Illegal ivory dealers starting to use similar code words to hide online sales

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Ivory sellers in Europe are using the same code words in different languages to covertly advertise items for sale, potentially making it easier for law enforcement agencies to uncover such activities by reducing the number of phrases they have to track.

Sara Alfino and Dr. David Roberts from the Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology within the School of Anthropology and Conservation at the University of Kent examined 19 different code words and phrases that have been identified as representing ivory products on sale across four of eBay's European websites: the UK, Italy, France and Spain.

They found that despite eBay's ban on ivory sales there were 183 ivory items on sale by 113 sellers during their research window between 18 January and 5 February 2017.

Not only did these sales violate eBay's trading conditions but some broke regulations under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and EU regulations regarding the sale of 'unworked' ivory.

Despite the use of codes to hide sales and the problems this could pose law enforcement agencies working in different languages, the researchers found that the majority of items on offer—around 80% - were grouped around six code words across the four eBay sites monitored.

This suggests the sales of ivory items online between traders is standardising around set code words, even when using different languages, as globalisation and market forces affect their business like any other.

This could help narrow the scope within which law enforcement agencies have to search for the sale of ivory items and allow machine learning tools to be focused on key terms too, helping improve identification of illegal sales.

However, the researchers say further work will be required to monitor

sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Craigslist to see what terms are used. These sites have different ways in which items are presented for sale and therefore it is not known to what extent these code words are not only shared between languages, but also across these online sales platforms.

Nonetheless, if a 'digital fingerprint' could be identified for the sale of ivory items or other wildlife trade items that spanned platforms, languages and countries, the global monitoring of wildlife trade could potentially be made easier.

Dr. Roberts said: 'It is clear that identifying illegal online trade in ivory is a challenge for law enforcement agencies. However, the research shows that there are ways in which they can take advantage of market conditions that are forcing traders to standardise on code words to try and find buyers for their goods.'

The paper, Code word usage in the online trade in ivory across four EU member States, has been published in the *Oryx-The International Journal of Conservation Fauna & Flora International*.

More information: Sara Alfino et al, Code word usage in the online ivory trade across four European Union member states, *Oryx* (2018). DOI: 10.1017/S0030605318000406

Provided by University of Kent

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