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Reports of random packages in seemingly benign 'brushing' scams could lead to potentially damaging identity theft

After a Brisbane man reported four mystery packages were sent to him as part of a scam, experts explain what brushing is and what to do if you think you are a victim.



Shaye Windsor

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3 min read

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The Sunday Mail (Qld)



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Thanks to COVID, lockdowns and working from home, increased virtual presence has created fertile ground for online fraudsters and identity thieves.

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Four mystery packages sent to a Brisbane man have exposed a bizarre online scam targeting South East Queenslanders.

Users have taken to popular online forum Reddit to report a number of cases of items never purchased being delivered from unknown senders.

One post in the Brisbane Reddit thread said: "I received two rings in the mail from GRA moissanite, I didn't order them but it was addressed to me with correct name and address?? Is this some sort of scam??"

The scam, known as brushing, gained popularity during the pandemic as the result of the online shopping boom, and it is feared recent large-scale data breaches could lead to more.

Brushing is used to boost a seller's presence and reputation on marketplaces such as eBay or Amazon.

This is done through fake shopper accounts and sales, with dodgy sellers sending cheap and light goods like seeds, phone accessories or jewellery to unsuspecting people before leaving fake positive reviews on the recipient's behalf.

The free products come at the cost of the recipient's data, which was likely purchased through breaches such as the recent instances from Optus, Medibank and the NDIS.

Boondall resident David Edwards said he received four unexpected packages recently.

The most recent arrived in mid-October, and all were addressed to Arthur Paraphone, a name unfamiliar to anyone in his household.

"Google and Facebook have been no help," he said.

"They all contained different items, the first one we sent back, the second had a pink wig and some Halloween goth style temporary tattoos."

"The third was some lacy glove type things and some jewellery, and the fourth that arrived yesterday had a piercing kit."





The piercing kit that Mr Edward's randomly received

Mr Edwards was one of the millions of Optus customers whose data was hacked in September but said the packages began arriving in April.

“I may have been a victim of another one,” he exposed.

“They happen so often these days it’s hard to keep up.”

UQ Cyber Security director Professor Ryan Ko said the package senders buy the stolen addresses directly from hackers or access it through dark web forums.

He added they source and send the products at almost no cost making their store appear trustworthy with thousands of successful transactions and positive reviews.

For the brushing recipients the random packages may go without question as a simple mistake but experts are concerned it is just the red flag before potentially damaging fraud.

“If you’re a victim of a brushing scam this is the first warning that your data could be used for other types of identity theft,” Professor Ko said.

Queensland University of Technology’s Dr Cassandra Cross, an author on cyber fraud and scams, said the packages could be a sign the recipients could face bigger problems.

“It’s an indicator that an offender is using their identity and potentially signing them up to different things.”

“Recipients perhaps need to investigate further if there are bank accounts or loans ... in their name,” she said.

If any unusual activity is found Professor Ko suggested contacting IDcare, Australia and New Zealand's national identity and cyber support service.

However Dr Cross worried that cyber fraud left government, companies and victims without recourse raising questions about the balance between convenience and security.

“Companies can be compromised for a significant period of time before they even realise it,” she said.

“Conversations are being had at society and government levels around the type of information that’s collected, the extent of what’s needed and how long that’s held for.

“I think there are many organisations that, in light of Optus and Medibank, are perhaps realising that amount of data... is a liability rather than an asset.”

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The piercing kit that Mr Edward's randomly received

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