2017 IEEE/ACM 14th International Conference on Mining Software Repositories (MSR)

Understanding the Origins of Mobile App Vulnerabilities: A Large-scale Measurement Study of Free and Paid Apps

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***Abstract*—This paper reports a large-scale study that aims to understand how mobile application (app) vulnerabilities are associated with software libraries. We analyze *both free and paid apps*. Studying paid apps was quite meaningful because it helped us understand how differences in app development/maintenance affect the vulnerabilities associated with libraries. We analyzed 30k free and paid apps collected from the official Android marketplace. Our extensive analyses revealed that approximately 70%/50% of vulnerabilities of free/paid apps stem from software libraries, particularly from third-party libraries. Somewhat paradoxically, we found that more expensive/popular paid apps tend to have more vulnerabilities. This comes from the fact that more expensive/popular paid apps tend to have more functionality, i.e., more code and libraries, which increases the probability of vulnerabilities. Based on our findings, we provide suggestions to stakeholders of mobile app distribution ecosystems.**

Keywords*—*Mobile App, Software Library, Vulnerability

I. Introduction

Software libraries play a vital role in the development of modern mobile applications (app). They enable developers to improve development efficiency and app quality. In fact, Wang et al. reported that more than 60% of sub-packages in Android apps originate from third-party libraries [34]. Although software libraries offer many advantages, in some cases, they could be the source of security problems, e.g., vulnerabilities or potentially harmful functionalities. Chen et al. [11] recently reported that 6.84% of apps published to Google Play were potentially harmful apps associated with harmful software libraries. These observations indicate that libraries can be the origins of the mobile app vulnerabilities.

We report a large-scale study to understand how mobile app vulnerabilities are associated with software libraries. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that uses large datasets to systematically quantify the vulnerabilities associated with libraries. To perform our analysis, we developed two frameworks, *Droid-L* and *Droid-V*, to detect/classify software libraries used in mobile apps and quantify how vulnerable mobile app libraries are, respectively. By linking the output of the two frameworks, we can identify the mobile app vulnerabilities associated with libraries. As the number of active mobile apps published in prominent mobile app marketplaces has exceeded *four million* [31], using a small sample of apps may result in intrinsic bias. However, analyzing all available mobile apps is not feasible. Thus, we applied proper sampling approaches to generate a dataset that is sufficient to extract statistically reliable results. We adopted two sampling approaches, i.e., top-K relative to the number of installs and random sampling. Top-K reflects the most influential apps and random sampling reflects the statistics of each population.

A unique and noteworthy approach of this study is that we analyze *both free and paid apps*. Very few studies have investigated the security of paid apps. We employ a relatively large number of paid apps to ensure statistically reliable results. Studying paid apps enables us to understand how differences in the development/maintenance of apps affect vulnerabilities associated with libraries. We examined software updates for these apps six months after they were originally collected. We collected 2M free apps to construct a database (DB) to detect/classify the libraries used in apps. In total, we used 2M free apps and 30K paid apps for our analyses.

Our primary findings are as follows.

- Roughly 70% of free apps and roughly 50% of paid apps with vulnerabilities were vulnerable due to libraries.
- More expensive/popular paid apps tend to have more vulnerabilities than other paid apps.
- Paid apps tend to have not been updated for longer periods than the free apps; thus, vulnerable libraries in paid apps have not been updated for longer periods than the free apps.
- Approximately one-half of the vulnerabilities detected by existing vulnerability checking tools are found in unreachable code.

Based on these findings, we derive suggestions for stakeholders in mobile app distribution ecosystems (Section VI-D).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In Section II, we present a high-level overview of the methodologies developed for our analysis. In Sections III and IV, we describe the *Droid-L* and *Droid-V* frameworks, respectively. In Section V, we characterize the dataset used for the analysis.

978-1-5386-1544-7/17 $31.00 © 2017 IEEE
DOI 10.1109/MSR.2017.23

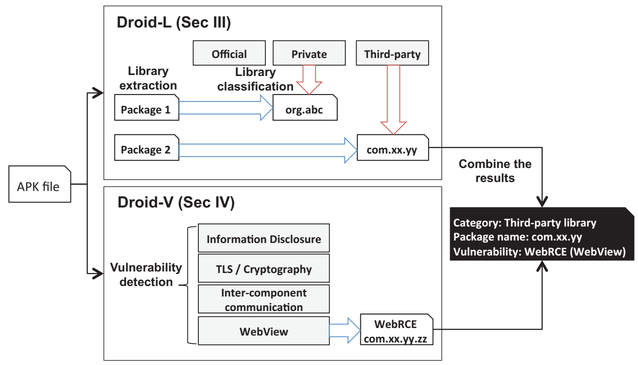

Fig. 1. High-level overview of methodologies

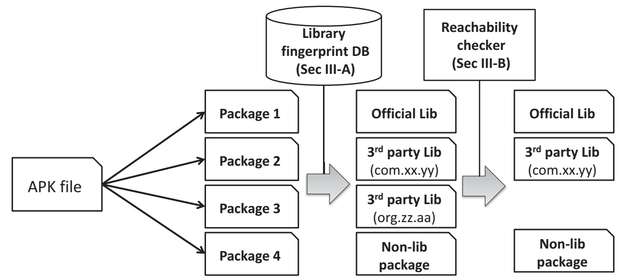

Fig. 2. Overview of Droid-L.

Findings are presented in Section VI. Limitations of the analysis and future research directions are discussed in Section VII. We also consider ethical issues associated with this research in Section VII. Section VIII provides a summary of related work, and conclusions are presented in Section IX.

II. Overview of Methodologies

Figure 1 presents a high-level overview of our approach, which consists of the *Droid-L* and *Droid-V* frameworks. *Droid-L* automatically detects/classifies software libraries used in mobile apps. It first extracts packages from a given APK file. In the Android OS, a *package* organizes multiple classes; thus, it represents the smallest unit of a software library. *Droid-L* then classifies the extracted libraries into three primary categories. *Droid-V* is a compilation system that measures the degree of vulnerability of mobile app libraries. For a given APK file, we use five vulnerability checkers to detect vulnerabilities and specify package names associated with the vulnerabilities. Finally, by linking *Droid-L* and *Droid-V* outputs, we can detect vulnerable libraries for a given APK file.

III. Droid-L: Library detector

The *Droid-L* system detects and classifies software libraries. Figure 2 shows an overview of the system, which comprises a *fingerprint DB* and a *reachability checker*. For a given APK file, the system first decompiles the file and extracts packages. The system then computes a fingerprint for each package and compares the computed fingerprints to the fingerprint DB. The fingerprint DB returns one of three library categories, i.e., official, private, or third-party. If the DB does not return anything, this implies that the package is not a library. Next, the system applies the reachability checker to the extracted libraries. The reachability checker employs static call graph analysis to determine if the library code is unreachable.

A. Building the fingerprint DB

As shown in Fig. 2, the role of the fingerprint DB is to classify a given package as official, private, or third-party (Section III-A2). To build the DB, we take the following two-stage approach. First, we employ cluster analysis to extract a set of packages with similar characteristics, which we call a *fingerprint*. A fingerprint is a unique signature that represents an extracted cluster. Then, we classify the clusters using two heuristics. The first heuristic is the naming convention of packages. Each package has an intrinsic name that may suggest which category it should belong to. For example, com.google.ads represents the AdSense library supported by the official Android SDK manager. The second heuristic is the number of distinct developer certificates per cluster. This feature is useful to determine how library is used. If it is a widely used public library, we will find many distinct certificates for apps that use the given library; if it is used by a single developer, the library is likely a private library.

Once we build a library fingerprint using a large collection of apps, we can extract libraries and classify them into categories. Note that we assume that code other than the detected libraries is attributed to app developers. We discuss the limitation of this assumption in Section III-C.

1) Clustering packages: To detect libraries contained in the collected apps, we begin by clustering packages. Similar packages used in many apps are clustered. A set of clustered packages possibly represents a software library. There are several ways to cluster packages [25], [34], [11]. LibRadar [25] leverages stable API features that are resilient to code obfuscation or minor software updates. LibFinder [11] compares two packages at the method level using control flow graphs. Due to its simplicity and high scalability, we adopted the approach used in LibRadar as our base and extended it for our purpose. Note that we could adopt other clustering approaches, such as LibFinder or other clustering algorithms using features extracted from packages.

Following the LibRadar approach, we first extract packages for the given apps. Here let p be an extracted package. Next, for each p, we derive $n(p)$, which is the total number of API calls in p, and $m(p)$, which is the number of distinct API calls used in p. Finally, for a given package p, we compute its fingerprint $F(p)$: $F(p) = h(n(p), m(p))$, where $h()$ is a lightweight hash function. After processing all packages found in all apps, packages with the same fingerprint are clustered. We eliminate a cluster if it has only one package.

From the set of all package names found in a cluster, we choose the most frequently used name as the *representative package name (RPN)*. The RPN offers a human-interpretable representation of a cluster while removing the noise introduced by developers who modify the names of packages. While extracting RPNs is common with LibRadar, the method we use to extract RPNs may not be identical because not all details are disclosed in Ref. [25]. We also apply deobfuscation to package names by heuristically identifying and removing obfuscated package names before choosing the RPN. We first extract words that are separated with dots from a given package name. If at least one of the words extracted is a single letter, we identify the package name as obfuscated. For example, if the package name zzz.a.b.c is given, we extract "zzz," "a," "b," and "c". Since the package name included three single-letter components, we detect it as obfuscated and eliminate it from the list of RPNs. Note that this simple rule may falsely eliminate legitimate package names that include a single letter. However, such cases were not common in our datasets. We use the RPNs to classify detected libraries into categories.

We explain further details about our clustering process and provide examples of RPNs in the full version of our paper [35].

2) Library classification: We aim to classify detected software libraries. Note that existing library detection schemes [25], [34], [11] have not considered classification. We define three library *categories*, i.e., official, private, and third-party, based on how they are distributed. This distinction is particularly important in relation to suggestions for managing libraries in the presence of vulnerabilities. We use RPNs and the number of distinct certificates per library for the classification task. The descriptions of the three categories of libraries and the ways to detect them are summarized below: **Official Libraries** are those supported by the official Android SDK Manager [2], e.g., the Android Support Library. Detected if its RPN matches one of the package names provided by the SDK Manager ,e.g., android.support. **Private Libraries** are those developed by a particular developer intended only to be used privately in apps developed by that developer, e.g., special logging/debugging libraries. Detected if all apps using the library are signed with a single signature. **Third-Party Libraries** are those distributed freely or commercially to be used by any developers, e.g., an advertisement library. Detected if it is not classified as an official library or a private library.

Next, we classify third-party libraries into sub-categories that describe their functionality or purpose. We considered 8 sub-categories: *Ad* (Advertisement), *Analyt* (Mobile analytics), *Build* (App building framework), *Cloud* (Cloud-based app building), *Dev* (Development aid), *Game* (Game engines), *Pymt* (Payment), and *SNS* (Social networks).

First, we compile a list of package names that are associated with popular third-party libraries listed in websites such as [7]. Let the compiled list be "list A." Second, for RPNs that are not detected in list A, we manually inspect the top package names used for at least 100 apps. We summarize the results as "list B." Finally, for libraries not covered by lists A and B, we apply the prefix-matching heuristics. For a given unclassified RPN C, if there is a classified RPN D that matches a prefix of C, then C is assigned the same category as D.

Finally, using the procedures described above, we construct a fingerprint DB. Each record consists of the following three-tuple, i.e., fingerprint, deobfuscated RPN, and class/category. The fingerprint DB is employed as follows. We extract packages from a given APK file and compute a fingerprint for each package. By querying the obtained fingerprints in the DB, we can obtain corresponding deobfuscated RPNs and categories. Note that an APK file may contain code from multiple libraries in the same category, e.g., it is quite common that an app uses more than two distinct ad libraries.

B. Reachability checker

Since some detected vulnerabilities may reside in unreachable code, we must distinguish such cases from legitimate ones. Thus, we built a reachability checker that can determine whether a given class is reachable from the app's entry point in its function call graph. If all classes within a detected library are unreachable, we conclude that it is an unreachable library. The purpose of reachability checker is to reduce the overestimation caused by such an unused library. Therefore, we do not focus on ensuring that the reachable code is actually used in the app, e.g., the code inside an *if* statement in which the condition is always false. Other limitations of static analysis are discussed in Section VII-A.

Figure 3 presents the pseudo code of the reachability checker. For convenience, let the term *function* include method, constructor execution, and field initialization. The code checks whether a given class is reachable (true) or unreachable (false). The algorithm uses depth-first search to search a function call tree. If it finds a path from the given function to a class of `ORIGIN` (line 4), it concludes that the given class is reachable, where `ORIGIN` is composed of three classes: `Application`, `App Components`, and `Layout`. `Application` is a class that initiates an Android app, and it is called when an app is launched. `App Components` are the essential building blocks that define the overall behavior of an Android app, including `Activities`, `Services`, `Content providers`, and `Broadcast receivers`. While the `Application` and `App Components` classes need to be specified in the manifest file of an app, the `Layout` class does not. It is often used by ad libraries to incorporate ads using XML.

`getf` (Line 5) is a function that returns a list of methods that instantiate/call a class. `refFunctions` (line 21) is a function that returns a list of functions that reference the given function. As an implementation of `refFunctions`, we adopted Androguard [13], which we modified for our purpose. If a function of a class, say Foo, implements a function of the Android SDK class whose code is not included in the APK, we cannot trace the path from the function in some cases. To address with such cases, we made a heuristic to trace the function that calls the init-method of class Foo (lines 16–19). Note that the heuristics can handle several cases such as async tasks, OS message handlers, or callbacks from framework APIs such as `onClick()`. A method is callable if it is overridden in a subclass or an implementation of the Android SDK and an instance of the class is created. Async tasks, the OS message handler, or other callbacks implement their function by overriding the methods of the Android SDK subclass. Therefore, this should be handled by heuristics. Finally, if there are no paths for which a given class can reach `ORIGIN`, the algorithm concludes that the class is unreachable.

C. Accuracy Evaluation

To validate the accuracy of the results generated by the *Droid-L* system, we inspected the detected libraries manually. We randomly sampled 25 apps from each of four datasets, i.e., free top, free random, paid top, and paid random apps. These 100 apps contained 11,633 packages, which were grouped into 7,620 distinct clusters, and 85% of the clusters (6,460)

```
INPUT
c : a class
a : an application (APK)
ORIGIN =  [Application, App Components, Layout]
list = getf(c,a)  # list of methods that instantiate/call 'c'.
done = []          # an empty list

WHILE list is not empty DO
    f = list.pop()
    IF f is in done:
        continue
    ENDIF
    IF f.parentClass is in ORIGIN:
        RETURN True
    ENDIF
    IF (f.parentClass inherits Android SDK)
        AND (f is not init)
        AND (f is not a static method):
        list.append(f.parentClass.init)
    ELSE IF (f is referenced):
        list.append(f.refFunctions)
    ENDIF
    done.append(f)
ENDWHILE
RETURN False
```

Fig. 3. Pseudo code of reachability checker

were detected as libraries using the fingerprint DB. The remaining packages (1,160) were not detected as libraries for the following reasons. First, the fingerprints of those libraries have been changed due to software updates. Second, some libraries use code optimization tools, such as ProGuard, which could also change fingerprints. We then inspected the 6,460 packages manually. First, we disassembled/decompiled the APK files. Then, we looked at the detected packages and inspected the classes/methods within the packages. We also searched the origins of the package source code using Internet search engines. We found that 6,308 packages (97.6%) were classified correctly. This result clearly validates the accuracy of the *Droid-L* system.

IV. Droid-V: Vulnerability checker

Our next goal is to identify vulnerabilities in detected libraries. To this end, we built a vulnerability checker, i.e., *Droid-V*, which uses various vulnerability scanners and compiles their results for further analysis. Taking an app as input, *Droid-V* detects the presence of vulnerabilities and identifies where in the code the vulnerabilities reside. This information can be combined with the results of *Droid-L* to identify the responsible libraries. In this section, we list and describe the vulnerabilities we targeted. Some of the limitations of our system are discussed in Section VII-A.

A. Vulnerabilities

As summarized in Section VIII, common and influential vulnerabilities found in recent mobile platforms can be broadly classified into four categories, i.e., *information disclosure*, *SSL/TLS and cryptography*, *inter-component communication* (ICC), and *WebView*. While the first two are underlying for all softwares, not just mobile apps and devices, the last two are mobile app/device-specific issues.

TABLE I. List of checked vulnerabilities

ID	Descriptions	Tools
	Information Disclosure	
ID-GLOB	Writes data to globally accessible area	AB
ID-STOK	Contains secret token	STF
ID-FGMT	Fragment injection vulnerability	AB
	SSL/TLS and Cryptography	
CR-KSPW	SSL keystore is not password-protected	AB, QA
CR-KSHC	SSL keystore is hard-coded	AB, QA
CR-SSLV	Miscellaneous SSL validation flaws	AB, MD, QA
CR-CERT	Contains weak certificate	WCC, QA
CR-ECBM	ECB mode encryption is used	QA
CR-PKEY	Contains private key	QA
	Inter-Component Communication	
IC-CPRV	ContentProvider without export attribute	AB
IC-SRVC	Service with intent filter	AB
IC-DNGR	Declares "dangerous" level permission	AB
IC-EXPT	Export attribute is missing "android:" prefix	AB
IC-DEBG	Debuggable flag is manually set to true	QA
	WebView	
WV-SSLV	WebView does not validate SSL	AB
WV-RCEV	WebView RCE vulnerability	AB
WV-FSYS	File system access is enabled in WebView	QA
WV-DOMS	DOM storage is enabled in WebView	QA

AB = AndroBugs, STF = Secret Token Finder,
MD = MalloDroid, WCC = Weak Certificate Checker, and QA = QARK

Each of these vulnerability categories has the following implications. *Information disclosure* involves the inclusion or improper access control of sensitive information that may lead to undesired leakage. *Cryptography* involves the misuse of SSL/TLS and cryptographic-related code, which may lead to cryptographic integrity being compromised. *ICC* involves improper permissions that may allow another app to access an app's sensitive information. *WebView* involves the misuse of Android's WebView class, which has been a source of many vulnerabilities, including remote code execution.

Table I lists the vulnerabilities we tested. We scanned our dataset for a total of 18 types of vulnerabilities using 2 original tools and 3 open source tools, which we describe in the next section.

B. Tools

We summarize the five tools we used to test the vulnerabilities. Note that some vulnerabilities, such as ID-FGMT and IC-CPRV, only reside on outdated Android API level. To address these cases, Droid-V also checks the app's target version.

AndroBugs [1] and **QARK** [24] are open source tools for scanning an app for a wide variety of flaws. Their lightweight static analysis and non-requirement of source code suits our needs. The tools have several detection levels, but we only adopted the "Critical" level flaws and we excluded those that are not vulnerabilities such as bugs. **Secret Token Finder** is a tool we developed to detect secret tokens present in an app, in a way similar to how it is done with PlayDrone [33]. Basically, it extracts all strings in an APK file and searches for matches with the regex patterns of IDs and secret tokens of known services such as AWS and Google OAuth. If such string patterns are present in any of the strings, we mark the app as vulnerable. **MalloDroid** [5] is an open-source tool for statically analyzing an APK file for various potential SSL-related security flaws, such as the inclusion of an invalid SSL certificate or misuse in the SSL validation logic. **Weak Certificate Checker** is a tool we implemented to find cryptographically weak certificates used to sign an APK file. It does several checks, such as on whether a certificate was created with a key with less than 1,024 bits or is vulnerable to certain attacks, e.g., Wiener's attack and common modulus attack.

V. Data

This section describes the free and paid app datasets used in our analysis. Since there have been no studies that analyzed paid mobile apps on a large scale, it would be meaningful to present how they are different from free apps. As discussed later, paid apps exhibit different characteristics compared to free apps. We construe that this reflects differences in app development and maintenance processes. We first provide an overview of datasets and then present interesting findings derived through an analysis of paid/free apps and the corresponding metadata.

A. Data description

We collected *paid* and *free* Android apps available on Google Play [3]. We used apps for two purposes. The first purpose was to generate the fingerprint DB (Section III-A). To this end, we collected 1,957,339 free apps and 30,000 paid apps from Google Play. They were collected between 2014 and 2016. The second purpose was to analyze the vulnerabilities of the libraries. Collecting and analyzing all paid and free apps on Google Play was not feasible due to budgetary and labor costs; thus, we made use of filtration and sampling as follows. First, we compiled lists of paid and free apps published on Google Play. From each list, we selected both the top-K and randomly sampled apps. The selected apps were divided into four sets, i.e., paid top, paid random, free top, and free random apps. The top-K apps represent the most influential apps, and the randomly sampled apps reflect the statistics of each population. We used the top-5k and random-10k (rand-10k) apps for our analysis. In total, 30k apps listed in Ref. [4] were used in our analyses. To further investigate the changes of vulnerabilities of apps over time, we updated these apps six months after we first collected them. Results for updated apps are presented in Section VI-C.

B. Characteristics of free/paid apps

In the following analyses, we attempt to characterize the collected data. The derived characteristics are useful to understand the sources and impacts of vulnerabilities associated with libraries. We investigate the number of installs, prices, and time of last update.

1) Number of installs: Figure 4 shows the distribution of the number of installs per app. Note that these numbers were discretized into logarithmic ranges. Needless to say, since top apps are installed a lot more than randomly sampled apps, vulnerabilities included in top apps would affect more users. Also, free apps demonstrate a larger number of installs than paid apps. Approximately 60% of randomly sampled paid apps show fewer than $10 - 50$ installs, and approximately 60% of randomly sampled free apps show fewer than $500 - 1000$ installs. This tendency also applies to top apps.

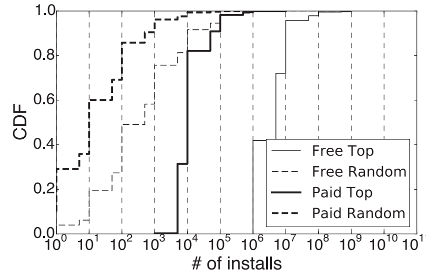

Fig. 4. Distributions of number of installs.

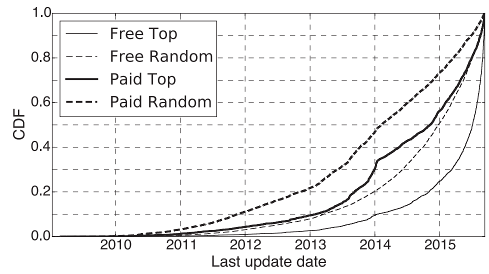

Fig. 5. Distributions of last updated date

2) Prices: Generally, the prices of the top apps were slightly higher than those of randomly sampled apps. For top apps, the average price was 3.44 USD and the median was 2.40 USD. For randomly sampled apps, the average price was 3.30 USD and the median was 1.50 USD. In addition, among random paid apps, several apps had a maximum price that can be set, i.e., 200 USD. We investigated such apps and found that most were a type of joke app, such as the "I am rich" app, which does not have any practical function.

In this study, we are interested in how *prices* correlates to vulnerabilities. It is known that customers use *price-perceived quality heuristics* [23] when appraising the quality of a product or service. It is natural to assume that such perception might reflect expectations regarding security risks. In other words, customers may believe that a paid app has fewer security risks than a free app. Likewise, users may expect expensive apps to be safer than inexpensive apps.

3) Time of last update: We look into the time of the last update and use it to estimate the maintenance effort made by app developers. For a set of apps, if they exhibit relatively recent date on average, it suggests that they tend to be actively maintained. Apps and libraries that are not maintained will lose the opportunity for their vulnerability to be fixed. Figure 5 shows the distributions of the last update date for each class of apps. Usually, we may expect that top apps tend to have a more recent last update date than randomly sampled apps for both free and paid classes. However, it is somewhat surprising that the top paid apps tend to have not been updated for longer periods than the random free apps. As presented in Section V-B1, we consider that this originates from the fact that paid apps tend to have a lower number of installs, i.e., the higher the number of users, the more app updates. In addition, this tendency may reflect the "sell-once-and-that's-it" model of some paid apps.

TABLE II. STATISTICS OF THE NUMBER OF DETECTED LIBRARIES PER APP.

Datasets	mean	std	max	min
Free (Top-5k)	10.67	9.39	101	0
Free (Rand-10k)	6.09	7.40	66	0
Paid (Top-5k)	4.86	6.45	69	0
Paid (Rand-10k)	3.07	5.20	74	0

TABLE III. TOTAL NUMBER OF DETECTED LIBRARIES PER EACH CATEGORY.

Category	Free Top-5k	Free Rand-10k	Paid Top-5k	Paid Rand-10k
Official	14,404	21,022	8,977	11,480
Private	1,477	2,067	1,094	2,018
Third-party	53,344	60,511	24,301	28,797

TABLE IV. TOTAL NUMBER OF DETECTED THIRD-PARTY LIBRARIES PER EACH SUB-CATEGORY.

	Free Top-5k	Free Rand-10k	Paid Top-5k	Paid Rand-10k
Ad	5,453	2,629	1,122	884
Analyt	3,264	3,365	1,872	1,835
Build	269	1,575	227	1,084
Cloud	537	1,167	299	674
Dev	17,525	24,594	8,309	10,001
Game	2,592	2,419	1,620	1,736
Pymt	831	1,108	462	439
SNS	2,805	2,560	1,043	1,020

VI. ANALYSIS RESULTS

This section describes the results we obtained through extensive analysis of the datasets. We first present the software libraries detected using the *Droid-L* system (Section VI-A). Then, we present vulnerable libraries found with the two systems, i.e., *Droid-L* and *Droid-V* (Section VI-B). We also analyze how these results have changed over time (Section VI-C). Finally, we summarize the key findings derived through the analyses. Based on the findings, we provide several suggestions to stakeholders (Section VI-D).

A. Detected software libraries

Table II shows statistics about the number of detected libraries per app. The results indicate two clear tendencies. First, free apps have more libraries than paid apps. Second, top apps have more libraries than randomly sampled apps.

Tables III and IV present breakdowns of the extracted libraries per category/sub-category. In Table III, across all the datasets, third-party libraries accounted for 70%–80% of the detected libraries. Official libraries accounted for 20%–30% of the detected libraries. The number of private libraries was much smaller than other categories. Next, in Table IV, across all datasets, development aid was the most dominant type of third-party library. This observation was somewhat interesting to us because, before we performed the analysis, we conjectured that the most dominant type of third-party library would be advertisements. Other popular third-party libraries include advertisements, mobile analytics, game engines, and social networks. At least two hundred libraries were extracted for each sub-category, suggesting that we succeeded in covering various types of libraries by using a large dataset.

Finally, we inspect how the prices of apps and the number of libraries are related. Figure 6 presents a box plot of the price of an app against the number of libraries in the app. We make

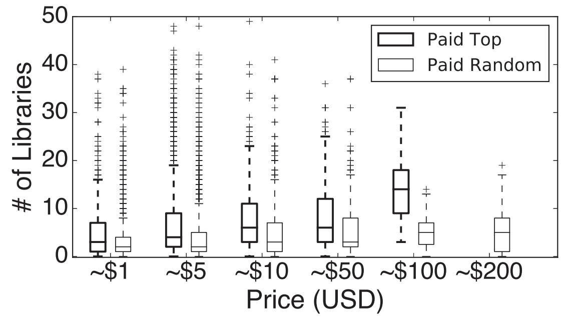

Fig. 6. Box plot of the prices of apps vs. the numbers of libraries in the apps. The top/bottom of the box is the first/third quartiles, and the band inside the box is the median. Whiskers represent the lowest/highest datum within 1.5 IQR of the first/third quartile where IQR is the difference between the first and third quartiles. Outliers are represented with plus symbols.

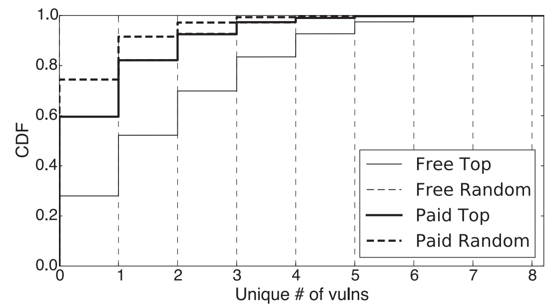

Fig. 7. Distributions of the number of vulnerabilities per each app. Note that the lines for the Free random and Paid top overlap.

two interesting observations. First, the higher the price of an app, the more libraries the app uses. Although not conclusive, we construe that, because expensive apps tend to provide more functionality than less expensive apps, they tend to use more libraries. Second, top apps have more libraries than randomly sampled apps. Our interpretation of this finding is the same as above, i.e., top apps provide more functionality than others.

B. Analysis of vulnerable apps/libraries

Here, we first present the statistics for apps that contain the summarized vulnerabilities. We then examine the libraries with vulnerabilities. We also examine how the detected vulnerable libraries changed over a period of six months. Note that an app could have a vulnerability contained in multiple libraries.

1) Vulnerable apps: Figure 7 shows the distributions of the number of vulnerabilities found for each app. While the number is less than that for free, paid apps do contain many vulnerabilities. In fact, for the top paid apps, roughly 20% contained at least three of the vulnerabilities. We also find that top apps contain more vulnerabilities than random apps.

Table V, V_{un} shows the fractions of detected vulnerabilities that reside in unreachable code. Surprisingly, approximately one-half of the vulnerabilities were attributed to unreachable code. By combining the outputs of *Droid-L* and *Droid-V*, we can successfully exclude vulnerabilities originating from

TABLE V. FRACTIONS OF DETECTED VULNERABILITIES IN UNREACHABLE CODE, V_{un}, AND FRACTIONS OF APPS WHOSE VULNERABILITIES ORIGINATED FROM THEIR LIBRARIES OVER ALL THE VULNERABLE APPS, V_{lib}.

	V_{un} (%)	V_{lib} (%)
Free (Top-5k)	49.7	71.2
Free (Rand-10k)	54.7	71.7
Paid (Top-5k)	40.1	45.9
Paid (Rand-10k)	52.3	52.1

TABLE VI. FRACTIONS OF UNREACHABLE CODE IN VULNERABLE LIBRARIES, D_v, AND IN NON-VULNERABLE LIBRARIES, D_n.

	D_v (%)	D_n (%)
Free (Top-5k)	61.1	34.9
Free (Rand-10k)	62.6	27.3
Paid (Top-5k)	71.5	19.5
Paid (Rand-10k)	66.0	24.5

unreachable code. Note that we exclude unreachable code in the following analyses.

2) Vulnerable libraries: Here, we examine how many detected vulnerabilities were attributed to libraries. We also assess the origins of the vulnerable libraries. Table V, V_{lib} shows the fractions of apps whose vulnerabilities originated from their libraries for all vulnerable apps. For free apps, of the apps that contain at least one vulnerability, 71%–72% were vulnerable due to libraries. For paid apps, the fractions were a bit smaller; however, 46%–52% were vulnerable due to libraries. Thus, we conclude that most mobile apps' vulnerabilities originate from libraries.

Table VI shows the breakdown of the fractions of unreachable code in vulnerable and non-vulnerable libraries. The detected vulnerable libraries are more likely to contain unreachable code. This observation suggests that it is crucial that static vulnerability scanners include an unreachable code checking mechanism.

Table VII shows a breakdown of the number of detected vulnerabilities for each category. Here, the numbers indicate the total number of Java classes that contained vulnerabilities in each set of apps. The fractions are the breakdown of the detected libraries. Note that, while this analysis counts the total number of vulnerabilities, the previous analysis shown in Table V, V_{lib} analyzed the fractions of apps with vulnerabilities due to their libraries. Free apps tend to contain more vulnerabilities in their libraries than paid apps. We also note that top apps tend to contain more vulnerabilities than random apps. These results agree with the results for app-level containment of vulnerabilities shown in Table II.

Table VIII shows a breakdown of the detected vulnerabilities. While we see library-driven vulnerabilities spanning many vulnerabilities, they are particularly concentrated for the ID-GLOB, ID-FGMT, CR-KSHC, CR-SSLV, WV-SSLV, and WV-RCEV vulnerabilities. Examples of libraries that caused these

TABLE VII. BREAKDOWN OF DETECTED VULNERABILITIES FOR EACH CATEGORY

	Total # of vulns	fractions (%)			
		Official	Private	Third party	Non libs
Free (Top-5k)	21,730	2.1	2.3	43.6	52.0
Free (Rand-10k)	15,516	1.3	6.4	59.5	32.8
Paid (Top-5k)	12,133	1.3	3.2	16.2	79.3
Paid (Rand-10k)	7,202	1.3	9.8	38.9	50.0

TABLE VIII. BREAKDOWN OF DETECTED VULNERABILITIES. THE NUMBERS X/Y INDICATE THE TOTAL NUMBER OF DETECTED LIBRARIES (X) AND THE FRACTIONS (PERCENTAGES) FOR WHICH THE VULNERABILITIES WERE DUE TO LIBRARIES (Y). BOLD FONTS INDICATE THE VULNERABILITIES THAT HAD A LARGE IMPACT (> 500) AND WERE LARGELY CONTRIBUTED BY LIBRARIES (> 40 %).

Vulnerability	Free Top-5k	Free Rand-10k	Paid Top-5k	Paid Rand-10k
ID-GLOB	2166/31	**1469/46**	5468/3	902/28
ID-STOK	186/10	128/71	71/23	61/57
ID-FGMT	4425/18	**3168/49**	2288/16	1362/31
CR-KSPW	6/33	7/71	4/75	8/12
CR-KSHC	**932/60**	485/78	219/44	124/54
CR-SSLV	**3644/61**	**2733/81**	**1195/59**	**772/75**
CR-CERT	0/0	1/0	0/0	6/0
CR-ECBM	0/0	0/0	6/16	9/55
CR-PKEY	72/0	81/0	217/0	217/0
IC-CPRV	237/0	151/0	164/0	161/0
IC-SRVC	1167/0	413/0	533/0	409/0
IC-DNGR	36/0	13/0	14/0	5/0
IC-EXPT	1/0	1/0	0/0	0/0
IC-DEBG	16/0	136/0	78/0	313/0
WV-SSLV	**1251/60**	**1032/73**	206/47	285/85
WV-RCEV	**7586/71**	**5689/83**	**1516/63**	**2338/78**
WV-FSYS	3/0	6/0	141/39	224/54
WV-DOMS	2/0	3/0	13/7	6/33

vulnerabilities are IronSource (CR-KSHC), Conduit App (ID-FGMT), PayPal (CR-SSLV), Apache Cordova (WV-SSLV), and Inmobi (WV-RCEV).

The top panel of Fig. 8 shows the relationship between the library categories and vulnerabilities. For each vulnerability, we inspected the distribution of categories, i.e., the fractions were normalized in each row. Most vulnerabilities were attributed to third-party libraries. In addition, although the amount was small, there are a few official libraries that contained vulnerabilities. Our manual inspection found that these vulnerabilities were attributed to certain libraries, such as Admob and the Google Mobile Service. Thus, they are classified as "official." We also found that the vulnerabilities were due to the use of older versions of libraries in which the vulnerabilities had not been fixed.

Finally, the bottom panel of Fig. 8 shows the relationship between third-party library sub-categories and vulnerabilities. Among the sub-categories, Development Aid (Dev), Social Network (SNS), Advertisement (Ad), and App building framework (Build) were the main origins of the vulnerabilities. In addition, each sub-category contains intrinsic vulnerability patterns, e.g., while Ad libraries mainly contributed to the ID-GLOB and WV-RCEV, SNS libraries mainly contributed to WV-SSLV and WV-DOMS.

The tendency in the type of vulnerabilities detected clearly varies with the subcategory. This may be because APIs used in a library tend to vary with its sub-category.

3) Price vs. vulnerabilities: Figure 9 shows a correlation between the prices of paid apps and the numbers of total vulnerabilities that originated from libraries. Interestingly, more expensive apps tend to have more vulnerabilities. In addition, top apps tend to have more vulnerabilities than random apps. This finding can be interpreted as follows. As shown in Fig. 6, more expensive/popular apps tend to have more libraries. In addition, as we have shown, the software libraries strongly contributes to the presence of vulnerabilities in an app. Therefore, expensive/popular apps, having more library code, are more likely to have vulnerabilities.

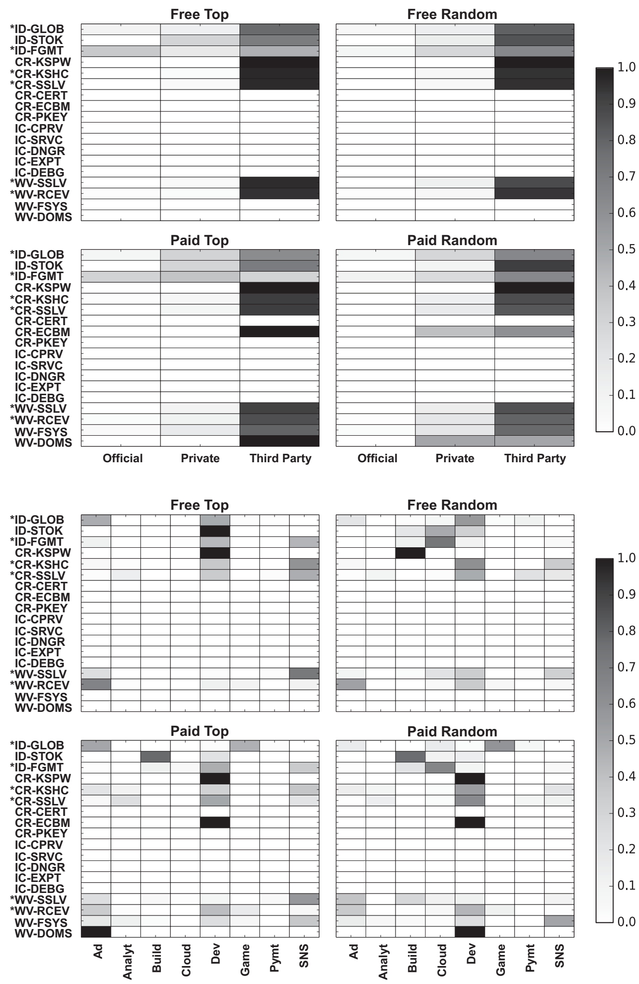

Fig. 8. Relationship between library categories (top) / sub-categories (bottom) and vulnerabilities. Vulnerabilities shown with bold fonts in Table VIII are marked with asterisk.

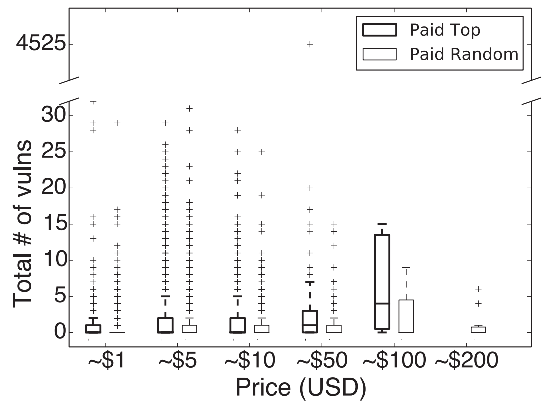

Fig. 9. The prices of apps vs. the number of vulnerabilities associated with the libraries in the apps.

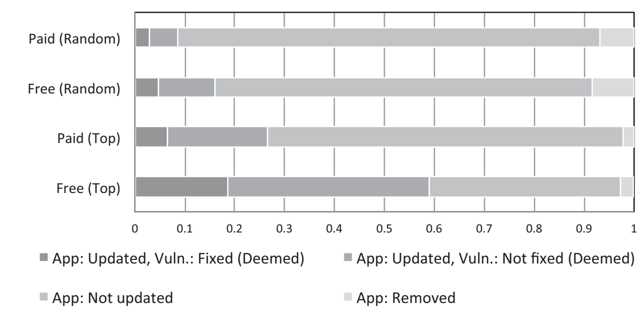

Fig. 10. Statistics of apps over time

The anomaly shown in Fig. 9, i.e., an app in the range of 50 USD, had 4,525 total vulnerabilities. The app was a digital book application. The price of the app was 12 USD. All 4,525 detected vulnerabilities were attributed to a single vulnerability, namely ID-GLOB. Note that these 4,525 vulnerabilities were found in the distinct 4,525 Java classes contained in the app. For each page of the book, the app declares a unique class rather than introducing a single generic class that represents a page. In other words, every time a user turns a page of the book, the app calls a new class. To fix this vulnerability, the developer must modify all 4,525 Java classes. Despite this rather poor code implementation, it is ranked as a top paid app and had been installed more than 10,000 times.

In summary, even if an app is a paid app, it is likely to have vulnerabilities. Somewhat paradoxically, more expensive/popular paid apps tend to have more vulnerabilities. These results indicate that we cannot apply *price-perceived quality heuristics* when we appraise the quality of an app with respect to security.

C. Time-domain analysis

We examined how vulnerabilities in apps are addressed over time. Here, we examine the status of the same apps with vulnerabilities six months after we first acquired them, and we summarize the statistics of the apps (Fig. 10). The percentage of apps removed from the marketplace in that period was less than 9% for each category. The percentages of apps that were updated are as follows: free (top): 59.0%, paid (top): 26.6%, free (random): 16.1%, and paid (random): 8.5%. The update intervals of paid and random apps were longer than that of free and top apps. We randomly acquired over one-half of the *updated apps* in the four categories and confirmed which vulnerabilities were fixed using *Droid-V*. The percentages of apps with fixed vulnerabilities indicate the same update interval tendency, i.e., paid and random apps were more difficult to fix than free and top apps. The percentages of apps whose vulnerabilities were fixed are as follows: free (top): 18.5%, paid (top): 6.4%, free (random):4.7%, and paid (random): 2.8%. Unfortunately, a large proportion of apps were still vulnerable even six months after our initial investigation.

Free apps are updated in a short period due to their monetization model, i.e., updating an ad library to optimize advertising effectiveness. Therefore, vulnerabilities in libraries are fixed when apps are updated. Ruiz et al. indicated that ad libraries are frequently updated by advertising companies, and such updates force developers to update their apps [29]. In contrast to the above *freemium* monetization model, *premium* monetization of paid apps results in less frequent updates. In addition, we assume that the effort spent on product development for random apps is less than that of top apps, and this results in infrequent updates for random apps.

The top three fixed vulnerabilities are CR-KSHC, IDSTOK, and WV-SSLV, and there is little difference between free and paid apps. The first two arise from the problem of hard-coded secret keys/tokens. WV-SSLV arises from problems with SSL validation. The reasons why these vulnerabilities are more likely fixed are as follows. First, CR-KSHC and ID-STOK are fairly easy to discover. Second, since all these vulnerabilities pose a high risk to the integrity of server-side services, developers have motivation to fix them.

D. Key findings and suggestions

Here, we summarize key findings derived from our extensive analyses.

- Roughly 70% of free apps and roughly 50% of paid apps with vulnerabilities were vulnerable due to libraries.
- Among the three library categories, third-party libraries were the main source of vulnerabilities.
- While most vulnerable libraries originated from third-party libraries, a few official libraries were also detected as vulnerable due to the use of old versions.
- Paid apps can contain vulnerabilities, and more expensive/popular paid apps tend to have more vulnerabilities.
- Paid apps tend to have not been updated for longer periods than the free apps; thus, vulnerable libraries in paid apps have not been updated for longer periods than the free apps.
- Approximately one-half of the detected vulnerabilities were attributed to unreachable code. We demonstrated that Droid-L can successfully exclude such cases from analysis.

These key findings enable us to derive clues to remediate vulnerabilities in mobile app. We make the following suggestions to the stakeholders of mobile app distribution ecosystems.

- **Mobile app developers**: App developers could apply vulnerability assessment before release to at least eliminate easily-detectable vulnerabilities. After the release of apps, they could also check the updates of libraries they use. As we discuss in short, building a systematic update checking mechanism will be useful.
- **Mobile OS developers**: Infrequent updates generally lead to vulnerabilities. For instance, some paid apps adopt the ”sell-once-and-that’s-it” model. For such apps, it may not be reasonable to expect developers to carry out vulnerability assessment of their products. If a mobile OS provides a mechanism, such as a shared library that makes it easy to update an app’s module, this could address the vulnerabilities caused by outdated software.
- **Mobile app market operators**: Mobile app market operators should inspect all active apps using systems like *Droid-L* and *Droid-V*. In addition, they should provide vulnerability notification mechanisms that inform app developers of the sources of detected vulnerabilities. Using systems like *Droid-L* and *Droid-V*, a mobile app market operator can inform users of the potential risks of an app.
- **Mobile app library providers**: By linking *Droid-L* and *Droid-V* outputs, a list of libraries that contain vulnerabilities are generated. The results would be useful for library providers to quickly know about the vulnerabilities and fix them.
- **Vulnerability test developers**: As reported, roughly one-half of vulnerabilities detected by existing vulnerability check tools reside in unreachable code. The developers of such tools could implement a reachability checker to address this issue.

VII. Discussion

A. Limitation of Static Analysis

Droid-L and *Droid-V* employ static analysis to perform a large-scale study. Clearly, static analysis may not be able to track dynamically assigned program code. Poeplau et al. [28] reported that malicious apps using dynamic code loading techniques can evade detection using offline vetting processes. Dynamic code loading is also an obstacle to reachability check and vulnerability assessment for external code for non-malicious apps. Employing dynamic analysis could be a promising solution to this problem. However, dynamic analysis has several technical challenges, i.e., scalability, code coverage, and generating a test scenario for UI navigation [26]. We intend to address these challenges in future work. Another limitation is apps with *native code*. While our analysis focuses on Java-written components, some Android apps contain native code components written in C/C++. Afonso et al. mentioned that “*Malicious apps can use native code to hide malicious actions*” and surveyed how actual Android apps use native code [6]. However, their work was not a vulnerability survey; thus, investigating vulnerabilities in native code remains a challenge.

B. Ethics

Acquisition of paid apps: All paid apps used for our analyses originated from the official marketplace, i.e., Google Play. We acquired all apps from the official marketplace according to the legitimate payment procedure. This means that we used our owned Google accounts to collect and purchase apps one by one without violating the Acceptable Use Policy.

No additional harm: We conducted our app analysis in a test environment without Internet accessibility. Therefore, there was no damage to the actual apps, devices, and services.

Responsible disclosure: After finding new vulnerabilities in apps and libraries, we followed the principle of responsible disclosure and are now in the process of reporting them to CSIRTs and app/library developers.

VIII. Related Work

A. Library analysis

Libraries play a vital role in improving the efficiency of development and monetization. As of 2012, 95% of popular free Android apps contained at least one ad library [20]. Unfortunately, several studies have revealed the risk of an ad library harvesting privacy-sensitive data without sufficient explanation to users [32], [20]. Chen et al. addressed the problem of a *potentially harmful library (PhaLib)*, which is potentially harmful code implemented as a library, and their developed tool for finding specific code over different mobile platforms discovered 117 Android PhaLibs and 46 iOS libraries [11]. To estimate the risk of information leakage, Demetriou et al. developed a tool to discover apps that expose a targeted user's privacy data to an integrated ad library [12].

Although many studies of software libraries aimed to discover malicious code, the motivation of our work is discovering vulnerabilities in libraries. To the best of our knowledge, our library analysis is the first work to classify libraries into three intrinsic categories, i.e., official, private, and third-party. This *fine-grained* library analysis helps app/library developers clarify the boundaries of responsibility for countering vulnerabilities and appropriate triage countermeasures. Backes et al. developed a library detection method called LibScout [9]. LibScout is resilient against common code obfuscations and capable of pinpointing exact library versions. We can also use these techniques as a complementary to the outputs of *Droid-L*.

B. Vulnerability analysis

There have been numerous studies related to vulnerability detection. Based on studies that consider vulnerabilities, we classify such vulnerabilities into four categories, i.e., *information disclosure*, *SSL/TLS and cryptography*, *inter-component communication*, and *WebView*.

First, apps should be able to carefully process sensitive information, such as credentials; otherwise, there is a risk of information disclosure when broadcasting, logging, and setting improper file permissions. Viennot et al. conducted a survey on secret tokens for authentication embedded in app code [33]. Second, misuse of SSL/TLS and immature implementation of original cryptography can cause serious risks due to insecure communication. Fahl et al. developed Mallodroid to find apps that misuse SSL/TLS APIs, which can result in man-in-the-middle attacks [15]. In addition, weak keys can potentially be cracked to obtain a private key, which enables the forging of a signature on a modified APK [10]. Third, inter-component communication allows individual app to communicate between app components. Felt et al. addressed the *permission re-delegation* problem, which occurs when an app with permissions performs a privileged task for an app without permissions [17]. Finally, WebView is an Android class that provides the functionalities of a custom WebKit browser to render web pages. Jin et al. revealed a new form of code injection attack using `addJavascriptInterface` [22]. Mutchler et al. analyzed a large number of mobile web apps embedded with WebView in terms of unsafe and leaky use of browser functionality. They found that 28% of the apps contained at least one security vulnerability [27]. Our investigation of vulnerabilities (Section IV) for leveraging both original tools and free tools broadly covered the above four categories.

C. Paid app survey at market scale

Although the scale of the analyzed data dramatically increases year-by-year with the exponential growth of marketplaces, the analysis of mobile apps was primarily performed in existing market-scale studies, except for paid apps. The total number of apps available on Google Play was approximately 2 million, and approximately 10% of these apps were paid apps as of February 2016 [8]. Although the current market share of paid apps should be considerable and paid apps serve an important role in monetization in marketplaces, in most studies conducted at the market scale, only free apps were examined.

TABLE IX. SUMMARY OF WORKS ON PAID APP ANALYSIS

Ref. / Year	# of apps	Object	Analytical purpose
[16] / 2011	100	Code	To detect overprivilege
[21] / 2012	2	Code	To detect pirated apps
[18] / 2013	171,493	Metadata	To understand preferences
[19] / 2013	1,223	Metadata	To infer rank-demand relationships
[14] / 2014	486	Metadata	To analyze review trends
[30] / 2015	234	Code	To analyze location privacy

Thus, the insights obtained from such studies were implicitly confined to free apps. Therefore, the actual security aspects of paid apps have not been considered adequately.

We investigated prior studies focusing on paid apps in terms of the number of paid apps, analyzed object, and analytical purpose (Table IX). While most studies of paid apps covered a broad range of security topics, the analyzed properties were only extracted from market-level metadata, e.g., reviews, ratings, and the number of installs. This means that such studies did not require the actual code of the apps. There have been conventional studies that analyze the code of paid apps; however, only several hundreds of paid apps at most were analyzed. Our work achieves a double-digit increase in dataset size compared to such studies. In addition, our work was accomplished using both the code information and market information. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to successfully bridge the software analysis of paid apps and market analysis at a large scale and successfully make the security of paid apps understandable at a high level.

IX. SUMMARY

To establish the assessment and remediation of mobile app vulnerabilities, understanding their origins is an imperative approach. This study has focused on mobile app libraries, which constitute most of the code in mobile apps. We have attempted to understand the provenance of mobile app libraries that cause vulnerabilities. By linking the outputs of *Droid-L* and *Droid-V*, we accurately specify the vulnerable libraries.

A unique and noteworthy approach of this study is that we used both *free and paid* apps for our analysis. Since paid apps have different software development/maintenance methods, compared to free apps, they exhibit a different use of libraries or software update frequencies, and these differences affect the characteristics of vulnerabilities in the apps. We found that even top paid apps do have vulnerabilities in their libraries, and many have not been updated. It was somewhat surprising that more expensive/popular paid apps tend to have more vulnerabilities. Based on the findings derived through our extensive analysis, we have proposed guidelines for stakeholders of mobile app distribution ecosystems.

While this work addressed the fundamental research question: "*how are the vulnerabilities of mobile apps associated with libraries?*", we can further generalize it to: "*where do the vulnerabilities of mobile apps come from?*". There are many research aspects that could address this question; e.g., the app development environments, the economic models of mobile app ecosystems, the sources of information for coding, and the reuse of code. An in-depth study of such research aspects is left for future work.

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