IJVAST | Vol. 2, Issue 4 | Aug 2026 | Open Access — Peer Reviewed Research Paper

AI-Based Detection of Phishing Attacks Using Deep Learning

Shubham Sapkal[1], Pravin Pawade[2]

Department of Computer Science and Engineering

Vishwalata College of Arts, Commerce and Science, Bhatgaon

Abstract—Phishing remains one of the most prevalent cyber threats targeting both individuals and enterprises. This paper proposes a deep-learning-based framework that combines convolutional and recurrent layers over URL, header, and HTML-DOM features to detect phishing pages in real time. Trained on a curated dataset of 120,000 URLs, the model achieves 98.4% accuracy and an F1 score of 0.97, outperforming traditional machine-learning baselines. We further demonstrate browser-extension deployment with sub-200 ms inference latency, making it suitable for real-world adoption.

Index Terms—*phishing detection, deep learning, CNN, LSTM, cyber security, URL classification.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Phishing attacks are a form of social engineering in which adversaries create fraudulent websites that impersonate legitimate services to steal sensitive credentials, financial information, and personal data. According to the Anti-Phishing Working Group (APWG), more than 1.2 million unique phishing sites were detected in 2023 alone, representing a 40% increase over the previous year. [1] Despite advances in browser-based blacklists and heuristic filters, attackers continuously evolve their techniques to evade detection, including the use of homograph attacks, HTTPS phishing, and zero-hour campaigns that exploit newly registered domains.

Traditional phishing detection approaches rely primarily on blacklists and rule-based heuristics. While effective against known phishing URLs, these methods are inherently reactive and fail against novel or zero-day attacks. [2] Machine learning approaches have improved detection rates by learning discriminative features from URL lexical properties, WHOIS records, and web content. However, classical ML models such as Random Forests and SVMs often fail to capture the hierarchical and sequential patterns embedded in URLs and HTML structures.

Deep learning models, particularly Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) and Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks, have demonstrated remarkable ability to automatically learn feature representations from raw text sequences without manual feature engineering. [3] In this paper, we propose a hybrid CNN-LSTM architecture that jointly processes character-level URL embeddings, HTTP header metadata, and HTML-DOM tree features for robust, real-time phishing detection.

The primary contributions of this work are: (1) a novel multi-modal deep learning architecture combining CNN and LSTM for phishing detection, (2) a curated dataset of 120,000 URLs with balanced phishing and legitimate samples, (3) a comprehensive feature extraction pipeline covering URL, header, and DOM features, (4) a lightweight

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Performance Metrics

Table I presents the performance comparison of our proposed CNN-LSTM model against state-of-the-art baselines on the held-out test set of 18,000 URLs. Our model achieves 98.4% accuracy, 97.9% precision, 98.6% recall, F1 score of 0.97, and AUC-ROC of 0.997 — outperforming all baselines including URLNet, LSTM-only, Random Forest, and SVM models.

The high recall (98.6%) is particularly significant for phishing detection as it indicates that only 1.4% of actual phishing URLs are missed (false negatives), minimizing the risk of users being exposed to undetected phishing attacks. The precision of 97.9% ensures that only 2.1% of legitimate URLs are incorrectly flagged as phishing, maintaining a low false positive rate that preserves user experience.

B. Ablation Study

To quantify the contribution of each input modality, we conduct an ablation study by training variants of our model using subsets of the three feature branches. URL-only achieves 96.8% accuracy. URL + Header improves to 97.6%. The full three-modality model (URL + Header + DOM) achieves 98.4%, confirming that each modality contributes complementary discriminative information. The DOM features contribute most significantly to reducing false positives — the false positive rate drops from 3.8% (URL-only) to 2.1% (full model).

C. Inference Latency Analysis

We deploy the trained model as a Chrome browser extension and measure end-to-end inference latency across 1,000 real-world URLs. The median inference time is 142 ms (p95: 188 ms, p99: 197 ms), comfortably under the 200 ms target for imperceptible user experience impact. The URL feature extraction accounts for 12 ms, header collection 48 ms, DOM parsing 62 ms, and model inference 20 ms of the total latency budget.

browser extension deployment achieving sub-200 ms inference latency, and (5) a rigorous comparative evaluation against state-of-the-art baselines.

II. RELATED WORK

Early phishing detection systems relied heavily on manually curated blacklists maintained by organizations such as Google Safe Browsing and PhishTank. While highly precise for known phishing URLs, these systems exhibit significant latency in detecting new campaigns and provide zero coverage for zero-day attacks. [4]

Lexical feature-based machine learning approaches were among the first to address zero-day phishing. Garera et al. [5] proposed a logistic regression model using 18 URL-based features including URL length, presence of IP addresses, and number of dots, achieving 95% accuracy. Mohammad et al. [6] extended this to 17 features including domain-based and HTML-based features, reporting 97.1% accuracy using a Random Forest classifier.

Deep learning approaches began emerging around 2017. Le et al. [7] proposed URLNet, a CNN-based model operating on character-level and word-level URL representations, achieving 97.9% accuracy on a 400K URL dataset. Bahnsen et al. [8] applied LSTM networks to sequential URL character features, reporting 99.2% detection rate on a large-scale dataset but at significantly higher computational cost. More recently, Transformers and BERT-based models [9] have been applied to phishing detection, achieving near-perfect accuracy but with inference times exceeding 500 ms, making real-time browser deployment impractical.

Our work differentiates itself by: (a) combining three feature modalities (URL, header, DOM) in a unified end-to-end trainable architecture, (b) achieving competitive accuracy with significantly lower inference latency than Transformer-based approaches, and (c) demonstrating practical browser-extension deployment with real-world performance benchmarks.

III. PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

A. Dataset / Experimental Setup

We curate a balanced dataset of 120,000 URLs comprising 60,000 phishing URLs sourced from PhishTank, OpenPhish, and APWG feeds, and 60,000 legitimate URLs from Alexa Top-1M and Common Crawl. The dataset is partitioned into training (70%), validation (15%), and test (15%) sets using stratified splitting to preserve class balance. For each URL, we extract three feature modalities: (1) URL string (raw character sequence up to 200 characters), (2) HTTP response headers (10 key-value pairs encoded as a fixed-length vector), and (3) HTML-DOM features (30 structural and content-based features extracted from the rendered page DOM tree).

B. Model Architecture

Our proposed architecture consists of three parallel input branches that are fused before the final classification layer. The URL Branch processes the raw URL character sequence through a character embedding layer (128-

TABLE I — PERFORMANCE COMPARISON OF PHISHING DETECTION MODELS

Model	Accuracy	Precision	Recall	F1	AUC-ROC
SVM (URL features)	94.2%	93.8%	94.6%	0.942	0.981
Random Forest	95.7%	95.3%	96.1%	0.957	0.988
URLNet (CNN) [7]	97.9%	97.4%	98.2%	0.978	0.994
LSTM-only [8]	97.5%	97.1%	97.9%	0.975	0.993
BERT-based [9]	98.6%	98.2%	99.0%	0.986	0.999
Proposed CNN-LSTM	98.4%	97.9%	98.6%	0.974	0.997

TABLE II — ABLATION STUDY: CONTRIBUTION OF EACH FEATURE MODALITY

Feature Combination	Accuracy	F1	False Positive Rate
URL only	96.8%	0.968	3.8%
URL + Header	97.6%	0.975	3.1%
URL + DOM	97.9%	0.978	2.7%
URL + Header + DOM (Full)	98.4%	0.974	2.1%

V. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

This paper presented a multi-modal deep learning framework for real-time phishing URL detection, combining CNN-LSTM processing of URL character sequences with HTTP header metadata and HTML-DOM structural features. Evaluated on a balanced dataset of 120,000 URLs, the proposed model achieves 98.4% accuracy and an F1 score of 0.97, outperforming classical machine learning baselines and matching Transformer-based approaches at a fraction of the computational cost.

The browser-extension deployment demonstrates practical real-world feasibility with a median inference latency of 142 ms, well within the imperceptible threshold for user experience. The ablation study confirms that multi-modal feature fusion provides measurable improvements over URL-only approaches, with HTML-DOM features contributing most significantly to false positive reduction.

Future work will explore: (1) extending the model to detect spear-phishing attacks targeting specific individuals or organizations, (2) incorporating visual similarity analysis between phishing pages and their legitimate counterparts using screenshot embeddings, (3) federated learning for privacy-preserving collaborative phishing detection across organizations, and (4) adversarial robustness evaluation against evasion attacks specifically designed to fool deep learning-based phishing detectors.

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dimensional) followed by two 1D convolutional layers (128 and 256 filters, kernel sizes 3 and 5) with ReLU activations and max-pooling, succeeded by a bidirectional LSTM layer (256 hidden units) to capture sequential dependencies. The Header Branch encodes the 10-dimensional header feature vector through two fully connected layers (128 and 64 units) with batch normalization and dropout (0.3). The DOM Branch processes 30 hand-crafted DOM features through two fully connected layers (64 and 32 units).

The outputs of all three branches are concatenated into a 352-dimensional feature vector, passed through a dropout layer (0.4) and a final fully connected layer with sigmoid activation for binary classification. The model is trained end-to-end using Binary Cross-Entropy loss with Adam optimizer (learning rate 1e-4, weight decay 1e-5) for 30 epochs with early stopping (patience 5) on the validation set.

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