DUJASE Vol. 5(1 & 2) 49-55, 2020 (January & July)

A Review on Hybrid Analysis Using Machine Learning for Android Malware Detection

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Received on 05 June 2020, Accepted for publication on 10 September 2020

ABSTRACT

Nowadays Android is the world's most popular mobile operating system. Its pervasiveness also provokes the enormous growth of Android malware. Using machine learning methods to detect Android malware, researchers have focused on static analysis and dynamic analysis for most. But, different evasion techniques by shrewd malware authors made those techniques inadequate and ineffective. Therefore, recent researchers have turned their attention to the discovery of an effective strategy to combat. Hybrid analysis which is a fusion of static analysis and dynamic analysis would be a good candidate for that as it prevails over the individual shortcomings of static and dynamic analysis with the cost of complexity. Hybrid analysis has many opportunities as well as challenges. This research is intended to offer a detailed and systematic review of hybrid analysis using machine learning techniques for malware detection in Android. It encompasses leading hybrid analysis research: their contributions, strengths, and weaknesses. This work also discusses the challenges, opportunities, and future directions of hybrid analysis in detecting Android malware.

Keywords: Hybrid Analysis, Android Malware Detection, Machine Learning.

1. Introduction

Android is the leading smartphone operating system (OS) in the world, currently: 72.23% of total mobile OS is Android [1]. Android malware also has evolved significantly with the massive growth of the Android system as well as upgraded its nature and activities [2]. On average 12,000 new malware instances are found per day [3]. To defend against that malware phenomenon, researchers emphasize on Android malware detection to ensure Android mobile application security.

To detect Android malware, three approaches are widely used: static Analysis, dynamic analysis, and hybrid analysis. Static features like API Calls, Permissions, etc. are used in the static analysis. Dynamic analysis analyze the application's dynamic behaviour like System Calls, Network Traffic, etc. Hybrid analysis tends to incorporate both the static and dynamic approaches into a common ground.

Static and dynamic analyzes have their limitations. Currently, malware authors are too smart to evade these detection techniques. For static analysis, commonly used evasion techniques by the malware authors are data obfuscation, control flow obfuscation, encryption, reflection, dynamically loaded code, repackaging, etc. [4]. For dynamic analysis, anti-analysis, mimicry, data obfuscation, misleading in formation flows, and function in-directions, etc. are used as evasion techniques [4]. Besides, limited code coverage lessens the effectiveness of the dynamic analysis.

As static and dynamic analysis have their drawbacks separately, it would be beneficial to merge all analyzes into one common ground. The approach to hybrid analysis combines both static and dynamic analyzes to minimize their limitations. Though hybrid analysis is complex enough, it is effective and feasible according to related research. But comparatively a few works have been performed in hybrid analysis. Researchers now a days focus on it because of its effectiveness and potential.

Though there exist many reviews on Android malware detection, none focuses on hybrid analysis. For instance, Tam et al. [4] reveal the evolution of Android malware and the techniques for detection, but they do not give substantial emphasis on hybrid analysis. Qamar et al. [5]present an all-inclusive review on mobile malware, but they nearly overlook the hybrid analysis. Baskaran et al. [6] cover hybrid analysis imprecisely in their Android malware detection review in parallel with static and dynamic analysis. Naway et al. [7] focus on deep learning techniques and Feizollah et al. [8] investigate feature selection for malware analysis. None of them presents an in-depth investigation of hybrid analysis.

Due to the potential of hybrid analysis in malware detection, a conclusive review of the existing research is necessary. In this work, we offer a comprehensive and systematic review of the hybrid analysis approach in Android malware detection, analyzed the existing works: their strengths and weaknesses, and discussed challenges, opportunities, and future directions in this regard. This study is an extension of our earlier study [9] and a further exploration of hybrid analysis in Android malware detection.

To be specific, this work makes the following contributions:

1) It presents the significance of hybrid analysis over static analysis and dynamic analysis by assessing their weaknesses and limitations.

2) It analyzes the existing works on hybrid analysis and presents a review of the research.

3) It prompts a discussion on the hybrid analysis's challenges, opportunities, and future directions.

2. Background

A. Android Malware

Android malware is an application running on the Android OS that implicitly or explicitly performs malicious activities. It includes viruses, worms, ran somware, spyware, and other malicious applications. It tends to cause - disrupting normal functioning, leaking information, root exploitation, manipulating data, private content exposed, phishing, disruption of services, etc. [5]. Moreover, malware is growing exceedingly to keep pace with the immense growth of Android applications. In each month, on average almost 10 million new malware is introduced [10]. New malware is found in every 10 seconds [11].

B. Detection Techniques

Researchers generally analyze Android malware with the following three approaches: static analysis or dynamic analysis, or hybrid Analysis.

Various static features are extracted from source files in the static analysis. According to the static features, a detection model is built using machine learning techniques to classify Android malware. Researchers used Androguard, ApkTool, Appknox, Droid Mat, etc. tools for static analysis. According to the existing research [12–16], the most used static features are as follows: Permissions, Intents, Instructions, Hardware Usage Analysis, Meta-data, Intents, API Calls, and Intents.

The dynamic analysis deals with the dynamic behaviours of an application. In doing so, the application is to be run on a physical device or in an emulated environment. A detection model is also built here according to the dynamic features. Researchers commonly used Droid box, Marvin, Apps Playground, Droid Logger, etc. tools for dynamic analysis. According to research [17–20], System Calls, Network Traffic, File Operations, Network Operations, and Phone Events are the most used dynamic features.

Hybrid analysis incorporates static as well as dynamic features for detecting Android malware. As it deals with dynamic features in addition to static features, it is computationally more complex. Andrubis, Andro Data, etc. are used by the researchers for hybrid analysis.

C. Drawbacks of Static and Dynamic Analysis

Perhaps alarmingly, the noxious malware developers are aware of the malware detection system and they use many new-found and crafty evasion techniques to avoid detection. Static analysis faces many troubles such as data obfuscation, control flow obfuscation, encryption, reflection, dynamically loaded code, repackaging, etc. [4].Likewise, dynamic analysis has some drawbacks. In escaping dynamic analysis, the anti-analysis technique is used frequently by malware authors to detect virtual machines or emulated environments. If the application detects emulated environments in advance, they will act as a benign application. By doing so, the dynamic analysis might fail to detect Android malware. Besides, malware authors use mimicry, data obfuscation, misleading information flows, and function indirections, etc. to evade dynamic analysis [4]. The biggest weakness of dynamic analysis is limited code coverage: covering all paths is not feasible when investigating the dynamic behaviours.

3. Hybrid Analysis Using Machine Learning

The hybrid analysis combines static as well as dynamic features for better effectiveness. Firstly, it seeks to extract the static and dynamic features. After that, those extracted static and dynamic features are combined to detect malware. Finally, machine learning techniques are used to classify malware. By incorporating static and dynamic approaches into a common ground, the hybrid analysis leads to more complexity. So, the detection process is more likely to take more time and effort.

As the hybrid approach is the mixture of static and dynamic approaches, this strategy will resolve individual weaknesses as well as reap the benefits thereof. For instance, in the case of dynamically loaded code, the static analysis will not identify malware, but the dynamic analysis can detect malware in that case. Conversely, a malware could imitate a benign application in an emulated setting, so failing to detect the malware will result in the dynamic analysis. But the static analysis would detect the malware using the static features. Thereby, the hybrid approach strengthens the detection process by combining them. It can also boost robustness, expand code coverage, and discover flaws [4].

4. Methodology

A state-of-the-art guideline presented by Kitchenham et al. [21] is followed for the systematic literature review. According to the guideline, to shape a systematic review, developing a review protocol is compulsory. A summary of the key steps of the review protocol carried in this work is given in the following subsections.

A. The Rationale for the Review: The hybrid analysis for Android malware detection is a promising research domain because the weaknesses of the static and dynamic analysis have lessened here. Thus, this domain's potentiality requires a brief examination of the current literature.

B. Research Questions: The following research questions have been defined for the review:

1) What are the size and source of the dataset used in the existing research?

2) What are the features used in hybrid analysis using machine learning?

3) Which techniques are used in the existing research?

4) Which evaluation metrics are used in the existing research?

5) What are the outcomes of the existing research?

6) What are the strengths and limitations of the existing research?

C. Study Selection Criteria: The literature is selected using the following criteria:

1) Inclusion Criteria:
   a. Journal, Conference Proceedings of hybrid analysis using machine learning
   b. Date (year) of publication: 2012-2020

2) Exclusion Criteria:
   a. Research that incorporates hybrid analysis, but not using machine learning
   b. Research that lacks a well-defined methodology and unambiguous contributions

D. Study Quality Assessment: We have scrutinized the selected papers for internal validity, bias, and external validity. Although there is no consensus on the definition of quality, the CRD Guidelines [22] and the Cochrane Reviewers Handbook [23] advise that quality correlates insofar as the research reduces bias and enhances validity within and outside [21].

5. Systematic Literature Review

In this section, we have resolved the research questions and presented an inclusive systematic review of hybrid analysis. Table 1 depicts the literature overview of hybrid analysis using machine learning.

A state-of-the-art study - Marvin [24] employ sseveral static and dynamic features in detecting malware. It uses SVM and Linear Classifiers to build a detection model where Linear Classifiers can detect more accurately but SVM is faster comparatively. To avoid the obsolescence of its classification model in the future, it presents a retraining strategy. Marvin's performance is sound enough as its accuracy is 98.24 % with less than 0.04% false-positive rate. But for previously unseen malware, its accuracy is close to 90%. Though Marvin considers a lot of features, it overlooks system-level events such as System Calls: an integral part of the behavioural aspects (dynamic features).

Samadroid [25] presents an on-device malware detection architecture which ensures the resource efficiency by reducing memory overhead of local devices. It uses a subset of Drebin's [12] features (6 out of 8) and 10 predefined System Calls. Its accuracy is about 98% with a false positive rate of 0.1%. As it used an outdated dataset, it would fail to fight against recent malware as malware behaviour changes frequently over time. It also overlooks any additional dynamic features except System Calls.

BRIDEMAID [26] proposes a framework using multi-level and multi-feature analysis. It can detect polymorphic and composition malware to avoid zero-day attacks. Its accuracy is relatively high regarding existing works. However, it does not use any benchmark dataset. Also, it reports only accuracy and FPR, other metrics should be reported to properly evaluate the framework.

Omni Droid [27] fuses several prior tools to extract many static and dynamic features and employs ensemble-based classifiers. Though they considered only a large feature-set, their performance is relatively lower than existing works. MADAM [28] concurrently assesses static and dynamic features at four levels in detecting mischievous activity. Though it gains accuracy of 96.9%, it has high memory overhead and limited scope (only run in the rooted device, works on post-installed apps).

Hadm [29] incorporates Deep Neural Network for feature extraction. It shows that integrating advanced features originated from deep learning with the preceding static and dynamic characteristics gives substantial returns. It achieves 94.7% accuracy while the preceding features gained an accuracy of 93.5%, an improvement of 1.2% with the cost of high complexity. Droid-detector [30] extracted more than 200 static and dynamic features with the deep neural network. It achieves 96.5% accuracy in detection. However, it uses a limited dataset and limited types of features.

Mobile-Sand Box [31] use Permissions, Services, Receivers, Intents, potentially dangerous functions as static features and investigates Native Code (Native API Calls) and Network Traffic as dynamic features to classify malware. However, its evaluation is insufficient as no detection metric is given. Kapratwar et al. [32] use Permissions and System Calls for hybrid analysis. Its performance (AUC) is significantly better for static features in comparison with dynamic features. But it uses a small (200 apps) and old dataset and overlooks other features. Dhanya et al. [33] use API Call sand Permissions for hybrid analysis. Separability assessment Criteria is used for feature selection. Their performance is insufficient as no accuracy measure is given. Besides, they do not consider any other features. Liu et al. [34] propose an Android malware detecting procedure where Permissions, API Calls, and System Calls are used. Their scheme's detection accuracy is from 93.33% to 99.28% according to experimental results. Nevertheless, they consider only a small feature-set and their dataset is also limited. Patel et al. [35] use Genetic algorithm for rule-based malware classification usinghy brid features. By assessing more than 231 features, it achieves 96.4% accuracy in malware detection. But it uses a limited dataset and its execution time and resource consumption are high. Yusof et al. [36] use Permissions, API Calls, and System Calls while achieving sound performance with respect to accuracy, precision, and recall. However, its model is trained with the malware samples only which would lead to a biased model. Also, FPR is high enough in their work.

In short, Permissions and API Calls are the most used static features and System Calls are the most used dynamic features according to the current research. The most common datasets are Drebin, Contagio, and Android Malware Genome Project. Besides, most researchers use the Google Play Store and local app stores to collect benign applications. Virus Total, Virus Share, etc. sources are also used for malware samples. In Android malware, the most used machine learning technique is the Support Vector Machine. Besides, Naive Bayes, Random Forest, J48, Logistic Regression, etc. are also common in the existing research. The most common evaluation metrics are Accuracy, True Positive Rate (TPR), and False Positive Rate.

Table 1: Systematic Literature Overview of Hybrid Analysis Using Machine Learning

Ref.	Static Features	Dynamic Features	Dataset Source	Dataset Size	ML Model	Results	Limitations
Mobile-Sand Box (2013) [31]	Permissions, Services, Receivers, Intents, Potentially Dangerous Functions	Native Code (Native API Calls) and Network Traffic	Asian markets and Google Play Store	40,000 apps			Insufficient evaluation. No detection performance is given. Old dataset.
Patel et al. (2015) [35]	Permissions, Intents, Receivers	SMS, File Operations, Native Code, Network Data,	Droid-Kin, Contagio	755 apps	Genetic Algorithm, Information Gain	Accuracy 96.4%	High execution time and resource consumption. Limited dataset.
Marvin (2015) [24]	Permissions, Intents, Suspicious Files, API Calls, Developer's Certificate	Network Operations, File Operations, Phone Events	Google Play Store, Virus-Total, Genome Project, Contagio	150,000 apps: 135,000 benign, 15,000 malware	SVM and Linear Classifier	Accuracy: 98.24%, FPR: <0.04%	Overlooking system-level events such as System Calls. Too many features. Higher complexity.
Droid-detector (2016) [30]	Permissions, API Calls	File Operations, Network Traffic, Phone Events, SMS	Google Play Store, Genome Project Contagio	21,760 apps: 20,000 benign, 1761 malware	Deep Belief Network	Accuracy: 96.7%	Overlooking many static features and important dynamic features like System Calls.
MADAM (2016) [28]	Permissions, API Calls	System Calls, SMS, Phone Event	Genome Project, Virus-Share, Contagio	2800 apps: 125 malware families	KNN	Accuracy: 96.9%	High memory overhead. Limited scope (only run in rooted device, post-installed apps).
Liu et al. (2016) [34]	Permissions	System Calls	Gnome Project, Wandoujia App Market	1000 apps: 1000 benign, 1000 malware	SVM, KNN	Accuracy: 93.33%∼99.28% , TPR: 94.59% ∼99.47%, FPR: 0.20%∼ 11.01%	Using limited dataset, considering few features
Hadm (2016) [29]	Permissions, API Calls, Intent	System Call Sequences	Google Play and Virus-Share	5888 apps: 4002 benign, 1886 malware	Deep Neural Network, SVM, Hierarchi-cal MKL	Accuracy: 94.7%, FPR: 1.8%	Higher complexity with respect to accuracy gains. No benchmark dataset. Limited features set.
BRIDE-MAID (2016) [26]	Permissions, Meta Info., Opcodes	System Calls, SMS	Google Play Store, Virus-Total	12,598 apps: 9804 benign, 2794 malware	SVM	Accuracy: 99.7%, FPR: 0.2%	No benchmark dataset. Insufficient evaluation
Kapra-twar et al. (2017) [32]	Permissions	System Calls	Google Play Store, Virus-Total, Drebin	200 apps: 103 benign, 97 malware	IBk, Nave Bayes, J48, Random Forest, Logistic	AUC: 0.5844~0.9660	Overlooking many static and dynamic features. Limited and old dataset. Insufficient evaluation
Sama-droid (2018) [25]	Permissions, API Calls, Intents, App Components	System Calls (10)	Drebin	5,560 malware	Decision Tree, Naïve Bayes, SVM, and Random Forest	Accuracy: 91.6%∼ 98.97%, TPR: 81.1%∼ 98.5%, FPR: 0.03%∼ 7.8%	Overlooking many dynamic features. Limited and old dataset.
Yusof et al. (2018) [36]	API Calls, Permissions	System Calls	Google Play Store, Drebin	Train: 5,560 malware, Test: 800 benign	SVM, Naïve Bayes, KNN and Random Forest	Accuracy 97.9%, Pre: 98.2%, Rec: 99.4, TPR: 99.4, FPR: 12.4	Model trained with only malware which may lead to biasness. High false positive rate.
Dhanya et al. (2019) [33]	Permissions	API Calls	Drebin	400 apps: 200 benign, 200 malware	NaveBayes, SVM, J48 &Random Forest	F-score: 0.71%∼ 0.975, Precision: 74.7%∼ 97.6%, Recall: 72.5%∼97.5%	Limited and old dataset. Considering few features. No accuracy given.
Omni-Droid (2019) [27]	Permissions, API Calls, Intents, Meta Info., Opcodes	System Calls, Network Data	Omni-Droid	22,000 apps: 11,000 benign, 11,000 malware	Random Forest, Bagging, Voting	Accuracy: 89.7%, Precision: 89.7%,	Too many features, Higher complexity regarding performance gain

6. Discussion

The opportunities, challenges, and limitations of hybrid analysis are discussed in this section.

A. Dataset Inadequacy: Almost 10 million new malware are found each month [10]. But there does not exist anyup-to-date dataset of malware. So, their performance in malware detection is doubtful considering the vast population of the new malware. Dataset inadequacy is a vital factor as an appropriate dataset is required for research evaluation. Therefore, it provokes escalating challenges as well as opportunities for new researchers.

B. Exploring New Features: Most of the existing research only deals with some common features. But it is more likely that there exist more distinguishable features. For instance, Talha et al. [37] reveal many unknown characteristics of Android malware, however, it did not integrate any machine learning technique to detect malware. They reveal that over-privileged permissions are one of the characteristics of malware. Besides, they uncover that malware's average number of incoming and outgoing connections, the average size of download and upload, etc. are distinguishable features in malware. It suggests that there will be decent opportunities in exploring new features.

C. New Malware Family: As existing malware's behaviour is decoded by the existing tool or research outcome; malware authors update existing malware families and create new malware families frequently to evade detection. They try to trick existing detection systems by introducing new behaviour as well as exhibiting benign behaviour. Consequently, malware detection becomes more challenging.

D. Reducing Complexity: Since the hybrid approach is a combination of static and dynamic analysis, its overall complexity is higher with respect to time, cost, and effort. Numerous features and malware families provoke this complexity which may limit and challenge the progression of hybrid analysis.

E. Better Performance: Hybrid analysis exhibits better performance on average than the static and dynamic approaches and triggers a lot of opportunities. By taking those opportunities and overcoming the challenges ahead, the hybrid analysis would be a vanguard for malware detection in the future.

F. Lack of Research: Though hybrid analysis is a promising and effective approach in Android malware detection, there is not enough research in hybrid analysis. A lot of opportunities and research directions are available right now. Researchers' enthusiastic focus on this field would have been beneficial to fight against the rising malware authors community.

7. Future Directions

The future directions of hybrid analysis in Android malware detection are discussed in this section.

Malware datasets should be updated on a regular basis to assure the effectiveness of the new research and to justify the feasibility of the existing research. Modern data extraction tools for Android, such as Androdata, Apk Tool, Droidbox, Androguard, etc. can efficiently extract static and dynamic data. Using those tools and collaborating with benign and malware apps sources (e.g., Google Play Store, Virus Share, etc.), data inadequacy can be reduced. Also, finding new malware families can be a promising research direction as malware family is growing exceedingly. *How do we detect new malware families effectively?* - would be a prospective research question in this regard.

Besides, looking for more discernible features using deep learning or ensemble learning would create new research directions for researchers. Apart from that, focusing on the complexity of hybrid analysis is required. *How do we reduce the complexity of hybrid analysis?* - would be a prospective focus for future researchers. Many leading-edge feature selection techniques can be used to reduce the complexity as there are numerous features incidentally. Reinforcement learning, Deep learning, Bagging, Boosting, Tree-based, and embedded feature selection techniques can be used for reducing complexity.

8. Conclusion

The hybrid analysis can offer a sound direction in detecting Android malware. According to the existing studies on hybrid analysis, though it**s** complexity is high relatively, it is a more robust strategy and performs better in malware detection. As a new research domain, hybrid analysis has many challenges and limitations like dataset inadequacy, high complexity, exceedingly growing malware, and malware families, etc. However, this study addresses several opportunities and research directions to overcome these challenges and limitations. By addressing the strengths and limitations of the hybrid analysis and pointing out specific challenges, limitations, and future directions, this research seeks to contribute to academia as well as raise concern for Android mobile application security.

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