

A Targeting Attack by Dynamic Fake QR Code Using Invisible Laser Irradiation

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Abstract: In this study, we propose a method to generate a fake QR code that can lead to a malicious website at any particular time by laser irradiation of a QR code. First, we explain the fake QR code. Subsequently, we will examine the configuration of a fake QR code that dynamically changes the probability of induction to a malicious website by laser irradiation, considering that the camera treats the area as a bright area when the area is imaged with high illumination by the laser. We show its feasibility by experimentation. We focus on the attackable distance, which is critical in evaluating the threat level. The feasibility is then shown and the threat level is evaluated by the attackable distance. Specifically, we examine the conditions necessary to achieve long laser irradiation distances. Consequently, a demonstration experiment shows that it is possible to fake a QR code by laser irradiation over a long distance of approximately 100 meters. Finally, we discuss countermeasures against laser irradiation for fake operation.

1 INTRODUCTION

QR code (QRc, 2015) is a matrix-type two-dimensional barcode developed by DENSO WAVE INCORPORATED in 1994, and an international standard in ISO. QR codes can handle more data than one-dimensional barcodes. With the spread of cell phones and smartphones, they are widely used as a means of communicating information, such as accessing websites and making payments. Humans do not immediately understand the data content of the displayed QR code. There are attacks that utilize this fact. One attack on QR codes was to put a sticker of malicious QR code on top of the legitimate QR code (Tech in Asia, 2021).

In a previous study, a fake QR code was found as an attack against QR codes (Takita et al., 2018). The method of its composition is shown. Fake QR codes generate a code that is intermediate between QR codes corresponding to two URLs. It allows a black-and-white detection error in a particular module to cause the decoded URL to switch. Specifically, it adds a small white or black stain in the center of a particular module. This probabilistically induces a black-and-white detection error by the camera, leading the user to the wrong URL. Countermeasure methods for fake QR codes are discussed in Reference (Ohigashi

et al., 2021)(Takita et al., 2018). However, software with the countermeasures is not widely available at this time. Therefore, it is important to analyze the attack capability of fake QR codes in environments where no countermeasures have been implemented. Additionally, it is important to discuss countermeasures against such attacks.

Because the fake QR codes are printed and posted on a smudged state, the probability of being misdirected after posting is fixed. Consider the case where the inducement probability is sufficiently low to prevent the user realizing that the posted QR code is a fake QR code. In this case, the victim of the fake QR code is unspecified users with low probability. Therefore, it is difficult to provide fake inducement to a particular user with a high probability. We call *fake inducement* the case that we are unintentionally induced to another website instead of the legitimate website. In this study, we discuss a method to increase the probability of inducement on printed materials. Although unrelated to discussion in this paper, one way to increase the probability of fake inducement is to replace the QR code displayed on the digital signage (electronic signage) with a fake QR code. Attacks using electronic media are expected to be alerted. However, printed paper does not change the information written in front of people eyes. Therefore, when read-

ing a QR code, one is not expected to be attentive.

In this paper, we propose a dynamic fake QR code that utilizes the technology of fake QR codes and laser beams. This QR code can be directed to a malicious website at any time using an invisible laser beam against a printed static QR code. Specifically, a laser beam is used to dynamically manipulate the module's black-white or white decision. The laser beam is highly directional, thus it can irradiate a specific module at a distance from the QR code. This attack of features is difficult to detect. Therefore, it is difficult to detect a fake QR code when the attack has stopped.

The proposed method is a highly covert method that allows fake inducement of specific targets. A laser beam with a uniform wavelength and wavefront is highly directional. This feature allows the beam to be focused to a specific location. This technology is applied to various technologies, such as satellite-based long-distance communication, measurement, ranging, and power supply (Degnan, 1985)(Hemani and Georges, 2017)(Jin and Zhou, 2019)(Liu et al., 2019)(Mohammad and Murat, 2014). Areas that are highly illuminated by the laser beam are treated as bright areas when read by the camera. The image sensors in smartphones and other devices are more sensitive to a wider range of wavelengths than the human visible spectrum. Therefore, the user cannot see directly owing to the wavelength of the laser beam that illuminates the manipulated object. However, the camera can be made to recognize it as a bright area. The QR code can be falsified without noticeable changes. Furthermore, the fake induction probability owing to laser irradiation depends on the power of the laser beam. Therefore, the probability of induction by a fake operation can be dynamically controlled at arbitrary timings.

We demonstrate the feasibility of the attack by experiments to target a fake QR code at a distance of 5 m. In the experiments, we change several parameters, which are the wavelength and the power of the laser, diameter of irradiation range, and angle of the scanning camera. In addition, to evaluate the covertness of an attack, it is essential to make an evaluation regarding the limits of the distance at which the attack is successful. Therefore, we verify the conditions for long-distance fake operation of dynamically fake QR codes using invisible lasers. Furthermore, demonstration experiments show the feasibility of long-distance fake operations. In optical communications, the receiver has a mechanism to compensate for the propagation angle of the arriving light. However, the proposed method requires precise control of the irradiation angle of the laser beam only by operation on the

transmitter side. When irradiating a QR code module, if an adjacent unrelated black module is irradiated, the module is determined to be white and the attack fails. In particular, precise irradiation that does not affect the surroundings is necessary. Therefore, we calculate the starting position of the laser beam to ensure that the laser beam is focused on the QR code. It is shown that stable irradiation can be achieved by calculating the lens distance. Consequently, a fake operation at a distance of up to 100 m was achieved in the demonstration test. The results of this experiment suggest that it may be possible to attack the target QR code from a neighboring building. Therefore, we consider this experiment a realistic threat as a laser-based attack. Note that the QR code to be attacked must be created by the attacker.

Recent studies on the effects of laser irradiation on security include the Light Commands(Sugawara et al., 2020), which enable silent voice input by irradiating smart speakers with lasers, and an attack that misleads the traffic sign recognition system of self-driving cars by irradiating traffic signs with invisible light lasers(Sato et al., 2023). The discussion on attacks by laser irradiation is one of the important themes that spills over into these studies.

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 2 explains the fake QR code on which this research is based. Section 3 explains the principles of dynamic fake QR codes and experiments with varying parameters. Section 4 calculates the distance between the laser end-face and the lens that focuses on the QR code, and based on the results, conducts experiments on irradiation from long distances. Section 5 describes considerations and countermeasures this attack. Section 6 summarizes this paper.

2 FAKE QR CODE

Takita et al. show how QR codes that induce decoding errors (fake QR codes) can probabilistically lead to malicious websites (Takita et al., 2018). Fake QR codes utilize error-correcting code technology. As shown in Fig. 1, probabilistically different information is read. In addition, the probability of being directed to each website can be adjusted arbitrarily. Therefore, it is possible to make it difficult to detect the posting of QR codes that are causing damage by adjusting the system to ensure that inducements to malicious websites occur rarely. In this paper, we use the legitimate website (URL1): <http://www.u-tokai.ac.jp/> and the malicious website (URL2): <http://www.u-yokai.ac.jp/>. We outline a method of constructing a fake QR code that proba-



Figure 1: Original Fake QR code.

bilistically generates a lead to these two websites, as an example.

QR codes embed information by arranging the smallest unit cell called a module, which indicates one bit of information, in two dimensions. The information is read as an image and decoded. The number of modules that can be deployed can be specified by the version information. QR codes use an error correction code, thus they can be read even if they are slightly dirty. The error correction level is specified as L, M, Q, H and S. The QR code used in this paper is the 2-M type QR code shown in Fig. 2. D1–D28 are the data part and E1–E16 are the error-correction part. Error correction can restore incorrect data from up to 8 symbols (8 bytes) of this QR code.

We show how to create a fake QR code that probabilistically directs the user to URL1 or URL2. First, we create two QR codes that are similar. The 2-M type QR code can correct errors up to 8 symbols. Therefore, these two similar QR codes must differ by at least $2 \times 8 + 1 = 17$ symbols. Subsequently, we create a QR code that combines symbols from both QR codes and resembles both, as shown in Fig. 3. This can be achieved by overwriting different parts of each QR code on a symbol-by-symbol basis. The created QR code can be restored to another QR code by overwriting one additional symbol. However, the symbol difference between URL1 and URL2 is only one module. Therefore, inverting the black and white of one module changes the URL to be read. Finally, we change the color of the central part of the module to ensure that this one module is probabilistically determined to be white or black. Changing the color of the central part of the module, rather than the entire module, makes loading unstable. This induces probabilistic reading errors. The probability depends on the brightness of the center, camera to be read, OS performance, and QR code. It does not appear to be a significant threat immediately owing to the difficulty of controlling the probability.

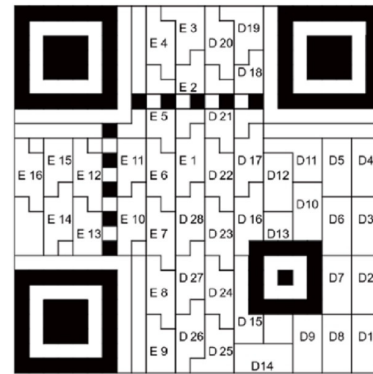


Figure 2: Module location in a 2-M type QR code.

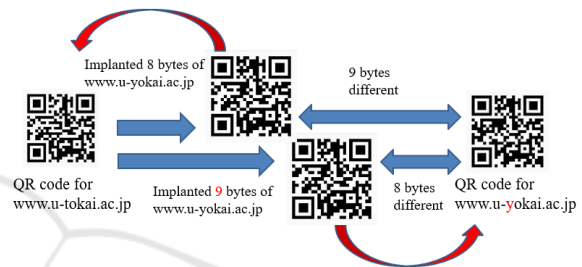


Figure 3: Creating an intermediate QR code.

3 DYNAMIC FAKE QR CODE

3.1 Principle

In this section, we explain dynamic fake QR codes. A dynamic fake QR code has a similar structure to the fake QR code in Chapter 2. The difference between the two QR codes is whether or not there is a module that changes probabilistically. Dynamic fake QR codes do not have a module that changes probabilistically. However, this QR code becomes different from the original by irradiating a laser beam on a specific black module. This QR code is realized by laser irradiation of a specific black module. By irradiating the laser, the camera recognizes the black module as a white module like Fig. 4. Consequently, the camera reads a different URL from the original QR code. This allows fake operations to be performed from a distance only when the laser beam is irradiated.

3.2 Experiments with Variable Parameters

We conducted an experiment in which we irradiated a laser beam with a QR code and directed the user to

a different URL from the original one to demonstrate the feasibility of the attack. In this experiment, the angle of scans and the power of the laser are changed. This experiment allowed us to intentionally change the reading results by irradiating the laser.

The whole system of the experiment is shown in Fig. 5. The distance between the optical system that controls the pointing of the laser beam and the QR code is approximately 3.8 m. The wavelengths of the laser beam used in the experiments were 635 nm and 785 nm, respectively. The range of wavelengths visible to the human eye varies between individuals, with the minimum being 360–400 nm and the maximum being 760–830 nm. Cameras, such as those of smartphones can be sensitive to ultraviolet rays below 400 nm, which is shorter than visible light, and infrared rays above 780 nm. The sensitivity regions are shown in Fig. 6 and Fig. 7 (Lucid Vision Labs, 2024)(Smith, 2000). The length of one side of the QR code is 114 mm, the length of one piece of the module is 4 mm, and the focal length of the lens is 40 mm. Illumination power of 2.65 mW and 9.4 mW are used at 635 nm wavelength. Illumination power of 2.65 mW and 7.1 mW are used at 785 nm wavelength. However, the illumination power at 785 nm could not be strong owing to equipment failure. Irradiation range diameter is 2 mm and 4 mm. The angles of scanning are 45° and 90°. The 90° is the one where the paper surface of the QR code and the camera are facing each other. We used a QR code that leads the user to URL2 when the QR code was read without any fake operation, and leads the user to URL1 when the QR code was read with a fake operation. The camera of iPhone was used to read the QR code. Experiments were conducted by changing the power of the laser beam, irradiation range, and irradiation angle of the laser beam relative to the normal of the printed surface of the QR code. The wavelengths for Experiments 1 and 2 were 635 nm and 785 nm, respectively.

The results of the experiments are shown in Table 1 and Table 2. The URL1 or URL2 indicates that the result switches depending on the timing of the scan. URL2 was read when the illumination power was 2.65 mW with a 635 nm laser beam. When the illumination power was 9.4 mW, two URLs were read from an angle of 45°, switching between them at high speed. From a 90° angle, URL1 was read. The camera may not be able to recognize the light when the power is weak or when it is at an angle to the illuminated surface. URL1 was read at any power, angle, and irradiation range for the 785 nm laser beam. However, in the angled case, the two URLs were read alternately. It is believed that the camera does not recognize the bright area owing to the reflection of the laser light on

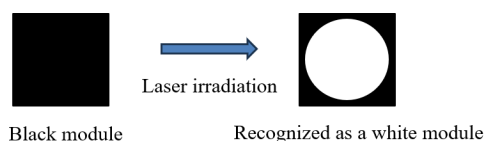


Figure 4: Laser irradiation on the module.

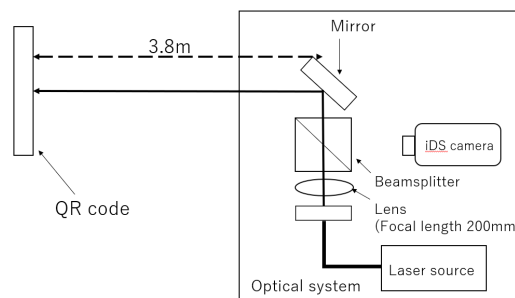


Figure 5: Full system of experiments.

the irradiated surface irradiating at an angle. Specifically, this also indicates that it is possible to attack and that a probabilistic attack is possible. Fig. 8 and Fig. 9 show photographs of a normal QR code and a QR code irradiated with laser beam.

4 CHALLENGE TO LONG-DISTANCE ATTACK

As in the experiment in Section 3, irradiation from a short distance is more likely to be found attacking. Therefore, it is necessary to attack from an undetectable location. For the practical attack, the attack should be extended to long distance attack, e.g. 50 m or 100 m. Subsequently, the attack may work against the target fake QR code posted on a neighboring building or over a street. However, to irradiate a laser beam from a long distance, it is necessary to focus the laser beam. In this section, we calculate the

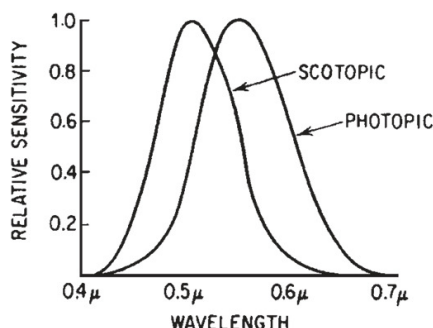


Figure 6: Photopic luminous efficiency function (Smith, 2000).

Table 1: Results of Experiment 1.

Illumination power	Irradiation range diameter	Camera angle	Result of URLs
2.65 mW	2 mm	45°	URL2
2.65 mW	2 mm	90°	URL2
2.65 mW	4 mm	45°	URL2
2.65 mW	4 mm	90°	URL1
9.4 mW	2 mm	45°	URL1 or URL2
9.4 mW	2 mm	90°	URL1
9.4 mW	4 mm	45°	URL1 or URL2
9.4 mW	4 mm	90°	URL1

Table 2: Results of Experiment 2.

Illumination power	Irradiation range diameter	Camera angle	Result of URLs
2.65 mW	2 mm	45°	URL1 or URL2
2.65 mW	2 mm	90°	URL1
2.65 mW	4 mm	45°	URL1 or URL2
2.65 mW	4 mm	90°	URL1
7.1 mW	2 mm	45°	URL1 or URL2
7.1 mW	2 mm	90°	URL1
7.1 mW	4 mm	45°	URL1
7.1 mW	4 mm	90°	URL1

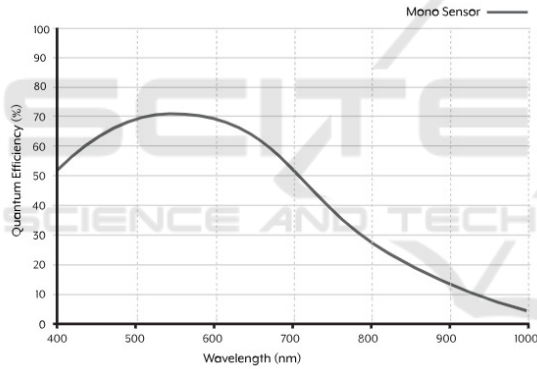


Figure 7: Quantum efficiency of a typical camera (Lucid Vision Labs, 2024).

emission position and focal point of the laser beam at the imaging lens. Based on the results, we conduct long-distance irradiation experiments.

4.1 Image Formation Position of Thin Lens

In Section 3.2, laser irradiation was used to fake the QR code at a distance of approximately 3.8 m. The QR code module used in this experiment was sized to fit the light flux diameter of the collimated beam. However, to fake the QR code by irradiating it from a greater distance, it is necessary to focus the laser beam. Therefore, in this section, the emission position and focal point of the laser beam at the imaging



Figure 8: Normal QR code. Figure 9: Wavelength 635 nm (irradiation range 2 mm, illumination power 7.1 mW).

lens are calculated for long-distance fake operation.

For a thin lens, let b be the position of the image by the lens of the light emitted from a on the optical axis. The lens imaging equation is shown in Eq. (1) (Hecht, 2017).

$$a^{-1} + b^{-1} = f^{-1} \tag{1}$$

The position of the image formed by the thin lens is shown in Fig. 10. Where a is the distance from the main plane of the lens to the QR code, b is the distance from the main plane of the lens to the position of the laser beam, and f is the focal length of the lens. Assuming the focal length to be 200 mm, from Eq. (1), the value of b for a is shown in Fig. 11.

Based on these results, we irradiated QR codes using invisible lasers.

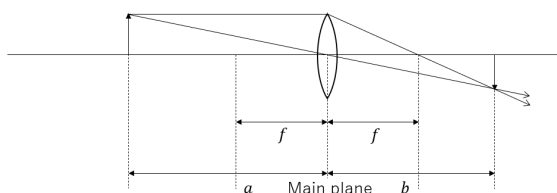


Figure 10: Image formation by a single thin lens.

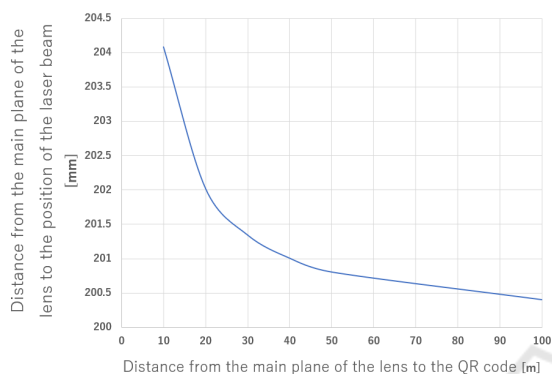


Figure 11: Relation between laser beam emission position and image formation position.

4.2 Long-Distance Irradiation Experiment

In this section, we conducted an experiment in which we irradiated a QR code with a laser beam from a distance of 10 to 100 meters to direct users to a URL that is different from the original URL. Consequently, we confirmed the difference in the destination of the guided directions of the fake QR code depending on the distance.

A diagram of the experiment at 10–50 meters is shown in Fig. 12; a diagram of the experiment at 100 m in Fig. 13; and a simplified diagram of the experimental environment in Fig. 14. The distances between the optics that control the pointing of the laser beam and the QR code are 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, and 100 meters, respectively. In the 100 m experiment, a mirror is set up at 50 m and the laser beam is folded back. Fig. 14 shows a plan view of the experimental site, with the air conditioning vents located between 40 and 50 meters. The wavelengths of the laser beam used in the experiments were 635 nm and 785 nm, respectively. The power of the laser beam was measured at the position where the laser beam was irradiated. The value was approximately 10 mW. The length of one side of the QR code used was 114 mm, as in Section 3.2, and the length of a piece of the module was 4 mm. Scanning a QR code is performed with the paper side of the QR code and the camera facing each other in front of the camera. Light emitted from the

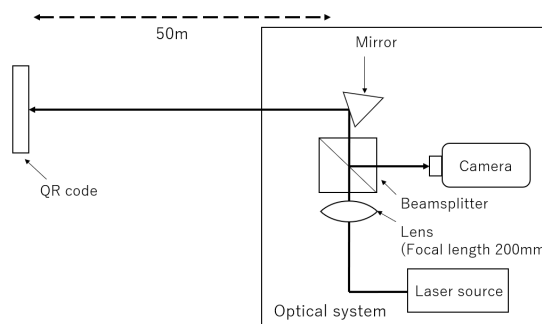


Figure 12: Configuration diagram of the 10–50 meters experiment.

laser source of the optical system is guided through a single-mode fiber and emitted into space. The focal point can be adjusted by passing the laser beam through a lens. In the experiments, the distance from the single fiber to the lens was adjusted based on Fig. 10. Additionally, a beam splitter was employed to adjust the laser beam to the desired location by adjusting the mirror while inspecting it through a camera.

Let URL1 be the URL where the QR code is read without laser irradiation, and let URL2 be the URL where the QR code is faked by laser irradiation.

The results of the experiment are shown in Table 3. URL2 was read by laser irradiation at 10, 20, 30, and 40 meters for both 635 and 785 nm. In the experiments at 50 and 100 meters, URLs 1 and 2 were read alternately. One possible reason for this result is that the irradiation position of the laser beam on the QR code was fluctuating. In this experimental environment, the laser beam was blurred owing to atmospheric turbulence caused by the air conditioning. This may have caused the irradiated area to vary by 2 to 3 mm vertically and horizontally, resulting in a difference in the URL readout.

During the demonstration experiment, fake induction succeeded even when the laser beam spread beyond the size of the module. This is because the intensity of the laser beam decreases as it moves outward from the center of the laser beam. The outward spread of the light decreases in intensity. Therefore, even if the laser beam irradiated beyond the size of the module, only the center portion is considered to have been determined as the bright area. Therefore, it is important to note that the range of possible irradiation is not the apparent range of the laser beam, but the range of high optical intensity.

Table 3: Experimental results when irradiated with 635 nm and 785 nm wavelength.

		Distance from the main plane of the lens to the QR code.					
		10m	20m	30m	40m	50m	100m
Wavelength of laser beam	635 nm	URL2	URL2	URL2	URL2	URL1 or 2	URL1 or 2
	785 nm	URL2	URL2	URL2	URL2	URL2	URL1 or 2

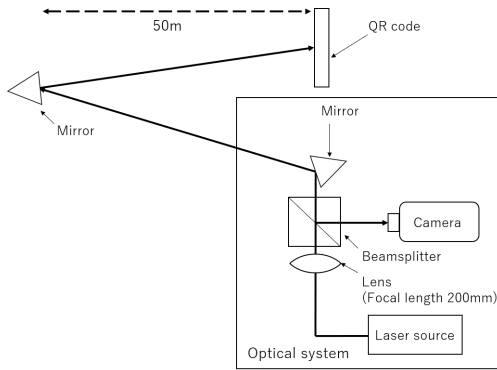


Figure 13: Configuration diagram of the 100 m experiment.

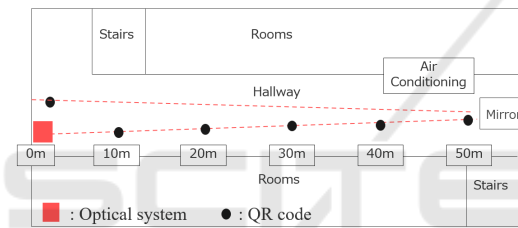


Figure 14: Simplified diagram of the experimental environment.

5 CONSIDERATIONS

5.1 Fake QR Codes Suitable for Long-Distance

This section discusses fake QR codes suitable for long-distance attacks. In the discussion up to the previous section, long-distance attack was achieved by calculating the emission position and focal point of the laser beam at the imaging lens. When considering the ease of focusing, it is considered effective to widen the target area of laser irradiation (laser aperture). This is because it eases the attack and the limitation of the equipment to be used. Therefore, we consider fake QR codes that have a wide range of irradiation targets, such as 2×2 or 3×3 modules, instead of one module.

The laser irradiation changes the judgment in the direction from black to white. We focus on this change and the fact that the judgment remains white even when a white module is irradiated by laser. For

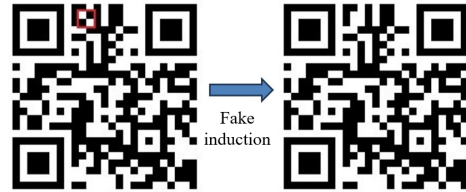


Figure 15: Fake QR code with expanded attack range (2×2).

example, if the entire area of a 2×2 modules is white to produce fake induction, the aperture can be increased by a factor of approximately 2. Thus, if it is possible to make the QR code in which all areas larger than 2×2 modules can be white, the rectangle of laser irradiation can be made larger.

However, it is not always possible to obtain a QR Code that satisfies these conditions. According to Reference (Ohigashi et al., 2021), the QR Code pattern can be extended by using the parameters of the HTTP GET method. Specifically, this method considers some cases, in which adding an arbitrary string after “?” in the URL will access the same website as if the parameter had not been added. The cases here are static pages or dynamic pages with no corresponding parameters. The same effect can be achieved by using the HTML fragment identifier “#”. We introduce this method. We searched heuristically with this method and found a QR code that can be attacked within a 2×2 range, as shown in Fig. 15. The area circled in red on the left side of the QR code in Fig. 15 indicates the area that can be laser irradiated for fake induction.

5.2 Countermeasures

As a countermeasure against static, fake QR codes, Takita et al. have shown how to change the QR code reading application (QRc, 2015). Specifically, multiple readings are attempted using a decoder, and the output results are compared. Dynamic fake QR codes can lead the user to another site with a high probability, such as probability 1, during an attack. The countermeasures taken by Takita et al. cannot prevent this because the legitimate sites are always accessed once the laser irradiation is stopped. The countermeasures taken by Takita et al. cannot prevent this because the legitimate sites are accessed when the laser irradiation is stopped.

However, Ohigashi et al. propose a detection method that focuses on the principle of the construction method of fake QR codes (Ohigashi et al., 2021). Dynamic fake QR codes have the same characteristics as static fake QR codes. Thus, The countermeasure methods in Reference (Ohigashi et al., 2021) work effectively. Dynamic fake QR codes require the irradiation of a laser. Therefore, an effective countermeasure can be achieved by adding atmospheric effects to the laser beam. Specifically, it is considered effective to install air conditioning, etc.

6 CONCLUSION

In this study, we proposed a method to generate a fake QR code that can lead to a malicious site at arbitrary timing by irradiating a laser beam onto a QR code. Specifically, we considered that certain modules are treated as bright areas when they are read by a camera with laser irradiation. In addition, a study was conducted on faking from long distances using laser irradiation. Calculations showed the relationship of the emission position to focus on the QR code. Subsequently, experiments were conducted to confirm the operation of QR code fake by laser irradiation at 10, 20, 30, 40, and 50 meters. In this experimental environment, the URL before the fake operation was occasionally loaded at a distance of 50 or 100 meters. The cause is owing to be that the air-conditioning system was in operation. The air conditioning system was centrally controlled and could not be shut down for the experiments. The air conditioning may have caused fluctuations in the atmosphere, making it difficult for the laser beam to continue irradiating the target module. Future experiments conducted over longer distances, such as 1 km, will require more precise laser irradiation. It is necessary to study the effect of long-distance laser irradiation, which is subject to strong atmospheric fluctuations, on the fake operation. Furthermore, we confirmed that the results change with the angle of the reading, even at the same laser power. In future work, we will study the change of the inducing site with the angle of the reading relative to the laser irradiation.

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