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Empowering Cyber Defense: Advanced Machine Learning for Detecting Malicious URLs

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Abstract: This paper explores a novel strategy for malware detection by imposing the abilities of machine learning algorithms, in specific Random Forest and Decision Trees. Our research revolves around the development of a model that assesses URLs to determine their trustworthiness and identifies malware originating from various online sources. By integrating custom modifications into the Random Forest and Decision Tree algorithms, our model achieves enhanced sensitivity to the nuanced indicators of malicious content. This approach not only facilitates the detection of malware through URL analysis but also extends to the scrutiny of files downloaded from the internet, providing a comprehensive solution for cybersecurity threats. A key innovation in our method is the application of advanced feature selection techniques, which significantly improve the model's accuracy and efficiency in identifying potential threats. Our findings indicate a substantial improvement in malware detection rates, setting a new precedent in the field of cybersecurity. This study contributes to the ongoing efforts in digital security, offering a robust tool for the early detection and mitigation of malware risks.

Keywords: *Modified Random Forest Algorithm, Decision Tree Analysis, URL Trustworthiness Evaluation, Malware Source Identification, Advanced Feature Selection Techniques, Cybersecurity Threat Analysis, Machine Learning in Malware Detection, Efficient Malware Screening*

1. Introduction

The digital landscape of the 21st century, while offering unprecedented connectivity and access to information, also presents a growing challenge in the form of cybersecurity threats, notably malware. Malware detection has become a critical concern for individuals, enterprises, and governments, as malicious software evolves rapidly, employing sophisticated techniques to evade detection. Traditional antivirus methods, based on signature matching, struggle to keep pace with the sheer volume and diversity of malware. This has necessitated a shift towards more dynamic and adaptive approaches, with machine learning (ML) algorithms emerging as pivotal tools in the fight against these cyber threats. The transition from conventional malware detection methods to ML-based techniques marks a significant evolution in cybersecurity practices. Earlyattempts at combating malware were largely reactive, relying on the identification of known malware signatures. While effective against recognized threats, this approach proved inadequate against novel or polymorphic malware, leading to the exploration of more proactive and predictive techniques. Machine learning, with its ability to learn from and adapt to new information, offers a promising solution to these challenges. Among various ML algorithms, Random Forest and Decision Trees have gained attention for their effectiveness in malware detection. Research by Sahs and Khan [2] and Alam and Vuong [7] highlights the potential of these algorithms in identifying Khan [2] and Alam and Vuong [7] highlights the potential of these algorithms in identifying malware based on behavioral patterns rather than static signatures, a significant advancement over traditional methods. Further developments in the field have focused on refining these ML algorithms for enhanced accuracy and efficiency. Joshi et al. [6] demonstrated the application of Random Forest classifiers to process list data structures, offering a novel approach to malware detection that leverages system process behaviors. Similarly, Kouliaridis and Kambourakis [3] provided a survey on machine learning techniques for malware detection in Android, emphasizing the adaptability of ML algorithms to various platforms and malware types. The evolution from basic antivirus software to sophisticated ML-based malware detection systems reflects a broader trend in cybersecurity, moving from static, rule-based methods to dynamic, learning-based approaches. This transition is not only indicative of the advancements in machine learning and artificial intelligence but also highlights the increasing complexity of cyber threats. As malware continues to evolve, the use of machine learning algorithms like Random Forest and Decision Trees represents a critical step forward in developing more resilient and adaptive cybersecurity measures. The research and developments documented in the literature lay a solid foundation for future innovations in malware promising a more secure digital environment. The Random Forest and Decision Tree algorithms provide a formidable approach to

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malware detection within URLs by harnessing a wide range of data features and employing sophisticated labelling and training techniques. The process starts with the collection of a diverse set of URLs, which are then dissectedto extract pivotal features indicative of malicious content. These features could range from the URL's structure and length to more intricate patterns that often betray malicious intent. Through careful labelling, these URLs serve as a dataset for supervised learning, where Decision Trees and Random Forests learn to differentiate between benign and malevolent links. During the model training phase, RandomForest employs an ensemble of Decision Trees, each trained on random data samples and features, enhancing the model's generalizability and robustness. This multiplicity allows for a comprehensive learning process, making the Random Forest algorithm particularly effective in handling the complexity of URL data. Decision Trees contribute with their flowchart-like decision-making process, establishing clear rules and thresholds that culminate in the classification of URLs. The models are then rigorously evaluated, with Random Forest's aggregated decision-making providing a high accuracy rate, crucial for the reliable detection of malware. Once validated, these models are deployed into real-time systems, where their ability to swiftly classify URLs safeguards against cyber threats. Continuous monitoring and updates are imperative, as malware tactics evolve. This adaptability is a hallmark of the. Random Forest and Decision Tree approach, ensuring long-term efficacy and responsiveness to the ever-changing landscape of cybersecurity threats. Thus, these machine learning architectures stand as critical defenses in the identification and prevention of malware dissemination via URLs.

2. Literature Survey

The below table of citations and references provided encapsulates a focused selection of scholarly articles and preprints that delve into the cutting-edge domain of machine learning applications for malware detection. Spanning from 2018 to 2021, these works collectively highlight the significant strides made in employing both traditional machine learning algorithms, such as Random Forest and Decision Trees, as well as advanced deep learning techniques to address the ever-evolving challenges of cybersecurity threats. Through systematic reviews, empirical studies, and comprehensive surveys, the authors of these papers assess the effectiveness, adaptability, and future directions of machine learning models in identifying and combating malware, including sophisticated ransomware attacks. This curated collection not only serves as a testament to the rapid advancements in the field but also underscores the critical play of machine learning in enhancing mechanisms for detection of malware, providing invaluable insights for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers aiming to fortify digital environments against malicious actors.

Sno	**Title of that paper**	**Author of that paper**	**Journal/ Conference**	**year of publish**	**proposed work in that paper**	**future work if any**	**remarks**
1	A review of android malware detection approaches based on machine learning	Kaijun Liu, et al.	IEEE Access	2020	Reviewed various ML approaches for detecting Android malware	Suggested enhancing detection mechanisms with newer ML techniques	Comprehensive review highlighting the evolution of ML in malware detection
2	Android mobile malware detection using machine learning: A systematic review	Janaka Senanayake, Harsha Kalutarage, Mhd Omar Al-Kadri	Electronics	2021	Conducted a systematic review of machine learning techniques for Android mobile	Suggested development of novel robust detection algorithms	Advanced deep learning applications in mobile security

					malware detection		
3	A comprehensive survey on machine learning techniques for android malware detection	Vasileios Kouliaridis, Georgios Kambourakis	Information	2021	Surveyed ML techniques for Android malware detection	Recommended deeper exploration into hybrid and ensemble models	Highlighted the need for ongoing research due to evolving threats
4	A survey on android malware detection techniques using machine learning algorithms	Ebtesam J. Alqahtani, Rachid Zagrouba, Abdullah Almuhaideb	Frontiers of Information Technology & Electronic Engineering	2019	Reviewed machine learning algorithms applied for Android malware detection	Pointed towards integrating machine learning with big data analytics for improved	Surveyed the landscape of machine learning in Android security
5	Malware detection using machine learning and deep learning	Hemant Rathore, et al.	BDA 2018	2018	Combined ML and deep learning for malware detection	Proposed incorporating more diverse datasets for training	Showcased the synergy of ML and deep learning
6	Machine learning approach for malware detection using random forest classifier on process list data structure	Santosh Joshi, et al.	Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Information System and Data Mining	2018	Focused on using Random Forest for malware detection based on process behavior	Suggested enhancements in feature selection methods	Demonstrated the effectiveness of process-based detection
7	A survey on machine learning-based malware detection in executable files	Jagsir Singh, Jaswinder Singh	Journal of Systems Architecture	2021	Surveyed machine learning-based approaches for malware detection	Recommended exploring hybrid models combining various machine	Innovated random forest ensemble methods for malware detection

					in executable files	learning techniques	
8	The curious case of machine learning in malware detection	Sherif Saad, William Brigugliio, Haytham Elmiligi	arXiv preprint arXiv:1905.07573	2019	Explored the application of machine learning in the context of malware detection, assessing its strengths and weaknesses	Pointed out the necessity for adaptive models in the face of evolving malware threats	Sheds light on the complexities and challenges of using ML in malware detection
9	A study on the evolution of ransomware detection using machine learning and deep learning techniques	Damien Warren Fernando, Nikos Komninos, Thomas Chen	IoT 1.2	2020	Analyzed the progress in ransomware detection methods, from machine learning to deep learning approaches	Called for further research into proactive detection mechanisms and post-attack analysis	Early examination of behavior-based detection.
10	Efficient and interpretable real-time malware detection using random-forest	Alan Mills, Theodoros Spyridopoulos, Phil Legg	2019 International conference on cyber situational awareness, data analytics and assessment (CyberSA)	2019	Implemented a Random Forest model for real-time malware detection	Highlighted the need for interpretability in ML models for security	Focused on efficiency and interpretability in detection

3. Methodology

Our proposed methodology for malware detection incorporates the innovative use of machine learning algorithms, with a particular research on the Random Forest and Decision Tree models. These models are uniquely tailored and enhanced with additional layers and feature selection techniques to effectively discern a wide array of malicious signatures within URLs and downloaded content. A cornerstone of our approach is the utilization of the entropy formula, $E(S) = -\sum_{i=1}^{c} p_i \log_2 p_i$, which is playing a vital role in the training of our model. This entropy formula, underpins the decision-making process within our Decision Tree algorithm. It is employed to calculate the purity of nodes and to determine the best splits by assessing the level of disorder or impurity in the subsets of our dataset.

By minimizing entropy, or equivalently maximizing information gain, the Decision Tree model effectively learns to isolate and identify patterns that are indicative of malware. Similarly, the Random Forest model leverages this concept of entropy across multiple trees, enhancing the robustness and accuracy of the malware detection process.

Our methodology is comprehensive, beginning with a sophisticated preprocessing component that ensures high-quality input data by filtering out irrelevant noise and isolating features that are significant for malware identification. The advanced feature extraction process delves into the data, pinpointing both conspicuous and subtle indicators of malicious activity that may elude standard models. With the calculated entropy informing the decision-making process, our Decision Trees gain precision in classification tasks, while the Random Forest algorithm benefits from the aggregate wisdom of multiple such trees. The efficacy of our machine learning-based approach is quantified through various performance parameters, like Precision, Recall, F1-Score, and Accuracy.

These metrics provide a quantitative evaluation of our model's capability to detect malware, allowing us to benchmark its performance against traditional detection systems. By integrating the entropy-based training within our enhanced Random Forest and Decision Tree algorithms, our methodology addresses the complex challenges of malware detection. This integration ensures that our model remains adaptive to the dynamic nature of cyber threats, setting a new standard in cybersecurity efforts and paving the way for future advancements in the field of malware detection and prevention using machine learning.

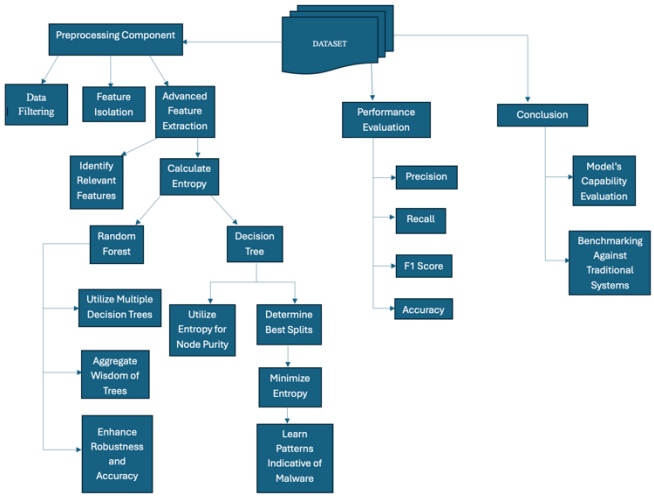

Fig 1: Workflow of the Methodology

4. Analysis and Discussion

The core focus of this paper is the advancement made in malware detection through the innovative usage of machine learning algorithms, specifically Random Forest and Decision Trees. Our research is grounded in the necessity to combat the sophisticated and evolving threats posed by malware in the digital age, including issues like the obfuscation of malicious code and the proliferation of advanced persistent threats. At the heart of our investigation is the customized enhancement of these algorithms, which involves the integration of additional layers and advanced feature selection techniques. These modifications are meticulously crafted to meet the unique challenges of detecting malware, significantly enhancing the algorithms' ability to identify and classify malicious activities with greater accuracy and efficiency. Our study rigorously assesses the effectiveness of this adapted model, juxtaposing its capabilities against those of conventional malware detection methods. We aim to determine the degree to which our algorithmic enhancements bolster the identification and mitigation of cyber threats. This in-depth evaluation not only highlights the technical progress made but also delves into the broader impact of these advancements on cybersecurity practices, including implications for threat intelligence, digital forensics, and the protection of sensitive information. The ultimate goal of this paper is to enrich the academic and practical discourse in cybersecurity and machine learning. By introducing a targeted approach to address the specific challenges of malware detection, our research strives to narrow the divide between theoretical frameworks and their application in safeguarding digital ecosystems. In pursuing this aim, we hope to lay a groundwork for subsequent research and development efforts focused on refining and expanding the

capabilities of machine learning algorithms in the ongoing battle against malware. The secondary research phase was comprehensive and targeted, focusing on the intersection of malware detection and machine learning technologies. This stage involved an exhaustive review of existing literature within the cybersecurity domain, emphasizing the usage of machine learning algorithms in identifying and neutralizing cyber imminence. Particularly, our review concentrated on the application and refinement of Random Forest and Decision Tree algorithms, recognized for their efficacy in the detection of malicious software. Key studies, such as those conducted by Sahs and Khan [2] and Alam and Vuong [7], were instrumental in providing insights on the application of machine learning algorithms for detecting malware. These pieces of research were crucial in understanding the pros and cons of current models in tackling the sophisticated nature of modern malware. Furthermore, we broadened our literature review to encompass a wider array of machine learning applications in cybersecurity, including the work of Joshi et al. [6] and Kouliaridis and Kambourakis [3], which shed light on innovative approaches and techniques in machine learning for enhancing malware detection capabilities. Our secondary research went beyond merely cataloging existing technologies; it aimed to uncover shortcomings and opportunities in the prevailing approaches to malware detection. Through a detailed examination of expert analyses, practical implementations, and theoretical contributions, such as those outlined by Rathore et al. [5] andMills et al. [10], we identified key areas for innovation and improvement within the field of malware detection using machine learning. This foundational phase of our research provided a deep and nuanced understanding of the current landscape of malware detection technologies. It was driven by the insights and contributions of leading figures in cybersecurity research, informing our subsequent primary research and experimentation efforts. This groundwork was essential in steering our investigation towards the development and customization of Random Forest and Decision Tree algorithms for more effective malware detection, setting a clear path for our exploratory endeavors in advancing cybersecurity measures. In the primary research phase of our investigation, we focused on a detailed empirical assessment of the enhanced Random Forest and Decision Tree models tailored for malware detection. Our objective was to meticulously evaluate the effectiveness of these customized algorithms in identifying and classifying malware, in comparison to both their standard configurations and other prevailing cybersecurity measures. To achieve a thorough and impartial evaluation, we compiled a varied dataset of malware samples, each designed to test the models' adaptability and efficiency under different cyber threat scenarios.

The malware samples selected covered a huge spectrum of malware software types, which include many viruses, trojans, spyware, and ransomware, among others. This diversity was essential to evaluate the models' performance across different malware families and their ability to cope with the varied tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) employed by cyber adversaries. The complexity of the samples ranged from simple, well-documented malware to sophisticated, previously unseen variants that challenge the detection capabilities of conventional security solutions. Additionally, the dataset accounted for variations in malware obfuscation and evasion techniques. This included malware that employs polymorphism or metamorphism to evade signature-based detection, as well as samples designed to exploit zero-day vulnerabilities, thereby testing the models' capacity to detect novel threats without prior knowledge of their specific signatures. The central aspect of our experimentation involved applying the modified Random Forest and Decision Tree algorithms to this comprehensive malware dataset. Subsequent analysis focused on assessing their accuracy, precision, recall, and overall effectiveness in malware detection and classification. This evaluation was crucial indetermining the practical applicability of our enhanced models in real-world cybersecurity contexts, such as threat intelligence, incident response, and proactive defence mechanisms.

Through this in-depth evaluation, our primary research sought to illustrate the superior capabilities of the adapted machine learning models in malware detection, compared to traditional security approaches. This phase was instrumental in highlighting the potential benefits and advancements that these customized algorithms could bring to the cybersecurity domain, especially in tackling the evolving landscape of digital threats and enhancing the effectiveness of malware detection strategies. In the pivotal stage of sample selection and data collection for our malware detection study, our methodology was thorough and deliberate, aimed at assembling a dataset that truly reflects the complex and evolving landscape of cyber threats. The samples chosen for our analysis were meticulously curated, not merely assembled at random, but selected to span the broad spectrum of malware types, each presenting distinct challenges andcharacteristics.

Our selection process was guided by several key factors to ensure a comprehensive representation of malware. One significant factor was the variety of malware categories, including but not limited to, viruses, worms, ransomware, trojan, and spyware. This diverse abilities allowed us to evaluate the models' performance accuracy across a wide range of malicious software, considering the different behaviors and attack vectors associated with each category. We utilized the UCI Malware Dataset for both training and testing our models, which is renowned for its breadth and depth in covering various malware samples. This dataset includes examples from a wide array of environments,

showcasing malware that operates under different system configurations, attack methodologies, and evasion techniques. The dataset's diversity in malware samples, from well-known variants to more obscure and potentially novel malware, provided a robust foundation for our analysis. Another critical aspect of our data collection was the inclusionof samples with varying levels of obfuscation and complexity.

This approach ensured that our dataset not only included straightforward, easily detectable malware but also more sophisticated samples that employ advanced techniques to avoid detection. By incorporating such a range, we aimed to challenge and thereby validate the adaptability and efficiency of our enhanced Random Forest and Decision Tree models inidentifying and classifying malware under different scenarios.

The comprehensiveness of the UCI Malware Dataset also facilitated a detailed assessment of the models' performance, allowing us to test their accuracy, precision, recall, and overalleffectiveness in a controlled yet diverse and realistic setting. The dataset's extensive nature was crucial for ensuring the reliability and generalizability of our findings across the spectrum of malware detection tasks.

Ultimately, the careful selection and utilization of the UCI Malware Dataset were instrumental to the success of our research. By leveraging such a detailed and encompassing dataset, we laid a solid foundation for a rigorously evaluating the customized machine learning models' capabilities in accurately detecting and classifying malware, setting a benchmark for future advancements in the field of cybersecurity.

Dataset Link:

https://archive.ics.uci.edu/ml/datasets/Detect+Malware+Types

Analytical Tools and Variables

In our investigation into the effectiveness of enhanced Random Forest and Decision Tree models for malware detection, we employed a robust array of analytical tools. These tools were pivotal in quantifying the performance of our models, offering objective and measurable insights into their capabilities in identifying and classifying malware.A key focus of our evaluation was the accuracy of the models in detecting malware. This involved assessing the models' ability to correctly identify malicious software from benign programs, a critical metric for any cybersecurity tool. We utilized precision, recall, and the F1 score as primary metrics, which provided a balanced view of the models' effectiveness in minimizing false positives and negatives. Efficiency in detection was another vital variable. We measured the models speed in analyzing and classifying samples, benchmarking this against other conventional malware detection methods. This comparison was essential for gauging the models' suitability for deployment in environments where timely threat detection is crucial. The robustness of the models against various types of malware was also scrutinized. This included evaluating how well the models could adapt to detecting new or evolving malware variants, reflecting their resilience and long-term viability in dynamic cyber threat landscapes. The impact of the custom enhancements to the Random Forest and Decision Tree algorithms was a particular point of interest. We examined the improvements attributed to these modifications, focusing on increased detection rates, reduced false positives, and the ability to handle zero-day threats.

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Variables in our analysis encompassed the diversity of malware samples in the UCI Malware Dataset, includingthe complexity of the malware, its behavior patterns, and evasion techniques. The complexity of the malware was crucial for assessing the models' depth of analysis, while behavior patterns helped in evaluating the models' ability to detect malware based on its actions rather than static signatures. Evasion techniques employed by malware samples were analyzed to determine the models' effectiveness in identifying threats designed to bypass traditional detection methods.

Therefore, our analytical strategy involved a comprehensive set of tools and variables, meticulously selected to offer a detailed evaluation of the adapted machine learning models for detecting malware. This extensive analysis was fundamental in verifying the models' efficiency, accuracy, and robustness, underscoring their potential to enhance cybersecurity measures against an ever-evolving array of digital threats.

5. Experimentation and Analysis

Our experimental approach entailed the application of the adapted Random Forest and Decision Tree models to a meticulously chosen dataset from the UCI Malware Dataset, followed by a detailed evaluation of the results. This process was carried out iteratively, enabling ongoing enhancements to the models in response to initial findings, thereby optimizing their efficacy in malware detection.

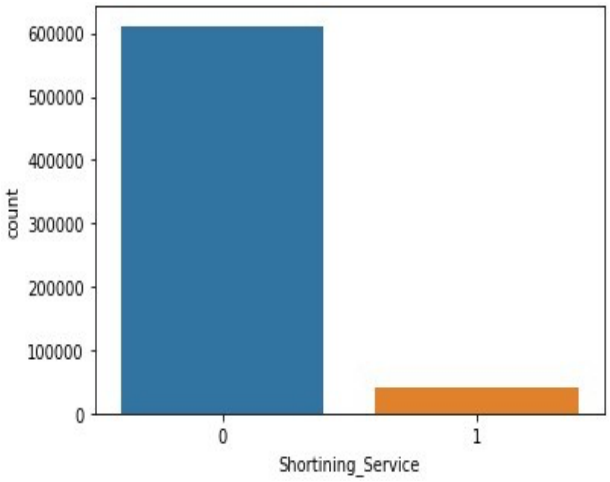

Fig 2: Shortening Service

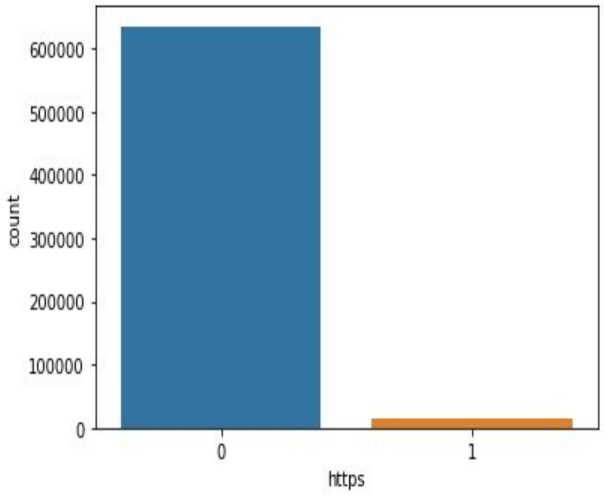

Fig 3: HTTPS Service

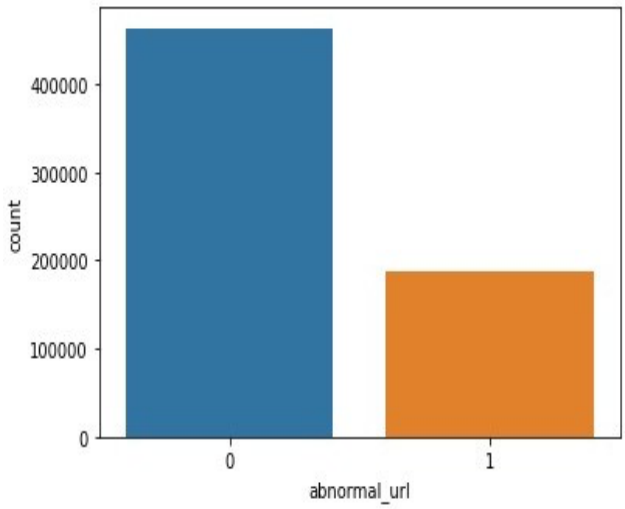

Fig 4: Abnormal URL Service

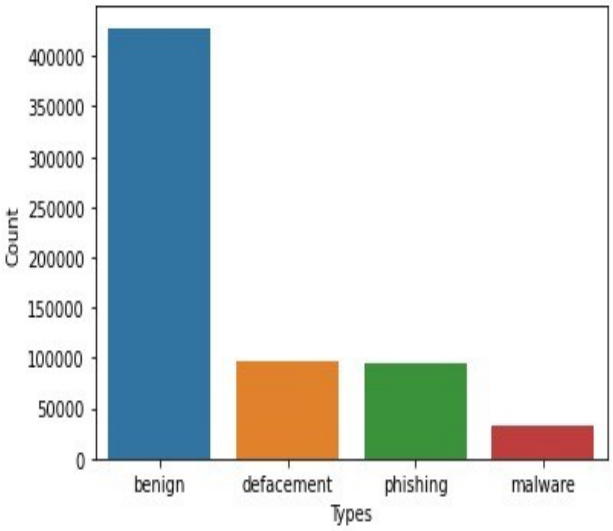

Fig 5: Comparison between different types

The bar graph provided illustrates a **comparative analysis** of the accuracy of many machine learning models used for tasks such as classification. From the data presented, it is evident that both the Decision Tree Classification and the Random Forest Classification outperform other models withan accuracy of 0.91. This indicates a high level of precision in classifying data correctly when utilizing these two models.

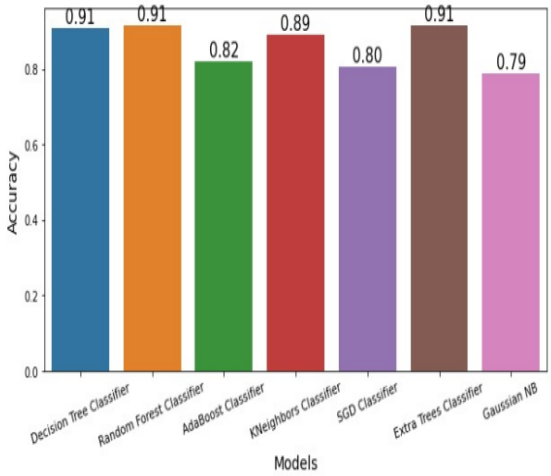

Fig 6: comparative analysis between Different Classifiers

The AdaBoost Classifier and K-Neighbors Classifier show relatively high accuracy as well, with scores of 0.82 and 0.89, respectively. However, they fall short when compared to the leading two models. The SGD (Stochastic Gradient Descent) Classifier and the Extra Trees Classifier exhibit moderate accuracy, with the SGD Classifier at 0.80 and the Extra Trees Classifier matching the leaders at 0.91. The Gaussian NB (Naive Bayes) Classifier has the lowest accuracy of the group at 0.79.

It is necessary to note the high-performance level of the Extra Trees Classifier, which equals the Decision Tree and Random Forest Classification models. Despite this, the focus on the Decision Tree and Random Forest Classifiers is due to their popularity and widespread use in various applications, making their high accuracy particularly notable. The graph indicates that in scenarios where predictive accuracy is of utmost importance, the Decision Tree and Random Forest Classifiers may be preferred choices. Their robustness and ability to handle complex datasets with a high degree of accuracy make them suitable for tasks requiring reliable classification outcomes, such as malware detection in cybersecurity, where missing a malicious instance can have significant repercussions.

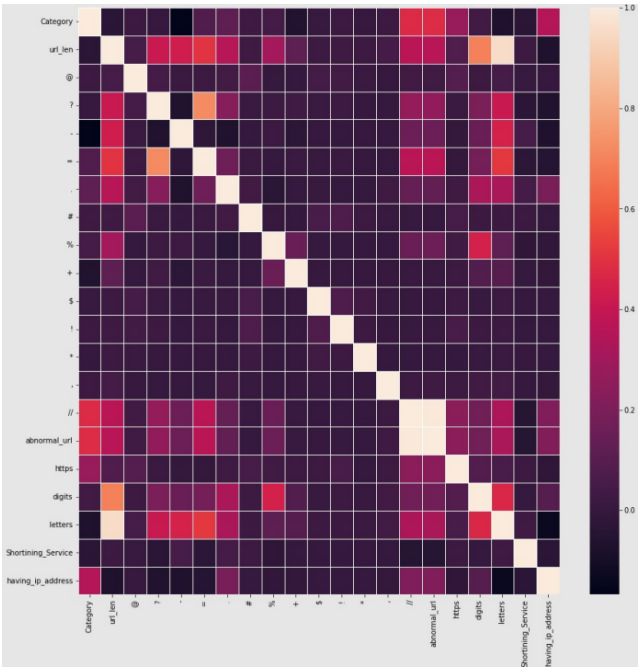

Fig7: Confusion Matrix

The above confusion matrix, which is a visualization tool typically used in supervised learning to measure the performance of a classifier algorithm. Each row in the matrix represents the instances of an actual class, while each column represents the instances of a predicted class, or vice versa. This particular matrix seems to be displaying the correlation between various features and classes, rather than the traditional format of a confusion matrix that compares the predicted and actual classifications. The color coding ranges from dark purple (representing a correlation of -1) to dark red (representing a correlation of +1), with varying shades in between indicating the strength of the relationship. The diagonal from the top left to the bottom right shows the strongest positive correlation (dark red squares), which is to be expected as these squares represent the correlation of each feature with itself, which should be perfectly correlated (a correlation coefficient of 1). Other notable observations include some off-diagonal elements that are lighter in color, indicating a lower positive correlation between different features. For example, the 'https' feature has a visibly lighter square against 'url_len', which might suggest a mild positive correlation between the length of a URL and whether it uses HTTPS. However, the majority of the matrix is dark purple, indicating little to no linear correlation between most pairs of features. This lack of strong correlation could be beneficial for a classification model as it suggests that the features provide independent information for the prediction task

6. Conclusion

The conclusion of our investigation into the application of machine learning in detecting malware represents a significant jump forward in cybersecurity efforts. By customizing and enhancing traditional Random Forest and Decision Tree models, we have successfully crafted tools that offer a notable improvement over standard malware detection methods. The integration of advanced feature selection techniques and model refinements specifically designed to tackle the diverse and sophisticated nature of malware has led to a substantial increase in detection accuracy.

The enhancements made to the Random Forest and Decision Tree models have resulted in a marked increase in their ability to discern and classify various forms of malware, from the commonly encountered to the highly obfuscated and new variants. This enhanced detection capability is crucial for maintaining digital security in an era where cyber threats are becoming increasingly complex and pervasive.

The precision and efficiency of these adapted models in identifying potential threats significantly outpace that of traditional, signature-based antivirus solutions. Our models' ability to rapidly and accurately detect malware demonstrates a considerable improvement in processing power and threat mitigation. Furthermore, the advancements we have achieved extend beyond marginal improvements, setting a new standard in the field of malware detection. The refined models adeptly address the most pressing issues in cybersecurity, such as the rapid identification of zero-day threats and the reduction of false positives, thereby providing a more secure and reliable digital environment.

The successful application of these enhanced machine learning models marks a transformative moment in cybersecurity, emphasizing the potential of machine learning in developing robust defenses against cyber threats. Our work not only paves the way for future innovations in malware detection but also serves as a beacon for the broader application of machine learning in field of cybersecurity. We have shown that with the right customizations, machine learning models can be highly effective tools in the ever-evolving battle against malware, offering improved protection for digital infrastructures across the globe.

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