

Image PUF: A Physical Unclonable Function for Printed Electronics based on Optical Variation of Printed Inks

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Abstract—Printed Electronics (PE) has a rapidly growing market, thus, the counterfeiting/overbuilding of PE components is anticipated to grow. The common solution for the counterfeiting is Physical Unclonable Functions (PUFs). In PUFs, a unique fingerprint is extracted from (irreproducible) process variations in the production and used in the authentication of valid components. Many commonly used PUFs are electrical PUFs by leveraging the impact of process variations on electrical properties of devices, circuits and chips. Hence, they add overhead to the production which results in additional costs. While such costs may be negligible for many application domains targeted by silicon-based VLSI technologies, they are detrimental to the ultra-low-cost PE applications. In this paper, we propose an optical PUF (iPUF) extracting a fingerprint from the optically visible variation of printed inks in the PE components. Since iPUF does not require any additional circuitry, the PUF production cost consists of merely acquisition, processing and saving an image of the circuit components, matching the requirements of ultra-low-cost margin applications of PE. To further decrease the storage costs for iPUF, we utilize image downscaling resulting in a compression rate of 484x, while still preserving the reliability and uniqueness of the fingerprints. The proposed fingerprint extraction methodology is applied to four datasets for evaluation. The results show that the process variation of the optical shapes of printed inks is suitable as an optical PUF to prevent counterfeiting in PE.

Index Terms—Printed Electronics, Disposables, Low-cost, Optical PUF, Anti-Counterfeiting, Security, Authentication, Identification, Fingerprint.

I. INTRODUCTION

Printed Electronics (PE) is a promising candidate to enable applications where ultra-low-cost, on-demand fabrication, and/or mechanical flexibility are required. PE provides these features owing to its additive and point-of-use manufacturing as well as the usage of various substrate types [1]. Therefore, several envisioned applications such as smart packaging [2],

in-situ monitoring for logistics [3], health monitoring patches [4], [5], smart cards [6], smart labels [7], pharmaceuticals [8] and disposable food sensors [9] can benefit from the features of PE.

Counterfeiting is a major problem in the domain of integrated circuits and systems, automotive parts, software, cosmetic, jewellery, health-care diagnosis systems, and drugs [10], [11], [12], [13]. Since PE has a huge market, projected to grow from \$29B in 2017 to \$73B in 2027 [14], [15], the counterfeiting of PE components has been expected to rise, and technology-specific, low-cost measures have to be taken [16].

Physical Unclonable Functions (PUFs), which generate biometric fingerprints from manufacturing variation, have been utilized to prevent counterfeiting [13], [17], [18]. Electrical PUFs and optical PUFs are two distinctive examples in various fields [18], [19], [20]. Recently, the optical PUFs has received an increasing interest since they can generate the fingerprint based on visual inspection and image processing without adding a physical overhead to the product [18], [19], [20], [21]. This is beneficial for low-cost applications where adding an additional physical tag is infeasible for economic reasons. On the other hand, it is important to develop an image processing based fingerprint extraction methodology which generates fingerprints while considering their storage costs, particularly for high volume products.

In this work, we propose an optical PUF, namely image PUF (iPUF), for the anti-counterfeiting and identification of ultra-low-cost PE systems. The proposed methodology extracts fingerprints from the optically visible variations of printed inks used during manufacturing process of PE circuits, so that no additional circuitry is required for fingerprint generation. Furthermore, we have examined downscaling compression to reduce the size of the fingerprints, resulting in significantly lower storage cost. The methodology is applied to four datasets to examine the optical variation of printed inks. The results show that the optical variation in PE is sufficient to extract unique and reliable fingerprints for anti-counterfeiting of PE. Moreover, we achieve 484x compression rate without compromising PUF metrics. The contributions of this work are summarized as follow:

- We propose a robust image processing methodology to extract fingerprints,
- We use an image downscaling algorithm to reduce the storage cost of fingerprints,

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- We evaluate the proposed methodology on four real datasets.
- We examine the suitability of the optical variability of the printed inks,
- We examine the downscaling compression to determine the optimal compression rate which satisfies PUF metrics.

The paper is organized as follows: Section II provides preliminary information on PE technology and related works. The proposed iPUF is explained in Section III, while the evaluation results are given in Section IV. Section V concludes the paper.

II. PRELIMINARIES

A. Printed Electronics

Printed Electronics (PE) has received a great interest since it enables exciting application areas where mechanical flexibility, lightweight, large area, low-cost and on-demand fabrication are of interest [23], [24], [25], [1]. The current market driver applications are radio frequency identification (RFID) tags [26], [27], [28], [29], sensor arrays [30], [31], [32], photovoltaic cells [33], batteries [34], [35] and displays [36], [37]. In addition, some envisioned applications are dynamic newspapers, smart labels, smart cards, ingestible health care diagnosis devices, energy harvesters and smart clothing [23], [24], [25].

Several additive printing processes are used to manufacture PE circuits instead of photolithography-based subtractive processes which are complex, expensive and environmentally hazardous [38]. These additive printing processes are screen printing, flexography printing, offset printing, gravure printing and inkjet printing [23], [1], [15], [39]. Several materials are printed on a flexible substrate to construct PE circuits and systems. Single or multiple printing processes can be used depending on the target application. Some of these processes such as inkjet printing enable a highly demanding feature: customized fabrication, more specifically, personalized fabrication [23], [39], which allows users to select their own material and substrate, and fabricate fully custom designs without profound expertise or sophisticated and extremely expensive manufacturing tools.

Several printed transistors such as p-type organic-based thin film transistors (OTFTs) [40], organic field-effect transistors (OFETs) [41], some n-type organic transistors [42], [43], and inorganic oxide semiconductor based transistors [44] are proposed to build functional PE circuits. Organic transistors generally suffer from low field effect mobility and high supply voltage requirement, and this makes them unsuitable for low-power applications [15]. On the other hand, inorganic oxide semiconductor based transistors such as Electrolyte-gated Field Effect Transistor (EGFET) are investigated since they provide high field effect mobility, and requires low supply voltage ($\leq 1V$) when combined with electrolyte gating [45], [46], [44], [47], which make EGFET a promising candidate that can be utilized in PE application requiring small supply voltages powered by printed batteries and/or printed energy harvesters [35], [48].

Since the fabrication process of EGFETs is based on inkjet printing, EGFETs have high intrinsic variation resulting from the random dispersion of the ink on the substrate. In inkjet-printing, all devices are printed individually by multiple additive process steps, where each step can vary on its own. These processes and systematic variations originating from the ink, droplet forming, the attachment of droplets on the substrate, and manufacturing tools are random and uncontrollable. These variations not only affects the electrical behaviour of EGFETs but also are optically visible which can be exploited for an optical PUF. In the context of this work, our aim is to extract fingerprints from optically visible variations of printed devices used in the PE applications. More specifically, we use EGFETs to evaluate the proposed optical PUF due to its promising features mentioned above. However, it should be noted that the proposed PUF is applicable to any printed structure.

In the fabrication process of EGFETs, the channel material, indium oxide (In_2O_3) semiconductor, is inkjet printed to form the channel between drain and source electrodes which use patterned indium tin oxide (ITO) as material. Then, on the top of the channel, the electrolyte is inkjet printed as gate dielectric. At last, PEDOT:PSS is inkjet printed on the top of the electrolyte as a top-gate in a way that it covers the channel area [22]. Figure 1 shows the structure, the fabrication process, and the photo of the EGFETs. As elaborated in Section III, patterned ITO electrodes (e.g., drain) can be used to align transistor images since it has less optically visible variation than printed inks (e.g., electrolyte) while the entropy of the proposed optical PUF are harvested from the optical image of printed inks of EGFETs.

B. Related Works

PUFs have become common in last decade to provide secret fingerprints [42]. They extract digital fingerprints from intrinsic manufacturing process variations. The inherent and uncontrollable variations ensure unpredictable fingerprints. Therefore, the fingerprints are utilized as a key for security purposes such as authentication and cryptography [17], [18], [49], [50], [51]. Several electrical PUFs have been proposed to secure integrated circuits and embedded systems. The most common electrical PUFs include SRAM PUF [52], Arbiter PUF [53], and Ring Oscillator PUF [54]. Furthermore, Printed memory PUF [55] and Printed Differential Circuit PUF [56] have been proposed in the context of PE.

On the other hand, recent research has also focused on optical PUFs for their advantages. Since Optical PUFs extracts randomness from optical variations, contrary to electrical PUFs, they require no additional circuitry in the product. Moreover, they provide high number of response bits. These advantages result in low-cost per piece, which make them beneficial for cost-limited applications [57], particularly for ultra-low-cost PE applications.

In [20], a camera based optical PUF, which exploits the surface patterns of injection moulded plastic components is presented to further reduce authentication cost while other optical PUFs in the literature mainly use costly imaging methods (e.g., laser). The method employs correlation coefficient

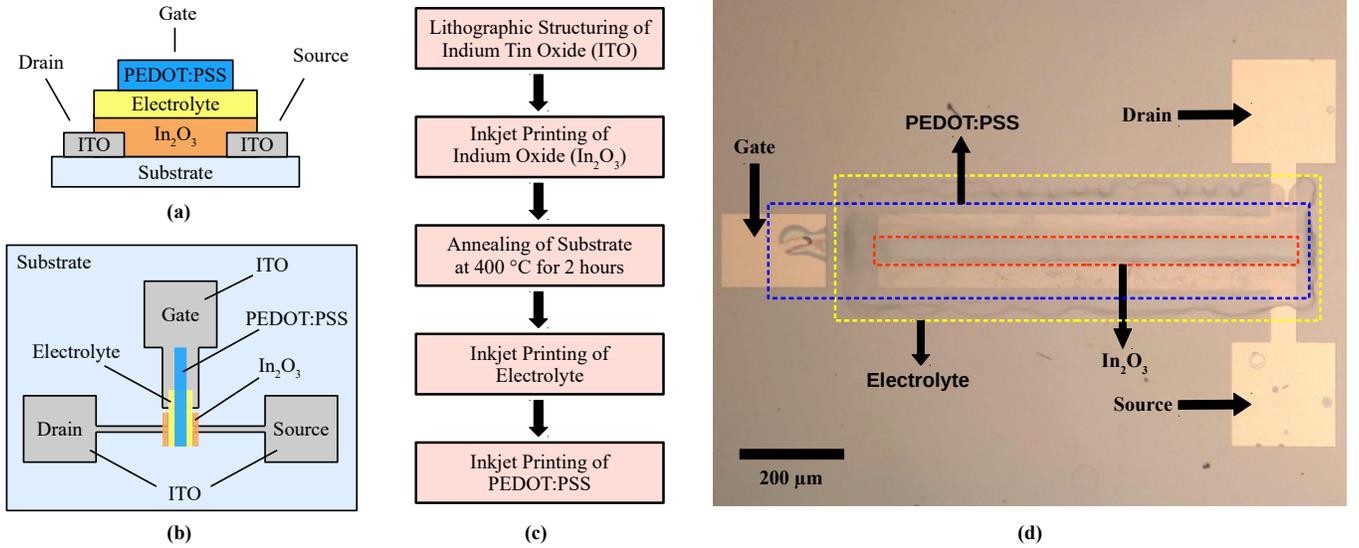


Figure 1: Description of Electrolyte-gated field effect transistor technology a) Cross-sectional view of EGFET on substrate [22]. b) Top view of EGFET on substrate [22]. c) Flow of fabrication process of EGFET [19]. d) Photo of a fabricated EGFET [19].

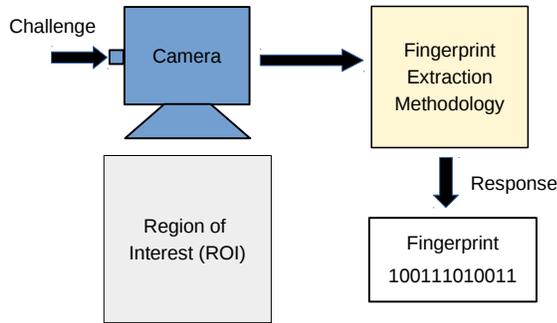


Figure 2: Overview of proposed optical PUF.

between pre-stored image and examined image after multiple pre-processing steps, which requires large memory for pre-stored images resulting in high storage cost. For instance, the binary image size of a component is 1800×1800 corresponding to ~ 0.386 MB in the memory, and for high volume produced components, it increases proportionally (e.g., for 1 billion components, required memory is ~ 368 TB), which harms its low-cost feature. The high memory usage of this method makes its utilization infeasible in ultra-low-cost PE applications. To the best of authors' knowledge, our paper presents the first work extracting fingerprints from optically visible variations of PE inks with the objective of low memory usage in the literature.

III. PROPOSED OPTICAL PUF

The electrical PUFs introduce exorbitant overhead which is infeasible for ultra-low-cost PE applications. For instance, the electrical PUF proposed for PE in [55] containing three transistors and two resistors allocates ~ 3.5 mm² generate one bit. Since the feature size of PE devices are large enough

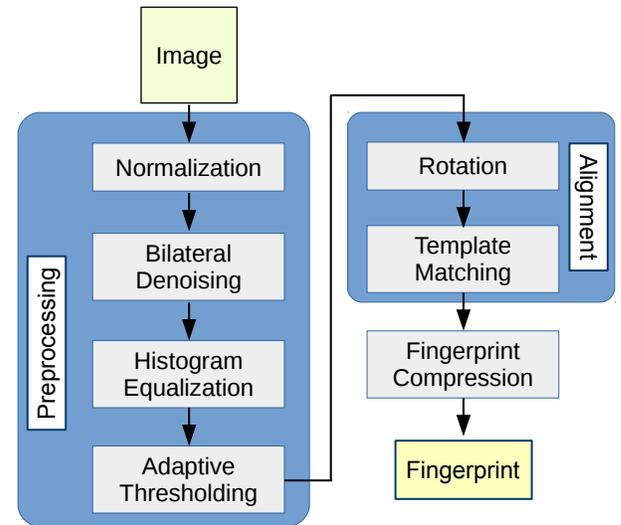


Figure 3: Proposed fingerprint extraction methodology composed of preprocessing, alignment, and fingerprint compression.

(e.g., $10 \mu\text{m}$), one can capture the optically visible variations of printed inks with a low-cost camera integrated to a microscope so that an optical PUF can extract multiple bits from one printed transistor, meaning that without any hardware overhead, multi-bit fingerprint can be generated. Therefore, the ultra-low-cost feature of PE has to be preserved while providing secure keys to prevent counterfeiting and overbuilding.

There are several challenges to extract reliable fingerprints. In electrical PUFs, external conditions such as supply voltage fluctuation and temperature may cause bit flips resulting in PUF unreliability. However, in optical PUFs, the sources of

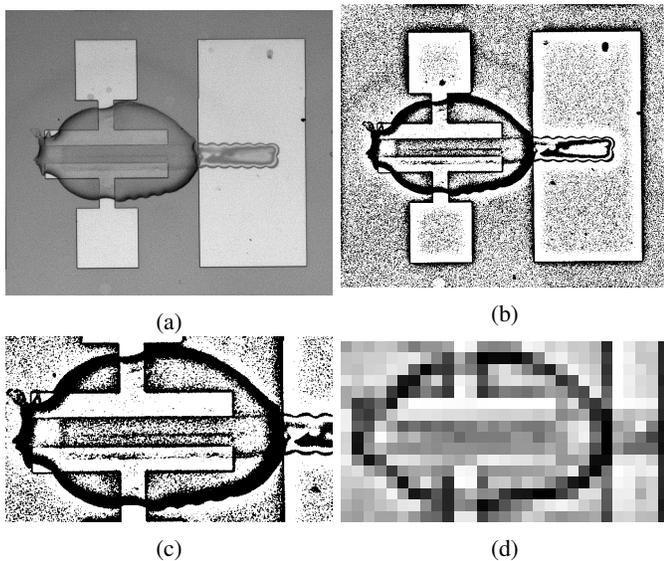


Figure 4: A printed transistor image (a) original, (b) preprocessed, (c) aligned (d) downscaled (downscaling factor=22).

unreliability are insufficient optical precision (different relative positioning), dust, camera noise and non-uniform illumination. We consider these challenges while developing the fingerprint extraction methodology of the proposed optical PUF.

The flow for extraction and processing of the proposed optical PUF is illustrated in Figure 2. It starts from the image acquisition using an optical camera integrated to a microscope, which is the challenge of the PUF. The preprocessing steps are applied to the acquired image to remove the effect of environmental conditions such as illumination and camera noise. After that, the images are aligned with respect to a reference. These steps are performed to ensure that the generated keys are reliably extracted. Last, to reduce the size of generated fingerprint, image downscaling is applied. The response of the PUF is the fingerprint consisting multiple bits. In the authentication phase, the extracted fingerprint of the examined printed component is compared with the fingerprints of all printed components which are stored in a secure data-center. The authentication of the printed component is verified based on the correlation of its fingerprint with a pre-stored fingerprint.

It should be noted that all steps described in this section are performed in *python* using the *scikit-image* open source library [58]. The details of each step is elaborated in the following subsections.

A. Image Acquisition

The images are acquired by a camera integrated to a microscope. In each acquisition, an image with the dimension of 2560x1920 pixels, where four transistors fit, is taken since transistors fabricated to evaluate the methodology are close to each other on a substrate. Then, the image is divided into four images, each containing one transistor image with a size of $\sim 800 \times 800$. An example transistor image is shown in Figure 4a.

B. Preprocessing

To increase the reliability of the proposed optical PUF method with respect to noise and illumination differences, we apply the following preprocessing steps respectively:

- **Normalization** is used to scale the pixel values to the range of $[0, 1]$ to reduce the effect of global lighting conditions, i.e. systematic shifts in the pixel value range.
- **(Bilateral) Denoising** [59] is an edge-preserving filtering. While basic filters perform a weighted sum of close pixels, bilateral filtering also considers their values. Through this, the pixels in the neighbourhood of a target pixel only have a strong influence if they also have a similar value before filtering. This is especially noticeable on sharp edges e.g. transitions from black to white. Here, black and white pixels would average to grey, where for bilateral filtering, the black pixels are not considered for white values (and vice versa) which leads to the preservation of the contrast after filtering.
- **Histogram equalization** [60] tries to achieve a more equal distribution of the pixel value intensities in an image. For this, the images cumulative frequency histogram of the pixel values is used to transform the values of all pixels according to their rank in intensity. This leads to increased contrasts in the image while also decreasing the effect of global lighting conditions.
- **Adaptive thresholding** binarizes the image by comparing the weighted neighbourhood of a pixel to a threshold value. If this threshold is exceeded, the pixel is declared black, else white is assigned.

The preprocessed version of the transistor image is shown in Figure 4b.

C. Alignment Correction

Following the preprocessing, the alignment of the images is applied to provide same relative positioning which increases the reliability of the fingerprint extraction with respect to shifts and rotations. For this purpose, first, a reference line, which is top edge of drain electrode (upper), is identified through a Hough Line Transform [61]. The images are then rotated such that the reference lines form the same angle to a horizontal line. Through this, an invariance to rotation is achieved. Then, a template matching [62] is performed on the rotated images to identify the position of the drain electrode, which will serve as a reference point to locate the region of the image containing electrolyte (region of interest i.e. ROI), which contains the most optically visible variation. The aligned version of the transistor image is given in Figure 4c, where the ROI is a 2-dimensional matrix containing bits, which then can be used as a fingerprint.

D. Fingerprint Compression

Since the extracted fingerprint after alignment has high resolution, it requires high storage area causing high storage cost. The local averaging based image downscaling is applied to reduce the size of the ROI to lower the storage cost. An example downsampled image with a downscaling factor

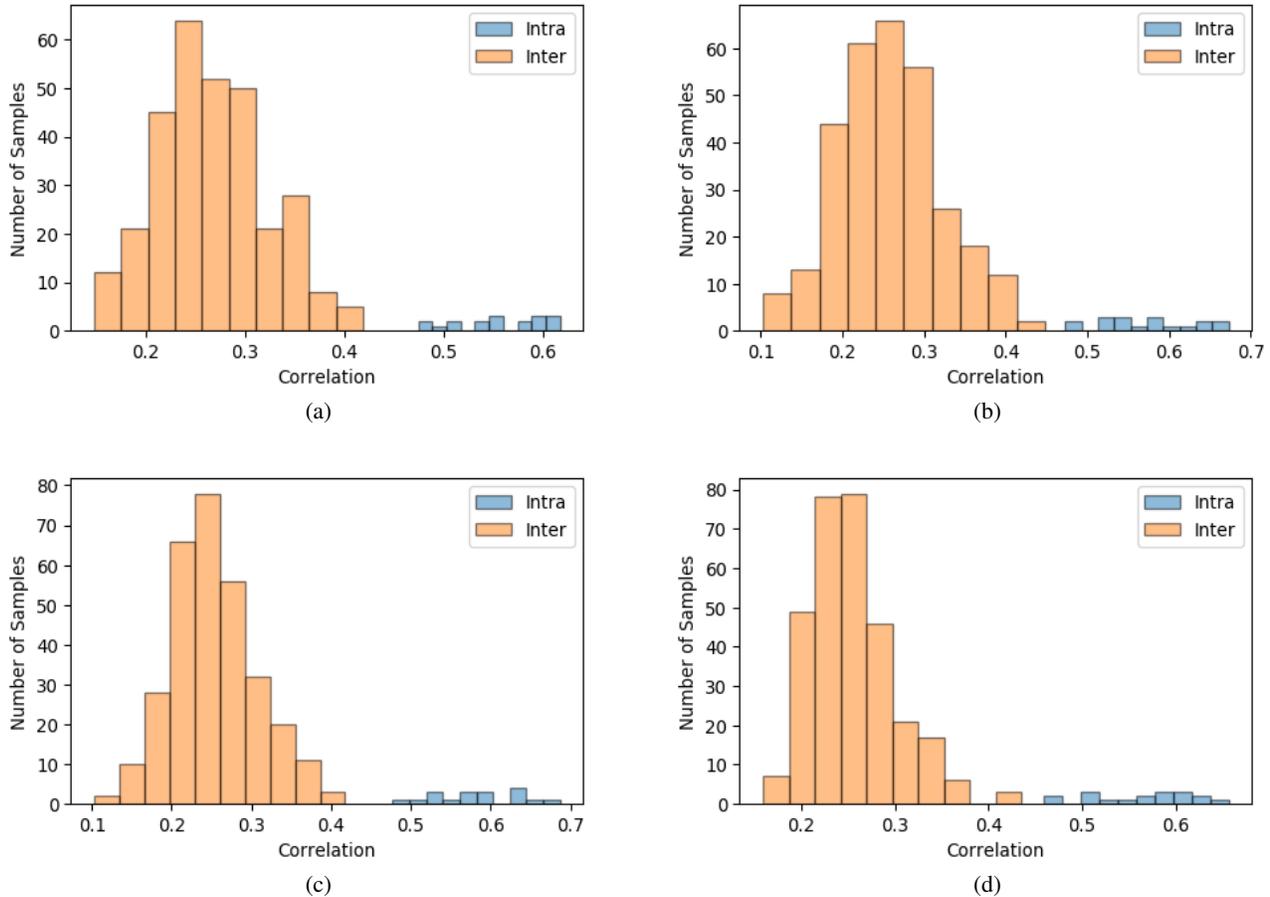


Figure 5: Intra and inter (pearson) correlation distribution of (a) Dataset-A, (b) Dataset-B, (c) Dataset-C, and (d) Dataset-D before downscaling (downscaling factor=1).

of 22 is depicted in Figure 4d. Moreover, the downscaling reduces the entropy of the image which results in worse uniqueness (inter correlation), while on the contrary, mitigates the errors caused from misalignment, dust, camera noise and illumination differences which improves the reliability (intra correlation). This trade-off should be examined to optimize the downscaling factor.

IV. EVALUATION RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, we explain the metrics to evaluate the proposed optical PUF. Moreover, we describe the datasets which are used to validate the methodology. Finally, we report and discuss the results obtained using the proposed methodology applied to described datasets as well as security implications of the proposed PUF.

A. Evaluation Metrics

To quantify the quality of the proposed method, we use inter (uniqueness) and intra (reliability) correlation metrics. The uniqueness represents the correlation between the fingerprints of different EGFETs, and it should be low. The reliability represents the correlation between the fingerprints of same EGFET, and it should be high. Therefore, the fingerprints

of different EGFETs are distinguishable from the keys of same EGFETs with a threshold. It should be noted that, in this work, fast normalized cross-correlation [62] is used to calculate uniqueness and reliability.

The uniqueness of the optical PUF reflects the visible variability of printed inks. The reliability of the optical PUF suffers from misalignment, dust, camera noise, improper illumination and shape degradation over time.

The figure of merit (FoM) for the distinguishability is the difference between the minimum value of the reliability and the maximum value of the uniqueness, and is given by:

$$FoM(I) = \min_{\{(i,j) | i=j, i,j \in I\}} C(i,j) - \max_{\{(i,j) | i \neq j, i,j \in I\}} C(i,j),$$

where the set I thereby denotes the multiset¹ of all transistor images. The first summand represents the intra correlation (reliability) between images of the same device i.e. $i = j, i, j \in I$, while the second summand denotes the inter correlation (uniqueness) between images of different devices i.e. $i \neq j, i, j \in I$.

¹The elements of I are not unique since there are multiple images i of the same transistor in I . We all denote them with the same repeated element

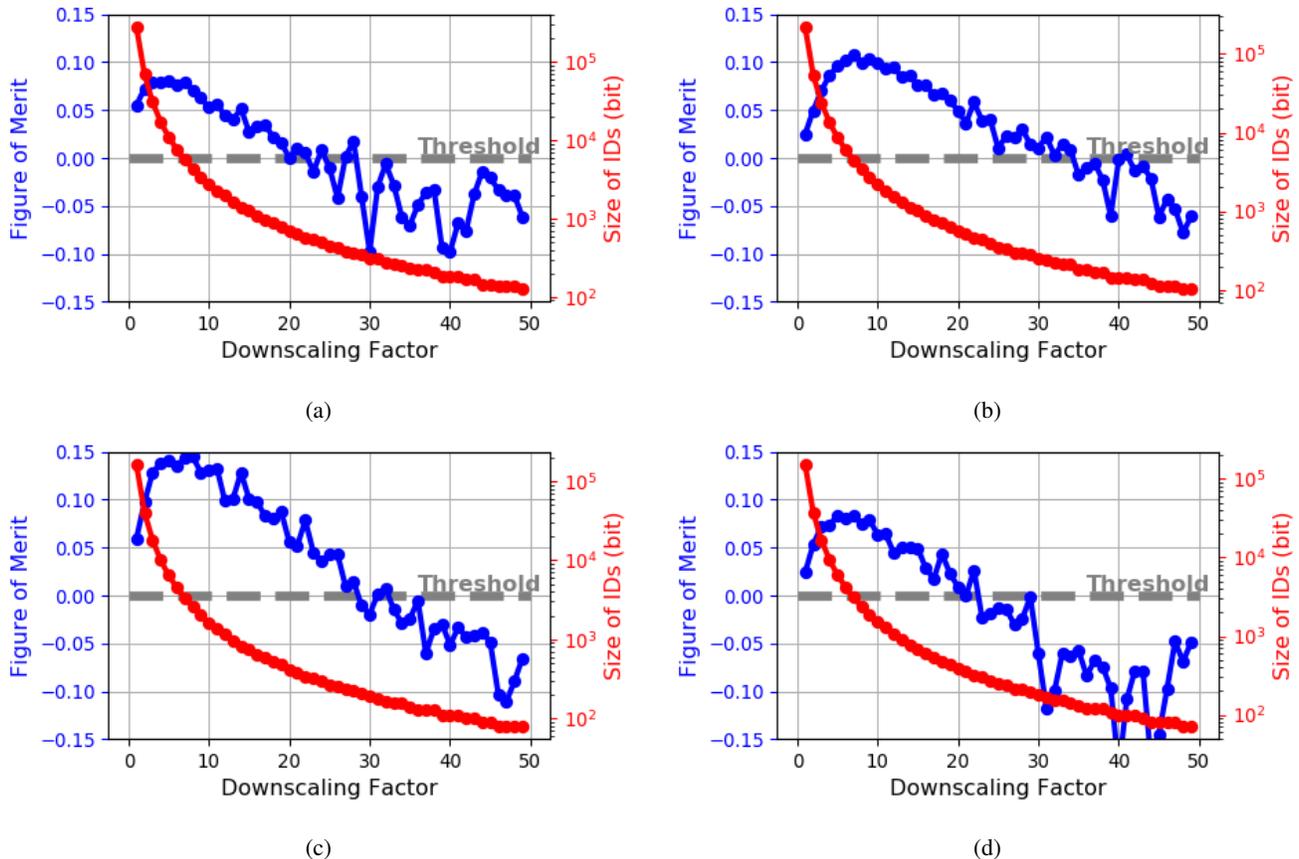


Figure 6: Figure of Merit (FoM) of (a) Dataset-A, (b) Dataset-B, (c) Dataset-C, and (d) Dataset-D with respect to downscaling factor (FoM: difference between minimum value of intra correlation and maximum value of inter correlation).

TABLE I: Definition of datasets

	# of EGFETs	Width (μm)	Length (μm)	Size of ROI Image After Alignment
Dataset-A	18	600	60	350x780
Dataset-B	18	400	60	350x620
Dataset-C	18	200	60	350x460
Dataset-D	18	100	60	350x430

B. Dataset

We used the optical images of fabricated EGFETs to validate the methodology. The dataset is split into four subdataset, each containing EGFETs of a certain width (see Table I). Moreover, two images of each EGFET are taken with a time difference of 120 days to evaluate the reliability of the methodology in the context of camera noise, dust, illumination and the shape degradation over time.

C. Discussion of Results

The intra (reliability) and inter (uniqueness) correlation distributions of four datasets are given in Figure 5. The results show that with a certain threshold, the extracted fingerprints are distinguishable meaning that FoM is positive. The number of bits of the extracted fingerprints from dataset-A, dataset-B, dataset-C, and dataset-D are 273000, 217000, 161000, 150500-bit respectively. Please note that these number of bits

are achieved using only one printed transistor in the optical PUF while the printed electrical PUF provides 1-bit using 3 transistors and 2 resistors. To achieve the equal number (e.g., 150500) of bits using the electrical PUF, an area of $\sim 0.5 \text{ m}^2$ is required, which is clearly infeasible. This comparison proves that the optical PUFs provides extremely larger number of bits with no hardware overhead and component cost.

To examine the relation between FoM and downscaling factor, we extracted FoM results with respect to several downscaling factors, as depicted in Figure 6. The maximum downscaling factors resulting in positive FoM are 28, 41, 32, and 22 for dataset-A, dataset-B, dataset-C, and dataset-D respectively, which means that the minimum compression rate of the generated fingerprints is 484 (22×22). This rate results in the decrease of the fingerprint bit-sizes to 576, 464, 336, and 320-bit, respectively. Therefore, the storage need is reduced significantly comparing to existing image-based fingerprints extraction methods [20], [21] where whole ROI is stored as fingerprint and compared for authentication. It should be noted that, in Figure 6, the FoM of all datasets increases while the downscaling factor is increased from 1 to around 8 because the downscaling eliminates the high resolution details resulting in lower maximum inter correlation (better reliability) and higher minimum intra correlation (better uniqueness). Thus, the distinguishability of the fingerprints become better. However, after a certain downscaling factor, the FoM is decreasing

since they start losing their distinctive features which leads to higher maximum inter correlation (worse reliability) and lower minimum intra correlation (worse uniqueness). Therefore, the fingerprints are less distinguishable while reaching better compression rates. The trade-off between distinguishability and compression rate should be considered, and the downscaling rate should be selected according to targeted application specifications.

D. Discussion of Security Implications

As explained in Section I, the target of this work is to countermeasure counterfeiting and overbuilding of PE components. In most prominent attack scenarios, attacker has to clone the part of the component where optical PUF extracts the fingerprint so that the cloned component can be authenticated. Several cloning attacks have been performed on electrical PUFs [63], [64], [57]. However, such attacks have never been generalized on optical PUFs [57]. Therefore, more specific attack should be considered in the proposed optical PUF.

One possible attack is to use more precise subtractive tools (e.g. laser) than additive printing to clone the edge shape of ROI since ROI is the entropy source of the fingerprint. This can be achieved by either fabricating the component using subtractive methods or reshaping already printed inks. However, such costly fine-grained cloning attack has to be done in large volume to be economically viable for the attacker. However, using such costly precise processes defeats the purpose of ultra low-cost PE products, hence rendering such attack economically unfit. Furthermore, regardless of economical suitability, in both ways, attacker cannot imitate the thickness and smoothness of the edges (see Figure 4c) since the thickness and smoothness of ROI results from the random dispersion of inks, which is specific to additive manufacturing. Moreover, an additional step can be performed during the pre-processing to detect any sharp edges caused by subtractive processes directly.

E. Discussion of iPUF Usage in Supply Chain Tracking

In addition to the usage of iPUF in PE application for anti-counterfeiting purpose, iPUF can be used for supply chain tracking thanks to its point-of-use fabrication feature. In the supply chain, each party can print a structure as a PUF ($iPUF_i$), which is a part of namely Super PUF along with formerly printed structures ($iPUF_0, iPUF_1, \dots, iPUF_{i-1}$). When the end-user or any party in the chain receives the product, it has a Super PUF consisting of multiple iPUFs, printed by each previous party in the supply chain. This way, the chain can be uniquely tracked down.

The advantage of using iPUF in supply chain tracking is that it can be printed using low-cost tools (e.g., inkjet-printer), which results in ultra-low-cost overhead while providing sufficient resolution in the range of 10 μm , and intrinsic visual features to sustain the unclonability of the optical PUFs as discussed in Section IV-D.

V. CONCLUSION

The growing market of Printed Electronics (PE) bring about the counterfeiting of PE components. PUFs are commonly utilized to prevent the counterfeiting. However, electrical PUFs which require extra circuitry and associated overhead to product are infeasible in low-cost PE applications. In this paper, we present an image based fingerprint extraction methodology from the optical variation of printed inks in the PE components. Therefore, no extra circuitry is required to obtain such fingerprint. Moreover, we utilize an image downscaling to compress the extracted fingerprints to reduce the storage cost of the fingerprints. The methodology is applied to four datasets for evaluation. The results show that the optically visible variation of the printed inks are suitable to utilize in fingerprint extraction for anti-counterfeiting of PE, and the downscaling compression reduces the storage cost of the extracted fingerprints nearly 484x while maintaining adequate PUF metrics.

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