

THE



∞ Meta

COUNTERFETTING EMPIRE

A global threat thriving on today's
social media.

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1.

INTRODUCTION

Major social media platforms continue to provide lucrative channels for sellers of fake consumer goods all over the world. A trend that is seemingly widening after our latest 2019 report focused on Instagram counterfeiting activities, from luxury handbags to designer sunglasses to counterfeit money and passports. A growth partially due to the Covid-19 lockdowns that in the last two years have pushed forward online shopping for consumers worldwide.

Particularly Facebook (now Meta) and its subsidiaries have developed a strategy increasingly aimed at becoming an e-commerce leader, thus attracting a more diversified crowd of ruthless counterfeiters. In turn this has further exposed Facebook's inability to keep under control such activities on its platforms. This controversial behavior led to an increase of counterfeit sellers and eventually to a general user distrust still evident today.

In order to properly address and expose these issues, already in 2014 we showed that Facebook hosted advertising for counterfeit products¹. Two years ago we contributed to an NBC News report about fake money sales on Instagram¹. In 2020, with the Covid-19 emergency underway, our study revealed a large market of counterfeit masks (over 10,000 accounts) on Instagram². And earlier this year another research uncovered a series of wholesale merchants openly selling fake Apple products on the same platform³.

This time our team decided to expand its research to the entire "Meta social family", addressing similar practices on Instagram, Whatsapp and Facebook itself.

¹ John Hendrickson, "Turns Out Those Facebook Ads Are Too Good to Be True", Equire, <https://www.esquire.com/style/a31911/facebook-counterfeit-goods/>

² Michael Cappetta, "On Instagram, counterfeit cash is for sale - and a short search away", NBC News <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/instagram-counterfeit-cash-sale-short-search-away-n1031821>

³ Ghost Data, "Covid-19 emergency Masks&PPE. Monitoring unreliable sales and scams on social media", Ghost Data https://ghostdata.io/report/gd_covid19_masks_.pdf

⁴ Ghost Data, "Instagram as a wholesale store for Fake Apple Products", Ghost Data https://ghostdata.io/report/0311IG_AAPL_2.pdf

2.

A BURGEONING “EMPIRE” FOR COUNTERFEITERS

Aiming at becoming a top e-commerce leader, two years ago Facebook launched a coordinated strategy throughout its various platforms. For instance, in July 2019 Messenger produced a study covering a trend toward IM usage for shopping purposes, in a report aptly titled “Why Conversation Is the Future of Commerce”⁴. At the same, a specific Facebook section explained how to effectively use Messenger as a sale tool⁵. And just in time for the year-end holidays, Facebook Pay⁶ was finally launched: “a convenient, secure and consistent payment experience across Facebook, Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp”.

Around the same time WhatsApp Business⁷, launched with a big fanfare in early 2018, makes it easy to create full online catalogs⁸ for small business and six months later introduces its in-app direct payment for Brazilian users⁹.

In July 2020, Whatsapp claims that Whatsapp Business account catalogs are used by over 40 million every month and introduces the functionality to make them shareable even outside Facebook apps¹⁰.

⁵ Facebook, “Why Conversation Is the Future of Commerce”, Meta <https://www.facebook.com/business/news/insights/conversational-commerce>

⁶ Facebook, “Turn conversation into customer loyalty with Messenger”, Meta <https://www.facebook.com/business/marketing/messenger>

⁷ Deborah Liu, “Simplifying Payments with Facebook Pay”, Meta <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/11/simplifying-payments-with-facebook-pay/>

⁸ Whatsapp Blog, “Introducing the WhatsApp Business App”, Whatsapp <https://blog.whatsapp.com/introducing-the-whats-app-business-app>

⁹ Whatsapp Blog, “Introducing Catalogs for Small Businesses”, Whatsapp <https://blog.whatsapp.com/introducing-catalogs-for-small-businesses>

¹⁰ Whatsapp Blog, “Bringing Payments to WhatsApp for People and Small Businesses in Brazil”, Whatsapp <https://blog.whatsapp.com/bringing-payments-to-whatsapp-for-people-and-small-businesses-in-brazil>

¹¹ Whatsapp Blog, “New Ways to Reach a Business on WhatsApp”, Whatsapp <https://blog.whatsapp.com/new-ways-to-reach-a-business-on-whatsapp>

In the summer of 2020 there are more than 50 million WhatsApp Business app users, while Facebook introduces a new option (Shops)¹¹ to process direct in-app payment for US business and a partnership with Shopify¹² (an Amazon competitor). Along with new and customization options, in early 2021 Facebook Shop becomes operative also for Canadian and UK users¹³.

In September 2020 the all-new Facebook Business Suite is touted as “a long-term investment to make this the main interface for businesses of all sizes who use Facebook, Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp”. In December 2020 the “Cart”¹⁴ option was added, explaining that “WhatsApp is fast becoming a store counter to discuss products and coordinate sales”. And last June Facebook finally announced: “New technologies like Instagram visual search and AR Dynamic Ads will power the future of shopping.”¹⁵

This short summary highlights a Facebook strategy clearly aimed at becoming an e-commerce leader, pushing the integration of its various apps and leading to (unintended?) consequences such as on-going counterfeit item sales.

¹² Facebook, "Introducing Facebook Shops: Helping Small Businesses Sell Online", Meta <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/05/introducing-facebook-shops/>

¹³ Shopify News, "Shopify partners with Facebook to help businesses launch branded Facebook Shops", Shopify <https://news.shopify.com/shopify-partners-with-facebook-to-help-businesses-launch-branded-facebook-shops>

¹⁴ Facebook, "Making It Easier to Shop and Sell on Our Apps", Meta <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/08/making-it-easier-to-shop-and-sell-on-our-apps/>

¹⁵ Whatsapp, "Making it Easier to Shop on WhatsApp with Carts", Meta <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/12/making-it-easier-to-shop-on-whatsapp-with-carts/>

¹⁶ Facebook, "New Ways to Shop for Products You Love Across Our Apps", Meta <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/06/new-ways-to-shop-for-products-you-love-across-our-apps/>

3.

COUNTERFEITING A COSTLY AND DANGEROUS GLOBAL ISSUE

The global trade in counterfeit and pirated products was worth an estimated \$464 billion in 2019, amounting to approximately 2.5 percent of world trade, according to the latest data from the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (“OECD”). The Paris-headquartered intergovernmental economic organization asserted in June that the volume of trade in fakes – from pirated goods¹⁶ and products bearing counterfeit trademarks¹⁷, including “common consumer products like clothing and footwear and luxury items to business-to-business products, such as spare parts and pesticides,” as well as “fake pharmaceuticals, food, cosmetics, toys, medical equipment, and chemicals” – has “remained significant, representing amounts close to the gross domestic products of advanced OECD economies, such as Austria or Belgium.”¹⁸

While the figures used to gauge the size and growth of the global market for counterfeits and pirated goods tend to vary among researchers and relevant institutions, with ResearchAndMarkets, for instance, putting a much larger dollar value of \$1.2 trillion on the global counterfeit trade in 2017,¹⁹ The International Chamber of Commerce asserted this spring that there is at least “one thing that we know about the trade of counterfeit and pirated goods: that it continues to increase alarmingly.”

¹⁷ The European Commission defines piracy as the making of “an unauthorized exact copy—not a simple imitation—of an item covered by an intellectual property right.”

¹⁸ The U.S. Department of Justice defines a counterfeit trademark as one that is: (1) “not genuine or authentic;” (2) “identical with, or substantially indistinguishable from” another’s genuine trademark that is registered on the principal register in the United States Patent and Trademark Office and is in use; (3) used on goods or services “for which the genuine mark is registered;” (4) is used “in connection with trafficking in goods or services;” and (5) is “likely to cause confusion, to cause the mistake, or to deceive.”

¹⁹ OECD, “OECD Global Trade in Fakes”; OECD Publishing <https://www.oecd.org/gov/illegal-trade/global-trade-in-fakes-74c81154-en.htm>

²⁰ <https://apnews.com/press-release/pr-businesswire/ef15478fa38649b5ba29b434c8e87c94>

Such growth is likely to have accelerated further amid the COVID-19 pandemic, as government mandated lockdowns and widespread consumer caution has significantly impacted consumption behaviors and prompted a stunning rise in e-commerce activity. Counterfeiters have benefited from the spike in online shopping, which has been prompted in part by the increased comfort of consumers of various demographics to not adopt e-commerce as a mode of shopping but to shop for a wider array of goods online than ever before. This has allowed counterfeit-sellers to reach and potentially dupe more sizable pools of consumers than in the past. Consumers in the U.S., alone, spent \$861.12 billion on e-commerce sales in 2020 – up 44 percent on a year-over-year basis.²⁰ Globally, total e-commerce sales in 2020 amounted to \$4.29 trillion, an increase of almost 20 percent compared to 2019.²¹

At the same time, counterfeit-sellers have piggybacked on the production and distribution disruptions that have led to widespread shortages of authentic goods, thereby, enabling them to fill glaring voids for various types of products – albeit with inauthentic ones. Still yet, the COVID-19 pandemic has had an immediate effect on the trade in counterfeit goods in other ways, as well, according to OECD, including through “the emergence of new routes for illicit trade, a boom in the misuse of the online environment, and growth in counterfeiting in sectors” that were not as heavily inundated with fakes prior to the pandemic, such as personal protective equipment.

²¹ Fareeha Ali, Jessica Young, "US ecommerce grows 32.4% in 2020", Digitalcommerce360 <https://www.digitalcommerce360.com/article/us-ecommerce-sales/>

²² Jessica Young, "Global online sales reach nearly \$4.29 trillion in 2020", Digitalcommerce360 <https://www.digitalcommerce360.com/article/global-ecommerce-sales/>

More generally, the COVID-specific rise in counterfeit consumption corresponds with an increase in purchases of counterfeit goods by younger consumers, likely as a result of the saturation of social media platforms with promotions for counterfeit or otherwise infringing goods, as seen in the upswing in the promotion of “dupes” on TikTok.²² In a testament to the demand for fakes among younger consumers, a 2019 study from the International Trademark Association (“INTA”), which polled 1250 American consumers and 403 Chinese consumers between the ages of 18 and 23, found that 71 percent of Gen Z-ers in the U.S. and 84 percent of their Chinese counterparts had purchased a counterfeit good over the past year, with apparel and footwear being among the most-purchased types of fakes.²³

These findings are in line with the global rise in e-commerce sales that was underway before the onset of the pandemic, and which has allowed counterfeiters to steal sales more easily from legitimate brand owners and with little risk – both by targeting consumers who are intentionally seeking out counterfeit goods, as well as duping ones who are in search of authentic goods. The ease with which counterfeiters can establish sophisticated-looking websites with seemingly authentic domain names, legitimate payment processing systems, nearly identical products, and high-quality photos is greater than ever before. More than that, the scale of marketplace sites, from giants like Amazon and eBay to luxury resale entities, and social media apps, the latter of which continue to focus on developing their shopping capabilities, has prompted a further increase in the availability of counterfeit and pirated goods online than in the past.

All the while, counterfeits are becoming increasingly difficult to identify, as the internet continues to provide a safe haven for bad actors, giving them increased reach to consumers across the globe, and affording them the benefit of anonymity, as they can shield themselves behind fictitious identification information in order to avoid detection and liability.

²³ TFL, “A Hot Genre of Videos on TikTok: Those Dedicated to Showcasing Luxury Fakes”, TheFashionLaw <https://www.thefashionlaw.com/a-hot-genre-of-videos-on-tiktok-those-dedicated-to-finding-low-cost-luxury-fakes/>

²⁴ INTA Report, “Gen Z Insights: Brands and Counterfeit Products United States Country Report”, INTA <https://www.inta.org/wp-content/uploads/public-files/perspectives/industry-research/INTA-Gen-Z-Insights-the-United-States-Report.pdf>

Finally, counterfeit sellers consistently adopt new methods to obscure their identities and activities, and to make it difficult for brands to easily put a halt to their operations. Amazon highlighted in the lawsuit that it filed against a number of third-party sellers and influencers in November 2020²⁴, it is not uncommon for counterfeit-sellers to attempt to avoid Amazon's anti-counterfeiting and infringement efforts by using "hidden links" to Amazon listings. "Hidden links," as Amazon alleges in the case, enable in-the-know consumers to "order a seemingly non-infringing item in order to get a counterfeit fashion product," with the product that sellers "are advertising on Amazon simply [acting as] a false placeholder designed to evade Amazon's counterfeit detection systems." Once the orders are placed, "the seller defendants and other bad actors then ship [the] counterfeit products to customers," Amazon asserted.

Beyond that, and in order to avoid disruptions, counterfeit sellers often operate large networks of hundreds of e-commerce sites, accounts on social media apps and/or seller accounts on marketplace platforms, thereby, "making it an arduous task for a brand owner to stop [them]," per INTA, while also helping to ensure that at least some share of their operations remain in effect even if some accounts or e-commerce sites are disabled. As Facebook, Inc. acknowledged in the anti-counterfeiting lawsuit that it filed in April 2021 in tandem with Gucci²⁵, bad actors have used its platforms – both its Facebook site and its Instagram app – to "promote the sale of [luxury brand] counterfeit goods," including by establishing a web of numerous accounts across both platforms in order to avoid disruption should one or several accounts be shut down by the Facebook and/or Instagram.

In terms of the harm that arises from the sale of counterfeit and pirated goods former U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer previously declared that the current scale of the global market for illicit goods stands to "cause significant harm to intellectual property owners, consumers, and the economy." The OECD recently echoed this sentiment, stating that the overarching rise in the counterfeit trade is significant from a business perspective, as for modern industries and the companies that operate within them, intellectual property is "one of the key value generators and enablers of success," and thus, widespread infringement and counterfeiting can have adverse effects on the value of – and at least in theory, the reputation of – companies' brands.

²⁵ Amazon.com, Inc. v. Fitzpatrick et al, 2:20-cv-01662 (W.D. Wash.).

²⁶ Facebook, Inc., and Gucci America, Inc. v. Natalia Kokhtenko, 3:21-cv-03036 (N.D. Cal.)

The possibility of lost revenue is a significant issue for brands whose products are heavily targeted by counterfeits, as one in three brands have reported diminished sales as a result of counterfeiting. U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (“CBP”), alone, confiscated goods – from Nike x Christian Dior and Yeezy sneakers to Chanel purses – that would have been worth approximately \$1.3 billion if authentic. Reflecting on the seizure of \$8 million worth of Cartier Love bracelets, a CBP representative revealed that “consumers are often unaware that they are buying a [fake] product because the counterfeit is just that good,” which speaks to the increased risk of lost revenue as “the market for counterfeit goods in the United States,” at least, “has shifted in recent years from one in which consumers often knowingly purchased counterfeits to one in which counterfeiters try to deceive consumers into buying goods they believe are authentic.”

In addition to running afoul of the law and posing potential issues of health and safety for consumers, as well as for those in the supply chain, including laborers, “Counterfeiting has another drawback” that is particularly significant for luxury brands, according to luxury marketing strategists Jean Noel Kapferer and Vincent Bastien. Because the value of luxury brands and their offerings largely “rests on their ability to select the ‘right’ positioning, when a brand evokes non-aspirational [elements],” such as a lack of scarcity, “it dilutes its social appeal.” Against that background, “The multiplication of counterfeits creates a risk of prejudice, because they diminish the all-important exclusivity factor that is required to sustain the value of luxury.” Other experts argue that while the element of exclusivity is critical when it comes to the success of luxury brands and their pricing power, the existence of counterfeits in the market may not directly damage a brand and/or its bottom line, as they help to build brand awareness, and that the proliferation of counterfeits luxury goods may actually serve as a metric for demand of the real thing.

The increasing sophistication of the counterfeit products, themselves, and the ease with which bad actors can mislead consumers, often without consequence, paired with the fact that counterfeiters are connecting directly with consumers without any “middlemen,” has prompted many brands to lean more towards the former approach and prioritize the fight against fakes by way of routinely-filed anti-counterfeiting and infringement lawsuits and in at least a few cases, collaborative efforts with marketplace platforms.

The sizable role that marketplace platforms and social media apps play in facilitating the counterfeit economy – even if unwillingly, has translated to the filing of lawsuits in which plaintiffs seek to hold the platform operators contributorily liable for the counterfeit or otherwise infringing products offered up on their sites. Platform operators may generally be shielded from direct liability and even contributory liability, with the latter issue serving as the focal point in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit’s 2010 decision in the landmark *Tiffany v. eBay* case, assuming that they do not turn a blind eye to specific conduct of users of the platform. Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act also serves as a general safe harbor to liability for platform operators in connection with the actions of their third-party users.²⁶

Nonetheless, decisions in at least a couple of recent cases²⁷ serve as a reminder of the potential for liability for platform operators and other third-party service providers. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, for instance, opened the door for potential liability for certain marketplace operators when it held that print-on-demand site Redbubble “brings trademark-offending products into being,’ making it ‘more than just a passive facilitator’ and more vulnerable to claims that it contributes to any infringement occurring on its platform.’”

Aside from actions initiated by trademark holders, international lawmakers are paying increasing attention to the reach and responsibilities of “big tech” operators, with legislators in the U.S. drafting and pushing for the passage of bills that would increase transparency of third-party sellers on marketplace sites, as brands and consumers, alike, continue to voice concerns about their inability to discern the identities of counterfeit sellers in order to hold them accountable, as third-party service providers “do not adequately subject new sellers to verification and confirmation of their identities, allowing counterfeiters to ‘routinely use false or inaccurate names and addresses when registering with these Internet platforms.’”²⁸

²⁷ <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/47/230>

²⁸ *Omega SA v. 375 Canal, LLC*, No. 19-969 (2d Cir. 2021) and *Ohio State University v. Redbubble, Inc.*, No. 19-3388 (6th Cir. 2021)

²⁹ *Fear of God, LLC v. The Partnerships and Unincorporated Associations Identified on Schedule “A”*, 1:21-cv-03894 (N.D. Ill.); also see *Oberdorf v. Amazon.com Inc.*, 18-1041 (3d Cir.), in which neither Amazon customer Heather Oberdorf nor Amazon could identify or locate the individuals behind the third-party The Furry Gang account.

All the while, regulators appear, in at least some cases, to be eager to take action. Newly-appointed Federal Trade Commission chairwoman Lina Khan, a well-established critic of big tech entities, including Amazon and Facebook, has foreshadowed a potential for future action. Ms. Khan faulted “digital platforms” in her testimony before the House of Representatives Energy and Commerce Committee in July, saying that they have “tolerated and even promoted ... fraud” and engaged in “unfair or deceptive practices,” which could be understood to include the rampant offering and sale of counterfeit or otherwise infringing goods on various digital platforms.

Her criticism follows from Mr. Lighthizer’s assertion in connection with the release of the government’s 2020 Review of Notorious Markets for Counterfeiting and Piracy that “the greatest risk of importation of counterfeit and pirated goods, harming both U.S. content creators and U.S. consumers, is posed not by foreign flea markets and dark web sites, but by inadequate policies and inadequate action by e-commerce companies that market and sell foreign products to American consumers.”²⁹

Ultimately, as INTA has accurately asserted, “The link between the increased sales of counterfeits on the Internet and the harms caused to businesses and the public is clear, [but] the solution to the issue is complex and remains challenging.” What is clear is that the increasingly pervasive and multifaceted problem that is the global trade in counterfeit and pirated products requires consistent collaboration among the various stakeholders at play – from regulators and legislators to trademark holders and internet service providers, as the Internet continues to “change the way commerce and business are being conducted around the world.”

³⁰ USTR, “USTR Releases 2020 Review of Notorious Markets for Counterfeiting and Piracy”, Office of the United States Trade Representative <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2021/january/ustr-releases-2020-review-notorious-markets-counterfeiting-and-piracy>

4.

“LEGITIMATE” SELLERS OF COUNTERFEIT GOODS ON INSTAGRAM

We started by creating a list of the main features studied and their respective levels of importance.



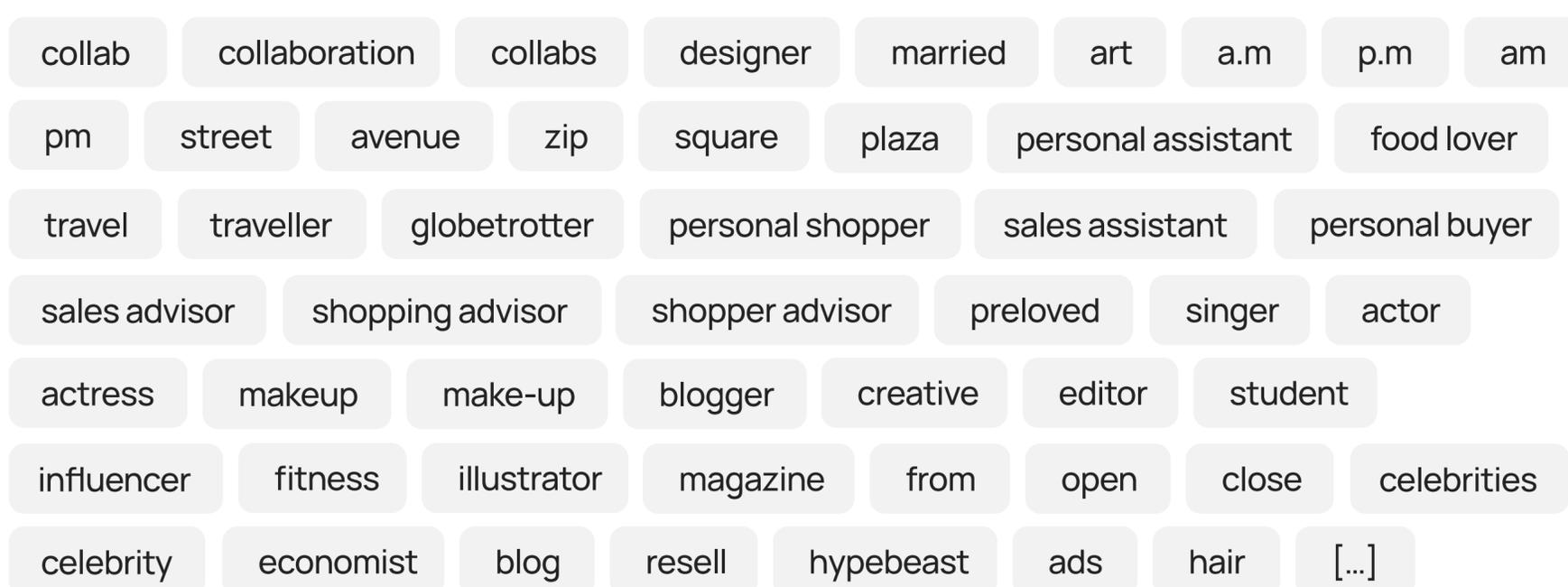
It is worth considering that those could be accounts created manually but managed by a software or vice versa (accounts created automatically but managed manually). There are also hybrid cases, where the account management is carried alternatively either by a software or one/several people.

After analyzing the first raw data, we noticed that counterfeiters' accounts appear to have significantly decreased using hashtags clearly referring to official brands and popular keywords such as "1: 1, AAA, Replica".

This is a recent behavior designed to avoid any blockage or censorship by the platform software or managers. Therefore we extended our analysis for each account to the last 30 posts (instead of the last 20), in order to identify as many counterfeiters as possible. Obviously enough, their initial posts include generic hashtags related to fashion and do not sell anything illicit, thus just trying to reach out to an interested audience.

As in our 2019 study, we tweaked our algorithm (by filtering certain recurring keywords) to exclude legitimate accounts that use Instagram to sell their own fashion products.

We further refined the keyword list and improved our data review with updated text analysis techniques, while also translating those keywords in several languages (including Russian, Chinese, Thai, Malay, Arabic [...]), so as to keep out any legitimate seller operating in a language other than English. Thanks to a data analysis technique, we extrapolated the most common words used by legitimate accounts, gathering the following list of most common keywords not addressed by our study:



As a result we identified 20,280 active counterfeiters' accounts on Instagram at the end of October 2021. Based on our analysis, we can estimate that they are able to reach an audience of at least 10 million people only through those users who directly follow them.



Follow

The best quality.Global shipping.Wechat or WhatsApp for more information please, thanks.

WeChat:

WhatsApp: +86

POSTS

TAGGED



Follow

WhatsApp/WeChat:+86

Global shipping

The only real account



AJ DIOR



NEW



New



NEW



NEW



NEW

POSTS

TAGGED



Follow

Shopping & Retail

Hello, I am a reliable supplier of shoes factory in China, I need shoes

WhatsApp: +86

www.wasap.my/86



快拍精选

快拍精选

快拍精选

快拍精选



Follow

45 posts

1,974 followers

56 following

Global luxury personal shopping

Whatsapp+852

微信: Azeriapp Line:

Sell All Luxury Brands 1:1

wa.me/852

POSTS

TAGGED



5.

IDENTIFYING COUNTERFEITERS ON FACEBOOK

As mentioned earlier, in this study we planned to identify counterfeiters also active on Facebook. We found that they tend to use both pages and accounts, and are fond of marketplaces and e-commerce tools. Given our focus on their profiles, we resorted to a complex network analysis technique, developing an ad hoc software including textual searches and visual recognition.

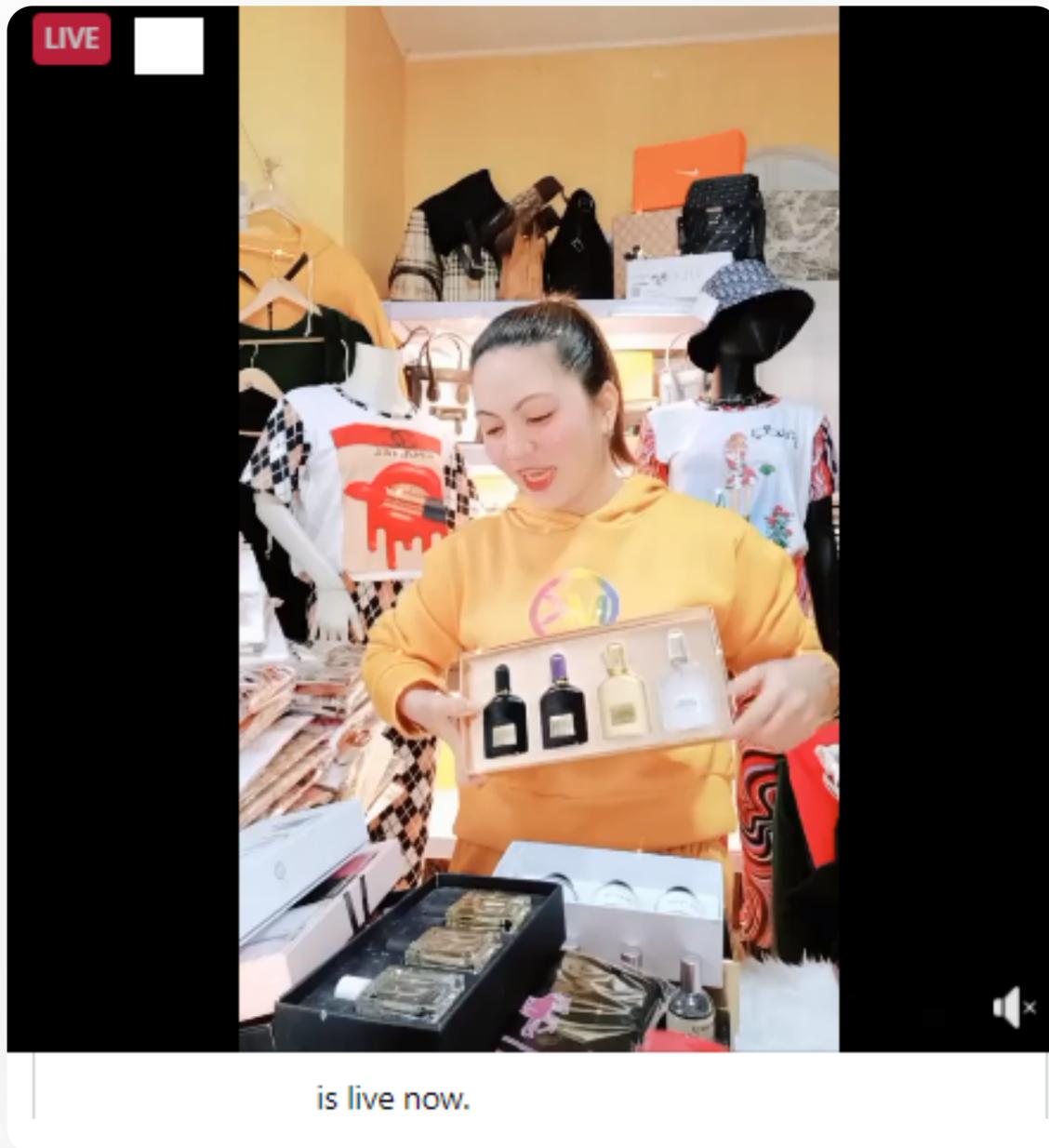
Based on 12 Instagram accounts of Chinese counterfeiters who also had personal profiles on Facebook, we studied their friendship lists and their major main characteristics. By closely tracking all 12 profile friends (only 8 of them had public friends on Facebook) we generated a new list of profiles to be analyzed.

With a careful study of the following characteristics we were able to identify those counterfeiters on Facebook, supported by a manual review on a sample of 200 profiles.

- Name
- Nickname
- URL
- Profile description/Bio
- Profile details (City, Job, University/School, etc.)
- Posts
- Friend list

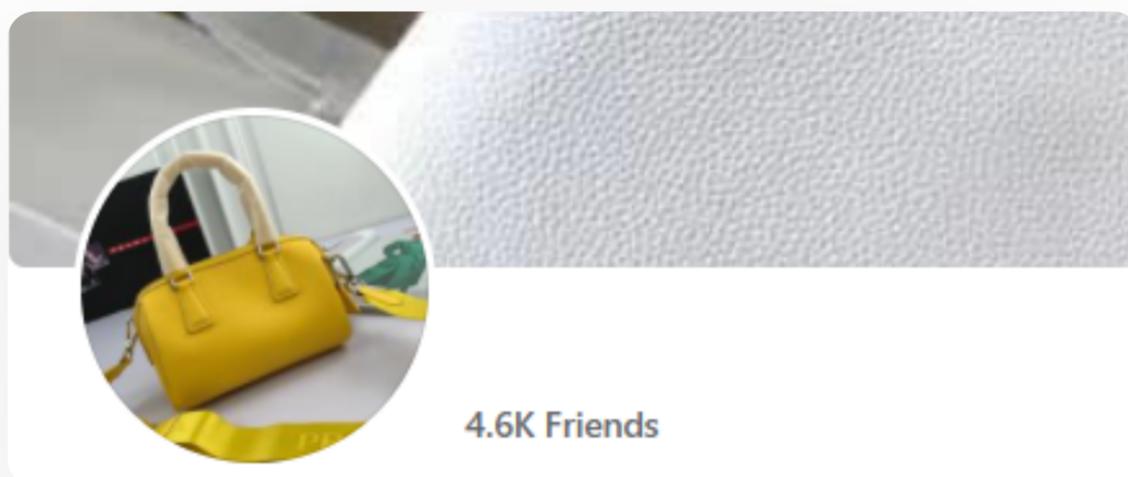
Then we expanded this network analysis procedure, to eventually identify in 20 days of network analysis a total of 26,770 counterfeiters' accounts active on Facebook at the end of October 2021. It should be noted that our analysis focused only on their activity on their wall. Their activity in other areas such as marketplaces, Pages and groups deserved to be explored, also considering several previous insights into the Marketplace³¹ as a preferred tool for counterfeiters.

³¹ "Our mission to buy a fake Rolex on Facebook reveals how the company is playing host to countless criminal enterprises", Shona Gosh, Business Insider <https://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-marketplace-fake-designer-scammers-2018-3>



Snapshot of a counterfeiter while she is using Facebook Live

Our study revealed that each counterfeiter profile counts an average of over 1,250 friends. A very conservative estimate indicates that counterfeiters reach about 20 million unique contacts through newsfeed and private messages.



A counterfeiter user with over 4,600 friends on Facebook



<https://api.whatsapp.com/send?phone=86>

Posts About Friends Photos Videos Check-Ins More [Add Friend](#) [Message](#) [...](#)



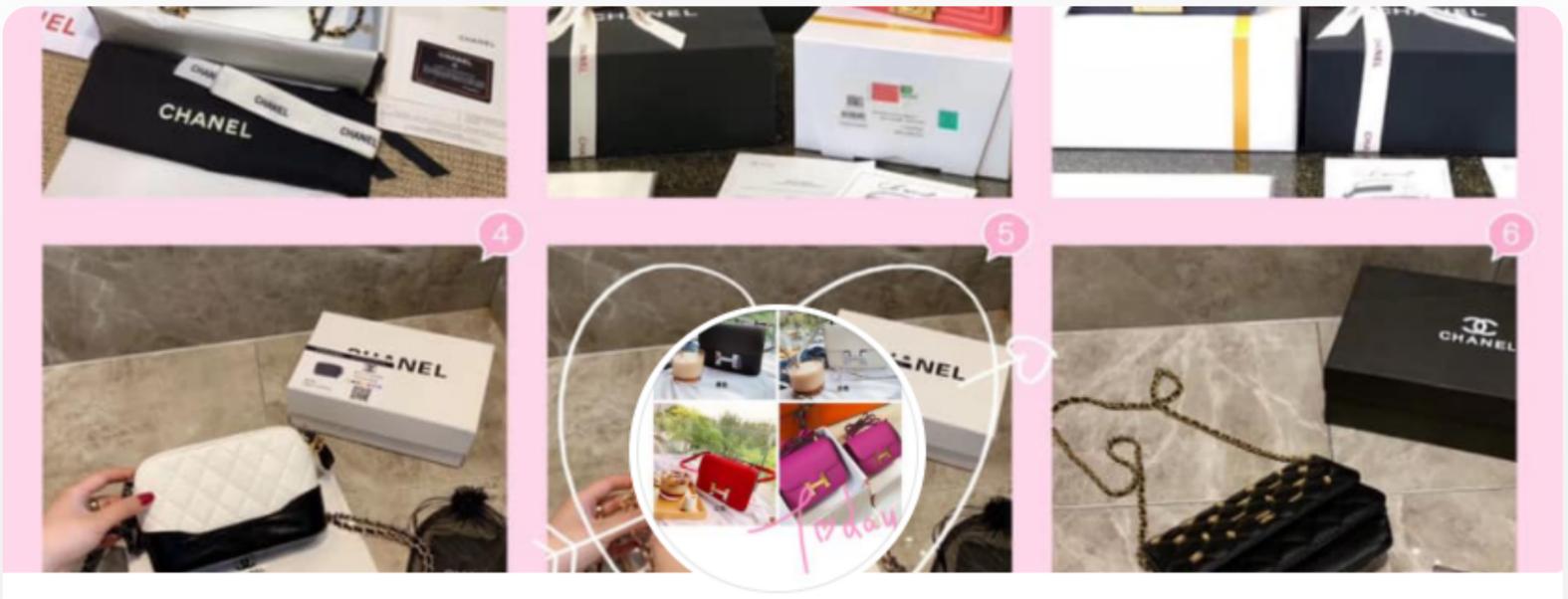
Manufacture supplies wholesale custom fashion designer supplies(WhatsApp)+86

Posts About Friends 4910 Photos Videos More [Add Friend](#) [Message](#) [...](#)



LV | GUCCI | CHANEL | PRADA | COACH | YSL | FENDI | BALENCIAGA | GIVENCHY

Posts About Friends Photos Videos Check-Ins More [Add Friend](#) [Message](#) [...](#)



Major brands of bags, belts, shoes, styles should have a circle of friends to choose a good style.

[Posts](#)

[About](#)

[Friends 4948](#)

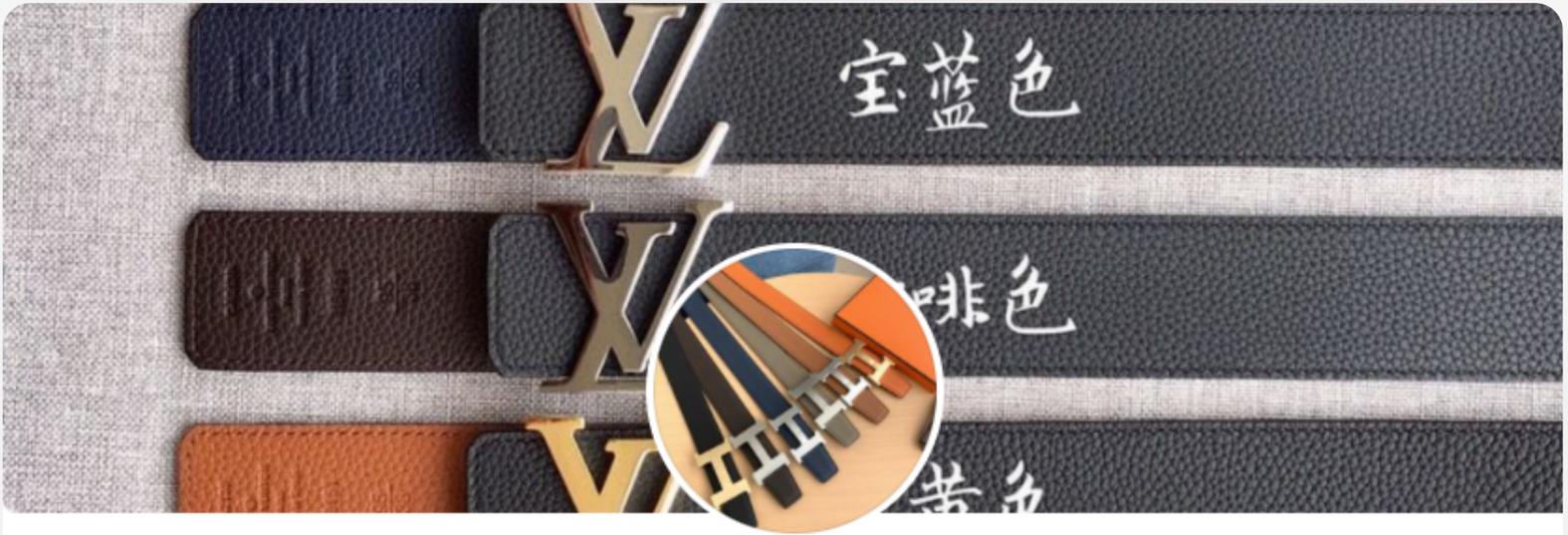
[Photos](#)

[Videos](#)

[More ▾](#)

[Add Friend](#)

[Message](#)



[Posts](#)

[About](#)

[Friends 831](#)

[Photos](#)

[Videos](#)

[More ▾](#)

[Add Friend](#)

[Message](#)



6.

NEW TECHNIQUES ON INSTAGRAM

Since our 2019 study, we noticed many changes in the counterfeiter behavior on Instagram. They are always upgrading their techniques in order to avoid being detected and/or becoming too exposed in public areas.

Here is a list of their main upgrades:

Profiles have increasingly become "anonymous"

Compared to 2019, today most counterfeiter profiles provide less or very basic information, while inviting users to contact them via Whatsapp or DM for more information. This is an obvious option to hide evidence of illegal activity or wrongdoing on Instagram itself.

New ways to attract customers

These profiles are more actively tracking down potential customers by sending them private messages and/or commenting under various posts of "famous" or very popular accounts. Their profiles no longer provide just a showcase, but are an active tool to chase potential customers throughout the platform.

Text on Images

Many counterfeiter profiles tend to include some text directly into their images, as opposed to provide static information in their posts or Stories. This technique avoids being caught by the OCR reader software used by Instagram to monitor illegal content, which often fails because that text is overlaid on low resolution images.

Fewer external sites

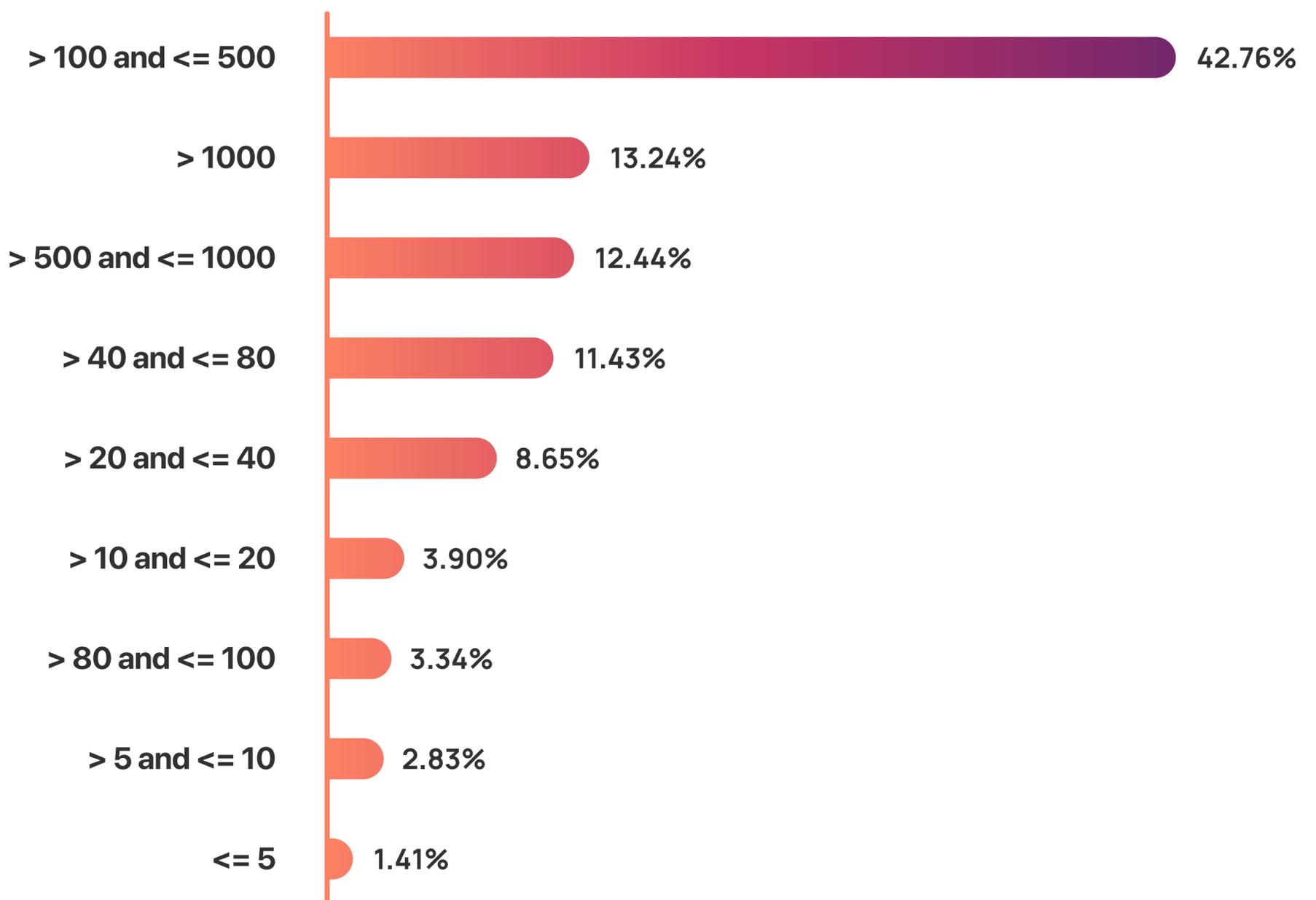
compared to 2019, there are almost no links to external sites where counterfeit goods are actually sold. Instead, as detailed below, the whole illegal counterfeiting commerce takes place directly within the various social networks owned by Meta (Facebook).

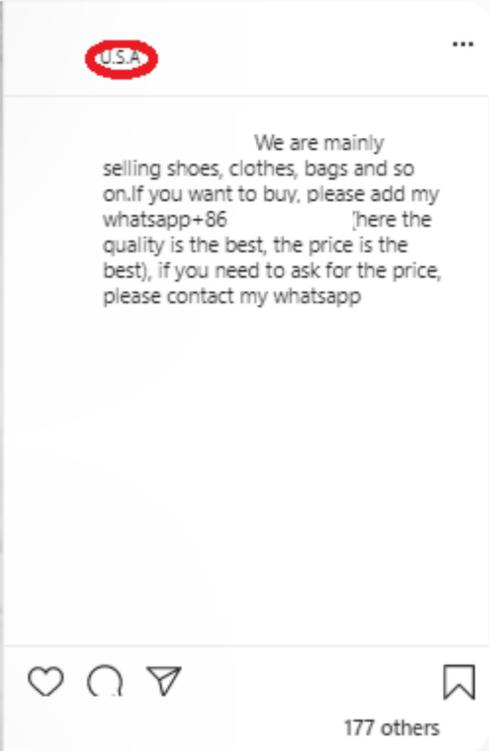
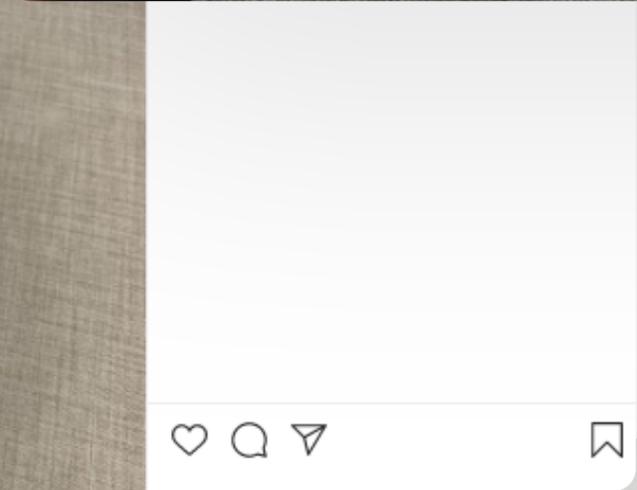
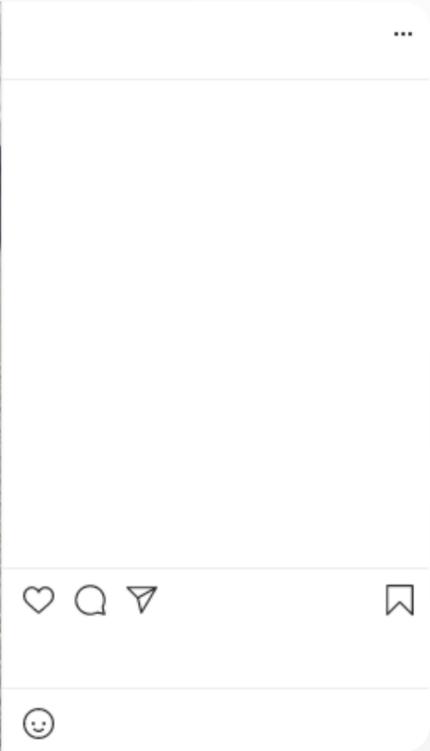
7.

COUNTERFEITERS' ACTIVITY ON INSTAGRAM

As shown in the graph below, most counterfeiters (42.7%) published between 100 and 500 posts, while 13% published more than 1,000 posts and 12% published between 500 and 1,000 posts. Overall these figures confirm that counterfeiter accounts appear to be quite prolific on Instagram.

Posts





Intro

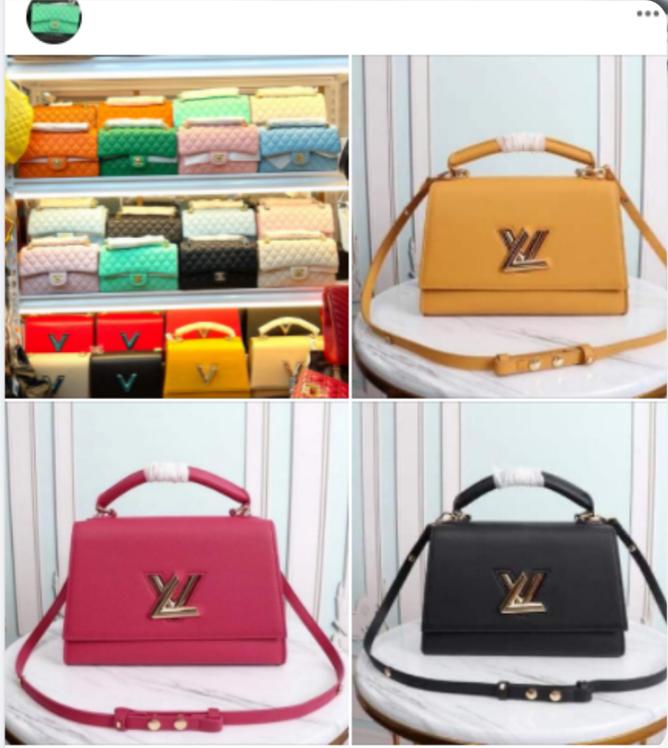
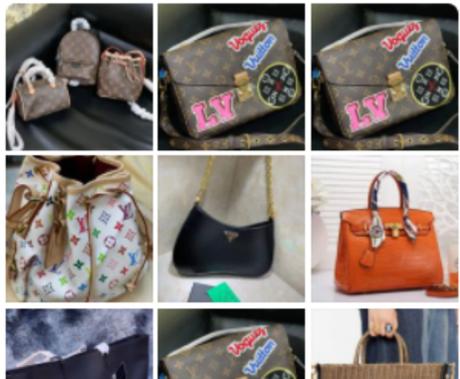
100% Supplier of Top notch and Master copy Bags. We accept Wholesale and Retail. since 2018

Works at

Lives in

Photos

[See All Photos](#)





Add Friend **Message**

Posts About Friends Photos Videos Check-Ins More

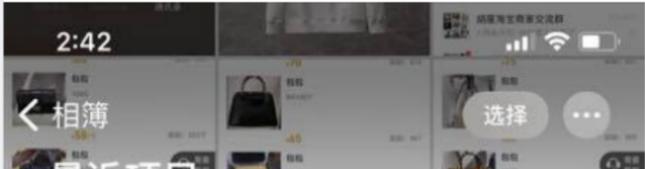
Intro

WeChat,

- Need to know
- Brand women's bag factory
- Lives in
- Joined May 2020
- Traveling

Posts **Filters**

About 12,000. There are no friends to have. The price is very cheap. Call me if you need anything




Add Friend **Message**

Posts About Friends Photos Videos Check-Ins More

Intro

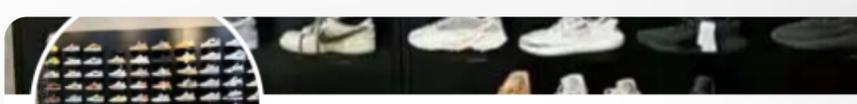
The company operates the Air Force SB Jordan series, with a minimum order of 100 pairs,

Posts



147 Friends

Posts About Friends Photos Videos



637 Friends

Posts About Friends Photos Videos Check-Ins More

Intro

Hi! My name is I am a Chinese factory supplier, shoes, handbags, bags, purses, clothing wholes

Intro

Whatsapp <https://api.whatsapp.com/send?phone=86>

- Lives in
- From
- Followed by 72 people
- <https://api.whatsapp.com/send?phone=86>
- <http://281x.yupoo.com/albums?page=1>
- Dear friends, I am a Chinese supplier. I provide you shoes, slippers, watches, handbags, wallets, clothes, hats, special offers Whatsapp <https://api.whatsapp.com/send?phone=86>

Posts **Filters**



8.

DIFFERENT ACCOUNTS FOR DIFFERENT ACTIVITIES & GOALS

In this new study we decided to focus on counterfeiter accounts/profiles from China. In general we noticed that, as confirmed also by careful manual reviews, the majority of them appear to sell directly to users (B2C), while a smaller number portray themselves as wholesalers interested in selling to other companies or counterfeiters (B2B).

On both Instagram and Facebook, we identified those accounts through search queries on a sample of 200 allegedly China-based counterfeiters, followed by a manual analysis and as a result, we divided them as wholesale (B2B) sellers and retailer (B2C) sellers: they attain, respectively, 32% and 68% (combining their activities on Instagram and Facebook).

It should be noted that, in order to differentiate wholesalers from retailers, we analyzed the words used in their profiles and posts (the last 10). For wholesale sellers, we track down such keywords as factory, wholesale, supplier, min. order, MOQ and the like. These words showed at least once either in their bios or in at least in 2 posts of the 10 analyzed.

9.

CHINA AS A “FACTORY” OF LUXURY COUNTERFEIT ITEMS

The vast majority of these counterfeiters seem to be operating from mainland China. Clearly they do not target buyers in their local market, but mostly export all over the world. Counterfeiters from other countries, on the other hand, focus mostly on their respective local markets.

Most Chinese counterfeiters also appear to be both manufacturers and wholesalers, while many from other countries are often just retailers, selling only to the final consumer, but not wholesale producers or exporters. Also, those accounts (from such countries as Indonesia and Turkey) that are also manufacturers seem to produce low-quality and low-value counterfeit goods. On the other hand, Chinese counterfeiters particularly in the clothing sector tend to produce and offer medium-high quality items.

Country	Quality	B2C	B2B
China	Med-High	X	X
Russia	Low	X	
Turkey	Low	X	
Indonesia	Low	X	
Ukraine	Low	X	
Brazil	Low	X	

In order to verify our research outcome, we contacted through Whatsapp 60 sellers, 10 for each country hosting a high number of counterfeiters.

We asked their selling price for 10 different top-of-the-line women's bags and 5 pairs of women's and 5 men's shoes (in some cases they were not selling men's products). The chart below shows our results.

Country	Quality	B2C Avg Price \$	B2B Avg Price \$
China	Med-High	~140	~120
Russia	Low	~90	
Turkey	Low	~75	
Indonesia	Low	~45	
Ukraine	Low	~45	
Brazil	Low	~65	

Chinese products are clearly the most expensive (\$ 140 from direct sellers, \$ 120 from wholesalers). Other sellers have much lower prices, down to \$ 45 in countries such as Indonesia and Ukraine – but their item quality is also much lower.



10.

ESTIMATE OF CHINESE FAKE ITEMS AVAILABLE ON WESTERN SOCIAL NETWORKS

This final step has probably been the most complicated and difficult of our research. In order to provide an estimate of the overall illegal goods trade, we built on our outcome by took into account the following data:

- **official information from police units (seizures and/or arrests of counterfeiters organizations using Instagram and/or Facebook as marketing tools);**
- **Analysis of public data from counterfeiter profiles and/or e-commerce sites;**
- **Social engineering through direct exchanges with counterfeiters.**

We also made sure those accounts analyzed were unique, by removing any duplicate that had the same phone numbers, similar nicknames and/or identical bios).

As a final result, we estimate that on Facebook and Instagram combined there are about 6,000-7,000 wholesalers from China, with an annual business turnover ranging between \$ 1.8 billion and \$ 2.1 billion. This is a quite conservative estimate, based on about \$ 300,00 yearly revenue for each counterfeit vendor.^{32 33 34 35 36}



³² Comunicato Stampa, "Vestiti d'alta moda contraffatti venduti sui social: nei guai una 20enne", Faro Online <https://www.ilfaronline.it/2020/12/21/vestiti-dalta-moda-contraffatti-venduti-sui-social-nei-guai-una-20enne/383978/>

³³ Archivio Notizie, "Milano: scoperta truffa delle scarpe contraffatte", Polizia Di Stato <https://www.poliziadistato.it/articolo/milano-scoperta-truffa-delle-scarpe-contraffatte>

³⁴ Anna Giorgi, "Milano, griffe false vendute online: 4 in cella", Il Giorno <https://www.ilgiorno.it/milano/cronaca/griffe-false-online-1.6631683>

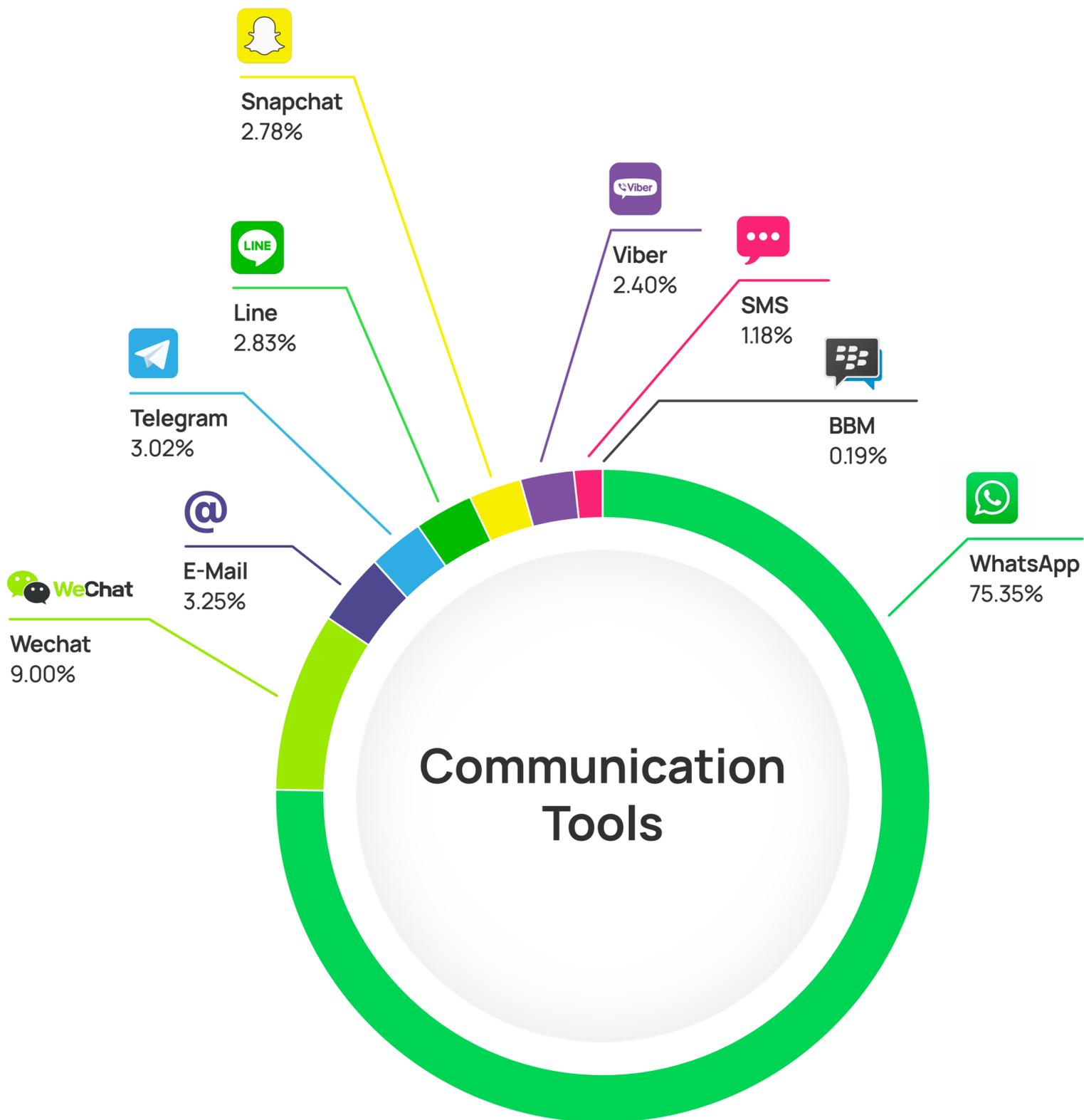
³⁵ Redazione Ansa, "Europol, operazione Aphrodite contro merci contraffatte", ANSA https://www.ansa.it/europa/notizie/propriet%C3%A0_intellettuale/2020/09/25/europol-operazione-aphrodite-contro-merci-contraffatte_738852a9-2852-4a6c-8f6a-bffe6139123a.html

³⁶ SneakerVip, "SneakerVip is an original Factory for brand sneakers", SneakerVip <https://www.sneakervip.site/>

11.

COMMUNICATION TOOLS USED BY COUNTERFEITERS

The following chart highlights the online communication channels used by counterfeiters to reach and talk with their customers. By far their preferred IM tool is WhatsApp: its share grew from 56% in 2019 to 75% in 2021. As a corresponding trend, Wechat has seen a further decline compared to two years ago (9%), Line is well below 3% while Telegram gained a slight increase (3.02%). The truth is that Whatsapp has successfully attracted most counterfeiters for its functionality about ecommerce options and customer service.



Two main reasons support WhatsApp as a safe tool for counterfeiters: When it comes to private conversations, it is almost impossible to enact any sort of moderation or filtering due to its end-to-end encrypted chat. And even if/when an account gets suspended or blocked due to some ToS [Terms of Service] violations, a new account can easily be opened using virtual phone numbers that cost just a few cents.

The collage consists of several elements:

- WhatsApp Chat:** A screenshot of a conversation. The first message says "They delivered to my home the shoe already" (下午8:50). The second message says "But still Im on work, so later I send you my feedback for the item." (下午8:51). Below the chat is a photo of a pair of Nike sneakers in their original box.
- Instagram Post:** A post featuring a grid of four images: a Gucci bag, a woman carrying a white bag, a close-up of a metal clasp, and a woman in a yellow jacket with a Gucci bag. The caption reads: "If you want to buy,click on my instagram and add my whatappl#bagfashion#incognito#givenc hy#fashion#gucci#disneymerch".
- Social Media Profile:** A profile page with a bio: "Hello friend, nice to meet you! I am a wholesaler of shoes and clothing in China. Thank you". The "Works at" field is circled in red and contains the text "Works at WhatsApp". Other fields include "Lives in", "From", "0086", and ".x.yupoo.com".
- Product Photos:** Two small images at the bottom. The left one shows a Gucci bag with the caption "Very perfect" and "+7". The right one shows a pair of black shoes with the caption "名牌包包, 鞋子, 衣服" and "+6".

A counterfeiter says that he works for Whatsapp.

12.

WHATSAPP BUSINESS: AN EASY AND EFFECTIVE PLATFORM FOR COUNTERFEITERS

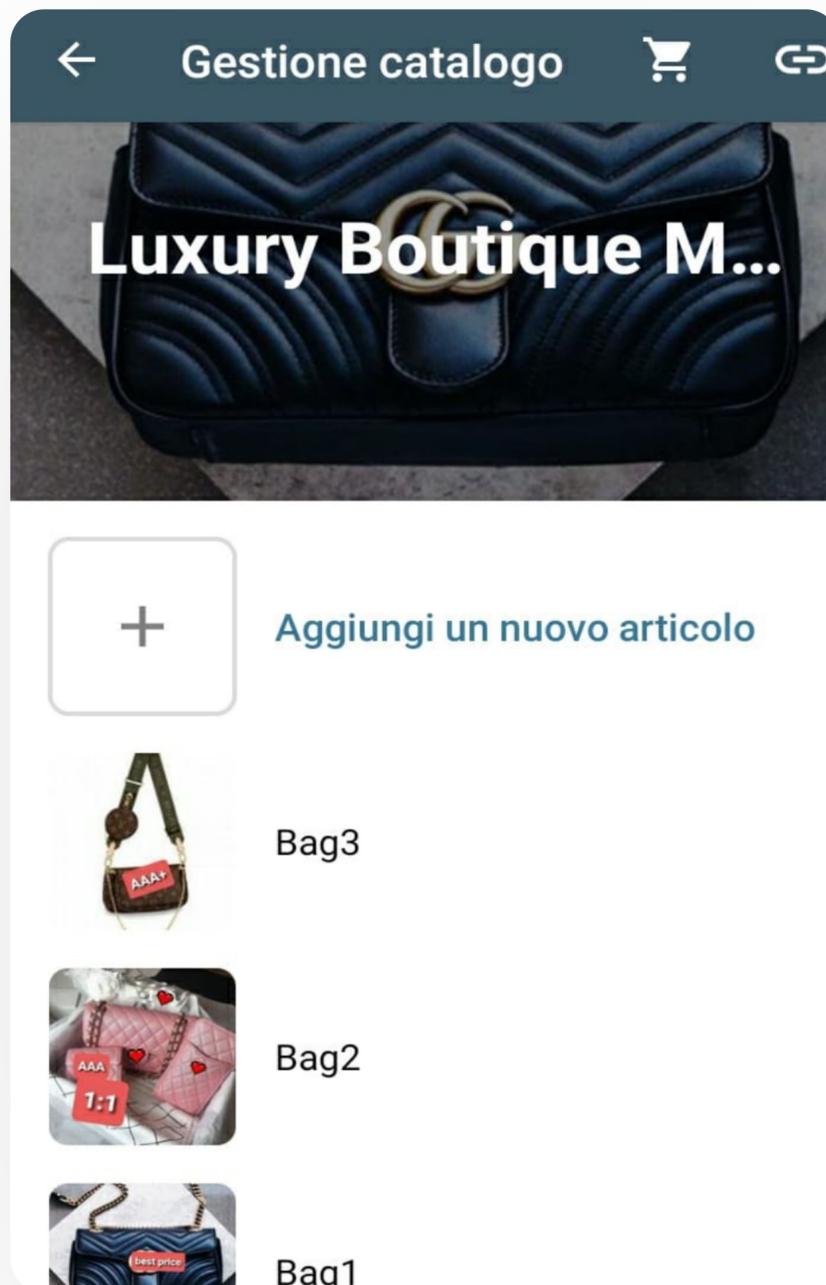
An important option offered by WhatsApp Business is the creation of ad hoc catalogs including all products for sale – easily shared via a simple link.

We did a little test: after acquiring 5 virtual phone numbers, we opened 5 WhatsApp Business accounts and created some catalogs with photos of counterfeit products taken from Instagram accounts.

It is not entirely clear how the moderation/filtering operates, but it obviously applies to image title and description, as well as to the image itself. Most importantly, to bypass any moderation it is enough to:

- **avoid using any name within a logo**
- **avoid using words like "reply" or "copy"**
- **cover a logo with a basic sticker**

Such trivial tricks make possible to effectively use WhatsApp Business catalogs to promote and sell counterfeit goods.



Our analysis of 200 WhatsApp profiles of sellers with Chinese numbers revealed that about 40% of them use a WhatsApp Business profile, thus taking advantage of the automatic reply feature and/or the creation of ad hoc catalogs within the messaging app.

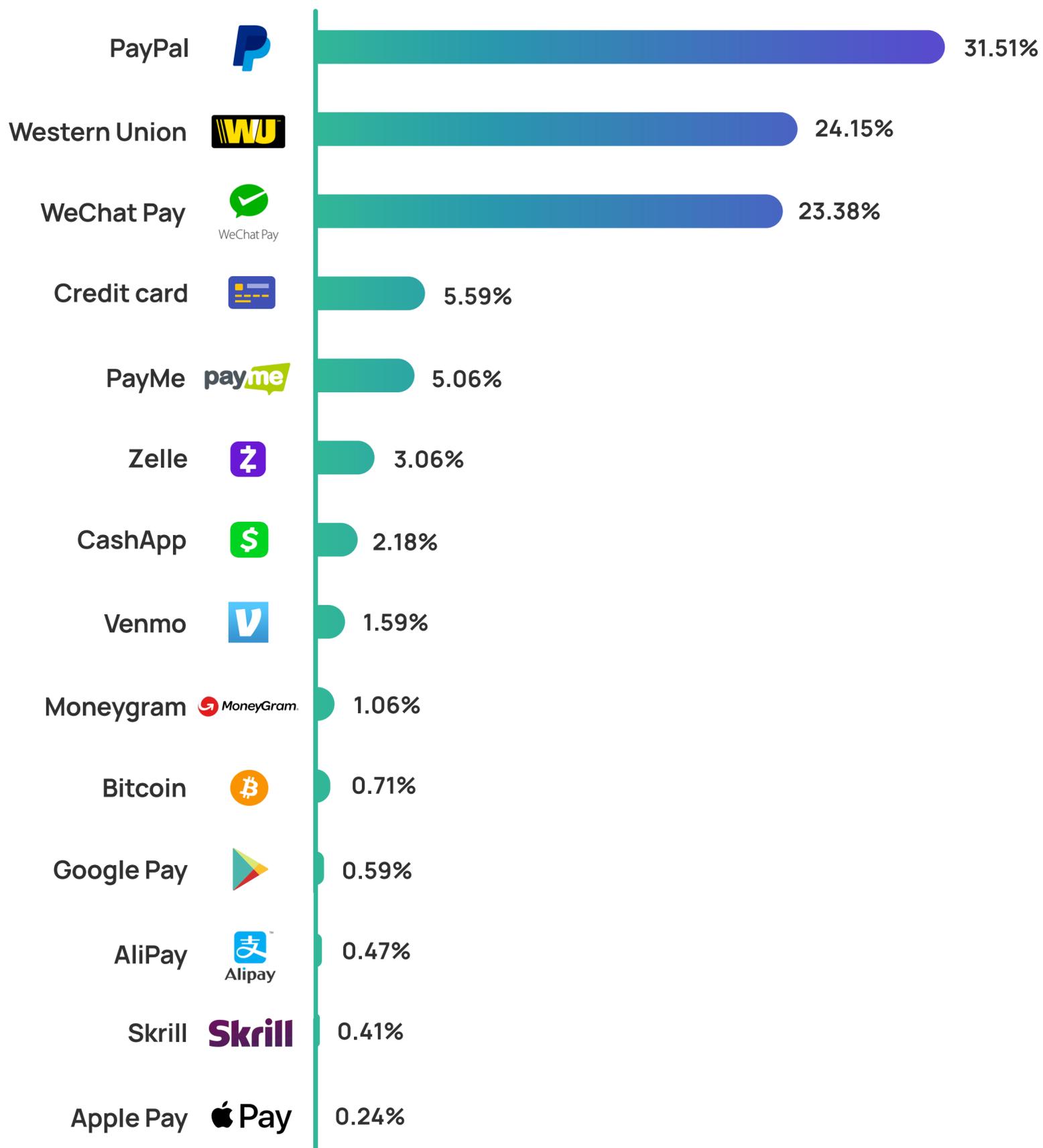


13.

COUNTERFEITERS' PAYMENT METHODS

Payment methods are a crucial feature of any counterfeit seller. Their chosen options must be fast, immediate and safe, ensuring a successful operation.

In 2019 WeChat Pay was the overall method of choice, now its share decreased to about 23%) while Paypal is number one (over 31%) followed by Western Union (over 24%). Credit card payment gateways are also growing (almost 6%), while, contrary to popular belief, Bitcoin is still struggling in this context (less than 1%). See the following chart for more details.



14.

COUNTERFEITERS' SHIPPING METHODS

Another important element for the success of such illegal activities is to provide impeccable shipping options. As for the communication and payment systems just described, this last step must be effective, safe and reliable. As for any legitimate purchase, even counterfeit sellers must ensure that a package arrives at its destination safely and promptly anywhere in the world. Indeed, if a shipment gets lost or doesn't show up, all various online payment systems mentioned above provide options for an immediate reimbursement.

While in 2019 the International postal Express Mail Service [EMS] was the most used system (over 54%) by counterfeiters worldwide, now its share went down to 35% and DHL International courier has grown to over 37.5%.

It is worth noticing that already several years ago the OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development]³⁷ warned about how small packages with counterfeit goods were shipped via International shipping companies such as DHL, beating any border checks without problems.

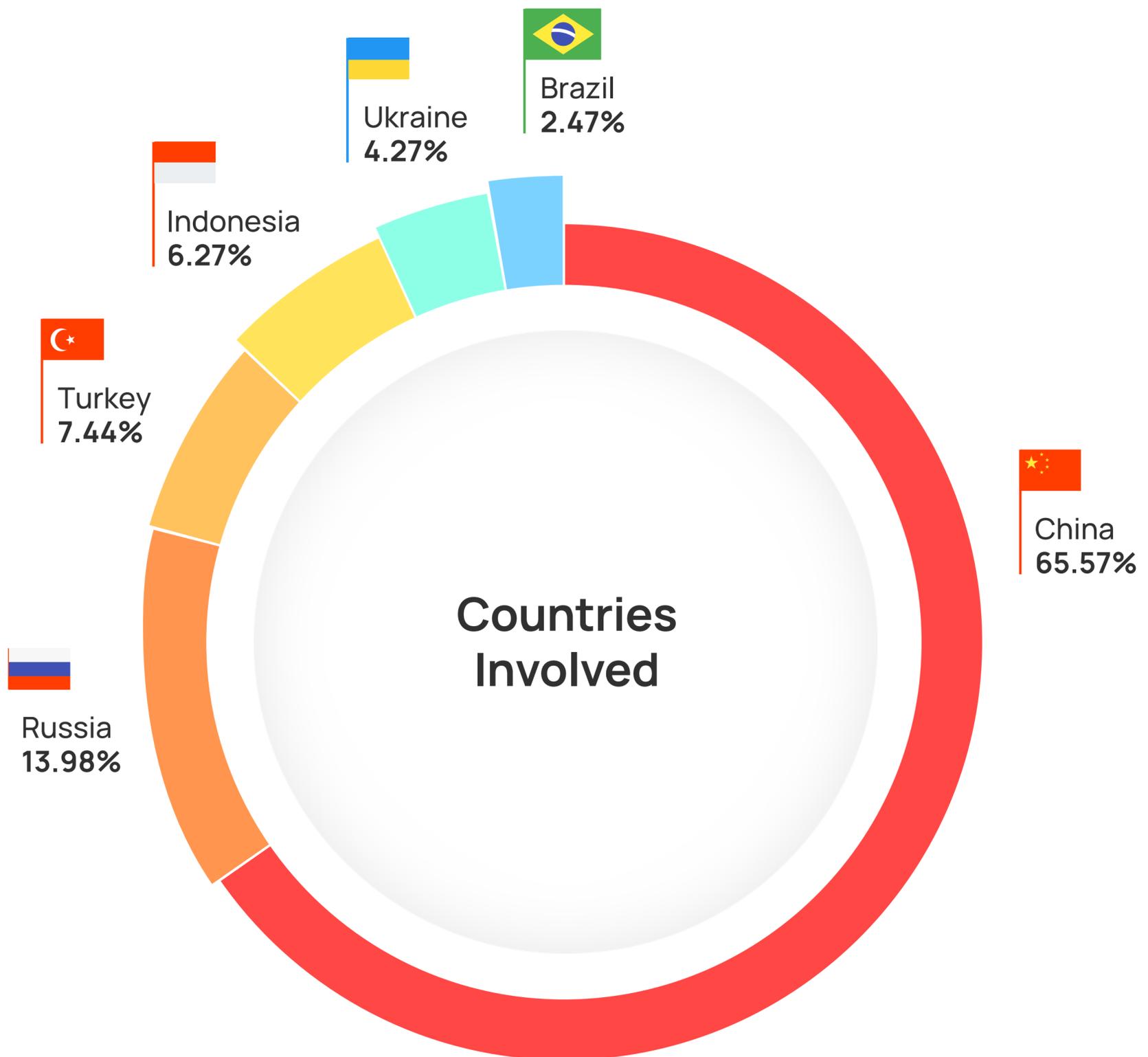
³² OECD, "TRADE IN FAKES IN SMALL PARCELS: FACTS AND TRENDS", europa.eu https://euipo.europa.eu/tunnel-web/secure/webdav/guest/document_library/observatory/documents/reports/Trade_in_fakes_in_small_parcel/Trade_in_Fakes_in_Small_Parcels_en.pdf

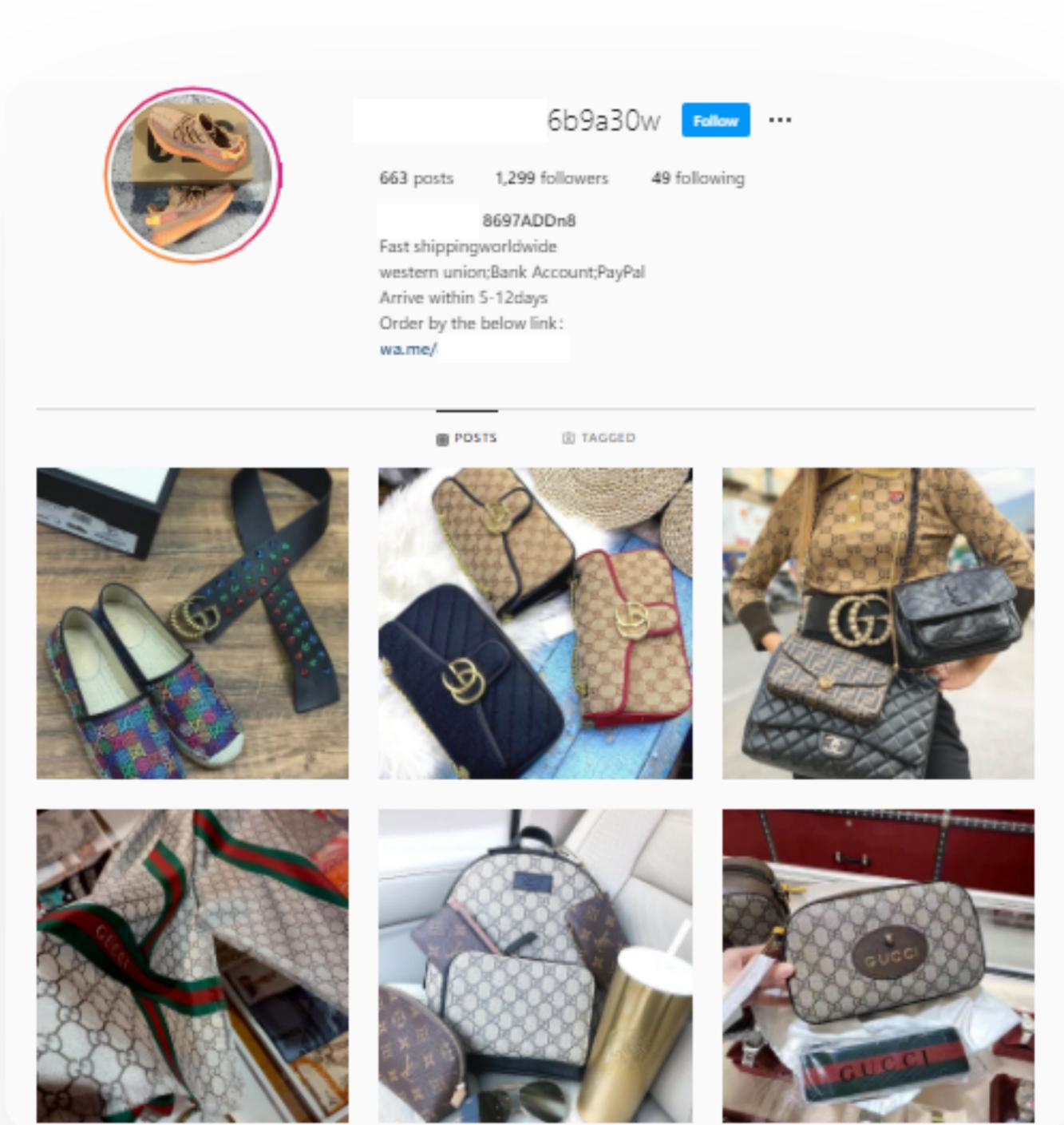


15.

TOP COUNTRIES INVOLVED

As confirmed by our own studies, in 2016 and in 2019 China was the top country for counterfeiters using Instagram to sell their fake goods. Our 2021 research data, combined from Facebook and Instagram, shows that is still a rampant and unrestrained trend. While two years ago China-based counterfeiters reached about 43%, today they are at a whopping 65% of worldwide sellers. Far distant are Russia and Indonesia with, respectively, a share of almost 14% and over 6% -- as shown in the graph below.





As a final note, our data are consistent with the main findings of the Special Report published by the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) – as shown in the following screenshot.

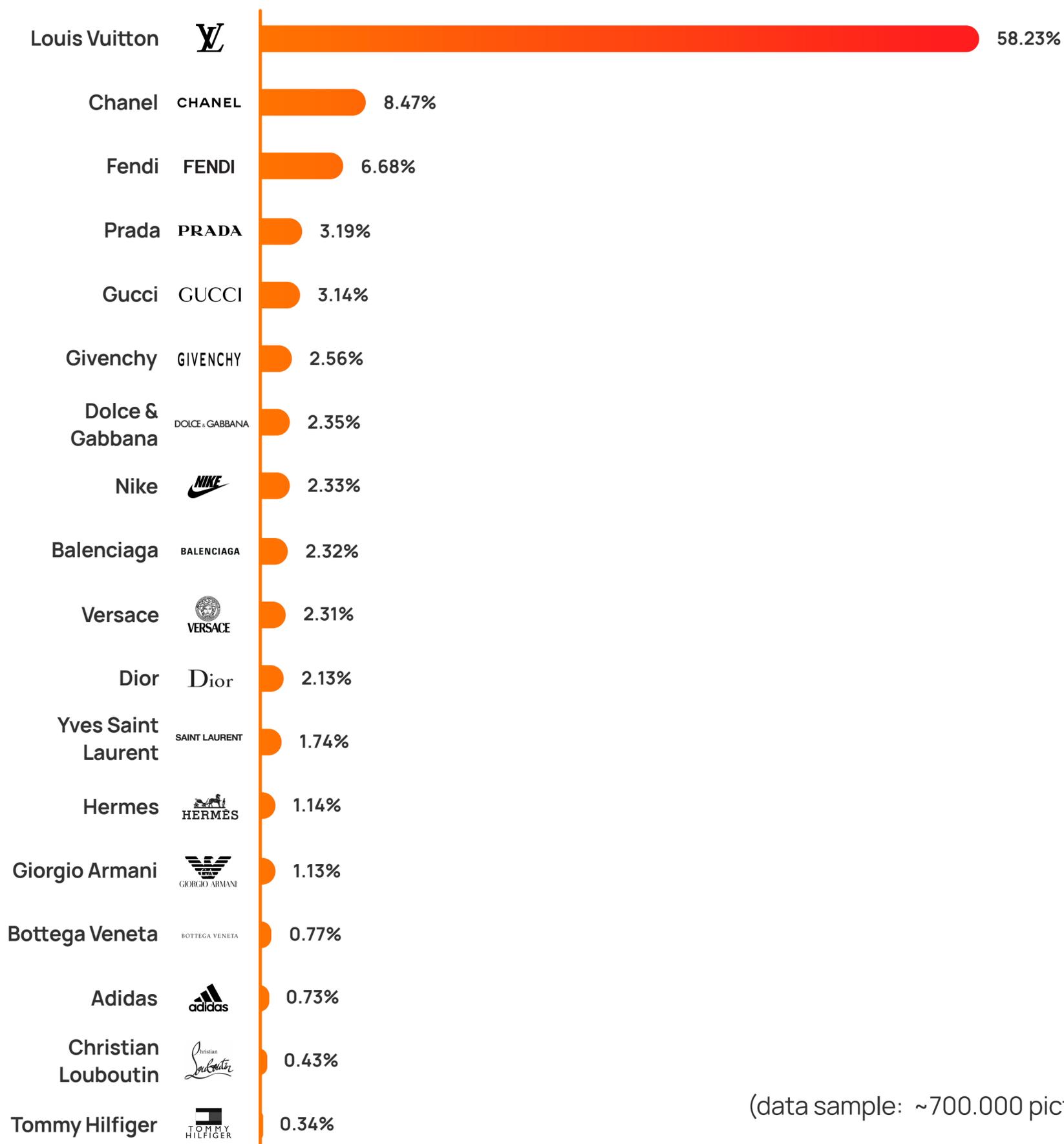
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16.

TOP BRANDS PICTURED BY COUNTERFEITING

As in our 2019 study, we deployed some visual recognition tools to get an accurate recognition of various logos and objects, in order to identify which brands appear most in counterfeiters' posts.

The graph below shows that – considering both Facebook and Instagram – Louis Vuitton products are by far (over 58%) the most targeted in those counterfeiters' photos and posts. Far distant are Chanel (about 8,5%), Fendi (6,7%), Gucci and Prada (both just over 3%).



(data sample: ~700.000 pictures)



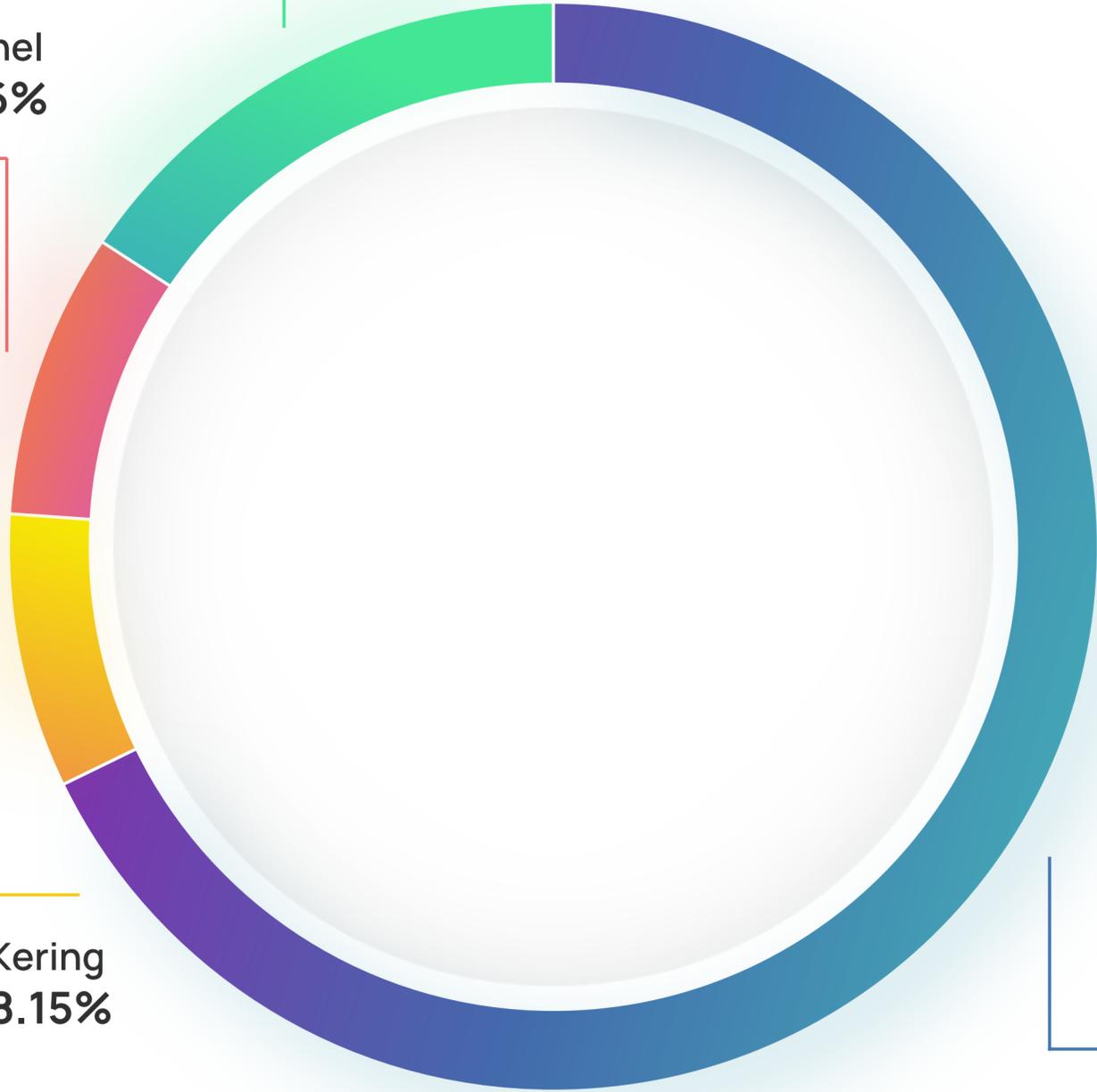
Chanel
8.56%

Other(s)
15.49%



Kering
8.15%

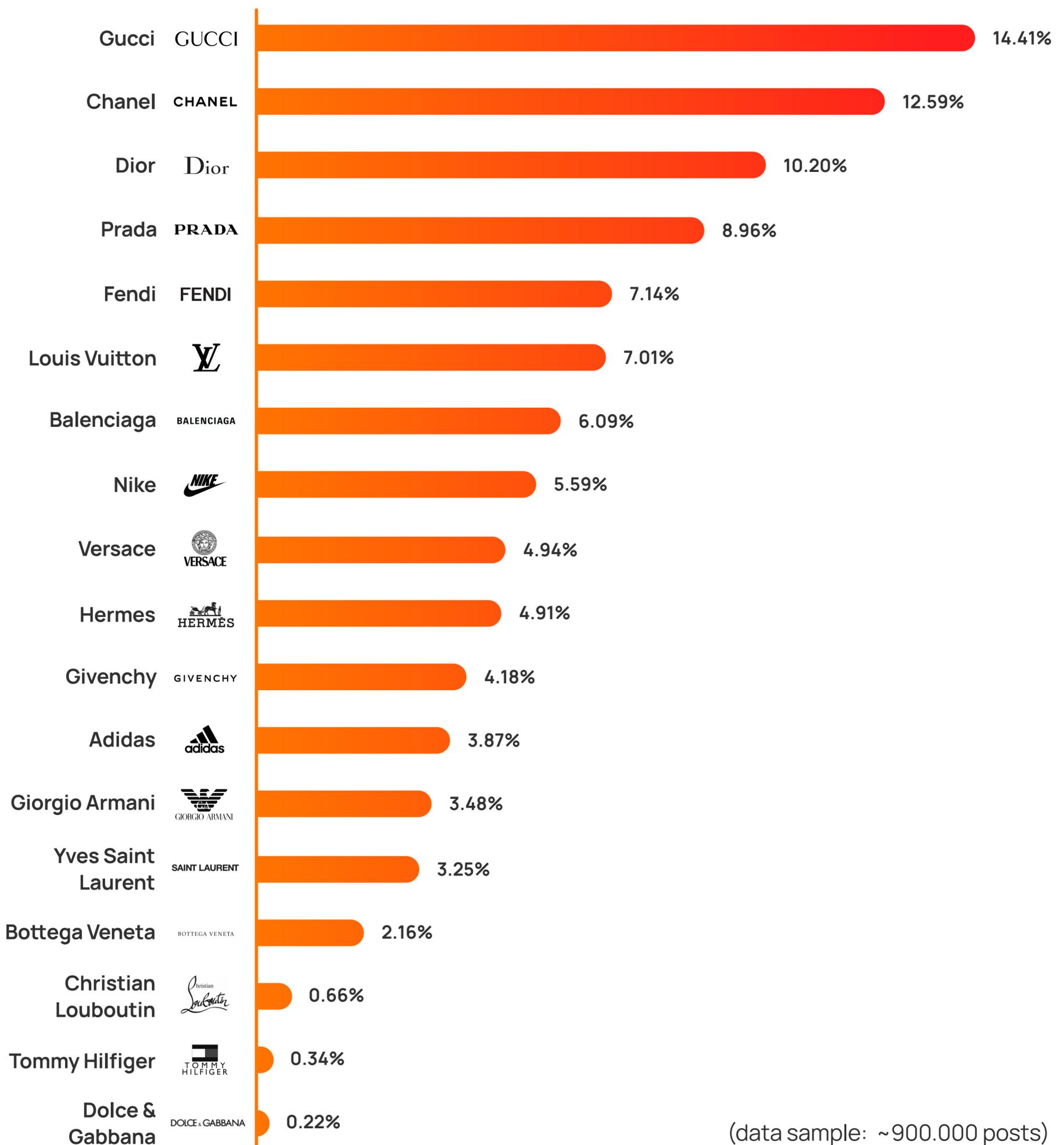
LVMH
67.80%



17.

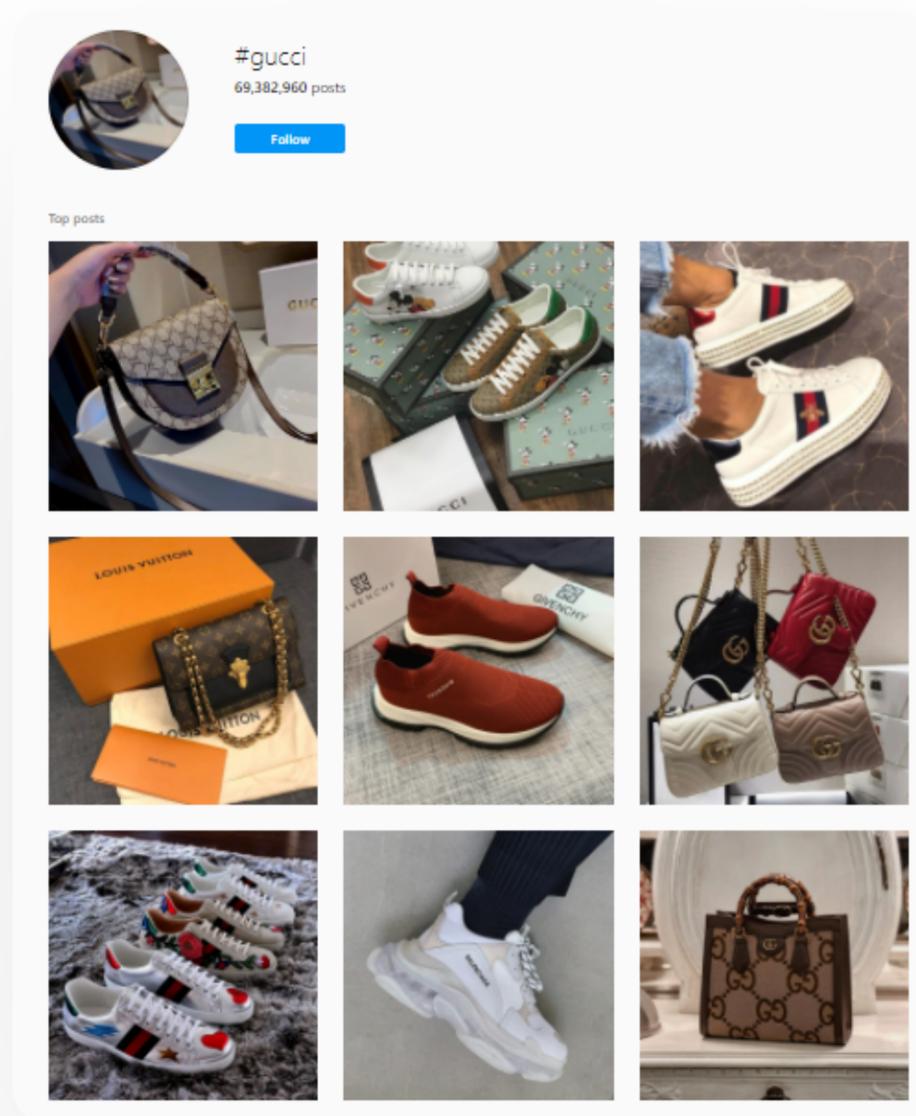
TOP BRAND MENTIONED BY COUNTERFEITERS

In contrast to the above data, the brand most mentioned by counterfeiters with various hashtags, KWs appears to be Gucci (over 14%), followed by Chanel, Dior and Prada. In this case, Louis Vuitton hashtags account for just 7%, even if images of its products are widely used by sellers of fake luxury goods.



18.

TOP BRANDS CHAIN-EFFECT ON INSTAGRAM



We also addressed this question: if a user is browsing posts featuring, for example, the Gucci hashtag, as in the above images, what are the chances that this user could actually land on content or images posted by a counterfeit account?

In our estimate, more than 1 out of 10 posts is some kind of content posted by counterfeiters. Overall this translates to a significant share: over 18% of Instagram content related to a specific hashtag or brand is generated by accounts promoting illegal activities.

Our estimate is based on 48 hours of continuing monitoring and analysis on Gucci hashtag in three different time periods (Aug/Sep/Oct).

Illicit posts

18.2%

Legit posts

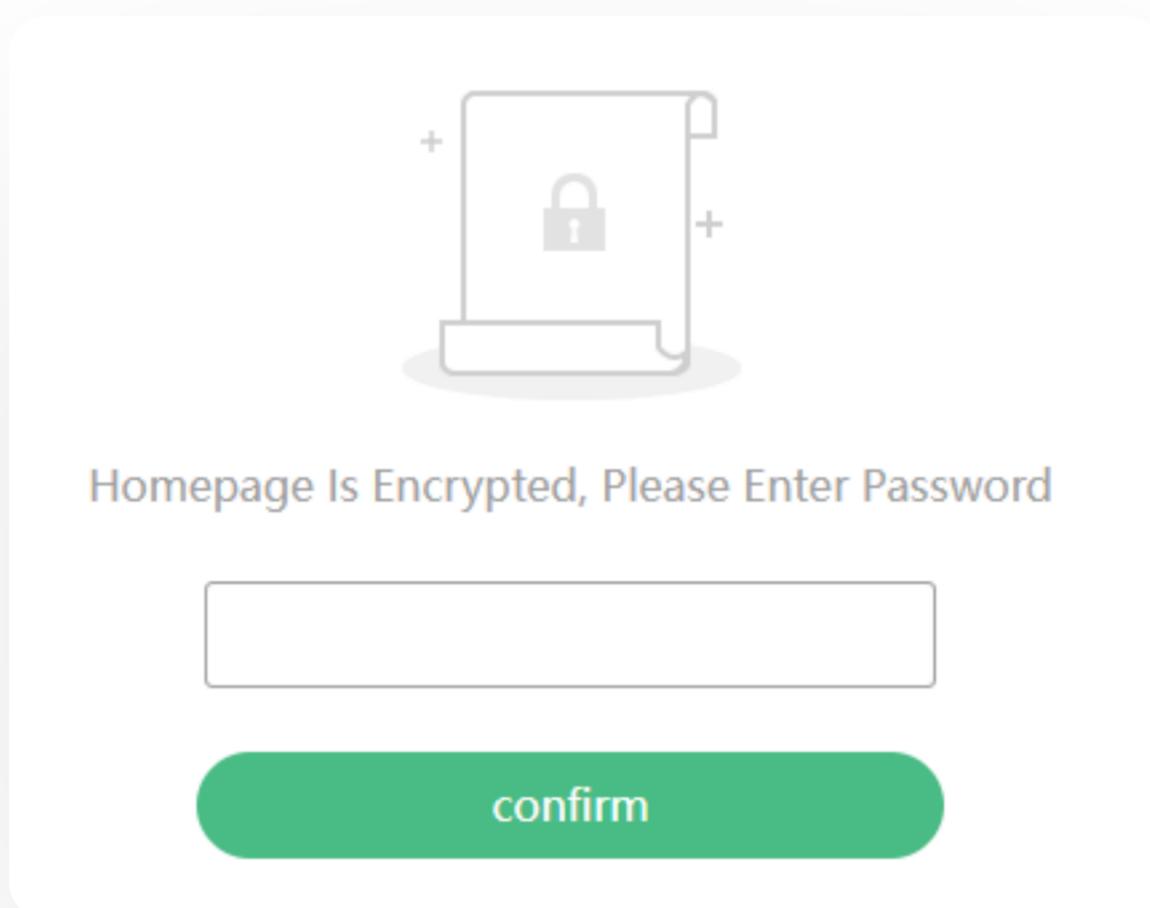
81.8%

19.

YUPOO: A PICTURE ALBUM SERVICE SEEMINGLY DEVOTED TO COUNTERFEITERS

In our study we decided to specifically focus on Yupoo, a Chinese image portal that combines some functionalities from Flickr and other features from Pinterest. It is a general catalog or a repository of images and videos that can be easily organized and shared via a simple link over the Internet. These catalogs can be totally public or protected by a password.

According to our analysis, many counterfeiters use Instagram as an e-commerce showcase, while adopting Yupoo as a detailed product catalog. We identified over 6,500 profiles on Yupoo containing images and videos of counterfeit products for a total of over 2 million images and videos (see examples below).



A counterfeiter profile login on Yupoo.



084-YUPOO-OSMPJ303#001-Loui* Vuitton | 10

[Click Here!!! To Visit yupooalbum](#)

[Click Here!!! To Visit New Page](#)

[Click Here!!! For Buy now](#)

[apply for batch download](#)

[share](#)

Thumbnail Detail Big



084-YUPOO-OSMPJ30...
2021-01-05



084-YUPOO-OSMPJ30...
2021-01-05



084-YUPOO-OSMPJ30...
2021-01-05



084-YUPOO-OSMPJ30...
2021-01-05



084-YUPOO-OSMPJ30...
2021-01-05



084-YUPOO-OSMPJ30...
2021-01-05



084-YUPOO-OSMPJ30...
2021-01-05



084-YUPOO-OSMPJ30...
2021-01-05



084-YUPOO-OSMPJ30...



084-YUPOO-OSMPJ30...

Pictures and video about a Louis Vuitton fake bag

in total 183 albums

< 1 / 2 >



HER clutch



HER clutch



HER Birkin 30cm
Special Order



HER Special
Order Birkin 25cm



HER KELLY



HER Togo HANDBAG



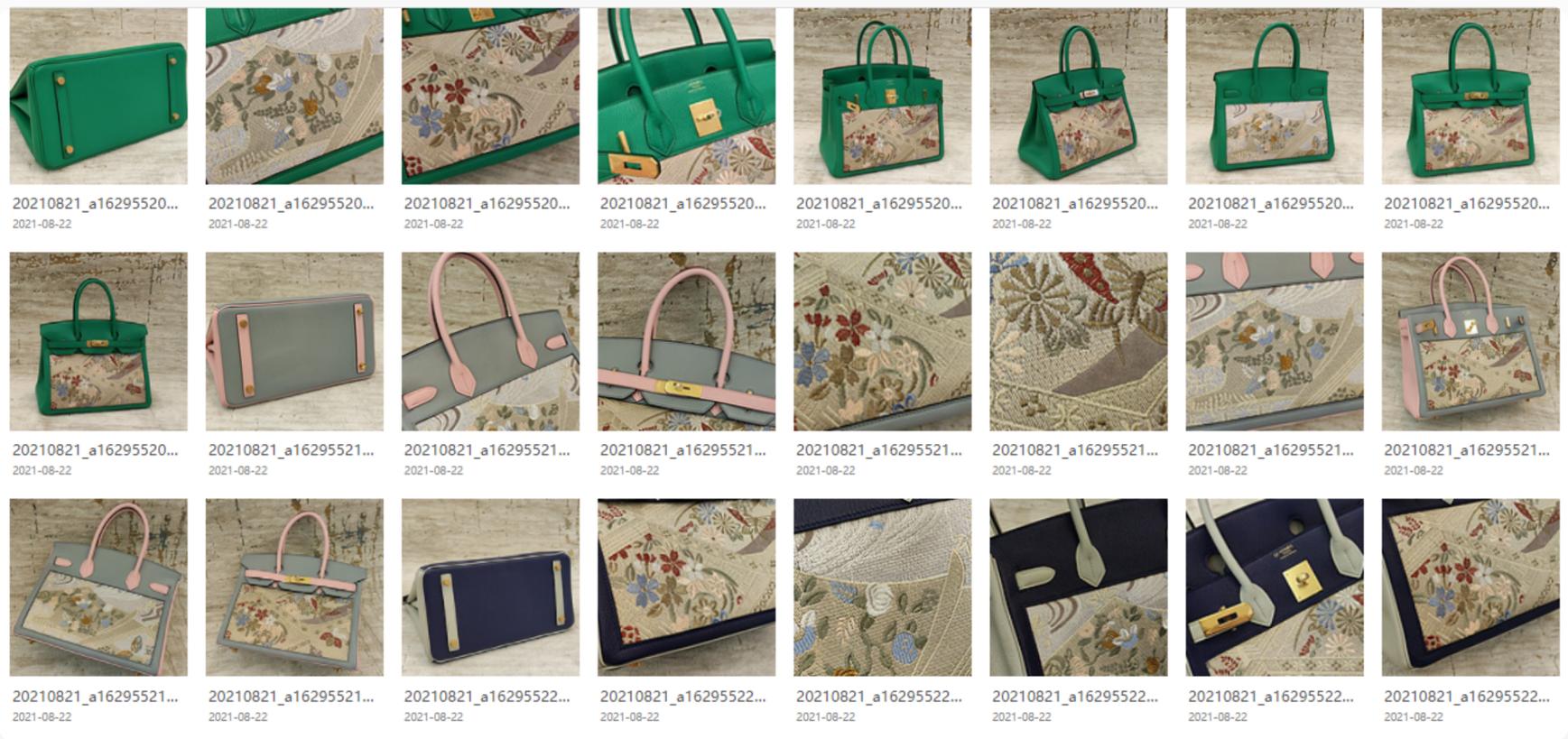
Her Dogon togo
wallet



HER Bearn Epsom



Images of several Hermes fake bags, with detailed photo albums for each model.



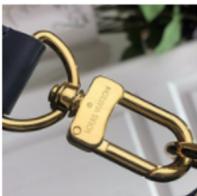
Other detailed catalogs on Yupoo of fake Hermes bags for sale

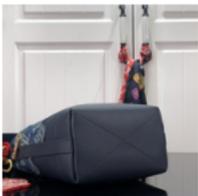

LV JAPANESE CRUISER M45970-1-9
 \$260.89 USD Size:23x28x10cm
 Quality: TOP quality. Come with Brand dust bag and booklet card serial number. Package Weight:1.9Kg

[apply for batch download](#) [share](#)

[Thumbnail](#) [Detail](#) [Big](#)










LV JAPANESE CRUISER... 2021-11-24
 LV JAPANESE CRUISER... 2021-11-24

LV JAPANESE CRUISER... 2021-11-24

Images and details of a Louis Vuitton Pre-Spring 2022 capsule collection by Nigo bag, on sale for \$260 against \$3,650 of the official price.

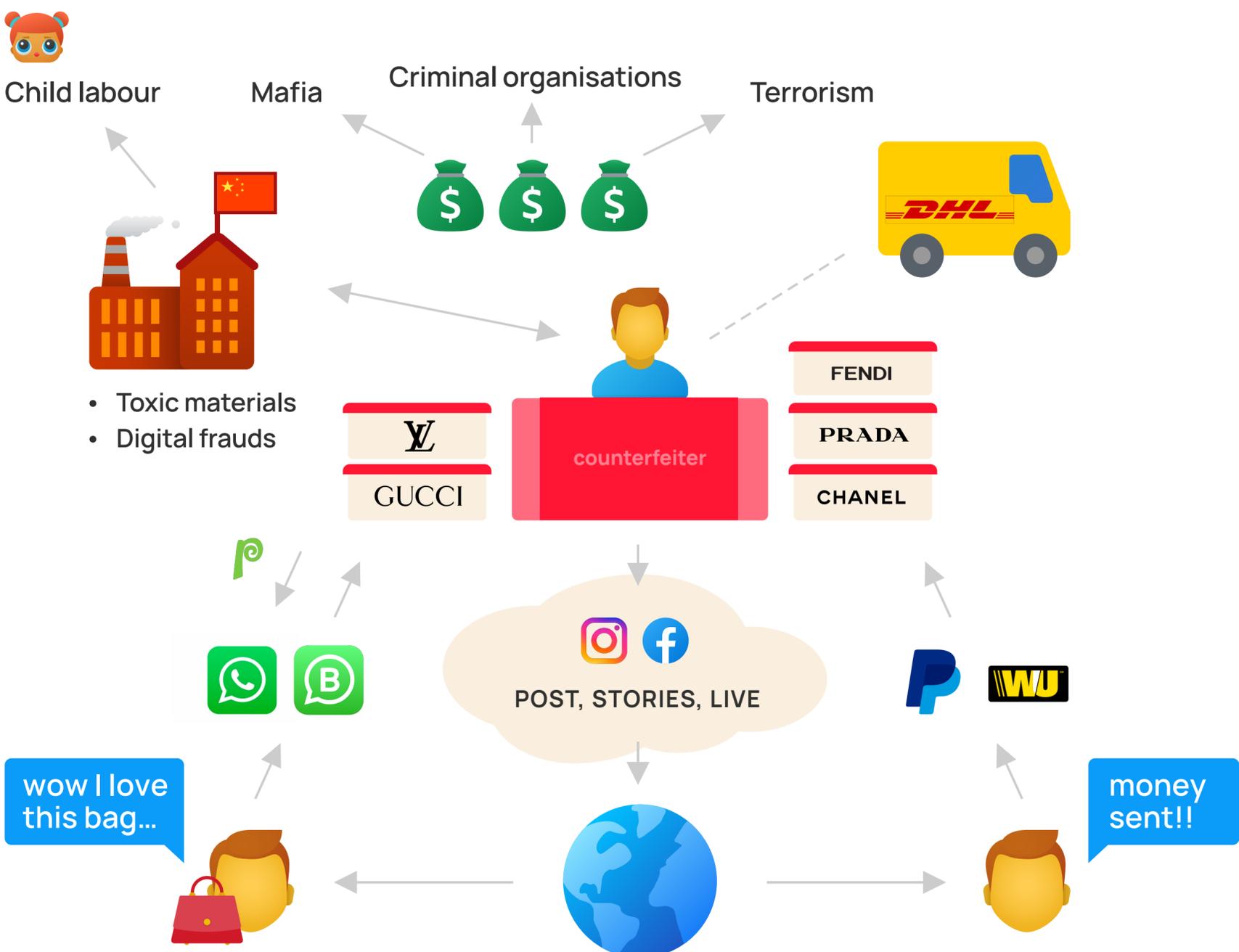
20.

MAJOR FINDINGS OF COUNTERFEITER ACTIVITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Here is a list of the major findings about our study addressing the on-going counterfeiting activities on Facebook and Instagram.

- 20,280 counterfeiters were active on Instagram at the end of October 2021.
- Their potential audience can easily reach 10 million users only through people directly following such counterfeiter accounts.
- 26,770 counterfeiters were active on Facebook at the end of October 2021.
- Their potential audience can easily reach 20 million users only through people that are “friends” with such counterfeiter accounts.
- These fake item sellers on Instagram tend to use less key-words or hashtags related or hinting at illicit activities (cheap, replica, 1:1)
- They also seem to proactively reach out to potential customers by posting various comments or sending private messages to other commenters.
- In general, these Instagram accounts are quite active: over 42% of them published between 100 and 500 posts, while 13% of them published over 1000 posts.
- An analysis of a sample of 200 China-based accounts combined on Facebook and Instagram reveals that about 4 out of 10 are wholesalers of counterfeit goods (B2B).
- Counterfeiters from China are the only ones producing and selling medium-high quality counterfeit goods, while those from Russia, Turkey, Indonesia, Ukraine, and Brazil mostly sell low and poor quality products.
- On average, the price of a Chinese fake product is \$140 retail and \$120 wholesale, compared to \$90 retail of a Russian counterfeit item and \$45 of an Indonesian one.
- Our estimate is that only Chinese wholesale counterfeiters on Facebook and Instagram generate sales between \$1.8 and \$2.1 billion dollars per year.
- About 75% of overall counterfeiters use WhatsApp to communicate with their customers, while 40% of Chinese counterfeiters prefer to use Whatsapp Business.
- Paypal and Western Union are the two payment methods most accepted by counterfeiters, while their top shipping methods are DHL (37.5%) and EMS (35.7%).

- The vast majority of Instagram and Facebook counterfeiters are based in China – 65% (up from 43% in 2019) – followed by Russia (14%) and Turkey (7.5%).
- The brands most pictured are items by Louis Vuitton (almost 6 out of 10), followed by Chanel (8.5%), Fendi (6.7%), Gucci and Prada (both over 3%).
- The LVMH group items/brands cover about 67.8% of the overall visual content posted by counterfeiters. Far distant are Kering and Chanel, both with over 8%, and the other groups combined with about 15%.
- The brands most mentioned by those counterfeiters are Gucci (14.4%), Chanel (12.5%), Dior (10.2%), Fendi and Louis Vuitton (each over 7%).
- Our estimate is that about 18% of overall posts including the most popular hashtags of fashion brands on Instagram (Gucci, Chanel, Dior) are generated by accounts promoting illegal activities.
- Yupoo, a new visual platform combining some features of both Flickr and Pinterest, is now the catalog system most used by counterfeiters. It is a China-based service enabling users to easily create detailed albums (with pictures of zips, seams, labels, etc.) that can be shared via a simple link over the Internet. We identified over 6,500 unique links with over 2 million images of images and videos of counterfeit items.



21.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, Meta is doing an excellent job against digital propaganda and similar illicit activities. We can't say the same about counterfeiting.

In 2014 our research team uncovered a broader counterfeiting trafficking on Facebook: today this trend worsened and spread to all Meta-related social media platforms. Aiming at becoming e-commerce leaders, particularly Instagram and Facebook are attracting counterfeiting merchants and producers, selling from luxury handbags to designer sunglasses to fake money and passports. Now even sales of fake surgical masks against Covid-19 infections are on rise on those platforms. This is the overall outcome of our latest research study.

Despite Meta's security reports and legal initiatives, the effects of their supposed crackdown on these illicit activities are disappointing and insufficient. As detailed in our studies on Instagram produced in the last five years, the number of active counterfeiters remains steadily in the tens of thousands and they generate a huge volume of content attracting a broad audience. This problem is now rampant also on Facebook itself: its various features, from Marketplace to Live, are used to openly showcase and promote a variety of counterfeit goods for sale.

At the same time, WhatsApp has become the counterfeiters' favorite and most used tool. Particularly WhatsApp Business, an option aimed at mom-and-pop companies, is now used by 40% of such Chinese counterfeiters, surpassing even the local and wildly popular WeChat.

Based on our data, we estimate that China-based wholesale counterfeiters earn about \$2 billion per year thanks to their visibility and activity on Meta platforms. An additional income is provided by an equivalent retail market. It is therefore obvious that for the Meta conglomerate, contrary to its public statements, such fight against counterfeiting is not a priority. In turn, this apparently unstoppable trend is causing a whole array of serious problems, including child labor, exploitation of women, toxic products, digital frauds, and funding of criminal and terrorist organizations.

It is evident that a broader and coordinated strategy is needed to successfully block and prevent such counterfeiting activities on major social media platforms. Along with stricter internal measures and policing tools, National governments and regulatory bodies must collaborate to tackle this issue and to protect consumers and companies worldwide.

While some media and experts paint a glowing online future based on metaverse and cryptocurrencies, we will do better to instead address current and urgent matters – starting with counterfeiting and related issues. It is true that many counterfeit goods can be difficult to spot, since they closely resemble legitimate items for sale. However, in the last few years, such e-commerce giants as Amazon and Alibaba have been implementing strategies that are showing some positive results.

The same is required in the wider social media sphere, starting with its main actor, the Meta conglomerate. Beside sharing content and conquering many “followers”, people using these platforms need to know that purchase and/or possession of illegal contraband carries serious criminal liability and heavy penalties.

Despite the difficulties of conducting our studies as independent researchers, we are confident that our data – collected in several study since 2014 – could contribute to a positive outcome for the public good. Not to mention the pressing need for further investigation and related media focus on this topic. Indeed, our data shown above underline how and why this is still a widespread problem deserving the full attention of all stakeholders involved.

As a final note, it is worth mentioning that our studies were mentioned in a 2019 report a for the President of the United States³⁸, while recently a research group from a US University reached out to ask us about techniques and methods for dealing with counterfeiting on social media. This open sharing about know-how and potential strategies are necessary steps toward a collaborative effort to address complex issues for the good of the world community.

³⁸ Homeland Security Office for Strategy, Policy & Plans, "Combating Trafficking in Counterfeit and Pirated Goods. Report to the President of the United States", dhs.gov https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/20_0124_plcy_counterfeit-pirated-goods-report_01.pdf