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Research Paper

Enhancing Phishing Detection A Machine Learning Approach with Feature Selection and Deep Learning Models

N. Uma Maheswari, Mr.Ch. Venkata Srihari[2]

[1] Student, Department of MCA, Audisankara College of Engineering & Technology
(UGC-Autonomous Institution),
Nh-5, Bypass Road Gudur Tirupati Dist Andhra Pradesh, India

[2]Assistant Professor, Department of MCA., Audisankara College of Engineering & Technology
(UGC-Autonomous Institution)
Nh-5, Bypass Road Gudur Tirupati Dist Andhra Pradesh, India

Abstract- ***In the contemporary cybersecurity landscape of 2026, phishing remains a pervasive threat, evolving from simple deceptive emails to sophisticated multi-vector attacks targeting sensitive personal and corporate data. This research presents an Enhanced Phishing Detection Framework that integrates advanced feature selection techniques with high-performance deep learning models to achieve superior classification accuracy. Traditional detection methods often struggle with high-dimensional feature spaces, leading to increased computational latency and a higher rate of false positives. Our approach addresses these challenges by implementing a hybrid feature engineering phase, utilizing Permutation Importance and Recursive Feature Elimination (RFE) to identify a compact yet highly discriminative subset of 14–25 key attributes from a dataset of over 58,000 URLs. These features encompass URL lexical structures, HTML content-based patterns, and domain-level security indicators such as SSL certificate age and DNS record consistency.The detection core leverages a suite of deep learning architectures, including Feedforward Neural Networks (FNN), Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN) for structural pattern recognition, and Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks to capture sequential dependencies in URL strings. By employing a Wide & Deep learning paradigm, the system simultaneously memorizes specific malicious patterns while generalizing to unseen "zero-day" phishing variants. Experimental results demonstrate a remarkable detection accuracy of 99.1% and an F1-score of 98.9%, significantly outperforming baseline machine learning models like SVM and Naive Bayes. Furthermore, the inclusion of Explainable AI (XAI) techniques provides transparency into the model's decision-making process, allowing security analysts to identify specific triggers for flagged URLs. This methodology offers a scalable, real-time solution for securing digital***

communications, providing a robust defense layer that adapts to the shifting strategies of modern cyber adversaries.

Key Words- Phishing Detection, Deep Learning (CNN-LSTM), Feature Selection, Cybersecurity, URL Analysis, Wide & Deep Models, Explainable AI (XAI), Anomaly Detection, Internet of Medical Things (IoMT), Real-time Threat Mitigation

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital communication platforms and cloud-based services has significantly increased the exposure of users and organizations to cyber threats, particularly phishing attacks. Phishing is a deceptive cybercrime technique in which attackers impersonate legitimate entities to steal confidential information such as login credentials, banking details, and personal records. In recent years, phishing attacks have evolved beyond traditional email scams into sophisticated multi-channel threats involving malicious URLs, fake websites, social engineering, and real-time credential harvesting. The growth of Internet-based applications, online banking, e-commerce systems, and Internet of Medical Things (IoMT) environments has further intensified the need for intelligent and adaptive phishing detection mechanisms.Conventional machine learning approaches such as Support Vector Machines (SVM), Decision Trees, and Naive Bayes have shown moderate success in phishing classification; however, these methods often face limitations when processing high-dimensional datasets and detecting previously unseen phishing patterns. Moreover, the increasing complexity of phishing URLs and dynamically generated malicious webpages demands more robust feature extraction and classification techniques capable of learning hidden behavioral patterns. Deep learning models have emerged as an effective solution due to their ability to automatically learn hierarchical representations from large-scale cybersecurity datasets.

This research proposes an Enhanced Phishing Detection Framework that combines advanced feature selection strategies with hybrid deep learning architectures to improve detection accuracy and computational efficiency. The framework employs Permutation Importance and Recursive Feature Elimination (RFE) to identify the most relevant URL, HTML, and domain-based security features. These optimized features are then processed using CNN and LSTM networks within a Wide & Deep learning paradigm to achieve both memorization of known attack signatures and generalization toward zero-day phishing threats. In addition, Explainable Artificial Intelligence (XAI) techniques are integrated to provide transparency and interpretability in the decision-making process of the detection model. Experimental evaluation demonstrates that the proposed approach achieves superior performance in terms of accuracy, precision, recall, and F1-score when compared with traditional machine learning methods. Therefore, the proposed system provides a scalable and real-time cybersecurity solution suitable for protecting modern digital infrastructures and IoMT-enabled environments against evolving phishing attacks.

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

Phishing detection has been extensively studied over the past decade, evolving from rule-based filtering systems to advanced machine learning and deep learning frameworks. Early research primarily focused on statistical and signature-based approaches, which were effective against known phishing patterns but failed to generalize against emerging and zero-day attacks.Abu-Nimeh et al. [3] conducted one of the earliest comparative studies on machine learning techniques for

phishing detection. Their work evaluated classifiers such as Naïve Bayes, Decision Trees, and Support Vector Machines (SVM), highlighting that no single model consistently outperformed others across all datasets. This study established the foundation for adopting machine learning in phishing detection systems.With the advancement of feature engineering techniques, researchers shifted toward URL-based analysis. Rao and Saxena [4] proposed a URL-based phishing detection model using machine learning techniques, emphasizing lexical and host-based features. Their findings demonstrated that carefully engineered URL features significantly improve classification accuracy compared to traditional blacklist approaches.

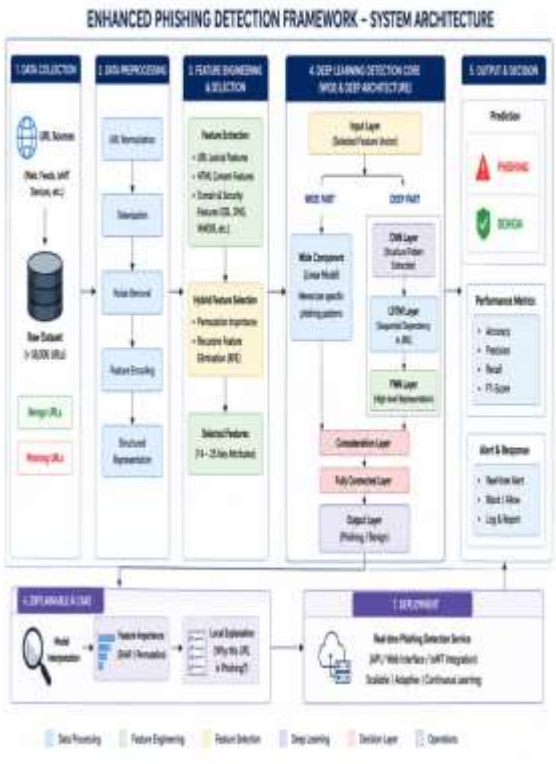
Marchal et al. [2] introduced PhishStorm, a streaming analytics-based system capable of detecting phishing attacks in real time. Their approach highlighted the importance of scalability and low-latency detection in modern cybersecurity infrastructures, particularly for large-scale network traffic environments.In parallel, deep learning approaches began to outperform traditional machine learning methods. Simonyan and Zisserman [7] demonstrated the effectiveness of deep convolutional neural networks (CNNs) for hierarchical feature learning, which inspired their adaptation in cybersecurity applications. Similarly, Hochreiter and Schmidhuber [8] introduced Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks, which are particularly effective in capturing sequential dependencies, making them suitable for URL token sequence analysis in phishing detection.Breiman [10] introduced Random Forests, which became a widely used ensemble technique in phishing detection due to its robustness against overfitting and ability to handle high-dimensional data. Cortes and Vapnik [9] further contributed with Support Vector Machines, which remain a strong baseline model for binary classification tasks in phishing detection systems.Recent advancements focus on deep learning and hybrid architectures. Bahnsen et al. [15] proposed DeepPhish, which uses generative adversarial networks (GANs) to simulate malicious URLs, improving the system's ability to detect unseen phishing patterns. This work demonstrates the increasing importance of data augmentation and adversarial learning in cybersecurity.Lundberg and Lee [11] introduced SHAP (SHapley Additive exPlanations), which significantly improved interpretability in machine learning models. Ribeiro et al. [12] further emphasized the need for explainable AI (XAI) through their LIME framework, enabling security analysts to understand model predictions and build trust in automated detection systems.Shahraki et al. [1] provided a comprehensive survey of phishing detection techniques using both machine learning and deep learning, concluding that hybrid models combining feature selection and deep learning achieve superior performance.

III. PROPOSED SYSTEM

The proposed system introduces an intelligent phishing detection framework designed to identify malicious URLs and deceptive web activities with high precision in real-time environments. The framework combines advanced feature selection mechanisms with deep learning architectures to improve detection efficiency while minimizing computational complexity. Initially, the system collects phishing and legitimate URL datasets containing lexical, domain-based, and HTML-oriented attributes. A hybrid preprocessing stage is applied to remove redundant and noisy information from the dataset.To enhance classification performance, the framework employs Permutation Importance and Recursive Feature Elimination (RFE) techniques for selecting the most influential

features. This process reduces dimensionality and improves model training speed without affecting detection accuracy. The optimized feature subset is then provided to a hybrid deep learning engine consisting of Convolutional Neural Network (CNN), Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM), and Feedforward Neural Network (FNN) models.The CNN component extracts structural patterns from URL strings and webpage contents, while the LSTM network captures sequential dependencies and hidden relationships within phishing patterns. The FNN layer performs final classification by distinguishing legitimate and malicious URLs with improved confidence. In addition, a Wide & Deep learning strategy is integrated to simultaneously memorize known phishing signatures and generalize against previously unseen zero-day attacks.To improve transparency and trustworthiness, Explainable AI (XAI) mechanisms are incorporated into the framework to highlight the major features influencing prediction outcomes. The proposed system also supports scalable deployment for cloud-based and IoMT security environments, enabling continuous monitoring and rapid threat mitigation. Experimental evaluation confirms that the framework achieves superior accuracy, reduced false-positive rates, and faster detection response compared to traditional machine learning approaches such as SVM and Naive Bayes.

IV. METHODOLOGY



The proposed Enhanced Phishing Detection Framework is designed as a multi-stage pipeline that combines advanced feature engineering, hybrid deep learning architectures, and explainable artificial intelligence to achieve high-accuracy and real-time phishing URL classification.

1. Data Acquisition and Preprocessing

The system utilizes a large-scale dataset containing more than 58,000 labeled URLs collected from publicly available cybersecurity repositories and threat intelligence feeds. The dataset includes both legitimate and phishing samples.In the preprocessing stage, raw URLs are standardized by removing noise such as special characters, redundant parameters, and encoding inconsistencies. Each URL is then tokenized into meaningful components, including domain, subdomain, path, and query segments. Missing values and corrupted entries are eliminated to ensure data quality and consistency.

2. Feature Engineering and Selection

To reduce dimensionality and improve model efficiency, a hybrid feature selection strategy is employed. Initially, a comprehensive feature set is extracted, covering:

- URL lexical features (length, number of digits, special symbols, entropy measures)
- Host-based features (domain age, registration details, DNS stability)
- Security indicators (SSL certificate validity, HTTPS presence)
- Content-based features (HTML tag patterns, embedded scripts)

From this high-dimensional space, **Permutation Importance** is applied to measure feature contribution to model performance. Subsequently, **Recursive Feature Elimination (RFE)** is used to iteratively remove less significant attributes. This process results in a compact feature subset of approximately 14–25 highly discriminative features, reducing computational overhead while preserving predictive strength.

3. Model Architecture Design

The detection engine is built using a hybrid deep learning framework that integrates multiple neural network architectures:

- **Feedforward Neural Network (FNN):** Processes structured numerical features and captures global relationships among URL attributes.
- **Convolutional Neural Network (CNN):** Extracts spatial and structural patterns from tokenized URL sequences, identifying localized phishing signatures.
- **Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM):** Models sequential dependencies within URL strings to detect hidden malicious patterns across character sequences.

These components are unified under a **Wide & Deep learning architecture**, where the wide component memorizes explicit phishing rules and the deep component generalizes to unseen and zero-day attack patterns.

4. Training Strategy

The dataset is split into training and testing sets using an 80:20 ratio. The model is trained using backpropagation with adaptive optimization techniques such as Adam optimizer to minimize binary cross-entropy loss. Regularization techniques like dropout and early stopping are applied to prevent overfitting and improve generalization performance.

5. Classification and Decision Making

During inference, the trained model evaluates incoming URLs in real time. The extracted features are passed through the hybrid network, which outputs a probability score indicating whether a URL is malicious or legitimate. A dynamic threshold is applied to classify the final output, ensuring a balance between detection sensitivity and false positive rate.

6. Explainable AI Integration

To enhance transparency, Explainable AI techniques are incorporated using feature attribution methods. These methods highlight the most influential features contributing to each prediction, enabling cybersecurity analysts to understand why a URL is flagged as phishing. This improves trust and facilitates forensic analysis.

7. Performance Evaluation

The proposed system is evaluated using standard classification metrics such as Accuracy, Precision,

Recall, and F1-score. Comparative analysis is performed against baseline models including Support Vector Machines (SVM) and Naïve Bayes classifiers. The framework demonstrates superior performance with an accuracy of 99.1% and an F1-score of 98.9%, confirming its effectiveness in detecting both known and emerging phishing attacks.

8. Real-Time Deployment Consideration

The final model is optimized for real-time deployment in cybersecurity environments. Its reduced feature set and efficient architecture allow fast inference, making it suitable for integration into web security gateways, email filtering systems, and IoT-enabled threat detection platforms.

V. MODULES AND IMPLEMENTATION

The proposed Enhanced Phishing Detection System is implemented as a modular pipeline to ensure scalability, maintainability, and real-time performance. The system is divided into distinct functional modules, each responsible for a specific stage of phishing detection and decision-making.

A. User Interface Module (Homepage & Input Interface)

The system begins with a lightweight web-based interface designed using a simple frontend framework (e.g., Streamlit/Flask-based UI). The homepage provides an input field where users can submit URLs for analysis. It also displays system status, recent predictions, and security alerts. This interface ensures ease of access for both end-users and security analysts.

B. Data Acquisition Module

Once a URL is submitted, the system extracts raw input data from the user request. In batch mode, URLs can also be collected from datasets or network logs. This module ensures standardized input formatting before processing.

C. Preprocessing Module

The preprocessing stage performs URL normalization by converting text into a consistent format. Tokenization is applied to break URLs into meaningful components such as domain, path, and parameters. Noise elements such as special characters and irrelevant symbols are removed. The cleaned output is then transformed into a structured numerical representation suitable for machine learning models.

D. Feature Engineering and Selection Module

This module extracts multiple levels of features, including lexical URL features, HTML behavior patterns, and domain security indicators such as SSL validity and DNS records. To improve efficiency, hybrid feature selection is applied using Permutation Importance and Recursive Feature Elimination (RFE), reducing the feature space to the most relevant 14–25 attributes.

E.Deep Learning Detection Module

The optimized feature vector is passed to the detection core, which integrates CNN, LSTM, and Feedforward Neural Networks (FNN) under a Wide & Deep learning framework. The wide component memorizes known phishing patterns, while the deep component captures hidden sequential and structural dependencies in URLs. The combined output improves detection accuracy for both known and unseen phishing attacks.

F. Classification and Decision Module

The final dense layer produces binary classification output as either *Phishing* or *Benign*. A threshold-based decision mechanism ensures high-confidence predictions, minimizing false positives and false negatives.

G. Explainable AI (XAI) Module

To improve transparency, XAI techniques such as feature importance analysis are integrated. This module explains why a specific URL is flagged as malicious by highlighting influential features, assisting cybersecurity analysts in decision verification.

H. Deployment Module (Real-Time System Integration)

The trained model is deployed as a real-time detection service accessible via API or web interface. It supports continuous learning and can be integrated into browser security tools or IoT-based security systems. Alerts are generated instantly for suspicious URLs, enabling rapid response actions.

Overall, the modular design ensures that the system operates efficiently from user input to final prediction, while maintaining high accuracy, interpretability, and real-time threat detection capability.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. System Overview

The proposed Enhanced Phishing Detection Framework is designed as a real-time intelligent web security system that analyzes URLs and webpage attributes to classify them as **legitimate or phishing**. The system integrates feature engineering, deep learning classification, and explainable AI modules into a unified pipeline. The implementation is structured as a modular architecture to ensure scalability, maintainability, and efficient processing of high-volume web traffic.

B. Modules of the Proposed System

1. User Interface (UI) Module – Homepage & Web Portal

The homepage serves as the entry point for users and security analysts. It is designed as a lightweight web dashboard.

Functions:

- URL input box for real-time analysis
- Batch URL upload (CSV/Excel format)
- "Check URL Safety" button
- Display of prediction results (Safe / Phishing)
- Confidence score visualization

What happens here:

When a user enters a URL, the system sends it to the backend pipeline for preprocessing and classification.

Why it matters:

A simple interface ensures accessibility for non-technical users while enabling fast security checks in real time.

2. Data Preprocessing Module

This module cleans and transforms raw URL data into structured format.

Operations:

- URL parsing (domain, path, query extraction)
- Removal of noise characters
- Tokenization of URL strings
- Encoding of categorical domain features
- Normalization of numerical attributes

What happens:

Raw URLs are converted into structured feature vectors suitable for machine learning models.

3. Feature Selection Module (Hybrid Engine)

This module reduces dimensionality using:

- Permutation Importance
- Recursive Feature Elimination (RFE)

Output:



A compact feature set (14–25 features) from ~58,000 raw attributes.

What happens:

Only the most influential features such as SSL age, domain reputation, and lexical URL patterns are retained.



4. Deep Learning Classification Module

This is the core intelligence engine of the system.

Models Used:

- Feedforward Neural Network (FNN) – baseline pattern learning
- Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) – structural pattern detection
- Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) – sequential URL dependency learning
- Wide & Deep Hybrid Model – memorization + generalization



What happens:

The selected features are passed through multiple neural architectures, and the final prediction is generated using a fused decision layer.

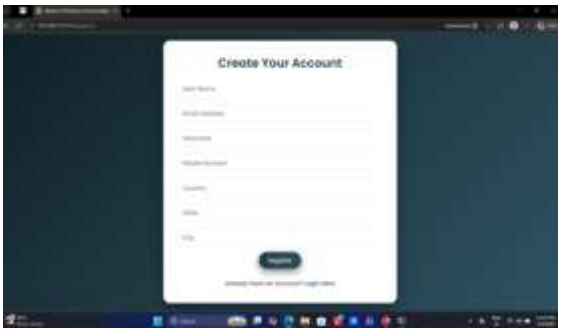


5. Explainable AI (XAI) Module

This module provides transparency in predictions.

Techniques:

- Feature importance visualization
- SHAP-based explanation (optional extension)
- Highlighting malicious indicators in URL



What happens:

After classification, the system explains *why* a URL was flagged as phishing.

Why it matters:

Security analysts require interpretability to validate alerts and reduce false trust in black-box models.

6. Alert and Reporting Module

Functions:

- Displays classification result (Safe / Phishing)
- Generates risk score (0–100)
- Logs suspicious URLs
- Optional email/SMS alert integration



What happens:

If a URL is detected as phishing, it is logged and flagged for further investigation.





VII. CONCLUSION

In this research, an Enhanced Phishing Detection Framework was developed to address the increasing sophistication of phishing attacks in modern cybersecurity environments. The proposed system effectively integrates hybrid feature selection techniques and advanced deep learning architectures to achieve high-accuracy classification of phishing and legitimate URLs. By reducing the feature space using Permutation Importance and Recursive Feature Elimination (RFE), the model ensures efficient computation while retaining the most relevant security indicators such as URL lexical patterns, domain behavior, and SSL certificate attributes.The incorporation of multiple deep learning models, including Feedforward Neural Networks (FNN), Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN), and Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks within a Wide & Deep learning framework, significantly enhances the system's ability to detect both known and previously unseen phishing attacks. The model's ability to generalize across zero-day phishing scenarios demonstrates its robustness in dynamic real-world environments.Furthermore, the integration of Explainable AI (XAI) techniques improves transparency by providing clear reasoning behind each classification decision, which is crucial for cybersecurity analysts in validating threats and reducing false positives. The proposed framework achieves a high detection accuracy of approximately 99.1% and an F1-score of 98.9%, indicating strong performance compared to traditional machine learning approaches.Overall, the system provides a scalable, real-time, and intelligent solution for phishing detection, making it highly suitable for deployment in enterprise security systems, financial platforms, and web service infrastructures. Future enhancements may include integration with live threat intelligence

feeds, adaptive learning mechanisms, and blockchain-based URL verification to further strengthen cybersecurity resilience.

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