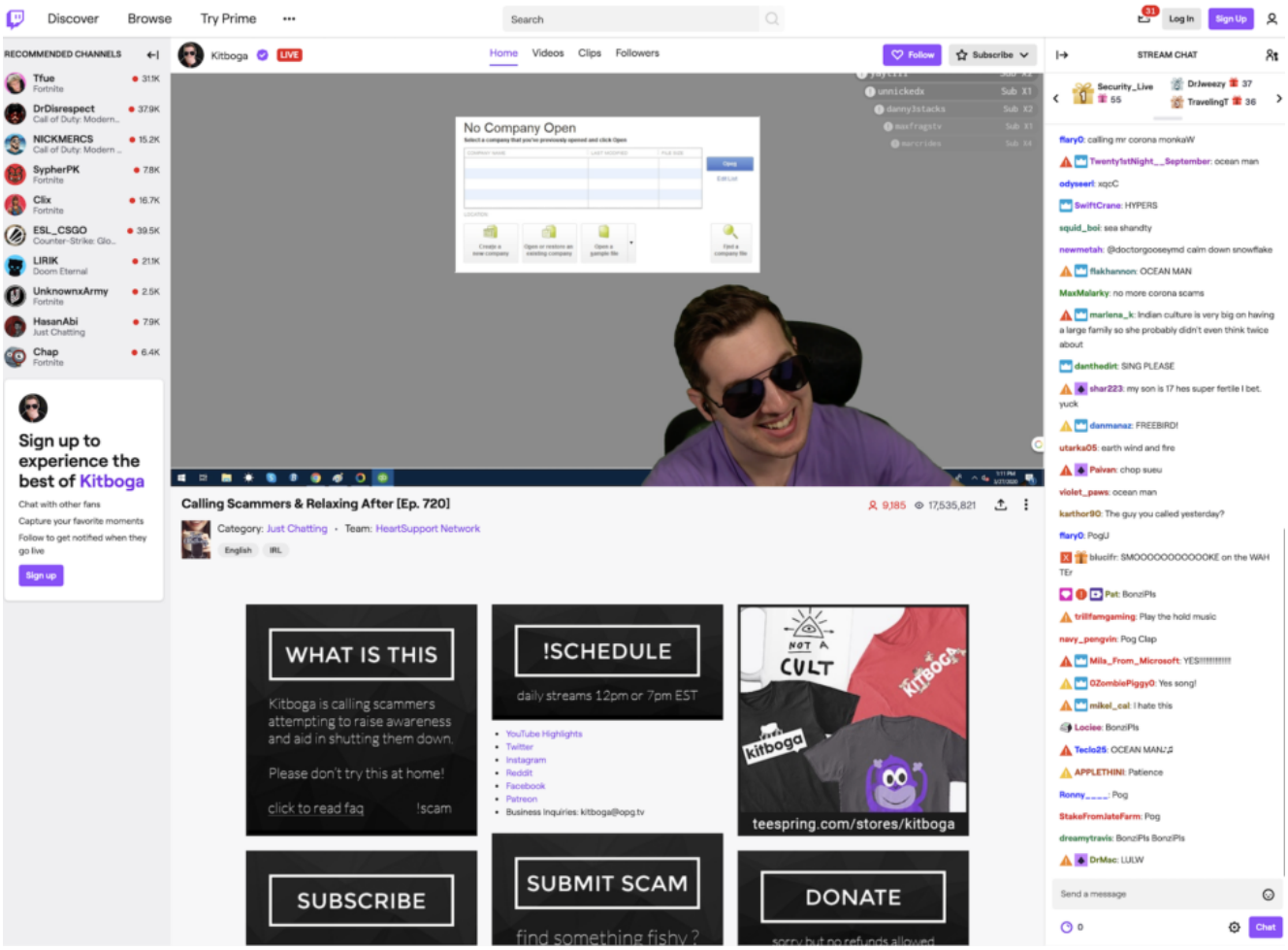
So far, the FTC has issued stern letters to at least seven sellers of products claiming to treat or prevent COVID-19, including N-ergetics, GuruNanda LLC, and Herbal Amy LLC. New York’s attorney general sent conspiracy theorist Alex Jones a cease-and-desist order after he said his toothpaste could be a coronavirus “stopgate.” Bonnie Patten, the executive director of nonprofit watchdog Truth In Advertising, says a huge number of scams have cropped up around COVID-19, particularly in the massive supplement industry. “The FDA has made it fairly clear that, with its limited resources, it’s going to go after companies that are deceptively marketing supplements using disease treatment or specific health claims,” says Patten. To avoid Web crawlers looking for keywords, snake oil companies are implying they can help combat this virus without coming right out and saying so.

A couple of days ago, Kitboga, who keeps his real-life identity and location a secret, trawled Google for coronavirus-related scams. The search turned up an article under the Fox News header—though not on any Fox News site—that read, “While the world is waiting for a vaccine, one mom has found a solution to fight back against the coronavirus outbreak.” While the byline named an actual Fox News editor, the article was fake. It advertised a product called Immunity Blend, which promised to “distribute benefits” to entire households and “protect against environmental threats.” The fake article claimed that “even if you do catch a virus, the symptoms and time it affects you [sic] experience, are greatly

reduced.”

Said the mom in the ad, “I am not worried about the coronavirus hitting our family because I have three ways to fight back in just one bottle of botanical oils.”

The concoction contains eucalyptus oil, which the ad claims has been “proven effective” against the swine flu and Herpes type 1. “Could it also kill the 2020 coronavirus?” it asks. The website links to an order form, underneath which a warning in red booms: “Due to global outbreaks and pandemic, demand is HIGH and supply is limited for our Powerful Immunity Blend.” The website and Facebook page, which was created March 16, are still up.



Enlarge / Kitboga’s Twitch page.

To investigate, Kitboga called a phone number listed on the ad. “I said my boyfriend was coughing up blood and I don’t have the money to go to a doctor,” Kitboga tells Wired. He had

put on his valley girl persona. The woman on the line told him that the Immunity Blend would save the boyfriend, Kitboga says. He hung up, shocked. “I didn’t expect them to be so blatant about it.” The company behind Immunity Blend did not respond to Wired’s request for comment.

On-stream the next day, Kitboga called the number again. “I saw the article on Fox about how there was a mom who found a solution for the coronavirus,” said Kitboga in the voice of an elderly man. “Yes,” acknowledged the customer service agent.

“You’ve got to hand it to her. She’s probably very smart. There’s scientists all over the world trying to figure it out. Thankfully she did,” Kitboga said on the stream, raising an eyebrow to his viewers. “I just hope that eventually, she’ll let the government know. Do you have any of that available, the cure?”

“Yes sir, we have it. We have a limited stock, however,” said the customer service agent. The price was $40 per bottle; they only sold packs of five.

On a third call, this time with a different representative, Kitboga asked whether the oil was a vaccine, and finally, the agent corrected him: “It’s an essential oil that’s there to protect you and your immune system.” Still, the rep said, he and his father had been using it with good results.

On his livestreamed calls to scammers, Kitboga tries to remain calm and collected, persisting in his line of questioning to glean as much information as possible. Over the last three years, he’s dealt with scammers who try to squeeze thousands of dollars from old ladies under the false threat of arrest or imprisonment. (In fact, he got into this line of work after a scammer took advantage of his real-life grandmother, who had dementia.) This wave of COVID-19 snake oil, he says, feels different.

“I think a lot of the scams so far are based around the fear

and uncertainty of it," says Kitboga. "I'm not a psychologist, but I imagine you are less likely to make rational decisions when you're afraid. Obviously there's lots of fear right now. When the scammers I talk to say things like, 'Ma'am, if you don't give me my money back you'll go to jail' or 'I'm calling the police right now,' they're trying to put you in that fearful, uncertain situation. In this case, we already are in that situation. So the scammers are one step ahead."

Kitboga says the next scam to look out for is telemarketers pretending to be government officials. People who don't know better might give their bank account information to a so-called government official who's offering to unload a no-strings-attached $1,200 government aid check. He plans to expose them on his Twitch channel when he nails them down.

"When I heard about the stimulus, I started thinking, 'There are gonna be scammers. Someone's gonna call and say, 'We're the government trying to give you $1,000 or $2,000, and you have to pay us money."

This story originally appeared on wired.com.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1663911