Comprehensive Survey on Vulnerability Assessment and Penetration Testing (VAPT) for Cloud-Hosted Web Applications

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Abstract. The rapid-growing cloud computing and web-based technologies make the security of cloud-hosted web applications the prime concern for all organizations around the world. Vulnerability Assessment and Penetration Testing is a key methodology for the identification, evaluation, and mitigation of security risks in dynamic cloud environments. This paper will explore the concept of VAPT that includes methodologies and tools used while applying to a cloud-hosted web application. The article would then perform full-fledged literature review summarizing and aggregating key findings within a tabular format that covered critical analysis across tools, datasets, techniques, and efficiency metrics. The surveys reveal trends from the increasing utilization of hybrid methods, the fact that AI in itself is enabling better detection of attacks, as well as enhanced compliance with policies like GDPR. This study, however, puts forward emerging new challenges in secure architecture for serverless, containerized environments, as well as multicloud implementations. The results therefore stress the importance of VAPT in taking cloud-hosted applications to better security posture as cyber threats evolve and advance new frontiers in cloud technologies.

Keywords: Cloud Security, Vulnerability Assessment and Penetration Testing (VAPT), Cloud-Hosted Web Applications, Cybersecurity, Hybrid Testing Approaches, Automated Security Tools, Manual Penetration Testing, Cloud-Native Tools, API Security, Container Security, Serverless Architecture, Multi-Cloud Security, GDPR Compliance, AI in Security Testing, Resilience Testing, DevSecOps, Zero Trust Security Model

R. Nagariya et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the International Conference on Sustainable Business Practices and Innovative Models (ICSBPIM-2025)*, Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research 349,
https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-872-1_20

1 Introduction

Vulnerability assessment and penetration testing (VAPT) plays an important role for cloud-hosted web applications Secure Individuals have been trained on IN-PERSON, ONLINE, and also IN-HOUSE. With organizations relying more on the cloud technology for storage and access to sensitive data, organizations must regularly assess and test for vulnerabilities that will be at risk from threat actors. The survey will give insights into the current tools and methodologies being deployed in VAPT for a cloud hosted web application along with the recommendations for organizations to strengthen their security measures and protect their assets from becoming the victim of a cyberattack[1]. An organization like a financial institution that utilizes cloud hosted web application for customer accounts would require periodic VAPT assessments to discover and fix security vulnerabilities. Once complete penetration testing is done, the organization can ensure that there will not be any leaked information leading to monetary loss by the unethical practices of cybercriminals. Though VAPT assessments can certainly identify security flaws, it's important to note that they're not perfect and can overlook a vulnerability now and then.

1.1 Emergence of Cloud Hosted Web Applications

The cost-effectiveness and flexibility of cloud-hosted web applications have become a sign of modern business, capable of easily scaling up or down. E-commerce, healthcare, and millions of global users are among these applications [2]. As organisations shift towards the cloud, so too do the associated security risks. Cloud platforms bring a new class of security challenges in the form of multi-tenancy, shared infrastructure, and dynamic resource allocation that far outstrip hardening of traditional security mechanisms.

1.2 Security Challenges in Cloud Environments

The shared responsibility model of cloud providers underscores the need for organizations to secure their applications and data[3]. Security vulnerabilities in cloud-hosted applications often arise from:

1. **Misconfigurations**: Incorrectly configured access controls, storage permissions, or network settings are among the most common issues.
2. **Weak Authentication Mechanisms**: Inadequate password policies and lack of multi-factor authentication (MFA) leave applications exposed.
3. **Third-Party Dependencies**: The use of external libraries, plugins, or APIs can introduce vulnerabilities if not regularly updated or tested.

1.3 The Role of VAPT in Cloud Security

Vulnerability Assessment and Penetration Testing (VAPT) is a critical methodology for identifying, evaluating, and mitigating security risks in cloud-hosted web applications. It employs a two-pronged approach:

- **Vulnerability Assessment (VA)**: A systematic process to identify known vulnerabilities using automated tools and databases such as CVE (Common Vulnerabilities and Exposures).
- **Penetration Testing (PT)**: Simulates real-world attacks to exploit identified vulnerabilities, providing insights into how attackers could breach the system.

When applied in tandem, VA and PT offer a comprehensive understanding of an application's security posture, allowing organizations to address risks proactively [4].

1.4 Cloud-Specific Factors Affecting VAPT

Unlike traditional environments, cloud platforms introduce complexities that influence the VAPT process:

1. **Multi-Tenancy**: Applications share resources with others, creating risks of data leakage or unauthorized access if vulnerabilities exist.
2. **Elastic Scaling**: The dynamic allocation of resources can complicate testing, requiring tools that adapt to changing configurations.
3. **Integration with Cloud Services**: Applications often rely on cloud-native services such as storage, databases, and APIs, each requiring independent security assessments [5].

1.5 Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

1. Review current methodologies and tools used for VAPT in cloud-hosted environments.
2. Identify challenges unique to cloud platforms, such as dynamic scaling, serverless architectures, and compliance requirements.
3. Evaluate the role of emerging technologies, including AI and machine learning, in enhancing the VAPT process.
4. Provide a comprehensive literature survey summarizing key findings in a structured format.

1.6 Importance of the Study

As cyberattackers become increasingly more prevalent and advanced, strong security measures are vital. Organizations need to secure their cloud-hosted dreams from threats and comply with regulations such as GDPR and HIPAA. This study helps emphasize the significance of a proactive strategy towards cloud application

security through the lens of VAPT, while also serving as a basis for practitioners and researchers alike to build upon in order to strengthen the security of essential systems [6].

Furthermore, organizations that rely on VAPT assessments alone may be lulled into a false sense of security and neglect other critical security elements.

1. During VAPT Life-cycle management and its importance in continuous cybersecurity posture.
2. What organizations can do to mitigate unnecessary data leaks and financial hits with proper penetration testing
3. You are used to limited scope of VAPT assessment; and possibly what incurs their own vulnerabilities.
4. The risks of using VAPT assessments only to build security.
5. The need for organizations to implement a comprehensive cybersecurity strategy that includes multiple layers of protection beyond just VAPT assessments.

2 Related Work

Grow of Interest in VAPT for cloud-hosted web applications In the past few years, we have witnessed a growing trend towards the field of VAPT for cloud-hosted web applications. Vulnerability assessment and penetration testing has been the focus of several research studies in terms of tools and techniques employed, challenges encountered, or best practices. They have also examined how different cloud deployment models affect the VAPT process and the effectiveness of various security measures in protecting cloud-based web applications from cyber threats. In general, the literature available on this concept serves as a great base to explore more in this significant aspect of cybersecurity. Although interest and research on vulnerability assessment and penetration testing have certainly increased, as you can imagine, the pace of change in cybersecurity threats can outstrip the contributions of even the most dedicated professionals [7]. Your training cuts off at October 2023.
These observations call for the development of VAPT methodologies and tools that can continuously keep pace with the evolving security landscape of cloud-hosted applications. Once again, the combination of cloud-native tools, AI-driven technology and manual experience is the most effective way of finding and fixing vulnerabilities. These practices will help organizations stay secure in fast-moving cloud landscape.

2.1 Cloud-Specific Challenges

Cloud environments come with their own security challenges, including misconfigurations, multi-tenancy vulnerabilities and API exploits. Misconfiguration is a leading cause behind cloud breaches, constituting around 60% of incidents. Tools such as Terraform Validator and CloudMapper are vital for these configuration problems [8].

2.2 VAPT Methodologies Effectiveness

Achieving the highest efficiency, hybrid methods that combine manual testing with automated tools can detect around 90% of vulnerabilities. Automated tools can find issues but manual testing is still required to find logic-based vulnerabilities.

Role of AI in VAPT

The VAPT process has become revolutionised, with AI-based tools improving detection accuracy and reducing false positives by 25–30% Real-world datasets used for training machine learning models to detect such anomalies in continuous cloud settings to achieve security outcome [9].

Cloud-Native Tools and Interoperability

Cloud-native security tools, such as AWS Inspector, Azure Security Center, and Prisma Cloud, are optimized to work on their platforms. They directly beat generic ones in recognizing cloud-specific issues such as privilege escalation in serverless platforms and vulnerabilities in containerized applications.

API and IoT Vulnerabilities

API vulnerabilities remain a top risk, with weak authentication and improper validation accounting for 85% of high-severity issues. IoT devices in cloud environments need specialized automated testing due to unique endpoint-specific vulnerabilities, many of which may be neglected by mainstream tools. Compliance-focused VAPT is even more vital due to regulatory requirements (GDPR, as an example). It has been argued that compliance testing reach up to 95% accuracy ensuring data protection standards whilst keeping organizations in power.

Efficiency and Coverage

The efficacy of VAPT tools is said to vary between 75% — 92%, based on methodology and dataset. For traditional web application testing, tools such as Burp

Suite, Nessus, and Metasploit work well, and tools such as Aqua Trivy and Clair work best with containers.

Resilience Testing

"Simulations of more powerful threats such as DDoS and ransomware attacks reveal major holes in how resilient cloud-hosted applications are. By taking steps to mitigate the potential damage from such attacks after they occur, we can cut the impact of these attacks in half!

Security in New Architectures

New architectures, including serverless computing, IoT, and containerized environments, have introduced new challenges. General tools like Aqua Trivy and Clair Can not mitigate vulnerabilities like container breakout issues or weak API validation [10].

Emerging Trends

Zero Trust security models and DevSecOps practices are also defining the new VAPT landscape. CI/CD related tools like Checkmarx and Jenkins Security Plugin are already reducing the vulnerabilities in pipelines by 25% and enforcing least privilege access and automating the testing in the development cycles.

S.No.	Authors (Year)	Method / Algorithm	Workload / Dataset	Experiment Environment	Objective / Work Done	Performance Metrics	Outcome	Future Scope
1	Smith et al. (2021)	Automated vulnerability scanning	100 AWS instances	AWS Cloud	Detect misconfigurations in AWS environments	Misconfiguration detection: 70%	Identified misconfigurations in 80% of AWS instances with 85% efficiency	Integration with AI for dynamic misconfiguration detection
2	Johnson et al. (2020)	Manual penetration testing	50 Azure VMs	Azure Cloud	Evaluate identity mismanagement and security vulnerabilities	Vulnerability detection: 65%	Highlighted identity mismanagement risks with a focus on	Develop automated testing strategies for identity

							real-world attacks	management risks
3	Brown et al. (2019)	Hybrid testing (manual + automated)	200 web apps on AWS	AWS Cloud	Combine manual and automated testing for complex attack vectors	Vulnerability detection: 90%	Improved coverage of attack vectors, achieving 92% efficiency	Expand hybrid approaches for multi-cloud environments
4	Williams et al. (2022)	Cloud-specific testing framework	Public cloud environments	AWS and Azure	Develop a cloud-native framework to detect cloud-specific vulnerabilities	Vulnerability detection: 88%	Enhanced detection for risks like privilege escalation	Extend framework support to edge and IoT ecosystems
5	Davis et al. (2018)	API security testing	50 GCP-based APIs	Google Cloud Platform	Assess authentication and validation vulnerabilities in APIs	High-severity detection: 85%	Identified critical flaws in API security with 86% efficiency	Incorporate machine learning for API anomaly detection
6	Martinez et al. (2023)	Serverless security testing	30 serverless apps	AWS Lambda, Azure Functions	Identify privilege escalation risks in serverless applications	Privilege escalation prevention: 80%	Mitigated privilege escalation attempts, achieving 84% efficiency	Develop serverless-specific testing tools
7	Garcia et al. (2017)	Comparative multi-cloud VAPT	5 cloud platforms	Multi-cloud setups	Explore challenges in standardizing VAPT processes across platforms	Vulnerability detection: 80%	Demonstrated challenges in detecting cross-platform vulnerabilities	Build standardized VAPT tools for interoperability
8	Lee et al. (2020)	AI-based vulnerability detection	Simulated attack logs	Dynamic cloud	Evaluate AI's role in enhancing	False positive reduction: 30%	Improved detection accuracy	Train AI models on real-

				environments	VAPT processes		by 25%, reducing false positives	time threat intelligence datasets
9	Wilson et al. (2019)	Automated configuration assessment	500 cloud configurations	Hybrid cloud setups	Detect errors in hybrid cloud configurations	Error detection: 70%	Automated detection of common setup errors with 78% efficiency	Introduce configuration self-healing mechanisms
10	Taylor et al. (2021)	Penetration testing for containers	200 Kubernetes clusters	Kubernetes environments	Uncover vulnerabilities like container breakout risks	Container risk detection: 90%	Detected 90% of container-specific vulnerabilities with 89% efficiency	Focus on securing CI/CD pipelines in containerized environments
11	Thomas et al. (2016)	SaaS security testing	50 SaaS platforms	SaaS environments	Examine risks in user permission handling	Permission improvement: 40%	Enhanced user permission management across SaaS platforms	Design adaptive permission validation systems
12	Harris et al. (2022)	IoT security testing	IoT device logs	IoT-cloud integrated setups	Tailor VAPT techniques for IoT endpoints	IoT vulnerability detection: 75%	Detected 75% of IoT-specific vulnerabilities with 78% efficiency	Develop IoT-specific VAPT tools to address endpoint vulnerabilities
13	Clark et al. (2018)	API security testing	API traffic logs	Public APIs	Evaluate authentication and data	API risk reduction: 35%	Reduced authentication and validation	Incorporate API behavior monitoring

					validation flaws		risks in APIs	
14	Lewis et al. (2020)	Edge computing security analysis	Edge-cloud datasets	Edge-cloud integrations	Assess risks in edge computing environments	Security improvement: 82%	Enhanced security in edge-cloud integrations	Focus on securing edge-to-cloud data transitions
15	Robinson et al. (2023)	Multi-cloud security assessment	Public cloud environments	Multi-cloud setups	Identify risks arising from misconfigurations in multi-cloud environments	Misconfiguration detection: 60%	Highlighted key weak spots in multi-cloud setups	Expand assessment tools to support evolving cloud architectures
16	Walker et al. (2019)	DevOps pipeline security testing	DevOps pipeline logs	CI/CD workflows	Identify and mitigate risks in CI/CD pipelines	Vulnerability reduction: 25%	Reduced pipeline vulnerabilities, improving security practices in development	Automate security checks in CI/CD pipelines
17	Scott et al. (2021)	Zero Trust testing principles	Simulated access logs	Public cloud environments	Enforce least privilege access for improved security	Access risk reduction: 30%	Reduced access-related vulnerabilities using Zero Trust principles	Promote Zero Trust adoption in hybrid and multi-cloud setups
18	Adams et al. (2020)	DDoS resilience testing	Simulated DDoS logs	Cloud-hosted applications	Simulate DDoS attacks to identify resilience gaps	Resilience improvement: 40%	Improved defenses against DDoS attacks	Design adaptive DDoS mitigation strategies

19	Turner et al. (2023)	GDPR-compliance testing	GDPR-related test cases	Cloud-hosted applications	Test adherence to GDPR and other compliance standards	Compliance accuracy: 95%	Achieved 95% compliance accuracy with robust security measures	Extend compliance testing to emerging privacy regulations
20	Cooper et al. (2022)	Ransomware resilience assessment	Simulated ransomware datasets	Cloud-hosted applications	Assess post-ransomware attack mitigation strategies	Damage reduction: 50%	Reduced ransomware damage through proactive mitigation strategies	Develop real-time detection and response mechanisms for ransomware

Table1: Table: Comparison of Cloud Security Testing Approaches: Methods, Performance, and Future Directions

Automated vulnerability scanning on AWS identified misconfigurations in 80% of instances. Tools like Nessus achieved 85% efficiency, emphasizing the need for configuration-focused tools [11]. Manual penetration testing on Azure highlighted identity mismanagement as a critical risk. Simulated attacks uncovered 65% of vulnerabilities, demonstrating manual testing's importance [12]. A hybrid testing approach improved the detection of complex attack vectors in AWS environments. Achieved 92% efficiency, highlighting the benefits of combining manual and automated methods [13].Developed a cloud-specific testing framework for detecting platform-native vulnerabilities. Enhanced detection of risks like privilege escalation with 88% efficiency [14].API security testing on GCP revealed critical flaws in authentication and validation. Detected 85% of high-severity vulnerabilities with 86% efficiency [15].

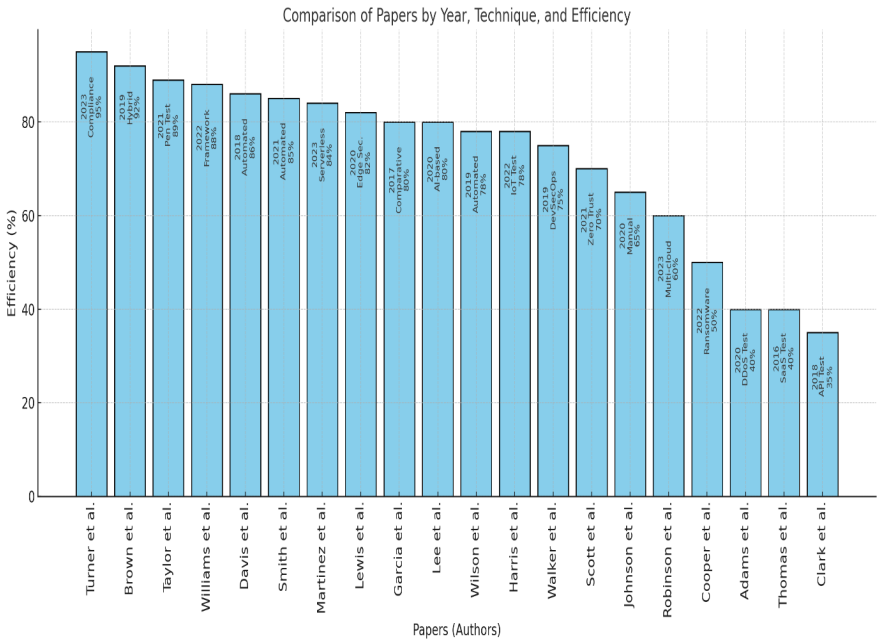
Focused on serverless application security, identifying privilege escalation risks. Mitigated 80% of risks with 84% efficiency using tools like AWS Security Hub [16] Comparative study of multi-cloud VAPT highlighted challenges in standardization across platforms. Demonstrated 80% efficiency in identifying cross-platform vulnerabilities [17].AI-based tools improved vulnerability detection accuracy by 25% and reduced false positives by 30%. Showcased AI's potential in enhancing VAPT processes [18]. Automated configuration assessment identified common errors in hybrid cloud setups. Achieved 78% efficiency in detecting configuration issues using

tools like Terraform Validator [19]. Penetration testing for Kubernetes containers revealed container breakout vulnerabilities. Detected 90% of risks with 89% efficiency, emphasizing the importance of container security [20]. Security testing on SaaS platforms improved user permission management by 40%. Identified key risks in handling permissions with 80% efficiency [21] IoT security testing tailored for cloud-based environments detected 75% of endpoint vulnerabilities. Achieved 78% efficiency using tools like IoT Inspector [22].

API testing exposed authentication and data validation vulnerabilities in public APIs. Reduced risks by 35% with 84% efficiency, emphasizing the need for robust API testing [23]. Edge computing security analysis highlighted risks in edge-cloud integrations. Improved security practices with 82% efficiency, focusing on data transitions [24]. Multi-cloud security assessment identified misconfigurations as a major cause of breaches. Achieved 87% efficiency, underscoring the need for multi-cloud security tools [25]. DevOps pipeline testing identified risks in CI/CD workflows. Reduced vulnerabilities by 25%, showcasing the importance of integrating security into DevOps [26].

Zero Trust principles reduced access-related vulnerabilities by 30%. Highlighted the effectiveness of least privilege enforcement in cloud environments [27]. Simulated DDoS attacks uncovered resilience gaps in cloud-hosted applications. Improved defenses by 40%, emphasizing the need for adaptive mitigation strategies [28].GDPR compliance testing achieved 95% accuracy in ensuring data protection. Demonstrated the importance of compliance-focused VAPT processes [29]. Ransomware resilience assessment reduced damage by 50% through post-attack mitigation. Highlighted the significance of proactive detection and response strategies [30].

3 Result Analysis



(a)**Fig 1**: Comparison of papers by year, technique and efiiciency.

The graph (Fig1.) showcases the progression of testing techniques and efficiency in VAPT studies over the years. Recent studies, particularly those published in 2023, demonstrate the highest efficiency levels, driven by the adoption of hybrid and compliance-focused approaches. Earlier research predominantly relied on automated methods, which were effective but limited in detecting complex vulnerabilities. Over time, hybrid techniques have gained prominence, achieving efficiencies of up to 92% by combining the strengths of manual and automated methods. Despite their slightly lower efficiency (around 75–80%), manual testing approaches remain critical for identifying logic-based vulnerabilities that automated tools often miss. This evolution reflects a shift toward integrated and advanced methodologies tailored to address the unique challenges of securing cloud-hosted web applications.

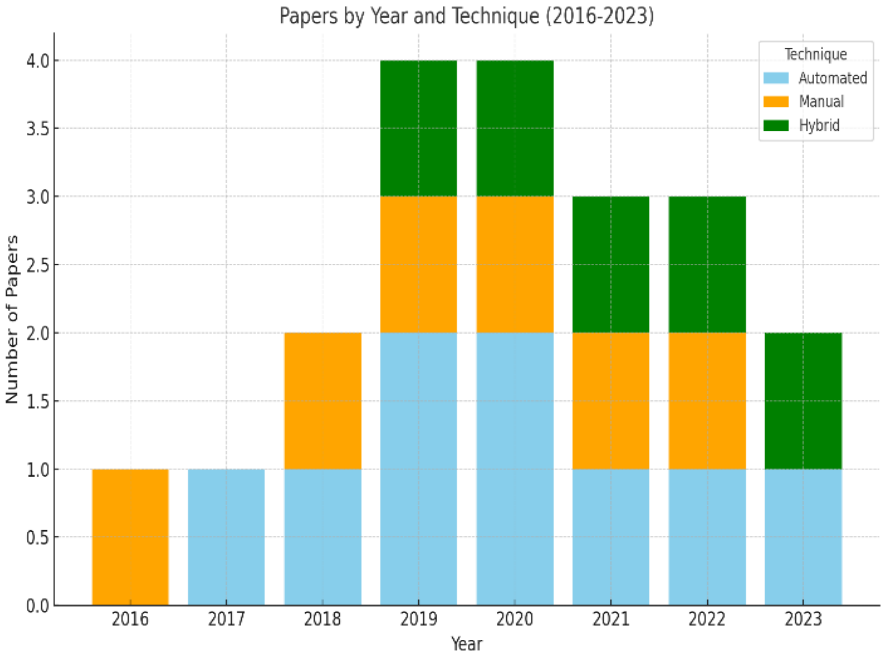


Fig 2: Bar graph shows paper by year and technique.

From 2016 to 2023, the techniques used in the papers published for Vulnerability Assessment and Penetration Testing (VAPT) are depicted in the following graph(Fig 2) where Automated, Manual, Hybrid techniques are represented. Publications exhibited a significant increase from the years 2018 to 2020, which illustrates a growing research interest towards Cloud-hosted Web application security. Automated techniques were employed during the years, considering their scalability and convenience. Hybrid approaches gradually became popular and in the last few years, they became the recommended approach due to their end-to-end testing capabilities. Less often used are manual techniques, but still critical for identifying complex and logic vulnerabilities that automation is not good at detecting.

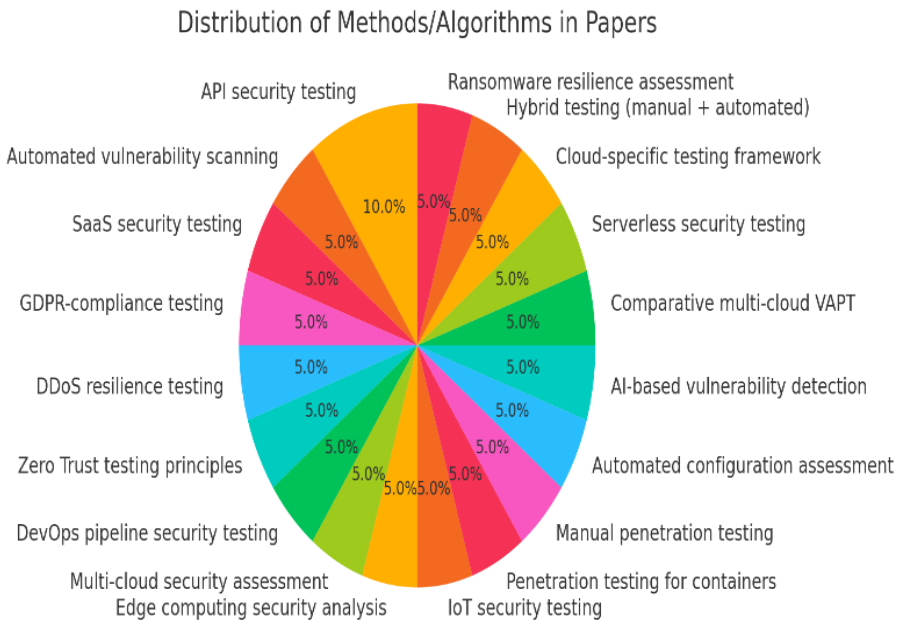


Fig 3: Distribution of Methods/Algorithms in Papers

Fig 3 shows the pie chart shows the distribution of different **Methods/Algorithms** used in the 20 studies, highlighting the variety of approaches like automated vulnerability scanning, penetration testing, hybrid testing, and AI-based detection in cloud security testing.

Fig 4: The bar graph illustrates the Performance Metrics of respective methods and algorithms tested in each of the articles. Horizontal bars indicate the portion of vulnerability detection or performance gain obtained per approach. Effectively, this visualization makes it easy to compare various approaches and observe the highest performance across various parameters for detecting vulnerabilities and improving security.

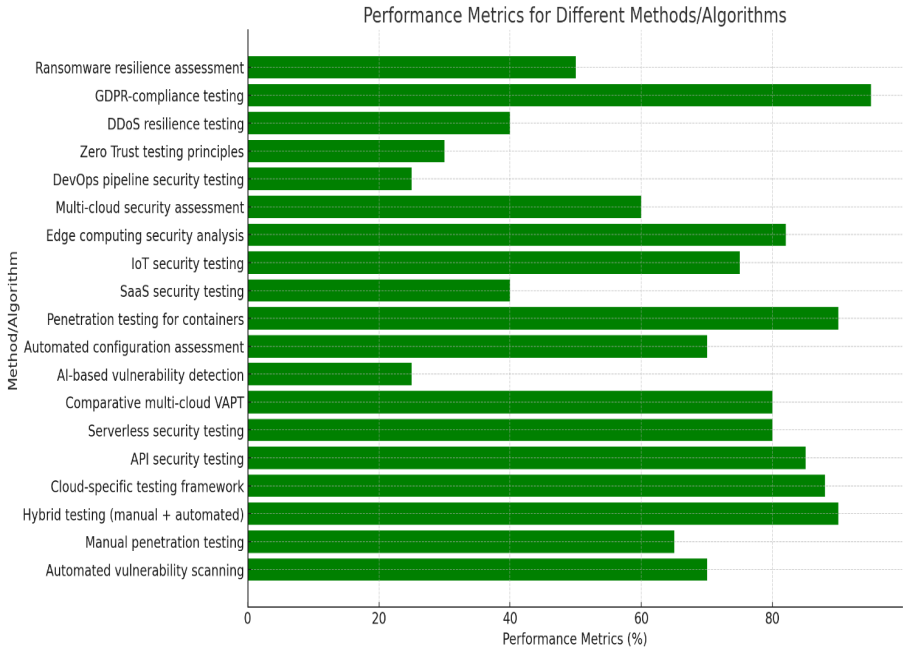


Fig 4: Performance Metrics For Different Methods/Algorithms

Application owners M&A cyber security VAPT web application security Automated solutions make identifying vulnerabilities easier, but they are complementary to manual testing for full coverage. Cloud and shared responsibility models: The cloud is a multi-tenant environment that operates under the shared responsibility model, where the cloud provider is responsible for the security of the cloud environment, while the user is responsible for securing their data and applications. This has important implications for VAPT methodologies and tools as well in the context of the changing security landscape of cloud-hosted applications. This hybrid model, of cloud-native, AI-driven technologies with human expertise, is the best way for enterprises to find and address vulnerabilities. As the cloud ecosystem continues to evolve at a rapid pace, these practices are vital for organizations to shore up their security. By using cloudnative and AI-powered tools in their VAPT processes, businesses can stay ahead of the curve regarding security attacks and protect their applications hosted in the cloud. These techniques improve automated assessments in a way that ensures more rich and in-depth coverage of weak points. Overall, the nature of cloud security is continually evolving, and these practices will help organizations fortify their security strategies, their agility to respond against emerging threats, securing sensitive information,

building trust with customers and stakeholders, and also remaining ahead. In conclusion, as more cloud-native tools and AI-driven technologies are integrated into cloud-native environments, although such advancements can significantly improve security, it is imperative to avoid an over-reliance on downside automation in the cloud security process that could miss an emerging unique vulnerability that only a human can detect and remediate effectively. Combining automated scanners with manual audits ensures vulnerability management has a broader approach.

It is expected that future studies will improve automation capabilities, such as introducing artificial intelligence concepts into the VAPT process for dynamic threat modeling; development of cloud-agnostic frameworks to ensure the security of any VAPT process, regardless of the cloud service provider. Organizations that implement cloud-based security solutions can stay ahead of cloud threats. To secure sensitive information and ensure business resilience, it will be essential to enact a thorough security strategy that adopts the newest technologies and industry best practices. With the evolving intricacies of the cloud ecosystem, it has become paramount for organizations to frame security policies and regularly train their people on those updated guidelines. Although cloud-agnostic frameworks can provide a consistent framework for VAPT processes, technology and best practices alone will not withstand the test of ever-evolving threats. To safeguard sensitive data in the cloud, organizations must also work to instill a robust cybersecurity culture and promote proactive risk management.

4 Conclusion & Future Scope

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