

The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Address Clustering

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Abstract—Address clustering tries to construct the one-to-many mapping from entities to addresses in the Bitcoin system. Simple heuristics based on the micro-structure of transactions have proved very effective in practice. In this paper we describe the primary reasons behind this effectiveness: address reuse, avoidable merging, super-clusters with high centrality, and the incremental growth of address clusters. We quantify their impact during Bitcoin’s first seven years of existence.

1. Introduction

Bitcoin is a double-edged sword for financial privacy. It allows anyone to conduct financial transactions with anyone else in the world without having to divulge identifying information to intermediaries. However, it requires those transactions to be broadcast to the world. The contents of the transactions, their relationship with other transactions, and the very act of broadcasting the transactions themselves may unintentionally disclose information about the transactors to interested third parties. In fact, many interested third parties systematically gather and analyse this information for reasons such as market research, competitor analysis, compliance, and law enforcement.

Address clustering is a cornerstone of this analysis. It partitions the set of addresses observed in Bitcoin transactions into maximal subsets of addresses that are likely controlled by the same entity. Each subset in the partition is an address cluster. When combined with address tagging (associating real-world identities with addresses) and graph analysis, it is an effective means of analysing Bitcoin activity at both the micro- and macro-levels, see, e.g., [1]–[8]. Experimental analysis has shown that a single heuristic (the multi-input heuristic) can identify more than 69% of the addresses in the wallets stored by lightweight clients.

As a token of its effectiveness, consider Fig 1. This is a graphical summary of the most significant flows of bitcoin between the largest address clusters during Bitcoin’s first five years in existence. Using publicly available information, we can identify all but the gray vertices: the red vertices are darknet markets; the purple vertices are gambling services; the green vertices are exchanges and the blue vertices are mining pools. The labels for the exchanges and mining pools, although known, are omitted to avoid indiscriminately

linking their identities to darknet markets without fully presenting the methodology behind this summary and the definitions for “most significant flows” and “largest address clusters”. However, it is based on the methodologies presented in the papers above and relies on address clustering at its core.

This paper considers the reasons behind the effectiveness of address clustering using the multi-input heuristic [9]. This heuristic assumes that the addresses in transaction outputs redeemed in a multi-input transaction were controlled by the same entity. Although not true in the general case, it is a useful heuristic in practice. In Sect. 2 we briefly list some related work. In Sections 3 and 4 we study address cluster counts and sizes. We quantify the levels of address reuse and cluster merging. We observe “super-clusters” and analyse their centrality. We study the formation and structure of address clusters in Sect. 5. We conclude with some future work in Sect. 6.

2. Related Work

Address clusters are the fundamental building-blocks on which many high-level blockchain analyses are performed. They can be constructed using the multi-input heuristic as noted by Bitcoin’s creator [9]. Reid and Harrigan [1] considered the impact of address clusters on anonymity. This approach can be augmented with change heuristics [2], [3], [6], temporal behaviour [5], [10] and transaction fingerprinting [7]. Although the analyses in the present paper are based on the multi-input heuristic only, they can be extended to any combination of heuristics.

Nick [11] analysed the performance of several clustering heuristics by exploiting a vulnerability in connection Bloom filtering used by lightweight clients. He found that the multi-input heuristic can identify more than 69% of the addresses in the vulnerable wallets.

Ober et al. [4] studied the sizes and lifespans of address clusters and showed that the sizes of the address clusters follow a scale-free distribution. Lischke and Fabian [8] showed that major darknet markets, gambling services, exchanges and mining pools were major hubs in the address cluster graph (similar to Fig. 1 but not limited to the largest address clusters) during Bitcoin’s first four years of existence.

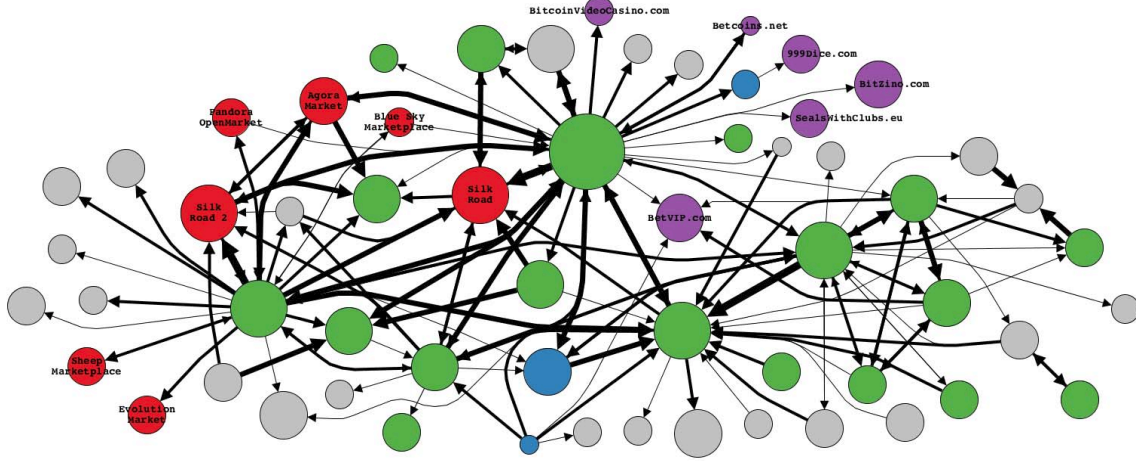


Figure 1. A graphical summary of the most significant flows of bitcoin between the largest address clusters during Bitcoin’s first five years in existence. The vertices correspond to address clusters: red vertices are darknet markets; purple vertices are gambling services; green vertices are exchanges and blue vertices are mining pools. The gray vertices are not immediately identifiable using publicly available information.

Maxwell described CoinJoin [12], a protocol for trustless centralised Bitcoin mixing. This causes the multi-input heuristic to produce false positives. CoinJoin is a centralised mixing protocol; it requires a third-party or CoinJoin server to operate. Other protocols in this category include Mixcoin [13] and Blindcoin [14]. Decentralised mixing protocols do not require any third-party, trusted or trustless. Protocols in this category include CoinSwap [15], CoinShuffle [16] and CoinParty [17]. Shentu and Yu [18] review several trustless Bitcoin protocols.

Möser et al. [19], [20] considered the implications of blockchain analyses, including address clustering, for anti-money laundering. Imwinkelreid [21] discussed its implications for digital forensics.

3. Counting Address Clusters

The following analyses were performed when the block at the tip of the Bitcoin blockchain was at height 396 577 and the last eight hexadecimal digits of the block hash were 900a6f4c.

Figure 2 compares the monthly counts of transactions (red line) with the monthly counts of new addresses (blue line). The number of new addresses has grown in line with the number of transactions. The monthly counts of address clusters (green line) with at least two addresses has grown at a much slower rate.

We consider the relationship between these counts in Fig. 3. We plot the number of new addresses observed per transaction (purple line) and the number of newly merged address clusters created per transaction (orange line). To adjust for the rapid growth in transactions in Bitcoin’s recent history, we replace the horizontal time axis with ordinal transaction numbers: this compresses low-activity periods and expands high-activity periods. We observe that both ratios have been relatively stable for the past two years and

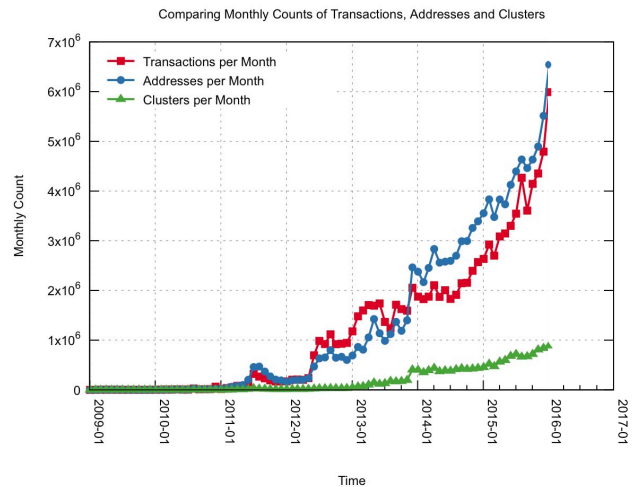


Figure 2. A plot of the monthly counts of transactions (red line), new addresses (blue line) and address clusters (green line) with at least two addresses. For the past two years, the monthly number of new addresses is greater than the monthly number of transactions.

that the former is an order of magnitude larger than the latter.

Can we establish upper bounds for the two ratios? Nakamoto [9] suggested that “a new key pair should be used for each transaction to keep them from being linked to a common owner.” This is from the perspective of the payee(s) only; if the payer requires additional transaction outputs, say, for change, they should also use a new address. For transaction outputs that contain Pay-to-PubKey and Pay-to-PubKey-Hash scripts, the number of transaction outputs per transaction is an upper bound for the number of new addresses per transaction. This can be adjusted for transaction outputs that contain OP_RETURN scripts, multi-

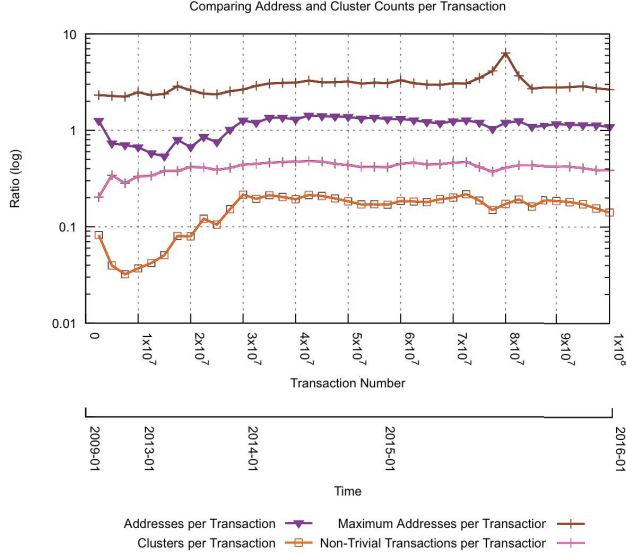


Figure 3. A plot of the ratios of new addresses per transaction (purple line) and newly merged address clusters per transaction (orange line). The maximum addresses per transaction (brown line) and non-trivial transactions per transaction (pink line) are respective upper bounds.

signature scripts and Pay-to-Script-Hash scripts where the redemption script is known (brown line). The gap between the brown and purple lines is a measure of the level of address reuse; the wider the gap the greater the level of address reuse.

Similarly, the fraction of transactions that spend at least two transaction outputs assigned to different addresses (pink line) is an upper bound for the number of newly merged address clusters per transaction. We refer to these transactions as being non-trivial. If every transaction output created a new address then every non-trivial transaction would create a newly merged address cluster. The gap between the pink and orange lines is a measure of the level of cluster merging; the wider the gap the greater the level of cluster merging. Even in the presence of address reuse, this gap could be narrowed through the use of merge avoidance [22], [23].

The existence of both gaps is significant. New key pairs are not being generated for every transaction allowing the multi-input heuristic to link addresses to a common owner. This is one reason that address clustering is unreasonably effective. There is considerable reuse of addresses and merging of address clusters. We will discuss a second reason in the next section.

4. Measuring Cluster Sizes

The address clusters with at least two addresses are binned by size in Fig. 4. Both the horizontal and the vertical axes use logarithmic scales. We observe the presence of “super-clusters”: there are 1955 address clusters with at least 1000 addresses but less than 10 million addresses. They cover 22% of all of the addresses represented in Fig. 4 and

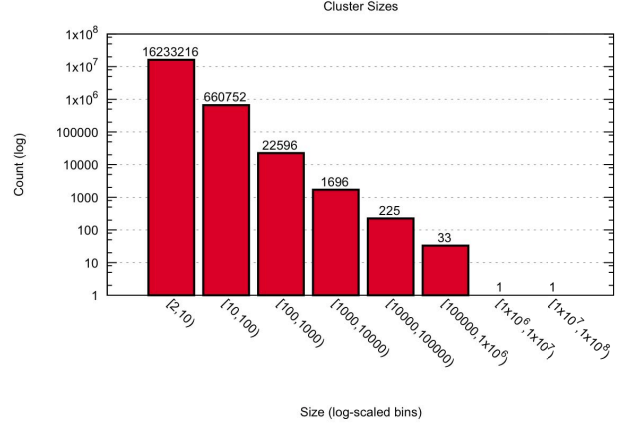


Figure 4. A histogram showing the number of address clusters with at least two addresses in each size range.

16% of all of the addresses observed at the time of the analysis.

We exclude the single address cluster with greater than 10 million addresses. This address cluster originally belonged to the Mt.Gox exchange that, for a time, allowed users to import private-keys directly from their wallets. This feature causes the multi-input heuristic to produce false positives and requires more advanced heuristics to separate the Mt. Gox addresses. We will discuss this issue in Sect. 5.

The super-clusters are not only large in terms of the number of addresses they contain, they are also hubs in terms of the number of transactions they are involved in. At the time of the analysis, the 107 million transactions created 319 million transaction outputs and redeemed 285 million of those through transaction inputs. Of those, the super-clusters were responsible for 72 million or 23% of the transaction outputs and 51 million or 18% of the transaction inputs. If we can link identities to the super-clusters then we can identify at least one of the transactors in a considerable number of transactions.

Lischke and Fabian [8] made a related finding – they analysed the degree centrality of the vertices in a network similar to the one in Fig. 1 but not limited to the largest address clusters, and found that the vertices representing the major darknet markets, gambling services, exchanges and mining pools had the highest degree centralities.

The existence and centrality of super-clusters is another reason that address clustering is unreasonably effective. Many of the major services reuse addresses and generate super-clusters thereby identifying much of their on-chain activity. Furthermore, this identifies much of the activity between the service and their users: deposits and withdrawals can be easily identified. This can be exploited to produce “wallet explorers” such as WalletExplorer.com. It also makes the services vulnerable to re-identification attacks [2].

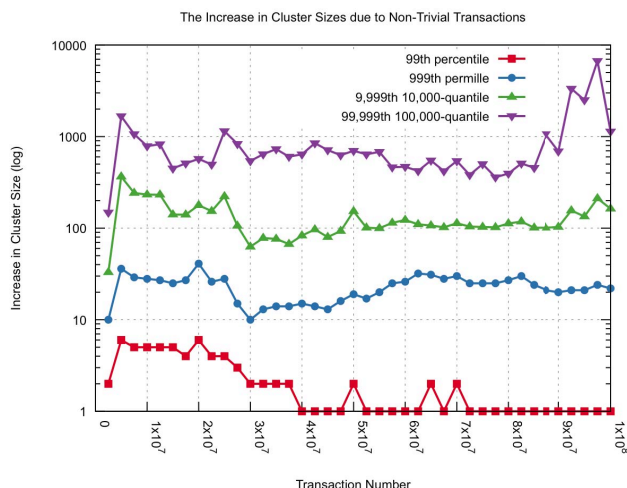


Figure 5. A plot of the q - 1th q -quantiles for $q = 100, 1000, 10000, 100000$ of the distributions of the increases in cluster size due to merging for every 250 000 transactions. The increases are heavily concentrated around median values of one. For the past 30 million transactions, the 99th percentiles are also at one.

Major services can avoid creating super-clusters. For example, Coinbase, the Bitcoin exchange and wallet provider, does not create a super-cluster that identifies all activity between the service and their users. They are notably absent from many high-level blockchain analyses. This is not to say that they do not create any large clusters. It simply means that the multi-input heuristic alone is insufficient for identifying all of their on-chain activity.

5. Formation and Structure

The address clustering heuristics listed in Sect. 2 cause address clusters to merge. We are not aware of any published heuristics that cause address clusters to split, e.g. to counter the mixing protocols in Sect. 2 or to partition the Mt. Gox address cluster in Sect. 4. When address clusters merge, we can measure the increases in size of the newly merged cluster. For example, suppose a transaction causes four address clusters of sizes 1, 1, 2 and 10 to merge. This can be represented by increases of 1, 1 and 2. Considering the multi-input heuristic only, the distribution of these increases is heavily concentrated around a median value of one. Figure 5 plots the 99th percentile, 999th permille, 9999th 10 000-quantile and 99 999th 100 000-quantile for every 250 000 transactions. We observe that large increases in address cluster sizes are rare. The multi-input heuristic usually merges at most one large address cluster with one or more small address clusters, but rarely merges two or more large address clusters.

This behaviour can be visualised as follows. Consider a bipartite graph for each address cluster generated using the multi-input heuristic where each vertex represents either an address (an address vertex) or a transaction (a transaction vertex) and each edge between an address vertex

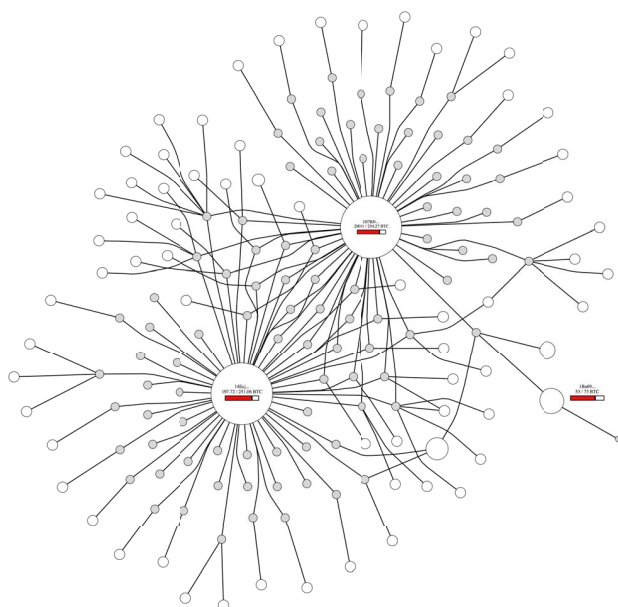


Figure 6. A bipartite graph representing the structure of an address cluster: white vertices are addresses; gray vertices are transactions; edges connect transaction vertices to address vertices when the corresponding transaction spends transaction outputs that were assigned to the corresponding addresses.

and a transaction vertex represents the transaction spending a transaction output that was controlled by the address. Figure 6 is the bipartite graph for a typical address cluster¹. The white vertices are the address vertices. The address vertices that correspond to addresses with non-zero balances are annotated with their current and all-time maximum balances. The majority of addresses have zero balances. The gray vertices are the transactions – they connect together the addresses to form the address cluster. Address vertices that are connected through multiple independent paths have multiple independent sets of transactions indicating that they are part of the same address cluster.

This graph was formed by small address clusters (the singleton address vertices along the periphery) merging with the large address cluster, through transaction vertices that connected the singleton address vertices to address vertices with non-zero balances. It is rare for such a graph to form as two large disconnected components, each containing at least one address vertex with a non-zero balance, and then to merge into a single connected component.

Address clusters that form when two large address clusters merge can be flagged as exhibiting unusual merging activity. This can be extended to a heuristic for splitting address clusters that may not be controlled by the same entity. For example, if we identify the 0.01% of transactions that resulted in the largest increases in cluster size during

1. The address cluster contains the address 1H7RNFmAbtMgVJzK72hNFeRGBfKuRekTMU: it received bitcoins from a mining pool (DeepBit), sent bitcoins to exchanges (Mt. Gox and Bitcoin.de) and purchased goods through a Bitcoin payment processor (BitPay).

the lifetime of the Mt. Gox exchange (July 2010 to February 2014), then the majority of those transactions spend transaction outputs that were controlled by the Mt. Gox address cluster. This is likely due to their private-key import feature.

The incremental growth of address clusters is beneficial for many high-level blockchain analyses. The address clustering is relatively stable over time. It is a rarity for two large address clusters to merge, thereby drastically changing the results of an earlier analysis. If fact, if two large address clusters do merge, it may indicate that the multi-input heuristic has produced a false positive. Furthermore, the address clustering is suitable for real-time analyses. Small address clusters merge with large address clusters early in their lifetime and the large address clusters are more likely to have identifying information associated with them.

6. Conclusion and Future Work

We have enumerated and analysed the primary reasons behind the effectiveness of address clustering using Bitcoin's blockchain. These are the high-levels of address reuse and avoidable merging; the existence of super-clusters with high centrality, and the incremental growth of address clusters.

The results can inform and help blockchain analysts. For example, the super-clusters are primary targets for re-identification attacks. The technique at the end of Sect. 5 can flag address clusters that may include addresses from more than one entity.

The opposing camp, those seeking to hinder blockchain analysis, can also benefit from these results. For example, the adoption and impact of privacy-enhancing techniques such as merge avoidance and Elliptic Curve Diffie-Hellman-Merkle (ECDHM) address schemes, e.g. stealth addresses [24], reusable payment codes (BIP47) [25] and out of band address exchange (BIP75) [26], can be measured indirectly through the gap between the number of non-trivial transactions and the number of address clusters created or merged per transaction (see Sect. 3).

Our future work revolves around the internal structure of address clusters, à la the bipartite graph in Fig. 6. This representation shows the structure of an address cluster beyond a simple set of addresses and may provide further insight into its formation and behaviour.

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