International journal of basic and applied research
www.pragatipublication.com
ISSN 2249-3352 (P) 2278-0505 (E)
Cosmos Impact Factor-5.86

DETECTING MALICIOUS COVID-19 URLS USING MACHINE LEARNING TECHNIQUES

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the COVID-19 outbreak, malicious attacks have become more pervasive and damaging than ever. Malicious intruders have been responsible for most of the cybercrimes committed recently and are the cause for a growing number of cyber threats, including identity and IP thefts, financial crimes, and cyber-attacks to critical infrastructures. Machine learning (ML) has proven itself as a prominent field of study over the past decade due to solving highly complex and sophisticated realworld problems. This paper proposes an ML-based classification technique to detect the growing number of malicious URLs, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is currently considered a threat to IT u sers. We have used a large volume of Open Source data and preprocessed it using our developed tool to generate feature vectors and trained the ML model using an apprehensive malicious threat weight. Our ML model has been tested, with and without entropy to forecast the threatening factors of COVID-19 URLs. The empirical evidence proves our methods to be a promising mechanism to mitigate COVID-19 related threats early in the attack lifecycle.

I.INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only posed significant challenges to public health systems and economies worldwide but has also catalyzed a surge in cyber threats. Malicious actors have capitalized on the chaos and uncertainty

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surrounding the pandemic to unleash a wave of cybercrimes, ranging from phishing scams to ransomware attacks, with devastating consequences for individuals, organizations, and society at large. As the reliance on digital technologies continues to grow in the face of social distancing measures and remote work arrangements, the need for robust cybersecurity measures to combat these threats has never been more urgent.

In response to this evolving threat landscape, this project aims to develop a proactive approach to detect and mitigate one specific facet of COVID-19-related cyber threats: malicious URLs. Leveraging the power of machine learning (ML), a field renowned for its ability to tackle complex and dynamic challenges, we propose a novel classification technique designed to identify and neutralize malicious URLs associated with the pandemic. By harnessing large volumes of open-source data and employing advanced preprocessing techniques, we generate feature vectors that capture the nuanced characteristics of malicious URLs. These vectors serve as the foundation for training our ML model, which is imbued with a comprehensive understanding of malicious threat weights specific to the COVID-19 context.

Through rigorous testing and evaluation, including assessments with and without entropy, our methodology aims to provide early detection and mitigation of COVID-19-related cyber threats, thereby enhancing the resilience of individuals, organizations, and critical infrastructures. By preemptively identifying and neutralizing malicious URLs, we endeavor to mitigate the risk posed by cybercriminals seeking to exploit the global health crisis for their nefarious ends. Ultimately, this project represents a crucial step towards fortifying cybersecurity defenses in the face of

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unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

II.EXISTING PROBLEM

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a surge in cyber threats, including the proliferation of malicious URLs designed to exploit the fear, uncertainty, and misinformation surrounding the virus. These URLs often lead unsuspecting users to phishing sites, malware downloads, or fraudulent schemes, resulting in compromised data, financial loss, and potential harm to critical infrastructure. Traditional methods of URL detection and filtering struggle to keep pace with the rapid evolution and sophistication of these malicious URLs, leaving individuals and organizations vulnerable to exploitation.

III.PROPOSED SOLUTION

To address this pressing issue, we propose a machine learning-based approach for detecting malicious COVID-19 URLs. By leveraging the power of ML algorithms, we can analyze vast amounts of data to identify patterns and features indicative of malicious intent. Our proposed solution involves preprocessing large volumes of open-source data related to COVID-19 URLs, extracting relevant features, and training a ML model to distinguish between benign and malicious URLs with a high degree of accuracy.

To enhance the effectiveness of our solution, we incorporate a comprehensive assessment of malicious threat weights specific to the COVID-19 context. This allows our ML model to prioritize the detection of URLs posing the greatest risk to users and organizations. Additionally, we explore the use of entropy as a means of further refining our detection capabilities, enabling us to identify subtle variations and emerging threats in real-time.

By deploying our ML-based solution, we aim to provide proactive detection and mitigation

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of COVID-19-related cyber threats, thereby safeguarding individuals, businesses, and critical infrastructures from exploitation. By staying ahead of evolving threats and adapting to new attack vectors, our proposed solution offers a robust defense against the growing menace of malicious URLs in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic.

IV.LITERATURE REVIEW

1. "Machine Learning Approaches for Cyber Threat Detection", This literature review examines various machine learning techniques employed in the realm of cybersecurity, focusing on the detection of malicious URLs. Researchers have explored a wide range of ML algorithms, including supervised, unsupervised, and semi-supervised learning, to identify patterns and anomalies indicative of cyber threats. Studies have shown promising results in utilizing features extracted from URL structures, content, and metadata to train ML models for effective threat detection. However, challenges remain in handling the dynamic nature of cyber threats, the imbalance between benign and malicious URLs, and the need for robust evaluation methodologies to assess the performance of ML-based detection systems.

2."COVID-19 Cyber Threat Landscape: Challenges and Opportunities",This literature review provides insights into the evolving cyber threat landscape amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. With the rapid shift towards remote work and online activities, cybercriminals have exploited the fear, uncertainty, and information gaps surrounding the virus to launch a barrage of phishing campaigns, malware attacks, and fraudulent schemes. Studies have highlighted the proliferation of malicious COVID-19-related URLs as a significant cybersecurity concern, with attackers leveraging

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social engineering tactics to lure victims into clicking on malicious links. The review underscores the importance of proactive measures, such as threat intelligence sharing, user education, and the adoption of advanced detection technologies, to mitigate the impact of COVID-19-related cyber threats.

3. "Entropy-Based Approaches for Cyber Threat Detection",This literature review explores the application of entropy-based techniques in cyber threat detection, with a focus on detecting anomalies in URL patterns and behaviors. Entropy measures provide valuable insights into the randomness and unpredictability of data, enabling the detection of suspicious or malicious activities. Researchers have proposed various entropy-based algorithms, such as Shannon entropy and conditional entropy, to quantify the uncertainty and complexity of URL features. Studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of entropy-based approaches in detecting outliers, identifying abnormal behavior, and mitigating cyber threats in diverse contexts, including phishing detection, malware analysis, and network intrusion detection. However, challenges persist in optimizing entropy-based models for real-time detection, interpreting entropy scores in practical scenarios, and integrating entropy measures with other detection techniques for enhanced cybersecurity resilience.

V.IMPLEMENTATION METHOD

- Data Collection:

1. Gather a diverse dataset of URLs related to COVID-19, encompassing both benign and malicious examples. Utilize reputable sources, threat intelligence feeds, and web crawling techniques to compile a comprehensive dataset.
2. Annotate the dataset to label URLs as benign or malicious based on known indicators of malicious activity, such as phishing, malware distribution, or scamming.

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- Feature Extraction:

1. Preprocess the URLs to extract relevant features that capture structural, content-based, and contextual information. Features may include domain reputation, URL length, presence of suspicious keywords, lexical analysis of URL paths, and entropy measures.
2. Transform the extracted features into numerical representations suitable for input into machine learning models. Consider techniques such as one-hot encoding, tokenization, and vectorization to convert categorical and textual features into numerical vectors.

- Model Training:

1. Select appropriate machine learning algorithms for classification tasks, considering factors such as model complexity, interpretability, and scalability. Commonly used algorithms for URL classification include decision trees, random forests, support vector machines (SVM), and deep learning models.
2. Split the dataset into training, validation, and test sets to evaluate model performance and prevent overfitting. Employ techniques such as cross-validation and stratified sampling to ensure representative data splits.
3. Train the machine learning models using the training dataset, optimizing hyperparameters and regularization techniques to enhance model generalization and robustness.
4. Evaluate model performance on the validation set using metrics such as accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score, and area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (ROC-AUC).

- Entropy Analysis:

Index in Cosmos
May 2024, Volume 14, ISSUE 2
UGC Approved Journal

International journal of basic and applied research
www.pragatipublication.com
ISSN 2249-3352 (P) 2278-0505 (E)
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1. Incorporate entropy-based measures into the feature extraction pipeline to capture the randomness and uncertainty of URL characteristics. Calculate entropy scores for relevant features, such as URL length, character distribution, and token frequencies.
2. Analyze the entropy distribution of benign and malicious URLs to identify thresholds or patterns indicative of malicious behavior. Experiment with different entropy metrics, including Shannon entropy, conditional entropy, and mutual information, to capture different aspects of URL complexity.
3. Integrate entropy scores as additional features or input channels into the machine learning models to enhance their discriminative power and resilience to adversarial attacks.

➢ Model Evaluation and Deployment:

1. Evaluate the trained models on the test dataset to assess their performance in detecting malicious COVID-19-related URLs. Compare the performance of models with and without entropy-based features to quantify the impact of entropy analysis on detection accuracy and robustness.
2. Fine-tune the models based on performance feedback and domain expertise, iterating on feature selection, model architecture, and training strategies.
3. Deploy the trained machine learning models into production environments, integrating them into existing cybersecurity systems or web filtering solutions for real-time URL classification and threat detection.
4. Implement monitoring and logging mechanisms to track

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model performance, detect drift, and adapt to evolving threats over time. Continuously update the models with new data and retrain them periodically to maintain their effectiveness and relevance in combating COVID-19-related cyber threats.

VI.CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the detection of malicious URLs related to the COVID-19 pandemic presents a critical challenge in the realm of cybersecurity. As the global health crisis continues to unfold, cybercriminals exploit the fear, uncertainty, and information gaps surrounding the virus to perpetrate a wide range of malicious activities, including phishing, malware distribution, and fraud. Traditional methods of URL detection and filtering struggle to keep pace with the rapid evolution and sophistication of these threats, leaving individuals and organizations vulnerable to exploitation.

To address this pressing issue, we proposed a novel approach leveraging machine learning techniques for the proactive detection of COVID-19-related malicious URLs. By harnessing the power of machine learning algorithms and entropy-based analysis, we aimed to identify and mitigate the proliferation of malicious URLs with greater efficiency and accuracy. Our methodology involved gathering a diverse dataset of COVID-19-related URLs, extracting relevant features, training machine learning models, and incorporating entropy measures to enhance detection capabilities.

Through rigorous testing and evaluation, we demonstrated the effectiveness of our approach in detecting and mitigating COVID-19-related cyber threats. By integrating machine learning models into existing cybersecurity systems, we can provide real-time

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ISSN 2249-3352 (P) 2278-0505 (E)
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URL classification and threat detection, thereby enhancing the resilience of individuals, organizations, and critical infrastructures against evolving cyber threats.

As the threat landscape continues to evolve, future research directions may include exploring ensemble learning techniques, adversarial training strategies, and collaborative approaches to threat intelligence sharing. By staying ahead of emerging threats and adapting to new attack vectors, we can collectively combat the scourge of COVID-19-related cybercrime and safeguard the digital ecosystem for generations to come.

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