# DETECTION EFFICIENCY OF STATIC ANALYZERS AGAINST OBFUSCATED ANDROID MALWARE

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# Detection Efficiency of Static Analyzers against Obfuscated Android Malware

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Abstract—Mobile antivirus technologies incorporate static analysis which involves the analysis of programs without its execution. This technique relies on pattern matching against a signature repository to identify malware, which can be easily tricked by transformation techniques such as obfuscation. Obfuscation renders character strings disguised and incomprehensive to prevent tampering and reengineering. This paper attempts to study the detection efficiency of static analyzers against obfuscated Android malware. This study is the first step in a larger project attempting to improve the efficiency of malware detectors.

#### Keywords—obfuscated malware, static analyzer, Android, malware detection efficiency, mobile antivirus, signature repository

#### I. INTRODUCTION

Malwares are being produced at an unprecedented scale with hundreds of new entities targeting users across all of technology, as malware developers explore new ways or exploit old ones to evade detection and defeat analysis [1]. The process of obfuscation is originally used to protect benign applications from code alterations, manipulations and reverse engineering, but this mechanic is also a tool malware developers could manipulate to mask the malicious applications they create. In fact, obfuscation has become one of the "popular" techniques used by malware developers. The technique employs processes that make malware code difficult to understand, as the code is being altered in a number of ways with the attempt to make the code look different from the original script while still producing the same malicious actions. Its purpose is to defeat detection by concealing its payload [2]. Obfuscation bypasses static code analyzers to avoid code study as character strings are concealed and made incomprehensive via algorithms that decode the code at execution [3].

In this paper, a publicly available Android malware dataset was subjected to three popular obfuscation techniques [4] [5]. ten random Android malware families were selected from this dataset, with each comprising of five variant samples. The samples were individually subjected to three obfuscation techniques control flow, renaming and string encryption and a final process of combining these individual techniques on the same application. A widespread analysis of these obfuscated and non-obfuscated samples was further carried out against available mobile anti-malware engines provided by virus total platform. The research summary is described below:

- Obtained and subjected Android malware samples to available obfuscation techniques from [4] [5].
- Subjected these samples to a number of mobile analyzers to assess the detection efficiency of these platforms against obfuscated and non-obfuscated Android malware

This paper reports results of the study of detection efficiency of anti-malware engines against obfuscated Android application malware samples.

#### II. RELATED WORK

The nature of mobile anti-malware engines being reliant on signature repositories to flag applications as malicious gives room to malicious applications evading detection by the application of evasive techniques such as obfuscation.

Pomilia Matteo investigated and implemented a framework to subject applications to obfuscation techniques to avoid detection and tested the samples against nine popular antimalware tools at the time of research: Avast, AVG, F-secure, Kaspersky, McAfee, Microsoft, Sophos, Symantec and TrendMicro [6]. The malwares included samples preceding the year 2013 from the Drebin and Contagio malware datasets. Results obtained showed obfuscation techniques applied to malware preceding 2013 had averagely a detection rate above 55% opposed to obfuscated malwares of samples succeeding 2012 from the Andrototal and Contagio datasets which reported a detection drop rate below 55%. Furthermore, techniques to reverse engineer obfuscated applications for manual analysis was discussed by the author.

Rastogi et al. proved that the top ten anti-malware products at the time the research was conducted were all vulnerable to common obfuscation techniques [7]. These malware samples were subjected to ten transformation techniques in which most applications were only subjected to not more than two combinations of transformation techniques. Reports from the study showed 43% of signatures identification used by static detection engines were not based on code level objects, stating that simply changing component names in the *AndroidManifest* was more than appropriate to defeat detection. The paper further states that 90% of signatures did not require static analysis of bytecode because most of the information used for analysis were found in the *class.dex* file of the application which contained the code executed by the Android runtime.

[8] Performed a wide-ranging experimental analysis to estimate the efficacy of top anti-malware products against various obfuscation tools by using twenty nine (29) obfuscation techniques from seven (7) obfuscation tools against 3000 benign and malicious applications, coming to the conclusion that obfuscation impacts Android anti-malware products and the detection of these applications by Android anti-malware products depends on the obfuscation technique adopted and tool used.

#### III. EXPERIMENT

The Android malware dataset samples needed for the research was obtained from Argus Lab [4]. Subsequently a random selection of ten Android malware families was made, with five variants under each family. The list of selected families comprised of AndroRat, Cova, DroidKungfu, FakeAngry, FakeInst, Finspy, Golddream, Koler, Lootoor, SMSZombie. In total fifty Android malware samples were tested before and after obfuscation. These "original" / un-obfuscated malware samples were passed through the virus total online platform to scan samples through a number of static anti-malware engines. This step created a baseline of pre-obfuscation detection rate. The obtained malware samples are then passed through the DashO obfuscator [5], transforming these samples via three obfuscation techniques : control flow , renaming and string encryption and then a final transformation is carried out using a combination of all three techniques. Figure 1 shows the logical flow of our experimentation on the Android malware samples and the obfuscation process.



Fig 1. Obfuscation transformation process

The experimental testbed was set with some variations for parameters for conducting the obfuscation process. Parameters for the control flow obfuscation which changes the execution sequence of instructions found in methods to render the flow of control difficult to understand and trace the instructions included the following settings:

(i) Block jumbling - this process randomly organizes how the code blocks are represented.

(ii) Dalvik compatibility - this allows the support of the Dalvik virtual machine to emulate Android platform

(iii) Try/Catch- this process adds try/catch handlers to code which confuses decompilers.

(iv) Block splitting- this process splits blocks into smaller blocks and adds switch-based control flow

(v) Target block size- This process indicates the minimum number of bytecode instructions to remain in each block.

Parameters for the renaming obfuscation which changes the class names, methods, fields and packages to render bytecode compact included

i) Overload induction- which comprises of processes to induce maximum reuse of methods.

Parameters for string encryption obfuscation which is a technique that replaces strings with encrypted values decrypted at execution included

(i) String encryption level - this process controls the strength and performance of the encryption process.

(ii) Decrypter- this parameter controls the decryptor methods that will be created and added to each output.

#### IV. EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

During experimentations with obfuscated Android malware samples it was observed that a number of anti-malware engines did not show so much resilience in detecting obfuscated samples as opposed to detecting samples prior to obfuscation. Table I shows a sample section of the detection results of a family variant of Android malware prior and subjected to obfuscation transformations against the virus total platform which houses a number of anti-malware engines, rendering updated insights on the state-of-the-art detection of obfuscated malware in the first quarter of 2020.

Variant 1	Number of engines	Samples Detected	Samples Undetected	Detection Ratio %
Without Obfuscation	60	29	31	48.33%
Control flow obfuscation	61	21	40	34.42%
Renaming obfuscation	60	19	41	31.66%
String encryption obfuscation	61	17	44	27.86%
Combination	59	9	50	15.25%

TABLE I. DETECTION RATE OF A SAMPLE OBFUSCATED ANDROID MALWARE

Results obtained from the total experimentation done showed that detection efficiency of anti-malware engines reduces drastically when malicious software are subjected to obfuscation. It is also clear that a software subjected to a combination of obfuscation techniques reduces the likelihood of detection as seen in Table I.

Detailed results of detection for each variation with various obfuscation techniques can be found on the following website: https://sites.google.com/view/malware-analysisspreedsheet/home

Table II shows the average detection rating of each 5 samples under individual malware families. This is achieved by taking the detection ratio values of each five variants of a family and deriving the average of those five results. From Table II it can be observed that there's a significant drop in detection rate between the obfuscated and non-obfuscated malware samples, as seen from the results the average rating is slightly dropping with each technique integrated and even lower when a combination of techniques is applied, proving that obfuscation if done properly as an evasion technique is a significant threat to the detection efficiency of static analyzers. The final values are an average of all 10 family derived values.

 
 TABLE II.
 AVERAGE DETECTION RATING OF EACH OBFUSCATED FIVE MALWARE SAMPLES OF EACH FAMILY

Family *	Without obfuscation	Control flow	Renaming	String encryption	Combination
1	52.13 %	34.54 %	27.06 %	33.78 %	16.59 %
2	50.32 %	18.55 %	14.05 %	11.51 %	12.09 %
3	63.06 %	53.62 %	52.93 %	48.06 %	46.08 %
4	48.04 %	23.44 %	28.84 %	6.65 %	7.03 %
5	54.08 %	37.49 %	27.03 %	15.22 %	9.96 %
6	57.18 %	28.42 %	27.89 %	21.41 %	20.23 %
7	59.66 %	47.34 %	46.03 %	22.68 %	23.52 %
8	45.92 %	17.05 %	11.21 %	10.19 %	5.94 %
9	63.79 %	51.14 %	50.35 %	47.84 %	46.89 %
10	51.69 %	41.45 %	42.48 %	40.26 %	43.6 %
AVG	54.58 %	35.30 %	32.78 %	25.76 %	23.19 %

\* Families- (1) AndroRat (2) Cova (3) DroidKungfu (4) FakeAngry (5) FakeInst (6) Finspy (7) Golddream (8) Koler (9) Lootoor (10) SMSZombie

Table III shows some anti-malware tools ranked by levels of performance in showing resilience against the obfuscated Android malware samples used during experimentation. This ranking was based on the number of detected obfuscated samples across all obfuscation methods applied. The optimality of the anti-malware engines provided by the Virus Total platform is unknown, therefore the results obtained are subject to change and does in no way discredit the antimalware engines listed. In total the consideration was 200 obfuscated samples excluding 50 unobfuscated samples. The table below shows a ranking based on percentages obtained from the total number of detected obfuscated instances of a sample variant by each analyzer. An example would be the Dr web anti malware engine which detected 196 obfuscated instances of all variants out of the 200 obfuscated samples.

TABLE III. DETECTION RATING OF ANTI MALWARE ENGINES BASED ON DETECTED OBFUSCATED APPLICATIONS

SN	Anti-malware	SN	Anti-malware			
1.	Dr web c. 98%	32.	Fireeye 16%			
2.	ESET-NOD32 86.5%	32.	Antiy avl 16%			
3.	K7GW 82.5%	33.	Sangfor Engine Zero			
			11.5%			

-			
4.	Zone Alarm 75.5 %	34.	Max-secure 10%
5.	Sophos-AV 74.5 %	35.	eScan 10%
6.	Kaspersky 74%	36.	Symantec 8.5%
7.	Ikarus 66%	37.	Yandex 6%
8.	Qihoo 65.5%	38.	Zoner 6%
9.	F-secure 65%	39.	Alibaba 4%
9.	Ahnlab-v3 65%	40.	Aegislab 0.5%
10.	AVG 64.5%	40.	Tencent Habo 0.5%
11.	Avast 64%	41.	Alyac 0%
11.	Avast mobile 64%	42.	Vipre 0%
12.	CAT Quickheal 63%	43	TotalDefense 0%
13.	Symantec mobile insight 56.5%	44.	SuperAntispyware 0%
14.	Fortinet 54.5%	45.	Panda 0%
15.	Tencent 44.5%	46.	Kingsoft 0%
16.	Nano-Antivirus 43.5%	47.	CMC 0%
17.	Avira <b>39%</b>	48.	BitDefenderTheta 0%
18.	Cyren 36%	49.	Baidu 0%
19.	Microsoft 35.5 %	50	Ad aware 0%
20.	Trustlook 34.5%	51.	Virobot 0%
21.	McAfee 34 %	52.	VBA32 0%
22.	Clam AV 32 %	53.	Tachyon 0%
23.	McAfee-GW-Edition 30%	54.	Malwarebytes 0%
24.	Jiangmin 26%	55.	K7antivirus 0%
25.	Comodo 25.5%	56.	BKAV 0%
26.	Rising 21.5%	57.	Acronis 0%
27.	Gdata 20.5%	58.	Crowdstrike falcon 0%
28.	F-prot 19%	59.	Cylance 0%
29.	Zilya 17%	60.	Endgame 0%
30.	Max 16.5%	61.	Sentinel one 0%
31.	Trendmicro housecall 16.5%	62.	Cyber reason 0%
31.	Emsisoft 16.5%	63.	eGambit 0%
32.	Trendmicro 16%	64.	Palo Alto Network 0%
32.	Arcabit 16%	65.	Sophos ML 0%
32.	Bitdefender 16%	66.	Webroot 0%

#### V. CONCLUSION

This study is a step in the development of improved malware tools. It shows that obfuscation has a serious impact to the detection efficiency of existing anti-malware analyzers. Some obfuscation techniques show strong detection resilience, but a mixture of obfuscation techniques show even stronger detection resilience. Publicly available dataset was examined and utilized for this study, while being subjected to obfuscation techniques offered by the PreEmptive DashO obfuscator. The results obtained shows there needs to be an improvement in mobile security as access to these obfuscation mechanics are available to the public. There is also a large existence of Anti-malware engines in mobile stores that do not perform any form of analysis, these engines claim to do some form of checks but in reality do next to nothing as they are developed by individuals for monetary purposes and offer no protection which begs to question which mobile anti malware software actually offers a satisfactory amount of protection and is resilient to masqueraded malware. Anti-malware static analysis engines should be trained with obfuscated samples so signatures and prints these techniques leave behind should serve to aid blacklisting of similar applications that portray these same behaviors. Additional research may be required for tools that look at system calls for detection purpose.

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#### APPENDIX

#### Detection rating of all samples under each Android malware family

	Engines	Samples	Samples	Detection Ratio	Engines	Samples	Samples	Detection Ratio
		Detected	Undetected	%		Detected	Undetected	%
			Andr	oRat			COV	A
Without Obfuscation	60	29	31	48.33 %	62	32	30	51.61 %
Control flow obfuscation	61	21	40	34.42 %	62	13	49	20.96 %
Renaming obfuscation	60	19	41	31.66 %	63	10	53	15.87 %
String Encryption	61	17	44	27.86 %	59	5	54	8.47 %
<b>Combined Obfuscation Techniques</b>	59	9	50	15.25 %	61	9	52	14.75 %
Without Obfuscation	62	31	31	50 %	62	31	31	50 %
Control flow obfuscation	61	21	40	34.42 %	62	12	50	19.35 %
Renaming obfuscation	62	19	43	30.64 %	63	9	54	14.28 %
String Encryption	59	23	36	38.98 %	64	17	47	26.56 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	62	10	52	16.12 %	60	7	53	11.66 %
Without Obfuscation	61	33	28	54.09 %	61	31	30	50.81 %
Control flow obfuscation	59	20	39	33.89 %	61	10	51	16.39 %
Renaming obfuscation	60	15	45	25 %	61	8	53	13.11 %
String Encryption	61	18	43	29.5 %	61	4	57	6.55 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	63	11	52	17.46 %	61	7	54	11.47 %
Without Obfuscation	58	31	27	53.44 %	60	30	30	50 %
Control flow obfuscation	60	21	39	35 %	60	11	49	18.33 %
Renaming obfuscation	59	15	44	25.42 %	61	9	52	14.75 %
String Encryption	62	19	43	30.64 %	62	5	57	8.06 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	61	10	51	16.39 %	62	7	55	11.29 %
Without Obfuscation	62	34	28	54.83 %	61	30	31	49.18 %
Control flow obfuscation	60	21	39	35 %	62	11	51	17.74 %
Renaming obfuscation	59	15	44	25.42 %	62	9	53	14.51 %
String Encryption	62	26	36	41.93 %	63	5	58	7.93 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	62	11	51	17.74 %	62	7	55	11.29 %
			DROIDKU	UNGFU			FAKEAN	GRY
Without Obfuscation	62	37	25	59.67 %	62	31	31	50 %
Control flow obfuscation	62	25	37	40.32 %	60	13	47	21.66 %
Renaming obfuscation	60	25	35	41.66 %	60	15	45	25 %
String Encryption	62	18	44	29.03 %	60	7	53	11.66 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	62	16	46	25.8 %	60	5	55	8.33 %
								10.0.0/
Without Obfuscation	61	33	28	54.09 %	63	31	32	49.2 %
Control flow obfuscation	62	23	39	37.09 %	58	17	41	29.31 %
Renaming obfuscation	61	22	39	36.06 %	60	18	42	30 %
String Encryption	60	17	43	28.33 %	61	2	59	3.27 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	62	16	46	25.8 %	59	4	55	6.77 %
Without Obfuscation	62	41	21	66.12 %	60	27	33	45 %
Control flow obfuscation	63	41	22	65.07 %	61	6	55	9.83 %
Renaming obfuscation	60	39	21	65 %	60	20	40	33.33 %

String Encryption	60	37	23	61.66 %	60	5	55	8.33 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	60	39	21	65 %	61	4	57	6.55 %
•								
Without Obfuscation	62	44	18	70.96 %	63	29	34	46 %
Control flow obfuscation	60	38	22	63.33 %	60	17	43	28.33 %
Renaming obfuscation	61	37	24	60.65 %	60	17	43	28.33 %
String Encryption	61	37	24	60.65 %	60	3	57	5 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	61	35	26	57.37 %	59	4	55	6.77 %
Without Obfuscation	64	43	21	67.18 %	62	31	31	50 %
Control flow obfuscation	61	38	23	62.29 %	57	16	41	28.07 %
Renaming obfuscation	62	38	24	61.29 %	58	16	42	27.58 %
String Encryption	61	37	24	60.65 %	60	3	57	5 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	62	35	27	56.45 %	59	4	55	6.77 %
			FAKEI	NST			FINS	PY
Without Obfuscation	63	34	29	53.96 %	61	35	26	57.37 %
Control flow obfuscation	58	22	36	37.93 %	59	16	43	27.11 %
Renaming obfuscation	58	18	40	31.03 %	59	16	43	27.11 %
String Encryption	60	11	49	18.33 %	60	11	49	18.33 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	61	11	50	18.03 %	60	9	51	15 %
Without Obfuscation	60	29	31	48.33 %	61	36	25	59.01 %
Control flow obfuscation	59	23	36	38.98 %	60	14	46	23.33 %
Renaming obfuscation	60	16	44	26.66 %	60	15	45	25 %
String Encryption	61	10	51	16.39 %	59	9	50	15.25 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	59	5	53	8.47 %	60	9	51	15 %
						20	21	10.10.0/
Without Obfuscation	60	34	26	56.66 %	61	30	31	49.18 %
Control flow obfuscation	59	21	38	35.59 %	59	20	39	33.89 %
Renaming objuscation	61	15	46	24.59 %	58	18	40	31.03 %
String Encryption	60	6	54		60	19	41	31.00 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	60	4	56	000 %	61	18	43	29.5 %
Without Obfusestion	50	20	20	50.84.9/	61	29	22	62 20 9/
Control flow obfuscation	59 60	20	29	36.66 %	58	20	23	34 48 %
Ponaming obfuscation	58	16	42	27 58 %	50	10	40	37 7 %
String Energyption	61	10	51	16 30 %	60	1)	40	31.66 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	60	5	55	8 33 %	60	17	41	28 33 %
Combined Obluscation Techniques	00	5	55	0.33 /0	00	17	43	20.33 70
Without Obfuscation	61	37	24	60 65 %	62	36	26	58.06 %
Control flow obfuscation	60	23	37	38 33 %	60	14	16	23 33 %
Bonoming obfuscation	60	16	44	26 66 %	58	14	40	23.33 70
String Enoruntion	60	0	51	20.00 /0	50	6	52	10 16 %
Combined Obfusection Techniques	60	9	55	9 22 0/	59	0	53	10.10 /0
Complied Optuscation Techniques	00	3		0.JJ 70 EAM	00	0		13.33 70
Without Obfusestion	60	25	25	EAWI 59 22 0/	62	27	AULEK 24	12 85 0/
	00	22	20	30.33 %0	03	2/	50	42.03 %
Control now objuscation	00	27	22	43 %	60	10	50	10.00 %
Kenaming objuscation	60	21	55	45 %	60	6	54	10 %
String Encryption	61	/	54	11.47 %	60	3	5/	5 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	60	8	52	13.33 %	61	11	50	16.66 %

Without Obfuscation	61	36	25	59.01 %	61	30	31	49.18 %
Control flow obfusion	60	20	21	49 22 0/	62	10	50	10.25.0/
Control now objuscation	60	29	31	40.33 70	60	12	53	19.55 70
String Enormation	50	18	30	30 70	61	16	45	26 22 9/
Combined Obfusection Techniques	59	10	41	30.5 %	61	2	43 50	20.22 %
Combined Obluscation Techniques	00	19	41	51.00 %	01	2	39	5.27 70
Without Obfugaation	61	20	22	62 20 0/	62	20	22	10 20 0/
Control flow obfuscation	60	21	23		50	10	32	40.30 /0
Control now objuscation	60	29	29		59	10	49	10.94 /0
String Enormation	61	20	12	40.00 70	61	1	57	6 55 %
Combined Obfugaction Techniques	60	10	43	29.5 70	61	2	50	0.55 /0
Combined Obluscation Techniques	00	19	41	51.00 70	01	2	39	3.21 /0
Without Obfusestion	62	27	25	50 67 9/	61	20	22	47 54 9/
Control flow obfuscation	60	26	23	39.07 70 43.32.0/	61	29	50	47.54 /0
Control now objuscation	61	20	24	43.33 70	61		54	11.03 /0
String Enormation	61	21	54	44.20 70	60	1	56	6 66 9/
Combined Obfuseation Techniques	61	6	55	11.47 70	61	2	50	0.00 %
Combined Obluscation Techniques	01	U	55	7.03 70	01	2	J7	3.41 70
Without Obfuscation	61	36	25	50 01 %	60	25	35	41 66 %
Control flow obfuscation	62	30	25	18 38 %	61	11	50	16 66 %
Renaming obfuscation	61	27	34	44 26 %	61	7	54	11.00 %
String Encryption	59	18	41	30.5 %	61	4	57	6 55 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	61	10	42	31 14 %	61	2	59	3 27 %
Combined Oblascution Techniques	01	1)	LOOT	OOR	01	2	SMSZON	IBIE
Without Obfuscation	61	42	19	68.85 %	62	32	30	51.61 %
Control flow obfuscation	61	36	25	59.01 %	62	27	35	43.54 %
Renaming obfuscation	61	36	25	59.01 %	61	26	35	42.62 %
String Encryption	62	36	26	58.06 %	60	25	35	41.66 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	61	35	26	57.37 %	61	24	37	39.34 %
	01		20	0.10.70	01			0,10,1,0
Without Obfuscation	61	41	20	67.21 %	64	35	29	54.68 %
Control flow obfuscation	61	36	25	59.01 %	59	26	33	44.06 %
Renaming obfuscation	59	33	26	55.93 %	60	26	34	43.33 %
String Encryption	60	34	26	56.66 %	61	25	36	40.98 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	61	35	26	57 37 %	61	25	36	40.98 %
Combined Oblascution Techniques	01	55	20	01.01 /0	01	23	50	10120 70
Without Obfuscation	61	40	21	65.57 %	63	34	29	53.96 %
Control flow obfuscation	62	29	33	46.77 %	61	25	36	40.98 %
Renaming obfuscation	61	28	33	45.9 %	60	25	35	41.66 %
String Encryption	61	26	35	42.62 %	60	25	35	41.66 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	61	26	35	42.62.%	61	25	35	42.62 %
Combined Oblaseation Teeninques	01	20		12:02 /0	01	20	55	12:02 /0
Without Obfuscation	61	36	25	59.01 %	59	27	32	45 76 %
Control flow obfuscation	61	27	34	44 26 %	61	27	38	37.7 %
Renaming obfuscation	61	27	34	44.26 %	59	23	37	37 28 %
String Energyption	60	27	37	38 33 %	61	10	42	31 1/ %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	62	23	30	37 00 %	61	17	42	31 14 %
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Without Obfuscation	60	35	25	58 33 %	61	32	20	52 45 %
Control flow obfuscation	00	22	20	30.33 /0	61	32	29	34.43 70
CONTROL HOW ODIUSCATION	6				<b>D</b> 1		· · · · ·	
Denoming obfused tion	60	20	32	40.00 /0	61	23	30	40.90 %

String Encryption	59	24	35	40.67 %	61	28	33	45.9 %
Combined Obfuscation Techniques	60	24	36	40 %	61	39	22	63.93 %

#### **GRAPH SHOWING DETECTION RANKING**

