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**Application of machine learning to  
threat classification from  
cybersecurity records**

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*Umjesto ove stranice umetnite izvornik Vašeg rada.*  
*Kako biste uklonili ovu stranicu, obrišite naredbu \izvornik.*



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# 1. Introduction

Every entity that is dependent on a computer system, from corporations to individuals, could be a subject to cyberattacks. In 2020, it is approximated that cybercrime costed the global economy almost USD 1 trillion (Cremer, 2022).

As technology evolves, more various threats to its security emerge. Tracking, describing, and evaluating these threats is of use when developing defense systems and making business decisions.

A **vulnerability** is a weakness in a computer system, that an attacker can exploit to execute malicious commands, access data in an unauthorized way, or perform other types of cyber attacks (Humayun et al., 2020).

A **threat** is any circumstance or event which has the potential to compromise system security (Derek, 2021).

In order to tackle the cybersecurity problems in a more organized manner, a system of *Common Vulnerability and Exposure* (CVE) has been developed. The MITRE Corporation maintains a public database of an increasing number of CVE records. A CVE record includes an ID, a brief description of the vulnerability, and references. In order to manipulate and prioritize vulnerabilities in a system, the metric of the *Common Vulnerability Scoring System* (CVSS) score is used. This metric estimates how "dangerous" exploitation of a vulnerability is. CVSS is an emerging standard of vulnerability comparison (Khazaei et al., 2015).

The CVSS score is computed using submetrics with discrete values that are assigned by experts. The weight of each submetric is hard-coded into a formula (Bozorgi et al., 2010). Khazaei et al. show an important concern in their work: the CVSS calculation **can be subjective** (Khazaei et al., 2015). Moreover, the annotation requires experts and time, which is prolonging the process and is costly. Sometimes, all of the information needed to compute CVSS scores may not be available. Many vulnerabilities aren't assigned the score at all. (Janamian, 2021).

The main subject of this research is predicting the CVSS score by analyzing the description of the vulnerability, taken from CVE records.

This would be a more objective approach, and the process of obtaining the score would be

cheaper and faster.

BERT classification model has proven to be 90-95 % accurate in predicting the submetrics using the description of the vulnerability.

BERT is computationally expensive, and sometimes it is advised to try simpler models first, because they might work just as well. That is why Support Vector Regression and similar models were used to predict the score directly from the description.

In the second chapter, the studies with similar concerns are mentioned. The details about the dataset used are explained in the third chapter. The simplified theory behind the models used is shown in the fourth chapter. The following are the explanations of the experiments, together with the results and their comparisons.

## 2. Related work

Inspiration to do this research has been given by the study of Janamian et al., 2021, who have developed an application that takes any vulnerability description and gives its CVSS score. They used BERT classification to predict the Base score submetrics. The CVSS score was then calculated using the hard-coded CVSS formula and the predicted submetrics results. They have achieved accuracy in the 0.90 range.

Another study developing an objective method of CVSS score calculation, written by Khazaei et al. in 2015, used Support Vector Machine, Random-Forest, and fuzzy system. Their model's accuracy was around 0.86.

This problem was approached in detail by Bozorgi et al., 2010. Instead of predicting the CVSS score itself, they have developed a new classification system, using various features of the vulnerability.



## 3. Data

### 3.1. Data acquisition

Dataset used has been acquired and prepared by Janamian et al., when used in their work *Using NLP to Predict the Severity of Cybersecurity Vulnerabilities, 2021*. (Janamian, 2021). Most of the data is publicly available and maintained by the MITRE organization and the National Institute of Standards of Technology.

From the cited research, we find out that at the beginning of 2021, only 50 % of CVE records had a CVSS score assigned.

The datasets were created by human experts and therefore didn't require much preparation or preprocessing.

### 3.2. Dataset structure

The entire dataset counts 77,020 entries. It is split into training set (80%) and test set (20%).

	Column Title	Values
1	attack_vector	physical; adj_network; local; network
2	attack_complexity	high; low
3	privileges_required	high; low; none
4	user_interaction	none; required
5	scope	unchanged; changed
6	confidentiality	high; low; none
7	integrity	high; low; none
8	availability	high; low; none
9	description	natural language description
10	base_score	float from 0 - 10

**Table 3.1:** Columns and their values used in experiments

The first eight entries of Table 3.1. correspond to eight submetrics of CVSS base score. The description is used as input in all performed experiments. The base\_score is a subgroup of CVSS score, which is most widely used when describing the severity of the vulnerability.

### 3.3. Dataset analysis

According to CVSS v3.0 Ratings the severity is classified in the following ranges.<sup>1</sup>

Severity	Base score range	No. of examples
None	0.0	0
Low	0.1-3.9	1115
Medium	4.0-6.9	24232
High	7.0-8.9	26793
Critical	9.0-10.0	9476

**Table 3.2:** CVSS range classification and number of examples in each class (from the training set)

From Table 3.2. we can clearly see that the medium to high scores prevail.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.nist.gov/>

## 4. Models

### 4.1. Support Vector Regression

#### 4.1.1. Support Vector Machines

The Support Vector algorithm was developed in its present form at AT&T Bell Laboratories by Vapnik with colleagues. [11,12]

The Support Vector Machines are supervised learning models, that can be applied to classification, regression, and outliers detection problems. [13]

In classification problems, the output is a discrete variable, and in regression it is continuous. The SV algorithm needs to find a function in  $n$ -dimensional space which fits the data. Support Vectors are the data points around this function. A flexible tube is formed symmetrically around the function so that the absolute values of errors less than a certain threshold are ignored both above and below the estimate. This way, the data points outside of the tube are penalized, and those on the inside are not. [14]

The SVR tries to find the narrowest tube centered around the function while minimizing the prediction error. [15]

The advantage of SVR is that its complexity does not depend on the dimension of the input space. [14]

Depending on the choice of kernel, data is mapped into different dimensional spaces. Kernel functions can be linear, rbf, polynomial, and sigmoid.

The free parameters of the model are  $C$  and  $\epsilon$ .

The model is defined by its hyperparameters. They control the way the model fits the data. Their fine-tuning was performed using Bayesian optimization, which is based on the Bayesian theorem. More commonly used Grid Search tries out all given combinations of parameters. Bayes Search, as opposed to Grid Search, memorizes the result of the previous combination and uses it to choose the next combination, so that it comes to the optimum

more quickly. [16]

The SVR, as well as other Support Vector models that will be mentioned, are implemented using scikit learn library. Implementation details are described in Chapter 5. Experiments and Results.

### 4.1.2. word2vec

Word2vec is a way to represent natural language as vectors. It was developed by Mikolov et al. in 2013. [17]

It consists of two learning models: Continuous Bag of Words (CBOW) and Skip-gram. CBOW predicts the word given its context, and Skip-gram predicts the context given a word. [18]

Knowing the distances between vectors, it is possible to group similar words. This algorithm is used to convert the text input into vectors, after which they can be used in Support Vector Regression tasks.

### 4.1.3. LinearSVR and SGDRegressor

LinearSVR is similar to a Support Vector Regression model with a linear kernel. The difference is that LinearSVR is implemented as a liblinear model, and SVR as libsvm. [scikit learn]

SGD stands for Stochastic Gradient Descent. This is an iterative method of finding a function optimum. The gradient of the loss is estimated each sample at a time and the model is updated along the way with a decreasing learning rate. [scikit learn]

It is advised to use LinearSVR or SGDRegressor over SVR for large datasets. [scikit learn]

## 4.2. BERT

### 4.2.1. BERT architecture

**Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers** is a fairly new and revolutionary language representation model, developed by Google (Devlin et al. 2018) [20].

BERT is fundamentally a transformer language model. Developed by Vaswani et al., 2017, the **Transformer** is a network architecture based on attention mechanisms. Until the invention of transformers, more complicated models such as recurrent and convolutional neural networks with an encoder and a decoder were used to solve translation tasks. The new model improved translation, sequence modeling, and other similar tasks. [21]

The transformer architecture is based on an encoder that maps an input to a continuous representation, and a decoder that produces the output using the encoded representation, one element at a time. At every step, the model takes into account the previously encoded symbols by including them in the input. This way, the model considers the context. [21]

By definition, an attention function is mapping vectors as a weighted sum to an output, where the vectors correspond to a query, keys, and values.

The novelty in the BERT model is the bidirectional encoder, that is, the incorporation of context from both directions. This matters significantly in token-level tasks, such as question answering, token classification, etc. In order to perform bidirectional pre-training, BERT uses masked language models. [20]

A great advantage of BERT over other language models is that the model has been already pre-trained on large text corpora. This model can then be fine-tuned with only one more output layer, and this model can be applied to a variety of tasks. [20] This framework is called transfer learning.

When implementing BERT to a specific task, we can use an already pre-trained model. Our task is then to fine-tune it. Fine-tuning is in fact putting data through a transformer self-attention mechanism.

#### **4.2.2. Data preparation for BERT**

The dataset has to be split into train, development, and test set.

Attributes that are necessary to fine-tune BERT are the following:

- input ids - list of tokens, smallest units of text that make sense,
- input mask - implies that all sequences that are longer than a specified length of a sequence will be truncated to that specified length, and those that are shorter will be padded with additional tokens,
- label id - id of the label for a sequence.

#### **4.2.3. BERT classification**

As previously mentioned, in order to fine-tune BERT for a specific task, an additional task-related output layer is added to an already pre-trained model.

In this research, the `bert-base-uncased` was used as the pre-trained model.

Some common tasks are implemented in the transformers library as the top layer. One of those is `BertForSequenceClassification`, which was used in this research to predict the eight submetrics of the Base score.

#### **4.2.4. BERT for regression**

Similarly to the classification task, on top of 12 transformers lies a BertRegressor layer that gives the output for a regression task. The Bert Regressor was used to predict the base score directly from the description.

BERT Regressor is widely used in machine translation evaluation tasks. [22]

## 5. Experiments and results

### 5.1. Base score prediction from vulnerability description

The goal of this experiment was to find out if it is possible to accurately obtain the CVSS score by direct analysis of the vulnerability description.

#### 5.1.1. Support Vector Regression + word2vec

The dataset of over 61k entries is too large for the Support Vector Regression model implemented as `libsvm`, because the fit complexity is more than quadratic with the number of samples.

That is why SVR used approximately half of the training data, 30k samples, and 6k test samples. 10k samples were used to fine-tune the hyperparameters.

All samples taken from the initial dataset were stratified with regard to the Base score, that is, the data was chosen in such a way, that the Base score values follow a uniform distribution. Vulnerability description tokens are transformed into vectors and then summarized in order to map one vector to one description. These vectors are then scaled using the Standard-Scaler's function `.fit_transform(X,y)`, which first fits the input data to the output feature, and then scales it.

Parameter fine-tuning is then performed by `BayesSearchCV`, the function from `skopt` library. The kernel was set to `rbf`, because the SVR linear kernel is too slow for large datasets. Bayes Search optimized the following hyperparameters:

Parameter	Value
C	31.6668
epsilon	0.732095
tol	0.003125

**Table 5.1:** Hyperparameters for SVR

Metric	Value
Mean Squared Error	1.711
Explained Variance Score	0.504
Maximum Residual Error	6.186
Mean Absolute Percentage Error	0.167
Coefficient of Determination ( <b>R2 Score</b> )	<b>0.503</b>

**Table 5.2:** SVR results

### 5.1.2. Linear Support Vector Regression

Linear SVR used the entire dataset.

Again, the BayesSearchCV was used to optimize the hyperparameters.

Because the number of samples was greater than the number of features, the loss function had to be set as 'squared\_epsilon\_insensitive'.

Parameter	Value
C	0.065189
epsilon	2.1582e-06
tol	0.00015387

**Table 5.3:** Hyperparameteres for LinearSVR

Metric	Value
Mean Squared Error	1.888
Explained Variance Score	0.302
Maximum Residual Error	9.786
Mean Absolute Percentage Error	0.169
Coefficient of Determination ( <b>R2 Score</b> )	<b>0.302</b>

**Table 5.4:** LinearSVR results

### 5.1.3. Stochastic Gradient Descent Regressor

SGDRegressor used the entire dataset as well.

Bayes Search optimized the hyperparameteres:

Parameter	Value
alpha	5.1431e-05
epsilon	0.37136
loss	"huber"
tol	1.5939e-07

**Table 5.5:** Hyperparameteres for SG-  
DRegressor

Metric	Value
Mean Squared Error	1.952
Explained Variance Score	0.279
Maximum Residual Error	9.786
Mean Absolute Percentage Error	0.169
Coefficient of Determination ( <b>R2 Score</b> )	<b>0.278</b>

**Table 5.6:** SGDRegressor results

### 5.1.4. BERT Regressor

The BERT fine-tuning was done with PyTorch.

The library `transformers` is used to import the tokenizer and BertModel in order to create a class BertRegressor. Firstly, the descriptions are tokenized using BertTokenizer. Then, the longest description is found. Using the method `tokenizer.encode_plus()`, `input_ids` and `attention_masks` lists are created. Those lists, as well as the labels list, are converted into tensors.



The training dataset is split into 80-20 train-validation sets.

The optimizer used is AdamW with default parameters, and the scheduler is obtained with the function `get_linear_schedule_with_warmup`. The loss function is `MSELoss`.

The model was trained for three epochs.

Metric	Value
Mean Squared Error	1.186
Explained Variance Score	0.563
Maximum Residual Error	6.953
Mean Absolute Percentage Error	0.116
Coefficient of Determination ( <b>R2 Score</b> )	<b>0.561</b>

**Table 5.7:** BERT regressor results

### 5.1.5. Results comparison

Model	R2 score
SVR	0.503
LinearSVR	0.302
SGDRegressor	0.278
<b>BERT Regressor</b>	<b>0.561</b>

**Table 5.8:** Models comparison

## 5.2. Base score submetrics classification

The goal of this experiment was to discover at what level of accuracy can we predict the submetrics of the Base score, having the vulnerability description as the input.

### 5.2.1. Baseline

The Support Vector Classifier with default parameters was used as a baseline model for this prediction.

The description tokens were converted into vectors, and the vectors were summarized just like in SVR.

### 5.2.2. BERT Classification

The fine-tuning was performed with PyTorch. Firstly, the dataset was divided into a test set (20%) and the rest set, which was divided into a training set (80%) and a development set. From the `transformers` library, `BertForSequenceClassification` made up the top layer of the BERT model.

In the function `convert_examples_to_inputs(X, y, label2idx, max_seq_len, tokenizer)`, a list of token ids, segment ids, and input mask lists were created. Longer descriptions than `max_seq_len` were truncated, while the shorter ones were padded.

Usually, batch size is 16 or 32, in this model the value of batch size is 16. The AdamW optimizer with a base learning rate of  $5e-5$  is used. The `WarmupLinearScheduler` linearly increases the learning rate during the warmup stage. During the training, the learning rate slowly decreases again.

The model was trained for three epochs. At each epoch, the model is trained on the training set and evaluated on the development set.

To perform the final evaluation, the model is given test data that has never been seen before, and it predicts the submetric values.

### 5.2.3. Results comparison

Model	R2 score
SVR	0.503
LinearSVR	0.302
SGDRegressor	0.278
<b>BERT Regressor</b>	<b>0.561</b>

**Table 5.9:** Models comparison

## 6. Conclusion

No system is without an error. As long as there is a flaw in the system, there exists a threat. The number of various flaws and threats continues to grow. This problem was systematically approached by MITRE and NIST, which maintain the database of Common Vulnerability and Exposure (CVE) records. Only a part of the records have been assigned their severity ranking, Common Vulnerability Scoring System (CVSS) score. This score helps in the risk assessment of the vulnerability. The CVSS base score is a result of eight submetrics, the values of which are assigned by human experts. Computing a CVSS score is a long and costly process, and it can be subjective.

In this research, more objective ways to get the CVSS score have been examined. Natural language processing methods were used to predict the CVSS base score directly from the vulnerability description.

Support Vector Regression and Bert Regressor have achieved the best results in this experiment, having the coefficients of determination  $R^2(\text{SVR}) = 0.503$  and  $R^2(\text{Bert}) = 0.561$ . This implies that even the best models were not very accurate, and modifications ought to be done. Due to computational complexity, the training of both models lasted for a long time.

If the direct prediction does not work accurately, it is possible to predict the base score submetrics. Depending on the values of the submetrics the base score is calculated. The Support Vector Classifier was used as a baseline model. We can see the accuracy of 85-90 %. BERT Sequence Classifier proved to be 90-95 % accurate in these predictions. The conclusion is that we can use even less computationally expensive models, such as SVC, to achieve a high degree of accuracy in this task.

Compared to Vulnwatch results...

Different models approach text tokens differently, so it is not clear in which way the text should be preprocessed. In order to achieve better models, the descriptions should be preprocessed in many different ways, and results should be compared. An increase in the number of epochs in the BERT Regressor could make the result more accurate.

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# LIST OF FIGURES

## **Application of machine learning to threat classification from cybersecurity records**

### **Abstract**

Abstract.

**Keywords:** Keywords.

## **Primjena strojnog učenja za klasifikaciju prijetnji iz zapisa o kibernetičkoj sigurnosti**

### **Sažetak**

Sažetak na hrvatskom jeziku.

**Ključne riječi:** Ključne riječi, odvojene zarezima.