

Counterfeit Identity Documents on the Open and Dark Web

Jin R. Lee (leejin26@msu.edu) and Thomas J. Holt (holtt@msu.edu)

School of Criminal Justice, Michigan State University

ABSTRACT: Counterfeit identity documents are useful tools for various types of criminal and deviant behavior, including financial fraud and identity theft. While obtaining counterfeit identity documents were historically limited to individuals with connections to specialized providers, the growth of the Internet has widened offenders' access to such documents. This analysis provides descriptive information on 1,648 products offered across 19 different counterfeit identity document vendors located on both Dark Web cryptomarkets and Open Web shops. The products' average pricing, avenues of communication, and preferred payment systems used by vendors, among other details are discussed.

Identity documents are generally defined as any authorized written certificate or printed material that can be used to prove a person's identity. Common identity documents include driver's licenses, identity cards issued by the federal or state/provincial government, passports, and visas. Since these documents give individuals' certain privileges and benefits (e.g., entry into countries, legal authority to operate a vehicle, ability to purchase certain substances such as tobacco and alcohol), they have the potential to be manipulated for various illicit purposes. These range in severity from underage drinking to facilitation of fraud and illegal entry into a nation to facilitate terrorism.^{1,2,3}

Access to counterfeit identity documents were historically limited to individuals' personal connections with specialized forgers and document providers. The growth of the Internet and various technologies (e.g., printers, scanners, photocopiers) has widened access to such documents.⁴ These advancements have increased availability of counterfeit identity document vendors operating on both Open and Dark Web platforms.⁵

Although counterfeit identity documents comprise of a small segment of the overall illicit market economy, it is a growing industry in need

of further study and investigation.

Understanding the unique features and characteristics of counterfeit identity document vendors are important in developing our comprehension of the state of the market, as well as its future directions and trajectories.

This analysis examined 1,648 products advertised across 19 different counterfeit identity document vendors operating on both Dark Web cryptomarkets (N = 8) and Open Web shops (N = 11). All data was collected between August 2018 and December 2019, reflecting a relatively robust period of market operations. The characteristics of vendor advertisements are provided, including average product pricing, types of communication methods, preferred payment platforms, modes of delivery, and the ways that vendors communicated trust in their goods and services.

Product Pricing and Payment Type

The average price of all products was \$1,278.80 (std. dev = \$1,085.64). The lowest listed price for a product was \$2 (Russian Passport Photoshop Datafile) while the highest priced product (Diplomatic Legit Passport) was advertised at \$10,000.

¹ Gordon, G. R., Willox, N. A., Rebovich, D. J., Regan, T. M., & Gordon, J. B. (2003). *Identity fraud: A critical national and global threat*. Utica, NY: Economic Crime Institute.

² Musco, S., & Coralluzzo, V. (2016). Sneaking Under Cover: Assessing the Relevance of Passports for Intelligence Operations. *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, 29(3), 427-446.

³ Rudner, M. (2008). Misuse of passports: identity fraud, the propensity to travel, and international terrorism. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 31(2), 95-110.

⁴ Gupta, G., Saha, S. K., Chakraborty, S., & Mazumdar, C. (2007, March). Document frauds: Identification and linking fake document to scanners and printers. In *2007 International Conference on Computing: Theory and Applications (ICCTA'07)* (pp. 497-501). IEEE.

⁵ Liggett R., Lee J.R., Roddy A.L., Wallin M.A. (2019) *The Dark Web as a Platform for Crime: An Exploration of Illicit Drug, Firearm, CSAM, and Cybercrime Markets*. In: Holt T., Bossler A. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of International Cybercrime and Cyberdeviance*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Six different product categories were advertised, including driver's licenses (19.6%), state IDs (25.2%), passports (40.1%), visas (3.5%), whole sets (i.e., driver's license, state ID/Visa, and passport from one nation; 10.1%), and various other items such as marijuana cards, student IDs, and foreign language certificates (1.5%).

Approximately 60% of all vendors also indicated whether their products were legitimate documents, meaning they could be used for legal entry and use, or falsified. Of this group, 53.9% indicated their products were legitimate, and vendors in some cases sold both fake and legal documents. Legitimate products were sold at higher prices than fake products. The average price of all legitimate products was \$1,705.02, whereas the average price of all fake products was \$741.95.

Thirteen different geographic locations were linked to the products (see Table 1 below for complete list). Of the 1,648 products listed, the majority of documents sold were for nations in the European Union (51.2%). A proportion of items were also connected to Asia (11.7%), South America (8.4%), Middle East (7.2%), United States (5.2%), Australia/New Zealand (3.6%), United Kingdom (2.4%), and Canada (2.4%). A smaller fraction of items were for Russia (1.7%), Mexico (1.3%), the Caribbean (1.3%), Africa (1.2%), and Central America (1%).

Bitcoin was commonly accepted across vendors (N = 16), regardless of their use of Open or Dark Web advertising. Three vendors also accepted other forms of cryptocurrency, while six vendors accepted Western Union or Moneygram. Finally, three vendors accepted money transfer services.

Types of Communication, Trust, and Service

Vendors utilized a few different communication platforms, with most operating personalized

email accounts affiliated with their shop or unique online identity (94.8%). Two vendors also listed gmail accounts, while one used encrypted email via protonmail. Six vendors also indicated phone numbers for voice or text messaging, while one vendor each listed WhatsApp and Skype contacts. Two vendors also operated a website-based contact form and ticketing system.

Vendors also displayed varying levels of trust and service. A majority of vendors operated customer service lines via some form of online communication (97.5%), while just under one-third offered bulk discounts (30.6%). In contrast, product replacements (19.8%) and free samples (4.5%) were less frequently offered or advertised.

Methods of Product Delivery

Vendors used various legitimate delivery methods to fulfill purchase orders. The four most common methods of product delivery were DHL (27.5%), Fedex (25.9%), UPS (25.9%), and USPS (21.4%). A limited number of vendors also indicated using other physical delivery service providers (0.3%) and downloads for digital identity materials (0.3%).

Conclusion

Despite its growth on both the Open and Dark Web, there is a dearth in research assessing the sale of counterfeit identity documents and its vendor characteristics.⁶ Given the potential for these documents to be used as tools for various types of offending behavior, it is important for research to continue investigating these market economies. Greater comprehension of its vendor processes can provide invaluable information on how broad and deep the market for these goods may be. Additionally, research is needed to assess how often these items are purchased for deliberate use in real world criminal activities.

⁶ Liggett R., Lee J.R., Roddy A.L., Wallin M.A. (2019) *The Dark Web as a Platform for Crime: An Exploration of Illicit Drug, Firearm, CSAM, and Cybercrime Markets*. In: Holt T., Bossler A.

(eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of International Cybercrime and Cyberdeviance*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Table 1. Frequency of items by product type and location (N = 1,648)

	Driver's License	ID	Passport	Visa	Whole	Other
Africa	4	4	9	1	2	0
Asia	34	35	90	10	19	4
Australia	15	16	19	2	7	0
Canada	7	11	16	1	4	0
Caribbean	4	4	9	1	3	0
Central America	3	3	9	0	2	0
European Union	178	219	329	26	91	0
Middle East	21	21	53	5	14	5
Mexico	4	4	9	1	3	0
Russia	8	7	9	1	3	0
South America	24	24	72	7	12	0
United Kingdom	7	11	15	1	4	1
United States	13	50	16	1	3	2
Unspecified	1	6	5	1	0	13
Total	323	415	660	58	167	25