

CYBER GUIDANCE ISSUE 00108

TRACKER PIXELS & PRIVACY ISSUES

DATE ISSUED: 22nd February 2021

IMPACT

LOW

MEDIUM

HIGH

EASE OF EXPLOIT

HARD

MEDIUM

EASY

OVERVIEW

Tracker pixels are invisible pixels hidden in emails and websites that track email activities of users and are also commonly known as web beacons or spy pixels.

BREAKDOWN

These invisible trackers are fast becoming a prolific issue in user privacy after a recent study conducted at the request of the BBC discovered that roughly two thirds of emails received contained one of these beacons. Sometimes as small as a 1x1 pixel, these tiny images are hard to spot as they are camouflaged to blend in with the email message content and require no user interaction to be downloaded, as this usually occurs upon opening the email, and lets the owner know the email has been read. They may even harvest other information including IP address and other device usage statistics. While this technology has been around for a long time, it is one of the lesser-known tracking methods and has been used in marketing emails or similar extensively. Under GDPR anyone who uses this technique must inform users and gain their consent, otherwise this practice is considered to be a breach of privacy. These trackers may also be present on websites to tracker user behaviour and platforms such as Facebook and other big-data harvesters are prolific users of these techniques, implanting their trackers on other websites to monitor traffic and user activity.

REMEDIATION STEPS

- Disallow automatic downloads or uploads of images in your email client and web browser.
- Use email and browser add-ons or extensions that block trackers.
- Use email filtering tools to prevent emails containing these trackers from reaching your users.

REFERENCES & RESOURCES

ZDNet

<https://www.zdnet.com/article/spy-pixels-in-emails-to-track-recipient-activity-are-now-an-endemic-privacy-concern>

Consumer Reports

<https://www.consumerreports.org/privacy/how-facebook-tracks-you-even-when-youre-not-on-facebook/>