

Apple removes WhatsApp and Threads from China App Store

April 20, 2024

Online Desk: Apple announced the removal of Meta Platforms' WhatsApp and Threads from the Chinese App Store on Friday, following directives from the Chinese government citing national security concerns.

Telegram and Signal, two other foreign messaging apps were also removed from the store on Friday, according to app tracking firms Qimai and AppMagic. The removal of the four apps suggests growing intolerance on the part of China's central government towards at least some foreign online messaging services that fall outside of its control. It also signals less leeway for Apple in China.

That said, other Meta apps including Facebook, Instagram and Messenger remained available to download, according to Reuters checks on Friday. Many other popular apps developed by Western companies including YouTube and X were also available.

It was not immediately clear how WhatsApp or Threads might have caused security concerns for Chinese authorities. "The Cyberspace Administration of China ordered the removal of these apps from the China storefront based on their national security concerns," Apple said in an emailed statement. "We are obligated to follow the laws in the countries where we operate, even when we disagree," the statement said. Meta declined to comment and referred queries to Apple. Apple did not respond to requests for comment on Signal and Telegram. Representatives for the two companies did not immediately reply to requests for comment.

The Cyberspace Administration of China also did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

None of the four apps are widely used in China where Tencent's WeChat is by far the dominant service. These apps and many foreign apps are normally blocked on Chinese networks by the "Great Firewall" – the country's extensive cybersystem of censorship – and can only be used with a virtual private network or other proxy tools.

The four apps remain available in Hong Kong and Macau, China's two special administrative regions. Some experts on China's tech industry said the government order on WhatsApp and Threads could be related to a new rule last August that requires all apps available in China to register with the government or risk being removed.

The deadline for companies to complete registrations was the end of March and the regulations came into effect on April 1.

Apple has removed apps from its China app store before. In 2017, Apple removed The New York Times news app, saying it violated local regulations – a move that came amid rising news censorship in the world's second-largest economy. It remains unavailable on Apple's China App Store.