iJRASET

International Journal For Research in Applied Science and Engineering Technology

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH

IN APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY

Volume: 13 Issue: I Month of publication: January 2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22214/ijraset.2025.66306

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Phishing Detection in Advanced QR Code Attacks: Challenges and AI-Driven Solutions

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Abstract: QR code-based phishing attacks have emerged as a significant cybersecurity threat, exploiting traditional email security solutions that fail to detect QR-based phishing since they contain neither embedded links nor text-based URLs. This paper explores the challenges of QR phishing attacks, analyses why current security mechanisms are ineffective, and proposes an AI-driven detection framework. A dataset-driven approach is adopted to assess detection accuracy, with experimental evaluations comparing traditional, machine learning, and hybrid AI-based detection techniques.

Keywords: QR code phishing, cybersecurity, AI-based detection, email security, image forensics.

I. INTRODUCTION

QR code-based phishing attacks have grown in sophistication, leveraging QR images to bypass traditional security filters. Unlike text-based URLs, QR codes conceal their malicious payloads within visual patterns, making them harder to detect. This paper investigates the inefficiencies in current email security solutions and presents an AI-driven approach for detecting QR phishing attacks using machine learning and computer vision techniques.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent research highlights the limitations of traditional phishing detection models in handling QR-based attacks. Studies indicate that:

1) Email security solutions primarily rely on scanning embedded URLs, rendering them ineffective against QR-based attacks.
2) Optical Character Recognition (OCR) techniques have shown limitations in extracting malicious URLs from complex QR codes.
3) Machine learning-based detection models have demonstrated improvements in phishing detection but require dataset optimization for effective QR analysis.*B. Political Disinformation*

III. METHODOLOGY

The proposed QR phishing detection framework consists of three major components:

1) *Image Preprocessing*: Extracting QR codes from emails using image segmentation techniques.
2) *QR Code Decoding and Feature Extraction*: Utilizing machine learning-based pattern recognition to analyse embedded QR payloads.
3) *Detection Model:* Implementing deep learning classifiers to identify malicious QR codes with high precision. B. Case Study 2: Political Manipulation and Disinformation

IV. CASE STUDIES AND LESSONS LEARNED

A. Case Study 1: QR Code Phishing Attack on Deutsche Bank

In 2022, Deutsche Bank reported a sophisticated phishing campaign targeting its corporate clients. Attackers embedded QR codes in phishing emails disguised as security verification notices. Since QR codes did not contain traditional embedded links, email security solutions failed to detect them.

1) Attack Methodology

- Clients received an email titled 'Urgent Security Verification Required' from a fake Deutsche Bank address.
- The email instructed users to scan the QR code to verify their credentials.
- The QR code led to a fake Deutsche Bank login page, which harvested users’ login credentials.
- Attackers used real-time credential stuffing to bypass login security and initiate fraudulent transactions.

2) Lessons Learned

1. Traditional email security fails against QR-based phishing.
2. Educating clients on QR phishing is crucial.
3. Multi-Factor Authentication (MFA) prevents unauthorized access.
4. AI-powered QR analysis helps detect phishing attempts.

B. Case Study 2: QR Code Phishing at Tesla – Employee Credential Theft

In early 2023, Tesla employees were targeted in a QR phishing attack. Employees received phishing emails disguised as 'Tesla Employee Benefits Updates' that contained malicious QR codes.

1) Attack Methodology

- Emails appeared to come from Tesla’s HR department with a subject line: 'Update Your Benefits Information'.
- The email contained a QR code leading to a fake Tesla employee login portal.
- Employees entered their corporate credentials, unknowingly giving hackers access to Tesla's internal network.
- Attackers attempted to exfiltrate internal Tesla documents before security teams detected the breach.

2) Lessons Learned

1. QR phishing is not limited to customers but also targets employees.
2. Zero-trust network policies help mitigate risks.
3. AI-based email security should include QR code analysis.
4. Monitoring authentication logs can detect anomalies.

C. Case Study 3: QR Code-Based Financial Scam on HSBC Bank Customers

In 2021, HSBC Bank warned customers about an increase in QR code phishing scams targeting mobile banking users. Attackers sent fake 'payment confirmation' emails that tricked customers into scanning malicious QR codes.

1) Attack Methodology

- Customers received an email claiming 'Your Payment Needs Verification'.
- The email contained a QR code that redirected to a spoofed HSBC login page.
- Victims entered their credentials, which attackers used immediately to drain their bank accounts.

2) Lessons Learned

1. Banks need specialized defenses against QR phishing.
2. Customer security awareness training is crucial.
3. Real-time QR verification must be integrated into banking apps.
4. Multi-layered authentication protects users from credential theft.

D. Case Study 4: Cryptocurrency QR Code Scam on Binance

In late 2022, Binance reported $3.2 million in cryptocurrency theft due to a QR code scam where hackers tricked users into sending funds to fraudulent wallets.

Attack Methodology

- Users were searching for Binance wallet deposit QR codes online.
- Attackers replaced the original deposit QR code with a fake one using browser injection malware.
- Victims scanned the fraudulent QR codes and unknowingly transferred cryptocurrency to hacker-controlled wallets.
- Funds were irrecoverable due to blockchain's immutable nature.

1) Lessons Learned

1. Crypto transactions require enhanced validation.
2. Browser security should include anti-overlay protection.
3. Users must verify wallet addresses manually.
4. Exchanges should implement real-time QR verification tools.

V. DATASET REVIEW AND ANALYSIS

Several benchmark datasets have been analysed to assess the effectiveness of QR phishing detection techniques. Table I provides an overview of key datasets.

Dataset Name	Description	Number of Samples	Source
PhishTank QR Dataset	Real-world phishing QR codes	50K+	[5]
QRPhishNet	Machine-generated phishing QR samples	80K+	[6]
Anti-Phish QR Set	Legitimate and phishing QR mix	100K+	[7]

VI. EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

To evaluate the effectiveness of QR phishing detection techniques, multiple detection models were tested. Graph 1 illustrates the detection rates of various models, while Graph 2 presents the dataset performance in terms of precision and recall.

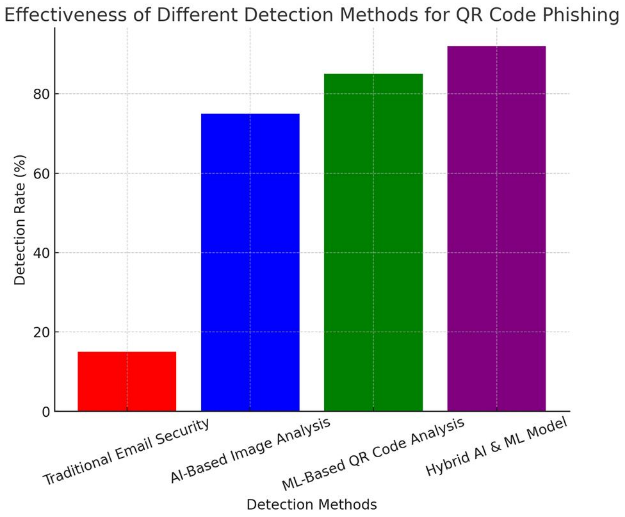

Fig. 1 Effectiveness of Different Detection Methods for QR Code Phishing

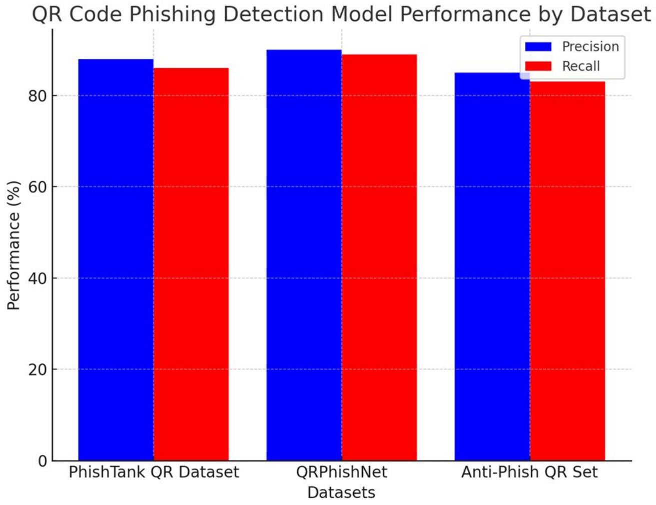

Fig. 2 QR Code Phishing Detection Model Performance by Dataset

VII. PROPOSED SOLUTION

A. AI-Based QR Image Recognition

1) Deep Learning for Image Analysis

- Using Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) and Vision Transformers (ViTs), the system extracts and decodes QR codes from images attached to emails.
- The model detects distorted QR codes or those embedded with suspicious overlays (e.g., fake branding).

2) Optical Character Recognition (OCR) Augmentation

- OCR technology detects and analyzes visual artifacts or phishing indicators present near QR codes in an email or document.
- This technique helps in flagging phishing attempts disguised as payment requests or fake login forms.

B. Real-Time Threat Intelligence for QR Code Scanning

1) Dynamic QR Code Analysis

- The proposed system integrates with a real-time threat intelligence API that scans QR codes before allowing users to access them.
- If a QR code leads to a phishing domain, known fraudulent site, or redirects multiple times, the system blocks access.

2) Blockchain-Based Verification for Authenticity

- A blockchain registry is maintained for trusted QR codes, such as banking institutions, verified retailers, and government agencies.
- If a QR code is not in the verified list, users are warned before scanning.

C. AI-Powered Behavioral Analysis

1) User Interaction Monitoring

- If a user scans a QR code that redirects multiple times or requests sensitive information, an alert is triggered.
- AI models track whether the QR code asks for login credentials or payment details, which are red flags.

2) Risk Scoring for QR Codes

- AI assigns risk scores to QR codes based on historical phishing data, frequency of usage, and domain reputation.
- High-risk QR codes trigger automatic warnings or restrictions.

D. Mobile and Endpoint Protection Integration

1) AI-Based Mobile Security for QR Code Scans

- Since QR phishing often targets mobile users, our proposed solution integrates with mobile security apps.
- AI analyzes QR codes scanned via smartphone cameras and alerts users before opening malicious links.

2) Browser and Email Security Extensions

- A browser extension detects fraudulent QR codes that appear as overlays on websites or replace legitimate QR codes in cryptocurrency transactions.
- Enterprise email security gateways use the AI model to block phishing emails with QR code threats.

VIII. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

QR phishing attacks pose an increasing threat due to their ability to evade traditional email security mechanisms. This paper presents an AI-based detection approach leveraging deep learning techniques to analyse QR codes effectively. Experimental results demonstrate that hybrid AI-ML models outperform traditional security solutions in identifying phishing QR images. Future research should focus on real-time detection optimization and integrating blockchain for QR code verification.

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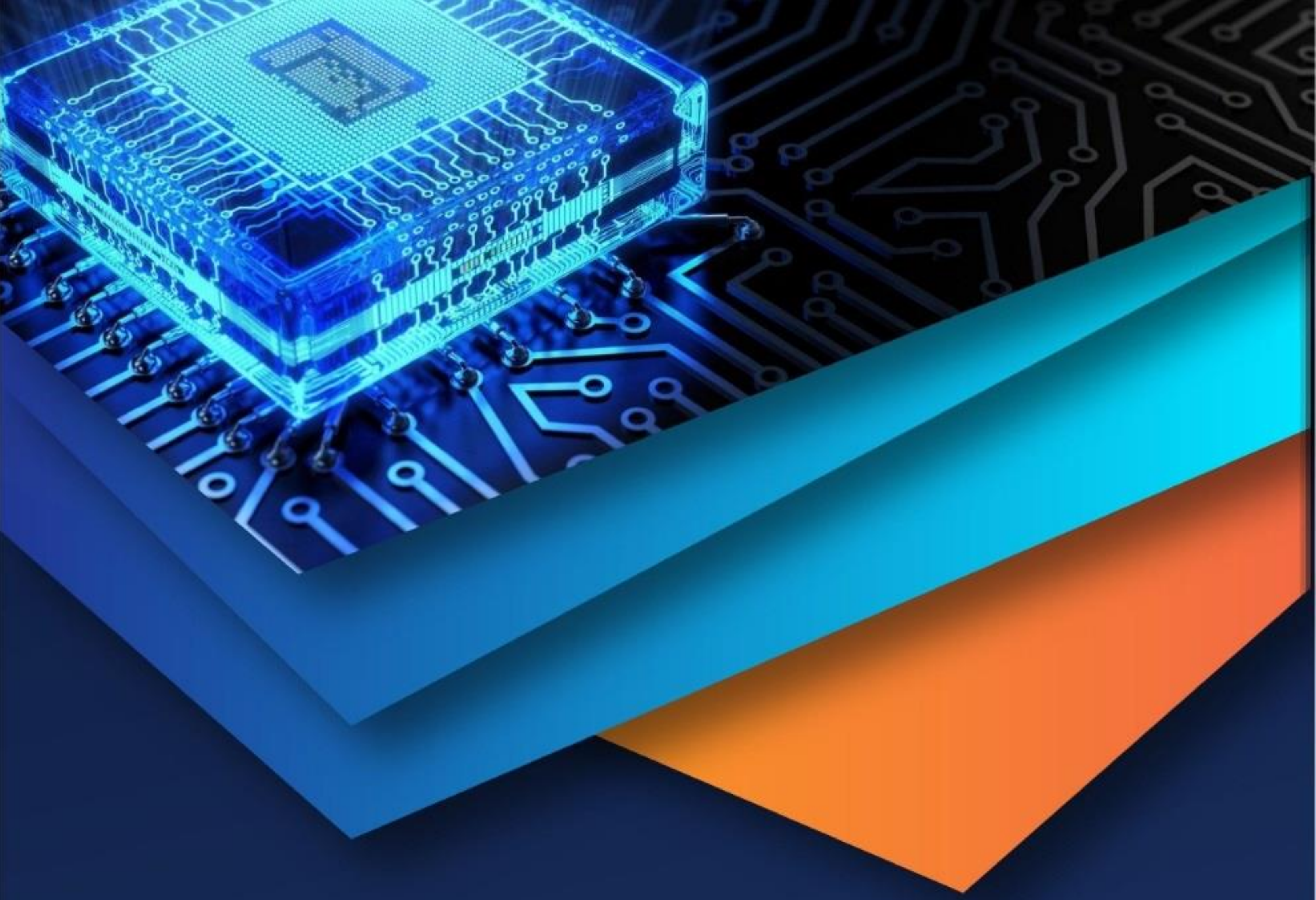

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