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# The Battle Against Botnets: A Comprehensive Investigation of Lifecycles, Architectural Strategies, Attack Mechanisms, and Detection Technologies

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***Abstract:*** The review paper explores the multifaceted aspects of botnets, offering a comprehensive examination of these malicious networks that pose significant cybersecurity threats. This analysis encompasses various critical components, including their introduction, operation, life cycle, architecture, notable attack instances, and effective detection techniques. This holistic review is intended to provide valuable insights and knowledge for a diverse audience, including cybersecurity professionals, researchers, and policymakers, enabling them to gain a deep understanding of botnets and the evolving landscape of cyber threats. By shedding light on botnets and their architecture, operation, and the most efficient detection strategies, this paper contributes to the ongoing efforts to counter this persistent cybersecurity menace.

***Index Terms* - :** Botnet, Bots, Cyberattack, Command Control, DoS, DDoS, Malware, Cybersecurity Threats, Malicious Software, Botmaster, Infiltration Techniques, Zombie Computers, Infected Devices, Botnet Topologies, Botnet Propagation

## I. INTRODUCTION

A botnet refers to a network of hijacked internet-connected devices that are infected with malicious software, commonly known as malware. A botnet typically consists of a collection of computers that have fallen under the control of a single malicious actor, referred to as the "bot-herder" or "botmaster." Each computer within the botnet is referred to as a "bot," and these infected devices can be orchestrated by the attacker to carry out coordinated illegal activities simultaneously from a central location. The size and scale of a botnet grant attackers the capability to execute tasks that were previously unattainable with traditional malware. Botnets enable remote attackers to maintain control over compromised machines, allowing them to issue updates and modify bot behavior at will. This feature has led to bot-herders renting out segments of their botnets on the dark web for substantial profits.

A botnet is created and controlled by a human operator, referred to as the botmaster, who manages the botnet through a Command and Control (C&C) server, serving as a central hub. The C&C server acts as a communication point through which the botmaster sends commands and instructions to the network of compromised bots. These bots all connect to the C&C server, providing the botmaster with the ability to control and coordinate their actions, making it a critical component for managing the botnet.

Botnets are frequently employed in Denial-of-Service (DoS) attacks, capable of disrupting individual machines, servers, or even entire networks. The primary targets of DoS attacks are web servers, as well as various organizations such as banks, media outlets, companies, and government institutions. Furthermore, botnets are often used in Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks, making them a preferred choice for hackers. Detecting botnets has become a significant challenge, as botmasters continually employ sophisticated techniques to evade detection. Infected machines often face difficulties in downloading antivirus software updates, making it even more challenging to combat this threat. Botnets have evolved into a substantial and dangerous digital crime in computer networks and on the internet. Botnet challenges fall into two main categories: the first involves remote access by the botmaster to execute commands on victim computers and receive results, while the second entails botnets running on victim computers without the user's knowledge.

According to Trend Micro, the first bot to surface was "PrettyPark" in 1999, enabling remote control of malicious programs through IRC networks. In the early 2000s, significant sites like Yahoo, eBay, Amazon, and CNN were targeted by a Canadian hacker. By 2002, new communication protocols for bots and botnets were developed, and from 2003 onward, bots employed various techniques to propagate. Today, bots can be delivered through various methods similar to traditional malware distribution [1]. Bots serve a variety of malicious purposes, including extortion, spam and phishing, identity theft, and the seeding of additional malware.

In general, the key distinction between botnets and other types of malware lies in the presence of a Command and Control (C&C) infrastructure. Therefore, the detection and prevention of botnets from engaging in various cyber crimes depend on identifying the C&C's location, which, in turn, hinges on the strengths and weaknesses of the communication protocols adopted by botnets for malicious activities. Conversely, bots are also used for benign purposes, such as search engine web crawling and providing virtual opponents in online games. Despite the industry's and a significant portion of academia's focus on mitigating the botnet threat through patch management, the quest for fundamental solutions to eliminate the botnet problem remains a work in progress. Realizing the full potential of the internet for humanity remains a distant goal without creative strategies to address this pressing issue. The subsequent sections of this paper are structured as follows: In section 2, we delve into the inner workings of botnets. Section 3 presents a comprehensive literature review, offering insights into the botnet lifecycle, botnet architecture, notable botnet attack instances, and detailed information on botnet detection techniques. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of future challenges and prospects in Section 4.

## II. How Botnet Works?

The term "botnet" originates from the fusion of "robot" and "network." In this context, a "bot" represents a device that has been compromised by malicious software, subsequently joining a network, or "net," of infected machines, all managed by a solitary attacker or a coordinated group of attackers.

Here are the procedures performed to kickstart a botnet attack:

1. Preparing the Botnet Forces: The initial phase in forming a botnet involves infecting a maximum number of interconnected devices to secure a sufficient quantity of bots for executing the attack. These infected devices contribute their computing power to clandestine tasks unbeknownst to their owners. However, the portion of network capacity acquired from a single device is insufficient, prompting the botnet to aggregate millions of devices for the purpose of executing extensive-scale attacks. This process involves generating bots through the exploitation of security vulnerabilities within software or websites, or through the use of phishing emails. Botnets are frequently introduced into systems through the distribution of Trojan horse viruses.
2. Creating the Connections: Following the device compromise in the preceding step, it injects a particular type of malware that establishes a connection between the device and the central botnet server. This process interconnects all the devices within the botnet network, rendering them prepared for executing the attack. A bot herder employs command-based programming to direct the actions of the bots.
3. Initiating the Attack: After being compromised, a bot grants access to administrative-level functions such as collecting and pilfering user information, reading and altering system data, observing user behaviors, executing DDoS attacks, transmitting unsolicited emails, commencing brute force attacks, engaging in cryptocurrency mining, and more.

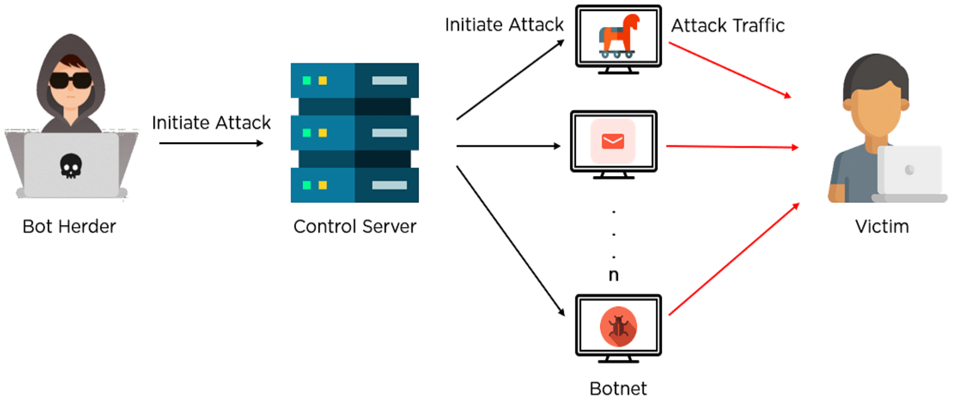

Fig 1: Botnet Working [2]

As illustrated in the image above, a bot herder instigates the attack by implanting malicious code into numerous devices, effectively forming the botnet. Subsequently, these devices assume control and execute the ultimate cyberattack. Consequently, in such a scenario, even if one attempts to trace the origin of the cyberattack, identifying the bot herder is a challenging endeavor.

## III. Literature Review

### A. Life cycle of Botnet

The process of establishing a botnet involves several distinct phases:

1. Initial Infection (Phase 1): In the first phase, the Botmaster initiates the infection of victim hosts with bots. This is achieved through various methods, including deceiving users, distributing malware through email attachments, scanning for vulnerabilities, exploiting weaknesses in software or systems, and employing other techniques.

2.Connecting to a Control Channel (Phase 2): In the second phase, the compromised bots establish connections to a central command and control channel. This communication channel serves as the linchpin for the entire botnet operation, enabling the Botmaster to maintain control and issue directives.

3. Issuing Commands (Phase 3): The third phase involves the Botmaster sending commands to the bots via established channels, which can include Internet Relay Chat (IRC), Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP), or Peer-to-Peer (P2P) networks. These commands can cover a wide range of actions, such as launching attacks, collecting data, or spreading further malware.

4. Growing the Botnet (Phase 4): The fourth phase focuses on expanding the botnet's size and reach. This process includes reinfecting more hosts with bots, allowing the Botmaster to control an ever-increasing number of compromised devices from a single point.

5. Botnet Updates (Phase 5): In the final phase, the bots receive updates, which may involve new versions of the malware or additional functions. These updates are orchestrated by the Botmaster using payload commands, ensuring that the botnet remains versatile and adaptive for the operator's purposes.

This discussion provides an overview of the five fundamental steps involved in creating and operating a botnet. It elucidates how bots infect other hosts, communicate with a central command channel, expand in number, and receive updates. These capabilities make botnets powerful tools for malicious activities that can significantly impact users and systems. [3]

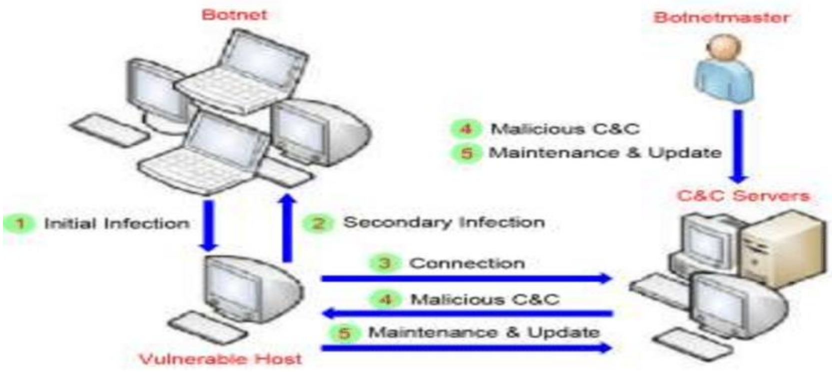

Fig 2: Botnet life cycle [3]

### B. Botnet Architecture

Botnets are constructed using four distinct architectural approaches: Centralized, Decentralized, Hybrid, and Hypertext Transfer Protocol Peer to Peer (HTTP2P). Each of these architectures has its own set of characteristics, advantages, and drawbacks.

#### 1. Centralized Architecture:

The centralized botnet architecture relies on a single command and control (C&C) server to manage all the infected machines or bots in the network. This makes it straightforward to set up and manage, with low message latency, allowing for quick coordination of the botnet's activities. However, it has a significant vulnerability as the entire network hinges on the central C&C server. If this central server is discovered and compromised, the entire botnet can be rendered useless. This architecture is less resilient and more susceptible to detection due to its reliance on a single point of failure, making it a less secure choice for botnet operators. [4]

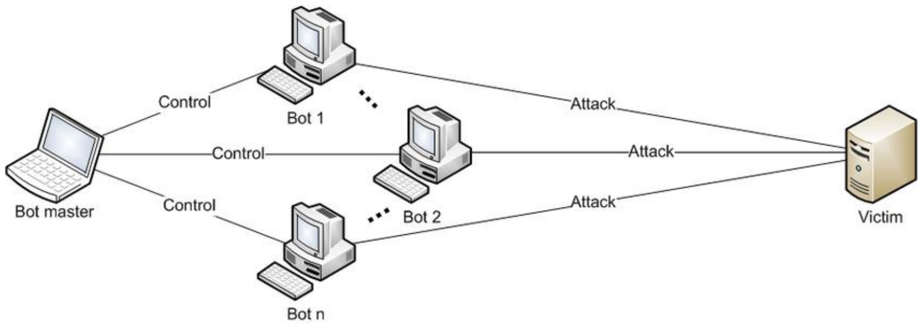

Fig 3: Centralized Architecture [5]

#### 2. Decentralized Architecture

In the decentralized botnet architecture, multiple C&C servers are employed, distributing command and control across the network. The bot-master sends instructions to one infected machine (zombie), which then disseminates those instructions to other infected machines, effectively acting as both servers and clients. This design offers increased resilience and survivability compared to the centralized architecture, as it disperses control and mitigates the risk associated with a single point of failure. However, its complexity in management and coordination among the infected machines can pose challenges, and detection of these botnets remains a demanding task, as they are more distributed and less vulnerable to takedowns. You can see what the decentralized architecture looks like in Figure 4.

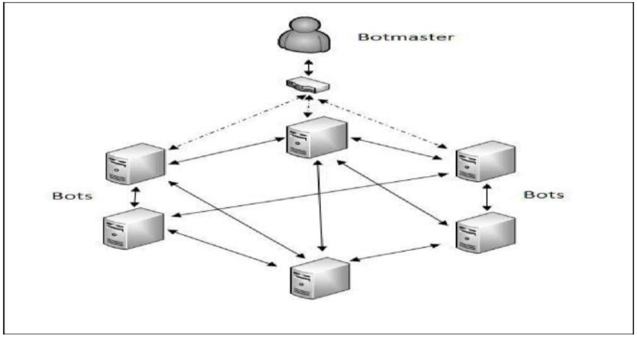

Fig 4: Decentralized Architecture [6]

This architecture is based on the peer-to-peer (P2P) protocol and is also known as peer-to-peer architecture. The message latency and survivability of this architecture is higher as compared to that of centralized architecture. Data mining techniques provides promising results when it comes to detect P2P attacks [7].

### 3. Hybrid Architecture

The hybrid botnet architecture combines elements from both centralized and decentralized designs. Each bot-master maintains a list of peers and does not share this list with others, enhancing security. The botnet is divided into servent and client bots, with servent bots receiving commands from the bot master and forwarding them to clients. This architecture combines the benefits of both centralized and decentralized approaches, offering some decentralization for resilience and isolation of peers for security. However, it also introduces a degree of complexity in managing the coordination between servant and client bots. You can see what the hybrid architecture looks like in Figure 5.

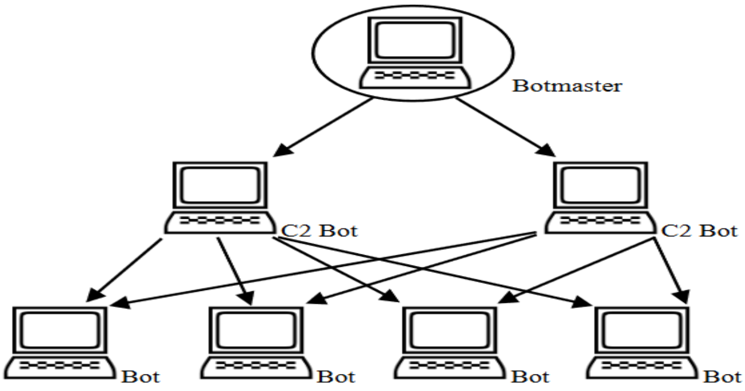

Fig 5: Hybrid Architecture [8]

The hybrid architecture combines the benefits of both centralized and decentralized approaches. In this setup, the Command and Control (C&C) servers form a decentralized network, and the bots connect to these servers in the usual client-server fashion [7].

### 4. Hypertext Transfer Protocol Peer to Peer (HTTP2P) Architecture

Hypertext Transfer Protocol Peer to Peer (HTTP2P) Architecture*: The HTTP2P architecture addresses vulnerabilities in peer-to-peer (P2P) networks, particularly the Sybil attack, by merging HTTP and P2P designs. In this framework, the bot-master encrypts messages and actively seeks out bot-clients to initiate communication, with bot-clients restricted from initiating contact themselves. This approach adds intricacy to the architecture, making it less detectable and enhancing security. However, it can be challenging to set up and manage due to the intricacies of encryption and the passive nature of bot-clients, potentially resulting in slower responsiveness.

### *A. Famous Botnet Attacks:*

Botnets, the preferred tools of choice for many cybercriminals, have been involved in various high-profile attacks over the years. Here are some notable botnets that have left a significant mark on the world of cybercrime:

### 1. EarthLink Spammer (2000):

The EarthLink Spammer, orchestrated by Khan K. Smith in 2000, is a pivotal point in the history of botnets. It gained notoriety for its role in sending out 1.25 million deceptive emails, masquerading as legitimate messages from well-known websites. These emails were essentially phishing scams, aimed at tricking recipients into revealing confidential information, such as credit card details or infecting their computers with viruses that transmitted data back to Smith. Eventually, EarthLink took legal action, filing a $25 million lawsuit against Smith for exploiting their network in his spam operation. This operation had reportedly earned him at least $3 million. The EarthLink Spammer served as an early example of how botnets could be used for financially motivated cybercrimes, setting the stage for more sophisticated attacks in the years to come.

### 2. Storm (2007):

Storm, which emerged in 2007, was among the early peer-to-peer botnets, known for its innovative approach to command and control. Unlike traditional centralized botnets, Storm had multiple controlling servers, which made it more resilient and harder to shut down. It gained a significant foothold, infecting a substantial number of computers, with estimates ranging from 250,000 to 1 million [9]. What set Storm apart was its availability on the dark web, where cybercriminals could lease it for various nefarious activities. These activities included Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks, identity theft, and the distribution of malware. In 2008, law enforcement and security experts managed to shut down some of the servers responsible for Storm, rendering the botnet largely inactive. However, Storm remains a noteworthy case study in botnet evolution and the challenges of combating these threats.

### 3. Zeus:

Zeus, originating in Russia in 2007, has evolved into one of the most notorious financial botnets. Its primary focus is the theft of financial credentials. Zeus is characterized by its ability to steal a wide range of account credentials entered on infected computers, encompassing banking, email, and social media accounts. It employs stealthy rootkit components, making it challenging to detect. By 2009, it had become widespread, affecting around 75,000 computers in over 200 countries. What makes Zeus particularly concerning is that a "Zeus bot-maker" could be purchased on underground internet forums, enabling individuals to create and distribute malware through methods such as drive-by downloads or spam emails [1]. Zeus's combination of financial motivation and accessibility on the black market has made it a significant threat in the world of cybercrime.

### 4. Mirai:

Mirai, a prominent Internet of Things (IoT)-focused botnet, made its debut in 2016 [10]. What set Mirai apart was its targeting of smart home devices and connected gadgets that utilized weak or default passwords. Initially, it was created by students who held grievances against their university. However, it quickly evolved into the largest IoT botnet to date, spawning numerous offshoots. In fact, there are now over a hundred botnets based on Mirai and its variants. Mirai's most notorious exploit came in October 2016 when it orchestrated a massive DDoS attack on Dyn, a prominent Domain Name System (DNS) provider. The attack led to the overwhelming of servers worldwide, briefly disrupting services like Twitter, GitHub, and Spotify. Remarkably, Mirai achieved this with a relatively modest 100,000 IoT devices, generating a massive traffic surge exceeding 1 terabit per second (1Tbps) [10]. This attack exposed the vulnerabilities of poorly secured IoT devices and highlighted the significant threat posed by IoT-based botnets. Mirai's legacy is a testament to the growing importance of securing IoT devices in an increasingly interconnected world.

## *B. Botnet Detection Techniques*

Detecting botnets is a formidable challenge due to their covert and constantly evolving nature. As the prevalence of botnet activity continues to grow, the cybersecurity community has intensified its efforts to identify and mitigate these threats. Detecting botnets necessitates advanced analytical capabilities involving the monitoring and analysis of network traffic and device behavior. In this context, the following botnet detection techniques are presented:

### 1. Honeypot and Honeynet:

Honeypots and Honeynets are well-established tools for detecting security threats and understanding the behaviors of cybercriminals. Honeypots are capable of luring in attackers, collecting malware samples, and analyzing the actions of perpetrators. Honeynets, on the other hand, are employed to monitor large-scale, diverse networks and often consist of multiple honeypots. Linux-based honeynet solutions are prominent due to the availability of open-source tools. While honeypots are powerful, intruders have attempted to dismantle them, necessitating the development of reactive firewalls to prevent multiple compromises. These security measures aim to detect compromised ports and selectively block inbound attacks, all while maintaining covert operations to avoid raising suspicions [11]

### 2. Flow-Based Methods for Botnet Detection:

Flow-based methods leverage network protocols such as NetFlow to collect IP network traffic data as it enters or exits network interfaces. These techniques categorize packets based on shared characteristics like source and destination IP, ports, and protocol type. By analyzing the unique flow patterns created by these characteristics, it is possible to detect anomalies and identify botnet-related traffic [12]. Flow-based detection techniques are effective in fast and data-intensive networks, and they have been widely adopted for identifying botnet activity. Researchers have made significant contributions to this domain, continuously refining and enhancing these methods.

### 3. Machine-Learning-Based Detection:

Machine learning-based botnet detection relies on the analysis of network traffic, system behaviors, and other data to discern patterns or anomalies associated with botnet activity. It encompasses various critical steps, including data source selection, feature engineering, supervised and unsupervised learning, hybrid approaches, feature selection, model training, evaluation metrics, online and real-time detection, and the utilization of ensemble methods. Challenges in this domain include handling imbalanced datasets, evolving botnet tactics, and maintaining low false positive rates. Additionally, the integration of threat intelligence feeds and external data sources enriches machine learning models with up-to-date information about known botnet activity, enhancing their effectiveness [13].

Machine learning-based botnet detection employs a variety of techniques and strategies to effectively identify and mitigate the threats posed by botnets. These strategies encompass the following aspects:

1. Data Sources (Machine Learning Features):

Machine learning-based botnet detection relies on a rich array of data sources to develop and train effective detection models. These data sources include network traffic logs, system logs, flow data, and behavioral attributes. Network traffic logs offer insights into the communication patterns within a network, tracking the interactions between devices, applications, and external entities. System logs provide detailed information about system activities, including login attempts, resource utilization, and security events. Flow data, often captured using protocols like NetFlow, categorize network traffic based on shared characteristics like source and destination IP addresses, ports, and protocols. Finally, behavioral attributes encompass the actions and habits of networked devices, helping to discern patterns and anomalies.

2. Feature Engineering:

Feature engineering is the process of selecting and transforming relevant features or attributes from the data sources to facilitate machine learning model training. It involves crafting features that encapsulate meaningful information about network behaviors, allowing models to distinguish between normal and botnet-related activities. For example, features might include the frequency of specific communication patterns, the volume of data transferred between devices, or the temporal aspects of network events. Effective feature engineering not only enhances the accuracy of detection models but also reduces the computational complexity, making the models more efficient. It's a critical step in preparing data for analysis, as the quality and relevance of engineered features significantly influence the performance of machine learning-based botnet detection systems.

3. Supervised Learning:

Supervised learning is a machine learning approach where models are trained using labeled datasets. In the context of botnet detection, these datasets consist of known instances of botnet and non-botnet activity. Common supervised learning algorithms, such as decision trees, random forests, support vector machines, and neural networks, learn to recognize patterns associated with botnet behavior based on historical examples. By utilizing labeled data, supervised models can make predictions about new data instances, classifying them as either benign or malicious. This approach is highly effective in scenarios where historical data is available, as it enables the models to generalize from past experiences and identify known botnet behaviors with a high degree of accuracy.

4. Unsupervised Learning:

Unsupervised learning techniques are employed when labeled data is scarce or unavailable, making them particularly valuable for identifying previously unknown or zero-day botnets. These techniques, such as clustering algorithms (e.g., K-means and hierarchical clustering), analyze data without the need for pre-defined categories. Instead, they group data points with similar characteristics, enabling the identification of anomalies or unexpected patterns. Unsupervised learning is especially useful for botnet detection when dealing with emerging threats that lack historical data. It allows the system to autonomously discover irregularities in network behavior, making it a vital component of a comprehensive botnet detection strategy.

5. Hybrid Approaches:

Hybrid botnet detection systems combine both supervised and unsupervised techniques to maximize detection accuracy and adaptability. This fusion of methods leverages the strengths of each approach. For example, supervised learning excels at identifying known botnet behaviors, while unsupervised techniques are adept at spotting previously unseen or emerging threats. By integrating these complementary approaches, hybrid systems provide a comprehensive defense against botnets and can handle a wide range of scenarios. They are especially effective in dynamic environments where both historical data and real-time anomaly detection are required.

6. Feature Selection:

Feature selection is a vital step in the machine learning-based botnet detection process. It involves identifying the most relevant attributes or features from the data sources for building detection models. Effective feature selection reduces the dimensionality of data, which not only improves model performance but also reduces computational resource requirements. The goal is to focus on the most informative aspects of network behavior, thereby enhancing the accuracy and efficiency of the detection system. Automated feature selection techniques help identify the attributes that contribute most significantly to distinguishing between benign and malicious network activity.

7. Model Training:

Machine learning models used in botnet detection are trained on historical data to learn the patterns and characteristics associated with botnet behavior. The model aims to differentiate between benign and malicious network activity by recognizing distinctive features and behaviors. Over time, the models evolve and adapt as new data becomes available. Continuous model training ensures that the system remains informed about emerging threats and adapts to new attack vectors. It's an ongoing process that allows the detection system to stay relevant and effective in the face of evolving botnet tactics.

8. Evaluation Metrics:

The effectiveness of botnet detection models is assessed using a range of evaluation metrics. These metrics include precision, recall, F1-score, and Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) curves. Precision measures the proportion of true positive predictions, while recall evaluates the ability to detect all actual positive cases. The F1-score is a balance between precision and recall, providing a single metric to assess model performance. ROC curves illustrate the trade-off between true positive rate and false positive rate. These metrics are essential for determining how well the model can identify botnet-related events while minimizing false positives, ultimately measuring the system's accuracy and reliability.

9. Online and Real-Time Detection:

Some machine learning-based botnet detection systems operate in real-time, continuously analyzing network data as it flows through the network. Real-time detection allows for immediate responses to potential threats, enhancing the network's security posture. Online detection systems can react swiftly to anomalous activities, reducing the potential impact of botnet attacks and bolstering network resilience.

10. Challenges:

Machine learning-based botnet detection faces several challenges. Imbalanced datasets, where benign data significantly outweighs botnet data, can lead to biased models. The ever-evolving tactics of botnets demand constant model adaptation and updates. Maintaining low false positive rates is essential to reduce unnecessary alerts and operational overhead. These challenges require ongoing research and innovation to ensure the effectiveness of botnet detection systems in real-world environments.

11. Ensemble Methods:

Ensemble methods involve the combination of multiple machine learning models using various techniques to enhance detection accuracy and robustness [13]. By leveraging the strengths of different models and techniques, ensemble methods can effectively identify a broader range of botnet behaviors. This approach is particularly valuable in scenarios where botnets employ diverse tactics and evasion techniques. Ensemble methods maximize the chances of detecting botnet-related activities by integrating the outputs of multiple models, reducing the risk of false negatives.

12. Big Data and Cloud:

With the growth of big data and cloud computing, machine learning-based botnet detection can scale to handle massive amounts of network traffic and data. These technologies enable the analysis of vast datasets and enhance the scalability of detection systems. As networks generate increasing amounts of data, big data and cloud solutions provide the necessary infrastructure and processing power to analyze this data efficiently.

13. Threat Intelligence:

Integration of threat intelligence feeds and external data sources enriches machine learning models with up-to-date information about known botnet activity. Threat intelligence feeds provide information about the latest botnet threats, including indicators of compromise and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) employed by botnets. This integration ensures that detection systems remain informed about emerging threats and can adapt to new attack vectors. Threat intelligence enhances the accuracy and relevance of botnet detection models.

### 4. Behavior-Based Botnet Detection:

Behavior-based botnet detection is a technique that identifies botnets by observing and analyzing the behavior of networked devices. It focuses on detecting unusual or suspicious activities, such as abnormal data traffic patterns and unauthorized access attempts. This approach aims to identify botnets by recognizing deviations from typical device behavior, making it especially useful for detecting zero-day threats and previously unknown botnets.

### 5. IRC-based Detection:

Internet Relay Chat (IRC)-based detection involves monitoring IRC communication channels and identifying botnet command and control (C&C) traffic. The detection technique revolves around recognizing the characteristic patterns of IRC communication commonly used by botnets for command issuance. By monitoring IRC channels and analyzing the content of messages, security professionals can pinpoint botnet-related activities and take appropriate action to mitigate threats.

## IV. FUTURE WORK -

Future directions in botnet detection and cybersecurity include the exploration of advanced machine learning techniques for adaptive threat detection, the development of more sophisticated behavioral analysis algorithms to identify novel characteristics, the creation of efficient real-time monitoring systems for swift threat response, adapting detection methods for IoT and edge computing environments, fostering collaborative defense strategies among organizations and governmental bodies, refining ethical hacking and red teaming practices to proactively identify vulnerabilities, evolving cybersecurity legislation and policy frameworks to address botnet threats comprehensively, and prioritizing continuous education and training initiatives to equip cybersecurity professionals with the knowledge and skills needed to defend against evolving botnet threats. These multifaceted approaches are essential to stay ahead of the ever-evolving tactics employed by botnets and ensure robust cybersecurity in the face of emerging threats.

## V. CONCLUSION

This comprehensive review serves as a valuable resource that delves into the intricate world of botnets, offering insights into their operations, life cycle, architecture, notable attacks, and a range of detection techniques. By providing a holistic understanding of botnets, this paper empowers cybersecurity practitioners, researchers, and policymakers to better combat the persistent threat posed by these digital adversaries. The knowledge shared within this review can aid in bolstering security measures and fortifying the digital realm against the ever-evolving landscape of botnet threats.

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