

Mail theft leads to \$4.8m share swindle

Liz Main Reporter



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The corporate regulator is investigating a group of people it suspects is involved in the identity theft of 33 victims and setting up fake trading and bank accounts to steal \$2.44 million in shares. It is suspected the money was spread around the syndicate using cryptocurrencies and sent to a gold dealer offshore.

The scam may have started with mail theft, according to the affidavit of an investigator at the Australian Securities and Investments Commission.

The alleged victims had shares in Commonwealth Bank, Woolworths, Fortescue, Bendigo Bank, Westpac and Lendlease, according to the affidavit from May 6.

Australia Post, superannuation funds, trading platforms, stockbrokers and banks were unwitting conduits to the fraud, according to the affidavit.



ASIC suspects \$2.44 million in stolen money was sent to a gold jeweller in Hong Kong. **Photo: Bloomberg**

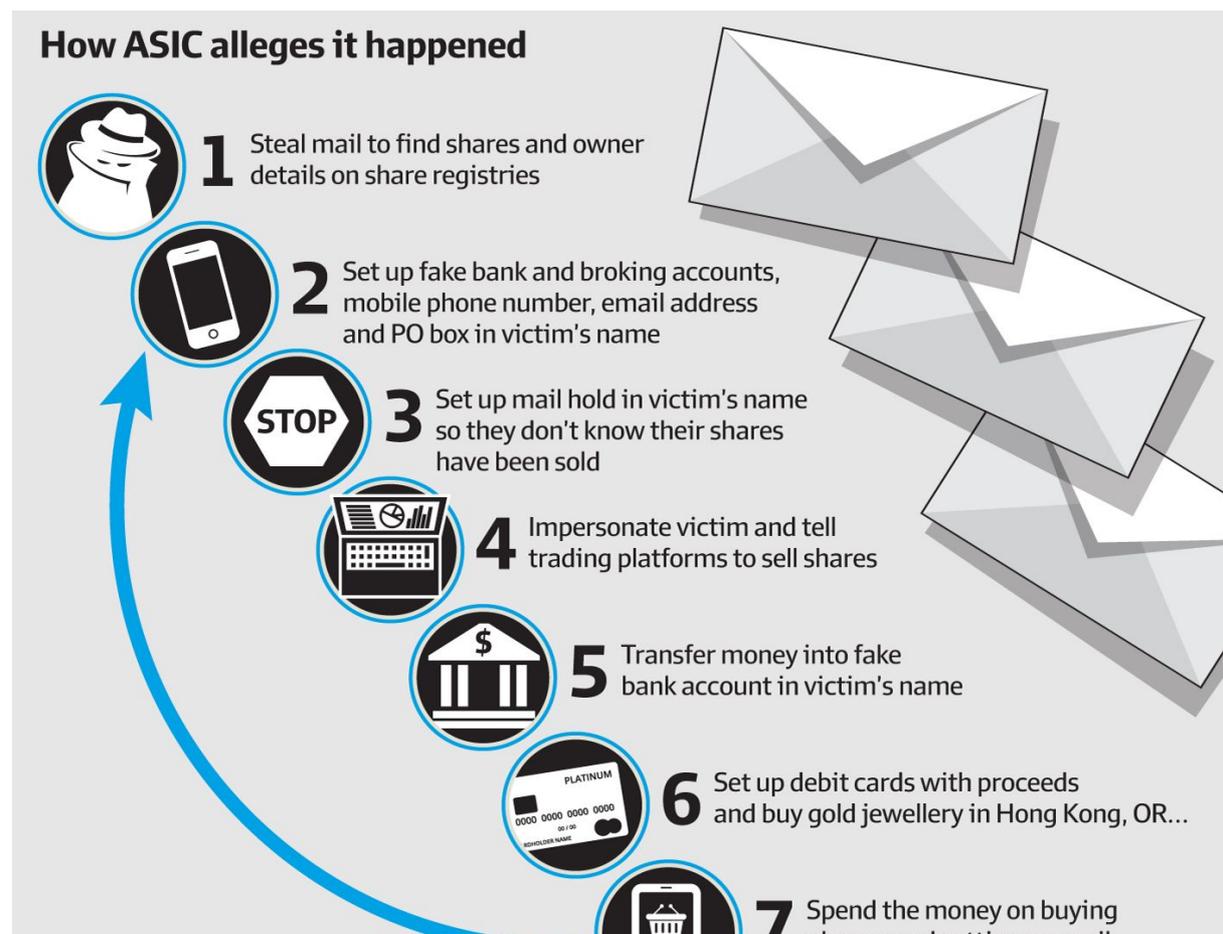
ASIC alleges fake bank accounts with Westpac and Bank West and broking accounts were then opened in the victims' names and were linked to prepaid mobiles. Email addresses and post-office boxes were also set up in their name without their knowledge.

In one instance, \$1.07 million was stolen from a man in Albany, Western Australia, when someone stole his identity and sold his CBA shares on OpenMarkets Australia in March last year.

ASIC claims a copy of a passport and a MasterCard stolen from another victim was used to put his mail on hold so he remained unaware 14,750 of his CBA shares were transferred into a fake broking account set up in his name.

A day later, the shares were sold for \$1.07 million and were transferred into a fraudulent Westpac bank account in the name of yet another victim of the scam, the affidavit states. The money was then sent to a business called Luk Fook Jewellery and Gold in Hong Kong, according to the affidavit.

ASIC alleges the WA man was one of at least 32 victims swept up in the swindle.



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the scheme, and attempts were made to steal a further \$2.35 million, ASIC alleges in the affidavit.

ASIC investigator Anthony Flynn has accused a Victorian woman, Jasmine Vella-Arpaci, 21, the mother of a baby, of being involved in the criminal activity.

"I believe that Ms Vella-Arpaci can assist ASIC in the investigation in relation to several other victims who have been defrauded by a remarkably similar pattern of behaviour," Mr Flynn wrote in his affidavit from May 6.

ASIC launched an investigation in January last year into whether Ms Vella-Arpaci and other unnamed players breached the Corporations Act and the Commonwealth Criminal Code Act, according to Mr Flynn's affidavit.

Ms Vella-Arpaci has not been charged with any criminal offences.



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On May 6 this year, the Federal Court barred Ms Vella-Arpaci leaving the country with its permission and ordered her to hand over her passport. On July 17, the travel ban was extended to October 10.

"I am concerned [Ms Vella-Arpaci] will attempt to leave Australia, which would likely hinder and or prejudice the investigation," ASIC lawyer Michael Bridge wrote in an affidavit dated July 16.

The affidavit outlines that ASIC and the Australian Federal Police executed search warrants on Ms Vella-Arpaci at Tullamarine Airport and at her home in Melbourne's west on April 31 and May 1. Devices such as her mobile phone, hard copy documents and emails were seized.

"Substantial evidence has been obtained under search warrants, which is currently being processed by both the AFP and ASIC and ... much of this evidence implicates [Ms Vella-Arpaci] in multiple serious offences, each of which carry up to 10 years'

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The investigation continues. Mr Flynn said ASIC was discovering more victims, including an elderly couple who had more than \$210,000 stolen when their CBA shares were sold, and other superannuation funds and stockbroking firms that were used.

ASIC has declined to comment.

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