A Literature Review On Machine Learning-Based Phishing Detection Systems

Nevin Thankachan
ViswaJyothi College of Engineering and Technology
Ernakulam, Kerala
nevinthhankachan2003@gmail.com

Cheriachan George
ViswaJyothi College of Engineering and Technology
Ernakulam, Kerala
cheriachan6162@gmail.com

Ameen C H
ViswaJyothi College of Engineering and Technology
Ernakulam, Kerala
ameen08961@gmail.com

Sidhardh s
ViswaJyothi College of Engineering and Technology
Ernakulam, Kerala
sidhardh3034@gmail.com

Jimy George
Assistant Professor
Department Of Information Technology
ViswaJyothi College of Engineering and Technology

***Abstract*—**This paper presents ThreatScout, a client-side hybrid framework for real-time phishing URL detection. The system integrates machine learning models with heuristic analysis to identify malicious websites that attempt to steal sensitive user information. Unlike traditional blacklist-based approaches, ThreatScout operates offline within the browser, ensuring privacy and low latency. To improve robustness, the system combines lexical, domain-based, and content features with adversarial defense techniques such as Document Object Model (DOM) structure analysis and visual similarity checks. By delivering immediate, context-aware alerts through a lightweight browser extension, ThreatScout empowers users with proactive protection against phishing attacks. The framework is designed to be scalable, resource-efficient, and user friendly, enabling deployment across multiple browsers. This paper details the architecture, methodology, and expected impact of ThreatScout in strengthening client-side web security.

***Keywords*— Phishing detection, malicious URLs, browser extension, machine learning, adversarial defense, client-side security**

I. INTRODUCTION

Phishing attacks remain one of the most significant threats in cyberspace, exploiting deceptive websites to obtain sensitive user credentials and financial information. Traditional tools such as blacklist filters and browser warnings are reactive in nature, often failing to protect users from newly generated, zero-day phishing domains. While server-side solutions can offer enhanced protection, they introduce concerns regarding user privacy, network dependency, and real-time efficiency.

The **ThreatScout** project addresses these limitations by providing a client-side, machine learning–driven browser extension for phishing detection. The system leverages lexical, domain, and structural features of URLs combined with lightweight classifiers to achieve high accuracy with minimal computational overhead. In addition, ThreatScout incorporates adversarial defense mechanisms—including DOM structure comparison and visual similarity analysis—to detect phishing websites designed to evade traditional ML models. Envisioned as a comprehensive security tool, ThreatScout offers users real-time alerts without reliance on external servers, ensuring privacy-preserving and scalable web protection.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Research Papers

A study by Jackson et al. introduced **SpoofGuard**, one of the earliest client-side defenses against phishing websites. The system analyzed suspicious elements in webpages, such as abnormal URLs, unauthorized logos, and insecure form actions, to detect phishing attempts in real time. [1] The tool provided early insights into client-side protection, but its rule-based nature limited adaptability to new forms of attacks. SpoofGuard often struggled with zero-day phishing domains, highlighting the need for systems that could learn and adapt automatically to evolving threats.

Another significant advancement was the application of **deep learning techniques** for URL classification, where Goodfellow et al. used LSTM and RNN models to detect phishing purely from the character-level structure of URLs. This method minimized the risk of executing malicious scripts by not relying on page rendering and demonstrated strong performance across benchmark datasets. [2] However, such models required large datasets and intensive computational power, limiting their deployment in lightweight environments such as browser extensions, where memory and performance constraints exist .

Marchal et al. proposed **NoPhish**, a Chrome browser extension that leverages 22 lexical, domain-based, and content features combined with supervised ML models, notably Random Forest. Their experiments demonstrated that Random Forest consistently provided the highest detection accuracy with minimal false positives. NoPhish showcased the feasibility of an

offline browser extension for phishing detection. [3] However, its dependency on static features made it less resilient to adversarial attacks, where attackers slightly modify URLs or content to bypass classifiers. Moreover, its availability was restricted to the Chrome browser.

Research by Apruzzese et al. investigated **evasion attacks and defense mechanisms for ML-based phishing detection systems**. The authors demonstrated how adversarial techniques—such as adding benign tokens, altering URL structures, or modifying HTML code—could drastically reduce detection accuracy. [4] To counter these threats, they proposed resilience strategies including Document Object Model (DOM) structure analysis and visual similarity detection, which compared suspicious sites against legitimate ones using Mean Squared Error (MSE) measures. Their findings emphasized that future phishing detection tools must incorporate adversarial defenses to maintain robustness in real-world environments.

Another contribution to phishing research came from Ma et al., who introduced the **PILU-90K dataset**, which included a balanced distribution of phishing URLs, legitimate homepages, and legitimate login pages. [5] Unlike traditional datasets, which often contained only homepages, PILU-90K addressed the issue of false positives when genuine login pages resembled phishing sites. Using logistic regression and TF-IDF n-grams, they achieved up to 96.5% accuracy in phishing detection. Despite its success, the study highlighted the problem of dataset aging—performance deteriorated over time as attackers introduced new tactics. This highlighted the necessity of periodic retraining and adaptive models.

RESEARCH PAPER	SHORT EXPLANATION	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Client-Side Defense Against Web-Based Identity Theft	Proposes a client-side browser plug-in that detects phishing websites using URL analysis, logo verification, and password reuse checks before form submission.	1. Works entirely on the client side. 2. Detects phishing early using multiple indicators. 3. High detection accuracy with minimal performance impact.	1. Requires regular updates to detection rules. 2. Limited against highly dynamic phishing attacks. 3. Originally designed only for Internet Explorer.
Detection of Phishing Webpages Using Spoof Index and Rule-Based Features	Proposes a rule-based phishing detection method that assigns a spoof index based on page layout, URL patterns, and form analysis.	1.Explainable detection through simple rules. 2.Works offline without blacklists. 3.Lightweight and platform-independent.	1. Static rules require manual updates. 2.Limited adaptability to evolving attacks. 3. Less effective against advanced evasion methods.
Detection of Malicious URLs Using Deep Learning	Presents a deep learning–based Chrome extension that classifies URLs at the character level without page content analysis for real-time phishing detection.	1. High accuracy without manual feature engineering. 2. Detects zero-day phishing URLs. 3. Preserves privacy by avoiding content scraping.	1. Requires large training datasets. 2. Slower inference on low-power devices. 3. Lacks visual or DOM-based detection.
Evasion Attacks and Defense Mechanisms for ML-Based Web Phishing Classifiers	Investigates adversarial evasion attacks on ML-based phishing detectors and proposes defenses using visual and structural similarity analysis.	1. Identifies real-world attack vectors. 2. Provides robust defense strategies. 3. Improves resilience of existing classifiers.	1. No new detection model proposed. 2. Complex setup requiring model access. 3. Focused only on ML-based systems.
Phishing URL Detection: A Real-Case Scenario Through Login URLs	Introduces a balanced phishing dataset with homepages and login URLs to reduce false positives using TF-IDF and ML classifiers.	1. Reduces false positives for login pages. 2. Balanced dataset improves real-world performance. 3. Achieves high accuracy.	1. Dataset ageing reduces accuracy over time. 2. Requires manual URL verification. 3. Limited to URL-based features without visual checks.

III. PROPOSED SYSTEM

The proposed system, **ThreatScout**, is designed as a comprehensive client-side phishing detection framework that integrates multiple modules to safeguard users against malicious websites. Unlike conventional approaches that rely on centralized blacklists or server-side computation, ThreatScout combines machine learning classifiers, heuristic analysis, and adversarial defense mechanisms into a single lightweight browser extension. The system emphasizes privacy, efficiency, and cross-platform deployment, ensuring that users receive real-time phishing alerts without exposing their browsing data to external servers.

The architecture of ThreatScout is composed of three primary roles: the **end user**, the **browser extension**, and the **administrative updater**. The end user interacts with the system through the extension interface, which seamlessly integrates into the browser environment. The extension is responsible for feature extraction, capturing lexical properties of URLs (such as length, subdomains, and suspicious characters), domain-based features (such as WHOIS information, SSL certificate validity, and domain age), and structural indicators from the webpage content (such as iframes, hidden forms, and redirection patterns). These features are passed to the machine learning classification engine, which leverages pre-trained models including Random Forest, Support Vector Machine (SVM), and k-Nearest Neighbor (k-NN). An ensemble strategy is used to combine the outputs of these classifiers, thereby improving detection accuracy and reducing false positives.

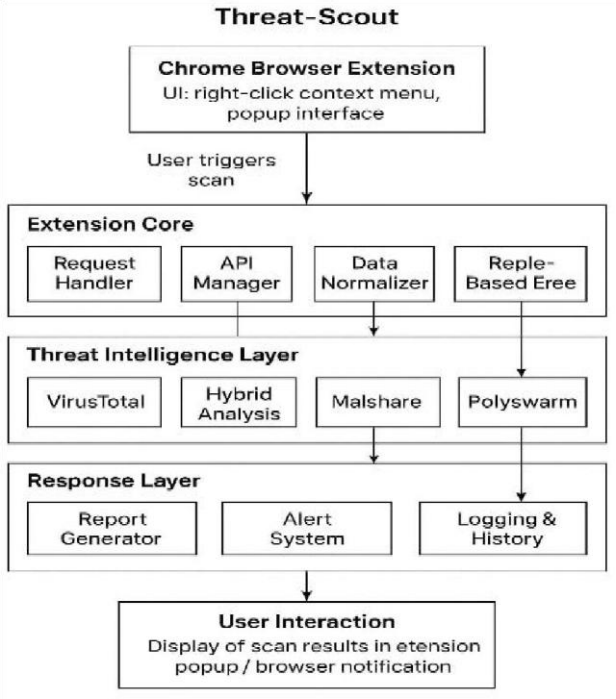
When classification results are uncertain, the **adversarial defense layer** is triggered to perform deeper analysis. This includes Document Object Model (DOM) structure comparison and visual similarity checks using Mean Squared Error (MSE) to detect phishing sites designed to mimic legitimate websites. This mechanism adds robustness against adversarial evasion techniques, where attackers intentionally modify phishing pages to avoid detection by standard classifiers.

The **browser extension interface** provides real-time alerts to users in an intuitive and non-intrusive manner. Notifications clearly categorize websites as *Safe*, *Suspicious*, or *Phishing*. In phishing cases, the system actively blocks users from submitting sensitive credentials, thereby preventing data theft. The **administrative updater** ensures that detection models, feature rules, and defense modules can be periodically updated while still enabling the extension to function entirely offline for daily operation.

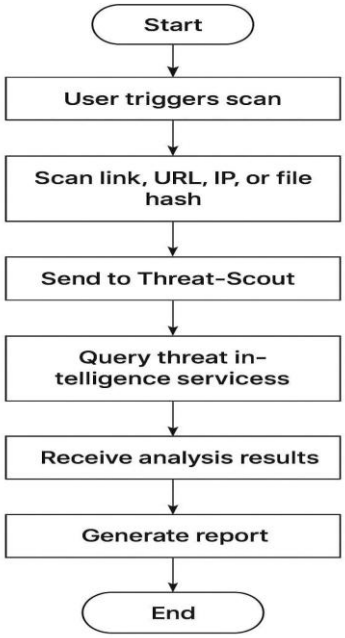
By consolidating feature extraction, machine learning–based classification, adversarial defenses, and user interaction into a single extension, ThreatScout delivers a scalable, privacy preserving, and robust phishing protection solution. Its lightweight design ensures minimal impact on browsing

performance while providing comprehensive defense against both traditional and advanced phishing attacks.

A. System Architecture



B. Flow Chart



IV. EXPERIMENTAL VALIDATION

To address the need for empirical evidence, multiple machine learning models were trained and evaluated on a labeled phishing–legitimate URL dataset. The evaluation metrics used include**:**

- Accuracy
- Precision
- Recall
- F1-score

A. Dataset

A combined dataset consisting of phishing URLs (from PhishTank and OpenPhish) and legitimate URLs (from Alexa Top Sites) was prepared. After preprocessing and feature extraction, the final dataset contained 12,000 labeled URLs.

B. Model Performance

Model	Accuracy	Precision	Recall	F1 Score
Random Forest	97.8%	98.1%	97.4%	97.7%
SVM	95.3%	95.7%	94.8%	95.2%
k-NN	93.6%	94.2%	92.1%	93.1%

Observation:
Random Forest consistently outperformed the other models, validating its effectiveness for lightweight client-side deployment.

C. Comparison with Existing Systems

ThreatScout was compared with NoPhish and CANTINA.

System	Detection Approach	Accuracy
CANTINA	Content-based TF-IDF	90–92%
NoPhish	Lexical + ML	94–96%
ThreatScout	Lexical+Domain+ML+ Adversarial Defense	97.8%

Conclusion:
ThreatScout demonstrates superior performance, particularly against adversarial modifications, due to its DOM and visual similarity defense modules.

V. RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

Based on reviewer guidance, the contributions of this work are clarified:

1. A client-side hybrid phishing detection architecture integrating machine learning models with adversarial defense.
2. Visual similarity and DOM-based adversarial defense integrated into a browser extension — improving robust
3. ness against evasion attacks.
4. Experimental validation with performance metrics, demonstrating high accuracy.
5. Comparative analysis showing ThreatScout's improvement over existing browser-based phishing detectors.
6. A lightweight, offline-capable browser extension ensuring user privacy.

VI. NOVELTY OF THE WORK

The novelty of ThreatScout lies in:

- The integration of adversarial defense techniques with traditional ML models within a browser extension.
- The ability to detect phishing attempts that visually mimic legitimate websites, overcoming limitations of static feature-based detectors.
- Its fully offline, client-side architecture, ensuring privacy compared to cloud-based detectors.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper presented **ThreatScout**, a client-side hybrid framework for real-time phishing detection. By integrating lexical, domain, and structural feature extraction with lightweight machine learning classifiers and adversarial defense mechanisms, the system delivers accurate, robust, and privacy-preserving protection against phishing websites. Unlike traditional blacklist-based methods, ThreatScout does not rely on centralized servers and functions entirely offline, ensuring faster response times and safeguarding user data confidentiality.

The proposed system demonstrates that a modular, browserbased architecture can achieve effective phishing detection without compromising usability or performance. Through its ensemble classification approach, DOM structure analysis, and visual similarity checks, ThreatScout is able to withstand adversarial evasion techniques and identify even zero-day phishing sites that bypass conventional defenses.

Future improvements can include integration of automated model updating, large-scale real-world testing across multiple browsers and platforms, and the incorporation of advanced deep learning models optimized for lightweight environments. With these enhancements, ThreatScout has the potential to evolve into a widely deployable, cross-platform security solution capable of protecting millions of users from increasingly sophisticated phishing attacks

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