

Partnërka in Crime: Characterizing Deceptive Affiliate Marketing Offers

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NYU

TANDON SCHOOL
OF ENGINEERING

26th Passive and Active Measurement Conference (PAM 2025), 12 March 2025



MUSK

ANNOUNCES DEPARTURE FROM TESLA

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Elon Musk To Step Back From Tesla And SpaceX, Jumps on Quantum Computing Financial Tech



most viewed



Venezuela crisis: Maduro claims victory over 'deranged' coup attempt



Trump Russia: Mueller criticized attorney general's memo on findings



Live Venezuela crisis: Maduro claims coup has been 'defeated' – as it happened



Japan welcomes new emperor Naruhito as Reiwa era begins



Box jellyfish: Australian researchers find antidote for world's most venomous creature

Smart Investing That Makes You \$9288 in 5 Hours And Cures Poverty

Our smart investing can make you thousands in less than 7 days, and will help cure poverty while you earn!



Partners




Deceptive Affiliate Marketing

Warning: Due to extremely high media demand, we will close regi

Immediate Edge v3.0 ABOUT US

Immediate Edge 3.0

Revolutionizing Cryptocurrency Trading: Introducing the Latest



What is the Immediate Edge 3.0?

30-DAY KETOSIS

THE EASIEST WAY TO BURN FAT



BURN FAT FASTER THAN EVER
Doctors, nutritionists, celebrities all know the fat burning benefits of being in ketosis!

BURN FAT FOR ENERGY, NOT CARBS!
When your body is in Ketosis, it is burning Fat Cells for energy instead of Carbs!

LOVE THE WAY YOU FEEL!
Burning fat for energy instead of carbs gives your body 225% more energy!

GET YOUR RISK FREE BOX!
100% ALL NATURAL PURE KETOSIS FORMULA

Win the brand new iPhone 12 Pro


Hurry! This offer will expire soon!

Please enter your email

I am over 18 and I have accepted the terms.

Continue

Scanning Done: 2020, Oct 12 13:22:05



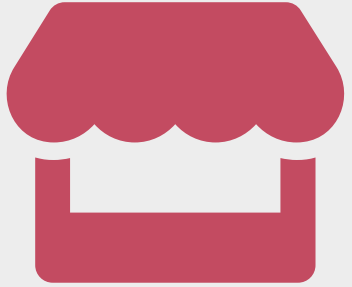
Install now:
Scan viruses / Farewell to virus / Stay safe 24/7 with real-time protection

To continue, first verify your phone number:

Example: (07xxxxxxxx)

What is it?

Affiliate marketing



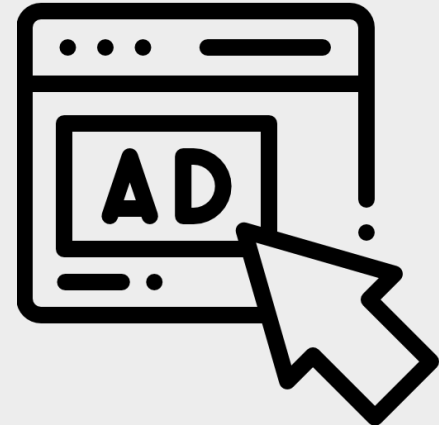
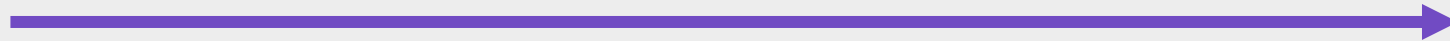
Merchant



Affiliate



outsource promotion



Affiliate marketing



Merchant



Affiliate network

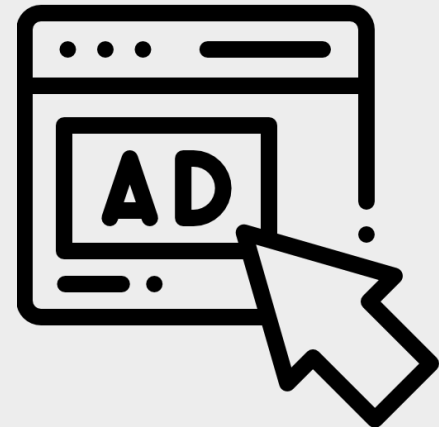
manage interactions



Affiliate



outsource promotion



Benign

Legitimate
affiliate
programs

amazonassociates

Promote, earn and grow with the
AliExpress Affiliate Program

Affiliate marketing

Benign

Legitimate
affiliate
programs

(Amazon,
AliExpress, ...)

Malicious

- Illegal pharma
 - Counterfeits
 - Ransomware
 - Malware
("malvertising")
 - ...
- affiliate programs*

Samosseiko. "The Partnerka - What Is It, and Why Should You Care?" 19th Virus Bulletin International Conference. 2009.

Kanich et al. "Show Me the Money: Characterizing Spam-advertised Revenue". USENIX Security. 2011.

McCoy et al. "PharmaLeaks: Understanding the Business of Online Pharmaceutical Affiliate Programs". USENIX Security. 2012.

Karami et al. "Folex: An Analysis of an Herbal and Counterfeit Luxury Goods Affiliate Program". eCrime. 2013

Huang et al. "Tracking Ransomware End-to-end". IEEE S&P. 2018.

Affiliate marketing

Benign

Legitimate
affiliate
programs

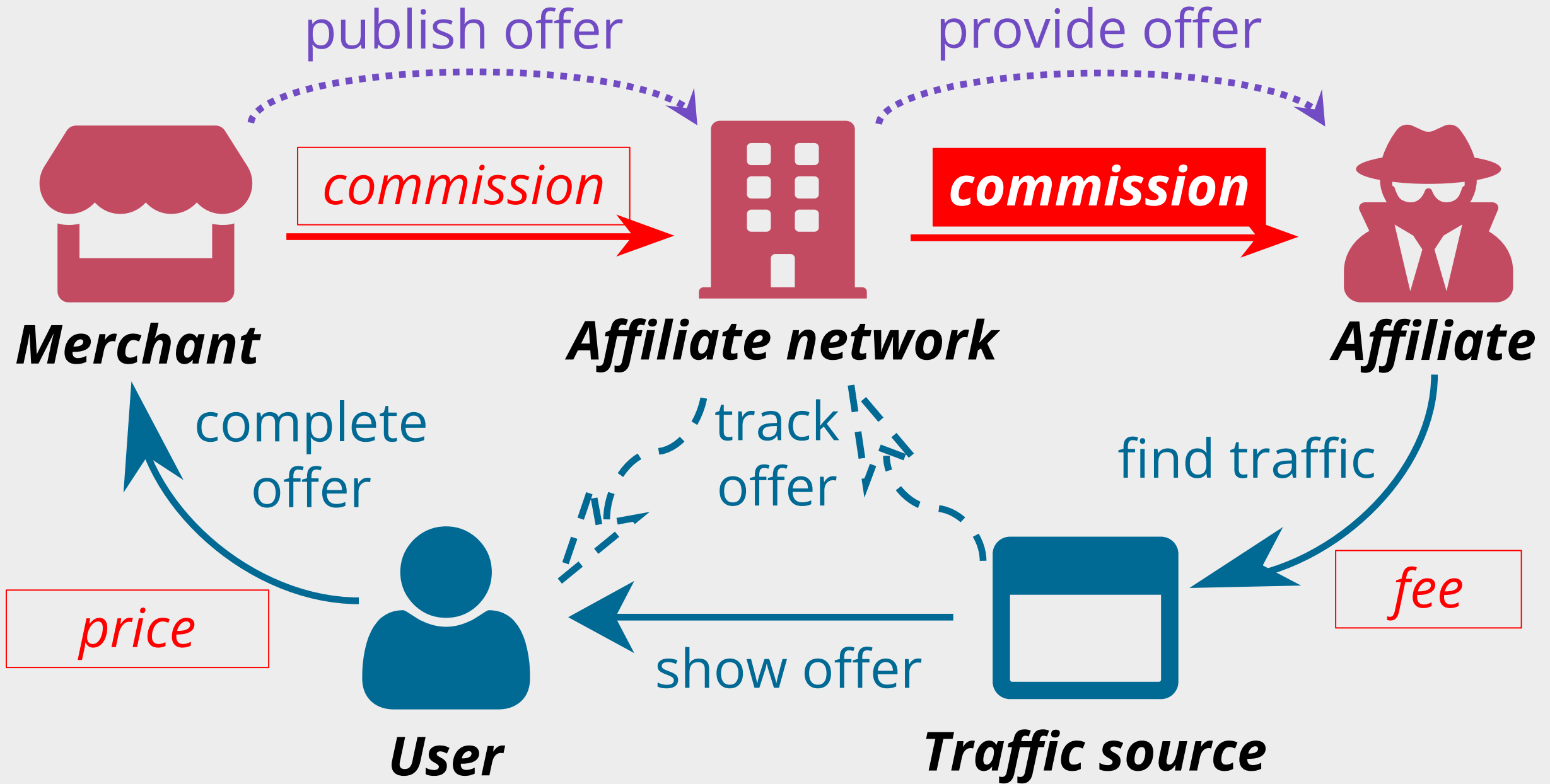
(Amazon,
AliExpress, ...)

Deceptive Affiliate Marketing

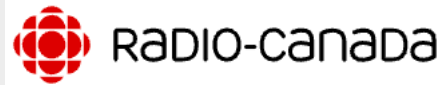
- Products/services of **low quality**
- Soliciting and selling **personal data**
- **Deceptive** terms/claims/endorsements
- No **mainstream** recognition

Malicious

- Illegal pharma
 - Counterfeits
 - Ransomware
 - Malware (“malvertising”)
 - ...
- affiliate programs*



“... the empire linked to Mr. Keezer generates **annual** revenues of **\$100 million.**”



“Gryn estimated that users of his tracking software place **\$400 million** worth of ads **a year** on Facebook and an additional **\$1.3 billion** elsewhere.”

**Bloomberg
Businessweek**

ALLEGED DECEPTIVE ADVERTISING & BILLING PRACTICES

Over 5 years,
consumers paid

\$179 million



Pitched products falsely
claiming to eliminate
wrinkles, add muscle,
or lose weight

Ran scam using fake
celebrity endorsements










Continued to charge
consumers who thought
they signed up for one-
time “free trial offers”

Source: Federal Trade Commission | [FTC.gov](https://www.ftc.gov)

How do we get *inside*?

Offer aggregators



	Bitcoin Billionaire (weekly payments)_CPA_AU_KW_QA_OM_AE_BH_MY ChameleonAds #Finance	\$ 600.00
	Sweepstakes - iphone 12 pro - \$18 - US/CA/AUS/NZ LoadedVIP #Sweepstake @US/CA/AU/NZ	\$ 18.00
	11863 Careem_SA_Android_NonRewarded_CPI_nonin AddAttain #Mobile #Android @SA	\$ 0.50
	MyeBooky - iPhone SE LP48 FR - CC Submit The Lead Wolves #Sweepstake @FR	€ 24.00
	Valued Opinions - US - DOI Affilade Media #DOI @US	\$ 0.80
	3-Bureau One-Time Report (PPS) - Financial/Credit Score - US Ambalaya Affiliate #Finance #PPS @US	\$ 10.00
	(15678) [WEB+WAP] Rox Casino - UA - CPA Rainmaker #Mobile #Casino #Gambling #Beauty @UA	\$ 20.00 15

Offer aggregators

OFFERVAULT



aff+

Affbank

...

- › **Ground truth**
- › Unprecedented metadata, across:
 - › affiliate networks
 - › verticals (categories)
 - › countries
 - › demographics
 - › commissions

Smart Investing That Makes You \$9288 in 5 Hours And Cures Poverty

Our smart investing can make you thousands in less than 7 days, and will help cure poverty while you earn!



QuantumAI English

Vertical: Cryptocurrency

Network: Algo Affiliates

Commission: \$600

Which scams are in it?

Dating/Adult
Entertainment
Finance
Gambling
Games
Health/Beauty
Software
Sweepstakes
E-commerce

**Deceptive
Affiliate
Marketing**

9 verticals

Dating/Adult
Entertainment
Finance
Gambling
Games
Health/Beauty
Software
Sweepstakes
E-commerce

Exaggerated claims

The screenshot shows a website with a red warning banner at the top: "WARNING: Due to extremely high media demand, we will close registration as of 2023-12-12 - HURRY! 05:17". Below this is the "BitcoinEvolution" logo and a note: "EXCLUSIVE FOR CANADA RESIDENTS" with a Canadian flag icon. A user profile for "Charlotte P. just made \$102" is visible. The main headline reads "Crypto Is Making People Rich And You Can Become The Next Millionaire..." with a sub-headline "See what famous people like Bill Gates and Eric Schmidt have to say". Below the headline is a video player showing a smartphone screen with a Bitcoin wallet app. To the right of the video is a button that says "START CHANGING YOUR LIFE TODAY". The bottom section of the page features a woman in a bikini holding a bottle of "CoreSlim" supplement. The text next to her says "30-DAY KETOSIS THE EASIEST WAY TO BURN FAT" and "BURN FAT FASTER THAN EVER". A testimonial below the bottle states: "Doctors, nutritionists, celebrities all know the fat burning benefits of being in ketosis!". On the right side of the page is a purple box with the text "TELL US WHERE TO SEND YOUR PACKAGE!" and a form with input fields for "First Name", "Last Name", "Phone Number", and "Address".

Useless / Dangerous(?) products

Dating/Adult
Entertainment
Finance
Gambling
Games
Health/Beauty
Software
Sweepstakes
E-commerce

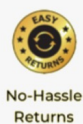
VIVO TONIC
Blood Sugar Support
60 CAPSULES
DIETARY SUPPLEMENT

TYPE 2 DIABETES
Diabetes drugs can't, won't and never will improve or cure type 2 diabetes!

4.7 OUT OF 5
PayPal VISA Mastercard DISCOVER

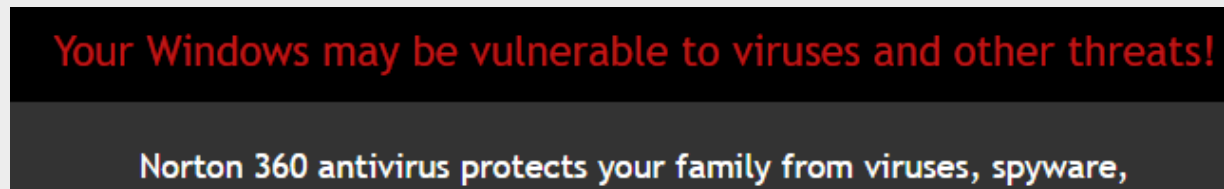
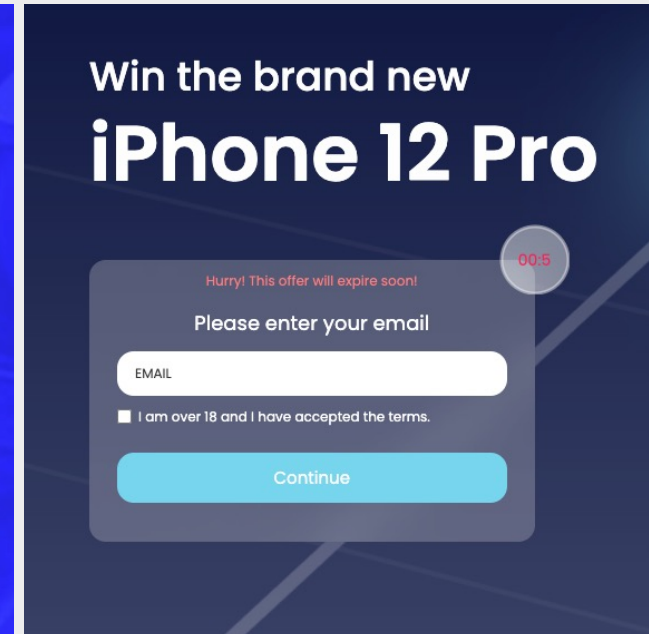
STOP WASTING MONEY ON DIRTY, UNSTABLE ELECTRICITY

- ⚡ Quickly and Easily Stabilize Your Homes Electrical Current
- ⚡ Reduce Harmful Dirty Electricity From Your Home
- ⚡ Protect and Prolong the Life of Your Appliances & Electronics



Brand abuse

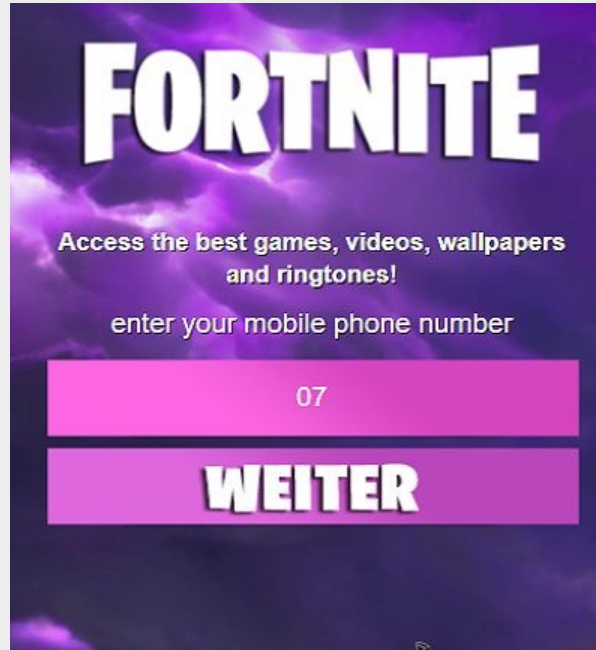
Dating/Adult
Entertainment
Finance
Gambling
Games
Health/Beauty
Software
Sweepstakes
E-commerce



Walmart warns customers against fake social media giveaway

Dating/Adult
Entertainment
Finance
Gambling
Games
Health/Beauty
Software
Sweepstakes
E-commerce

Hidden subscriptions ("free trial")



By participating, you enter a paid mobile content subscription. Each week you will receive 3 SMS, 5.00 CHF / SMS (Swisscom, Salt user) or 1 SMS, 9.90 CHF / SMS (Sunrise user). To stop the service, send STOP MOBIAPP to 711 or call the hotline 0445816520. You must be older than 18 years. By participating in this service, you accept the terms and conditions (terms and conditions) and confirm that they have read and understood. All brand names, (registered) trademarks, images and product descriptions are the property of their legal owners and are neither sponsor nor partner of this promotion. The standard MO SMS price depends on the tariff model of the user. Mobile operator data may incur charges.

on:09:48
December 21, 2024.

Dating/Adult

Fake dating profiles

Entertainment

Fake content platforms

Finance

Fake investment platforms

Gambling

Unregulated platforms

Games

Hidden subscriptions

Health/Beauty

Fake supplements, ...

Software

Scareware

Sweepstakes

Fake contests

E-commerce

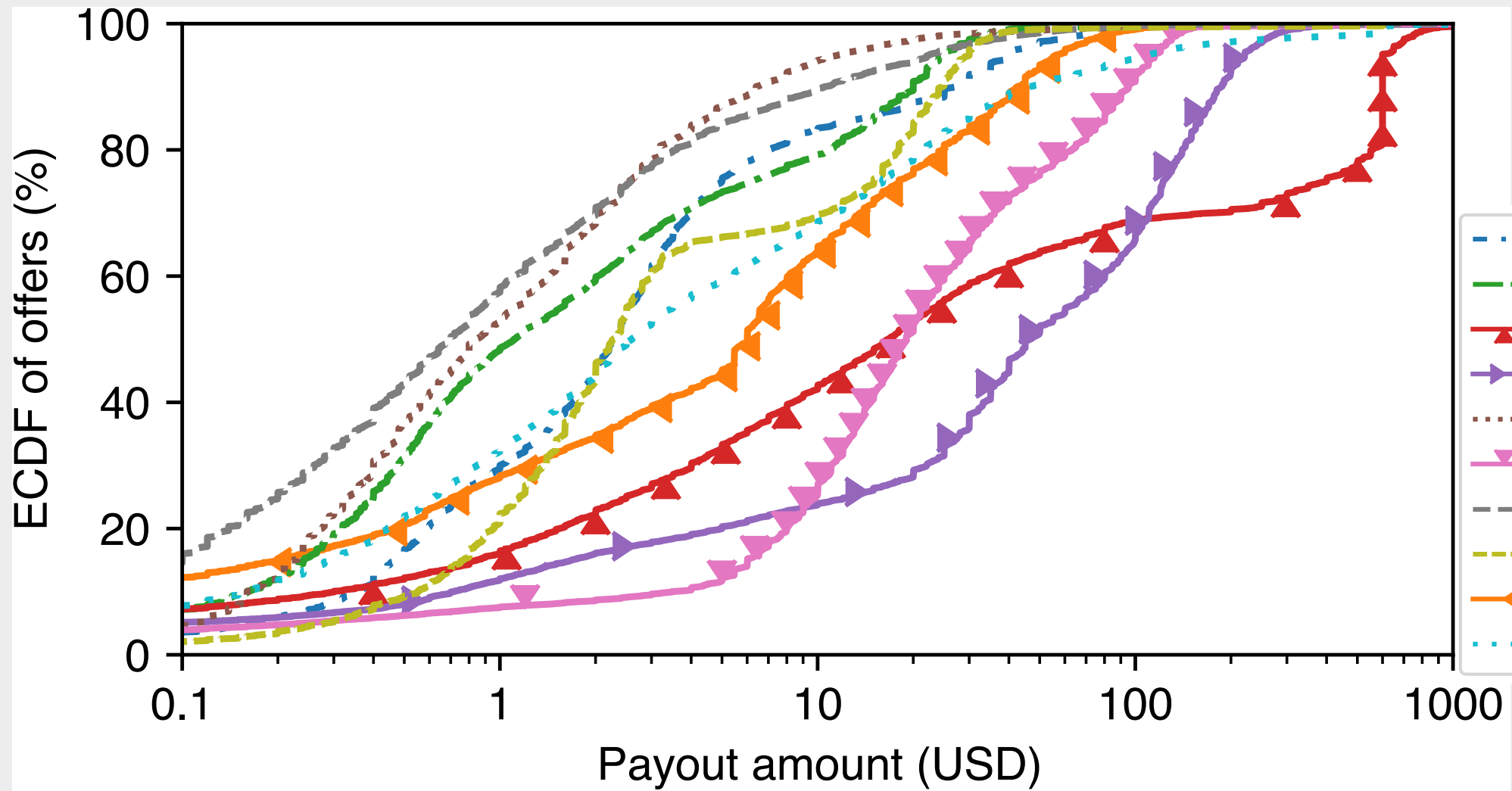
Useless products

How do they operate?

Summary statistics

- › **23** aggregators (16 English + 7 Russian)
- › **4** years of daily scraping (24 March 2020 – 1 Sep 2024)
- › **449,891** offers (= distinct products/services)
- › **1,165** affiliate networks

Offer commissions per vertical



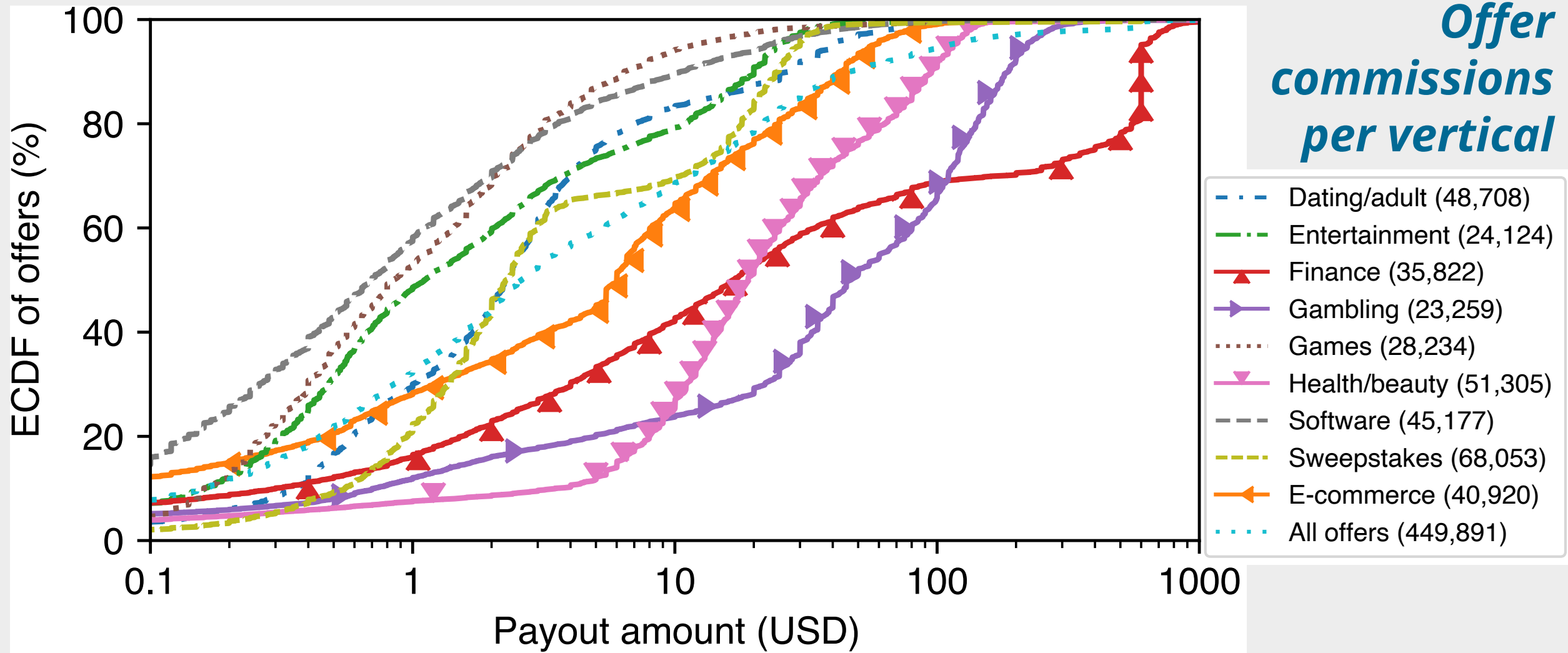
Entertainment
Games
Software

Subscriptions
Dating/adult
Sweepstakes

Physical goods
E-commerce
Health/beauty

Deposits
Finance
Gambling

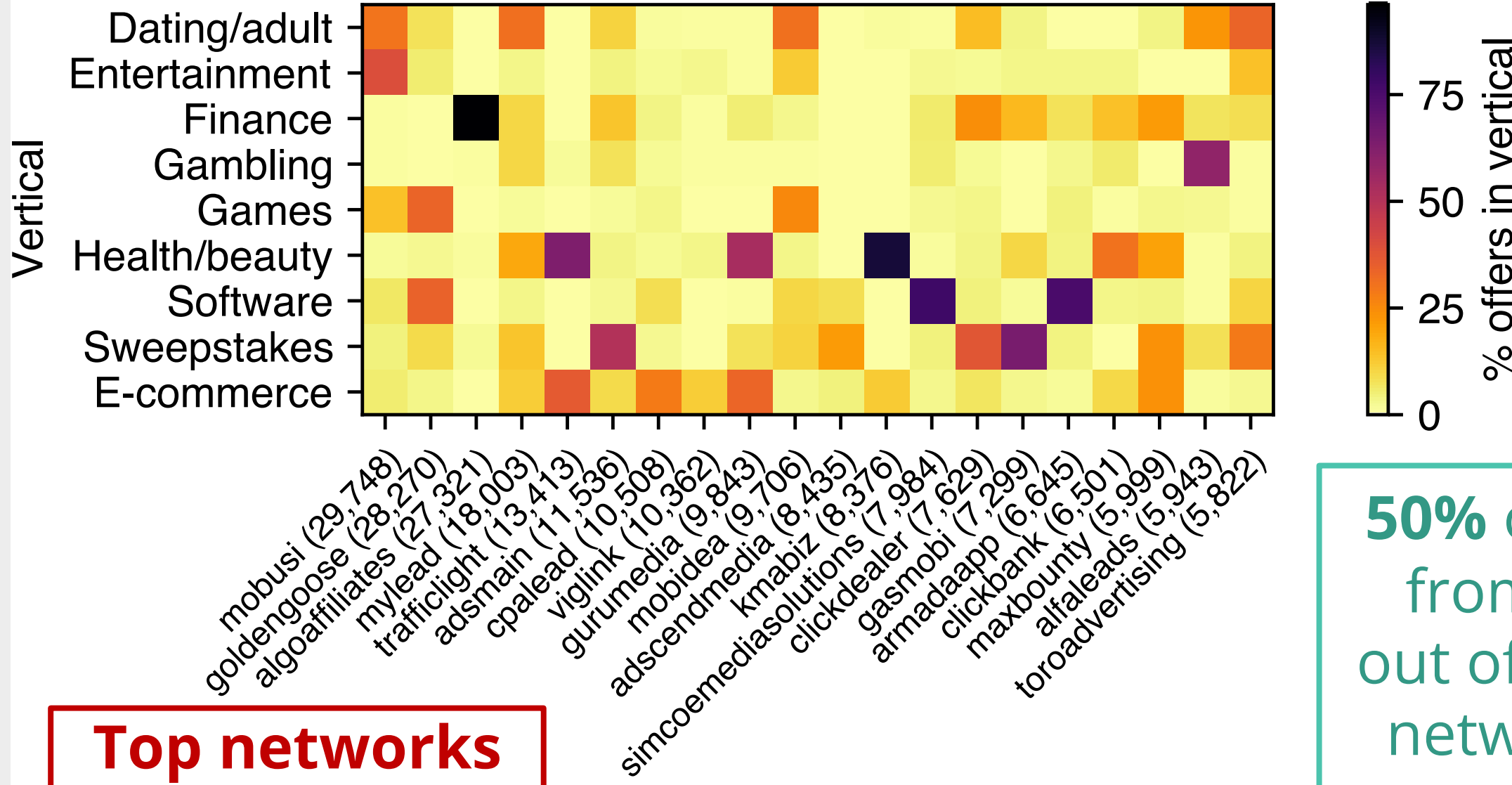
Offer commissions per vertical



Different promotion strategies for affiliates:

High risk/high reward/low volume? vs. Low reward/low risk/high volume?

Offer verticals per affiliate network

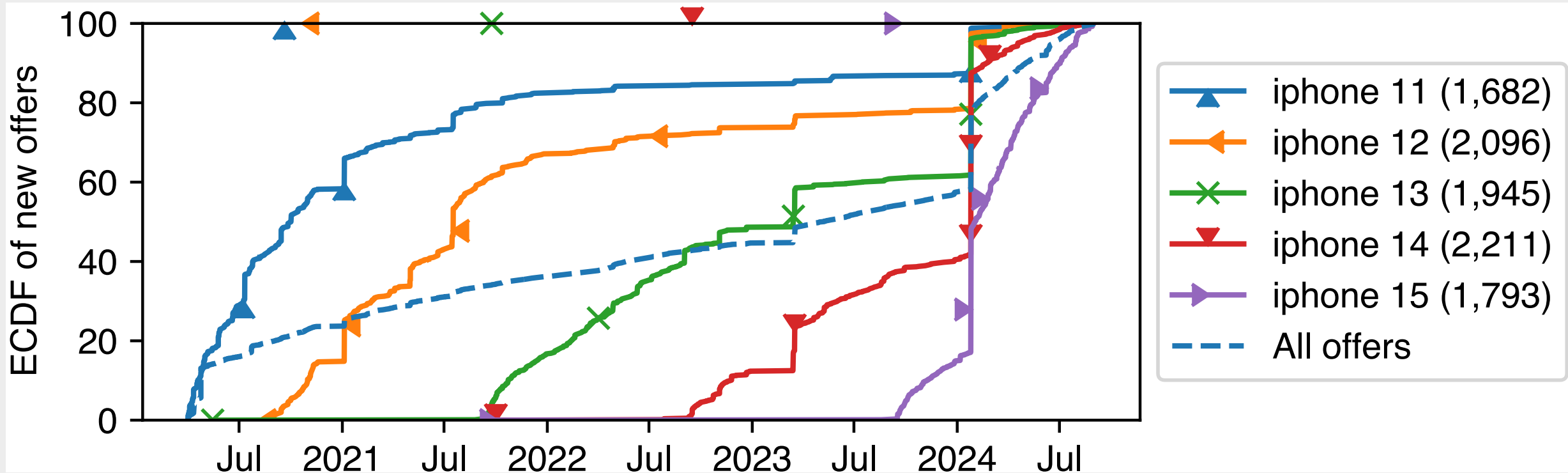


Top networks

50% offers from 47 out of 1165 networks

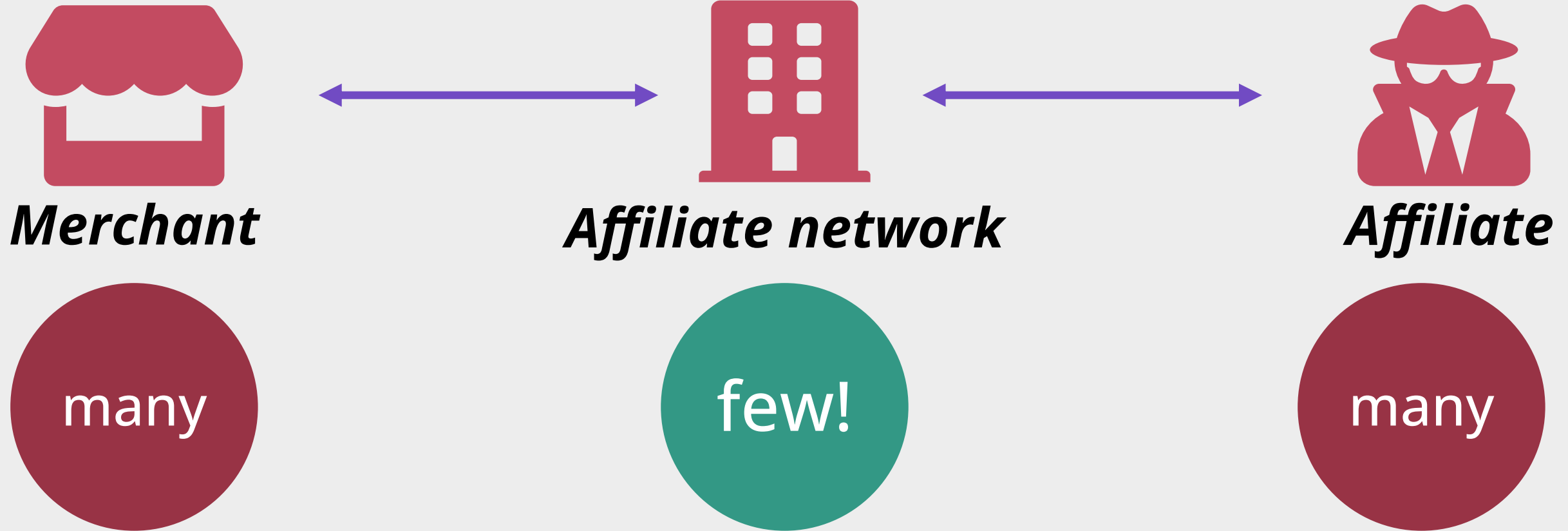
Affiliate network (number of offers)

Merchants capitalize on new trends



What can we do about it?

Affiliate marketing



Interesting **bottleneck** for
Infrastructural and **financial** intervention

Takeaways

- › **Deceptive affiliate marketing** is behind many scams
 - › *Huge harm: misleading users to lose millions and billions*
- › Affiliates/merchants **specialize, differentiate, innovate**
 - › *Must obtain **broad coverage** to be effective*
- › The **grey zone** means they operate **relatively openly**
 - › *Unique opportunity to study them from within*
- › **Affiliate networks** play a central role in the ecosystem
 - › *Prime target for intervention*

Partnärka in Crime:
Characterizing Deceptive
Affiliate Marketing Offers

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@VictorLePochat

