

Closing the market for fake documents on the open web

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In Holt's latest research, the team monitored the illicit market for physical goods such as driver's licenses or passports and digital goods such as credit card numbers. When the ads appeared, the team took screen captures of the images. Credit: Michigan State University

Buying a counterfeit driver's license or passport used to require a secret meeting with some shady characters. More recently, it meant having a connection to the dark web. But today, all you need is an internet connection and a search engine, says a Michigan State University

researcher.

"I've asked students in a large introductory class, 'how many of you have a fake ID?' and way too many hands go up," said Thomas Holt, a professor and director of the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University. "So, I follow my question up with, 'how many of you bought them online?' and about 20% of those students raise their hands."

Holt's research on counterfeit identity documents was published online Oct. 1 in the journal *Deviant Behavior*.

His team, including doctoral candidate Jin Lee and 10 undergraduate students, monitored the illicit market for physical goods such as driver's licenses or passports and digital goods such as credit card numbers. When the ads appeared, the team took screen captures of the images.

"We were surprised by the quantity of people selling passports and other identity documents," he said. "The way that these products were being sold was kind of novel and it mirrored traditional e-commerce sites like Amazon."

In order to shutdown these websites, the researchers needed to understand how a person partakes in this form of crime. It starts with the creation of an online ad by the vendor that a buyer can find and click on.

Holt and his team studied 19 different vendors and discovered they often used specific language to appeal to their audience, such as how using a fake document can enhance customers' lifestyles. One vendor even sought to pay customers to help peddle product. The vendor would sell a customer affiliate fake IDs at a discounted rate. The affiliate could then charge a higher rate on final sales. The vendor benefited from having a point person on college campuses and other hotspots, increasing the sales potential.

There is a surprising amount of trust and risk that goes into these interactions. Buyers need to trust that vendors they don't know are selling documents that will pass for real. In the counterfeit document world, there is not a public list of reviews.

Even if you are buying a fake ID for fraudulent purposes, you want the best quality that you can get for your money," Holt said. "The biggest downside to these markets is that the buyer is left with the risk of making a buy and seeing if they can use the document."

With many counterfeit documents being bought and sold online, it is a challenge for [law enforcement](#) to identify these vendors. Most transactions are done using bitcoin which is often difficult to trace to a specific person. "Bitcoin isn't hard to use, conditionally," he said. "There is a bitcoin ATM near MSU's campus."

But the online trail counterfeiters use can be tracked. Holt and his team have found clues within the vendor's online ads. If a website is using key search terms or advertising on a certain platform in a certain way, law enforcement can identify and disrupt those websites, Holt said.

The number of vendors selling fake documents online also presents an opportunity for law enforcement. The fake documents found for sale ranged from \$5 to \$5,000. Holt said a clever police tactic to appeal to the psyche of the criminal vendors would involve a made-up listing of dummy vendors and the prices of their "products" on a public website. Such "competition" might pressure the real criminals into making an online mistake that alerts investigators.

Holt and his team learned some surprising things through their research. While passports were the most common counterfeit document sold online, buyers were not looking for U.S. passports. Instead, they wanted passports originating from other countries, especially the European

Union. This may be an indication that U.S. passports are more difficult to reproduce because of the security measures in place, or that the people producing these fake documents don't have access to legitimate materials to fully copy a U.S. [passport](#).

Another important finding in the research dispels a common myth about the market for counterfeit documents. "Most people think that the majority of selling and buying of fake documents occurs on the dark web, but we found more opportunities on the open web," Holt said.

While Holt and his team are studying criminal behavior, there are many questions Holt wants to ask the vendors directly. "I would love to partner with law enforcement because of the potential to investigate further how much legitimacy surrounds a product," he said. "We still don't know what the final products offered look like."

More information: Thomas J. Holt et al, A Crime Script Analysis of Counterfeit Identity Document Procurement Online, *Deviant Behavior* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/01639625.2020.1825915](https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2020.1825915)

Provided by Michigan State University

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