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Network Security Visualization: Techniques, Challenges and Future Discussions

Ms. Usha Dhankar[1], Ms. Srishty Goswami[2], Himanshu Sharma[3], Nikhil Tiwari[4],Vansh Gupta[5] 1,2
Assistant Professor, 3,4,5 Student CSE Department
HMR Institute of Technology and Management, GSSIPU, Delhi 110036

Abstract - As networks become more complex and expansive, traditional security monitoring methods often fall short in detecting and responding to fast-evolving threats. This is where visualization steps in—turning overwhelming amounts of raw data into clear, intuitive visuals that help security teams spot anomalies, recognize attack patterns, and make faster, more informed decisions. In this paper, we explore how visualization techniques are revolutionizing network security, from analysing traffic and detecting intrusions to correlating security events. We also address real-world challenges, such as information overload, false alarms, and the difficulties of integrating these tools into large-scale systems. Looking ahead, we examine the future of security visualization—AI-driven insights, immersive environments like VR, and dynamic dashboards that make threat detection more interactive. By shedding light on these advancements, we highlight how visualization isn't just a helpful tool but a critical component of modern, proactive cybersecurity.

Keywords - Network Security, Security Information and Event Management (SIEM), Threat Detection, Anomaly Detection, Network Monitoring

I. INTRODUCTION

In an era defined by digital connectivity, modern networks have evolved from isolated systems into sprawling, dynamic ecosystems composed of billions of interconnected devices, services, and users. These infrastructures span cloud platforms, IoT environments, remote access endpoints, and hybrid enterprise networks—each introducing new vulnerabilities and complexities. As these networks grow, so too does the cyber threat landscape. Threat actors are no longer confined to simple brute-force or phishing attempts; they now employ sophisticated techniques such as Advanced Persistent Threats (APTs), polymorphic malware, ransomware-as-a-service, and insider sabotage. Many of these attacks operate stealthily, embedding themselves within legitimate traffic or exploiting blind spots in segmented architectures. Compounding the challenge is the explosion of data. Security teams are inundated with massive volumes of logs, real-time traffic, telemetry from endpoints, and alerts from disparate detection systems. Traditional monitoring tools, originally built for simpler infrastructures, struggle under this weight, often delivering unfiltered raw data rather than meaningful intelligence. Analysts face a critical bottleneck—having to sift through oceans of noise to identify subtle, high-impact threats within tight timeframes. This scenario demands a shift in how security data is perceived and processed. Network security visualization emerges as a powerful enabler, transforming abstract data into tangible visual representations such as node-link diagrams, time-series heatmaps, interactive dashboards, and geospatial traffic overlays. These tools provide immediate clarity, allowing defenders to observe evolving threats, correlate dispersed anomalies, and act before an intrusion escalates.

This paper investigates the transformative role of visualization as both a cognitive enhancer and an operational necessity in the evolving domain of cybersecurity. Visualization does not replace the human analyst—it empowers them. While automated detection tools offer speed and scalability, they often miss the nuances that human intuition can catch. Visual analytics bridge this gap by turning data into an interactive narrative, highlighting anomalies, drawing connections between events, and enabling exploratory threat hunting. Consider the impact of transforming an unstructured log file into a dynamic map where threats light up in context— patterns become visible, time-lapse flows reveal attack chains, and heatmaps flag hotspots of suspicious activity. These interfaces not only help analysts connect the dots but also mitigate fatigue by reducing the mental load of abstract analysis. This paper is structured into three key components to comprehensively explore this paradigm. First, we examine the practical visualization techniques and tools that are enhancing real-world cybersecurity operations—from topology-based intrusion mapping to behavioral clustering. Second, we address the challenges involved in adopting these systems, such as data overload, integration complexities, the risk of misleading visualizations, and the fine balance between granularity and

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usability. Finally, we explore the frontier of innovation: AI-driven visual analytics, immersive VR-based SOCs (Security Operations Centers), and the evolution of training programs that build visually fluent analysts. As threats continue to evolve rapidly and unpredictably, visualization becomes not just a support function, but a core strategy in enabling faster, more informed, and more intuitive responses to cyber incidents.

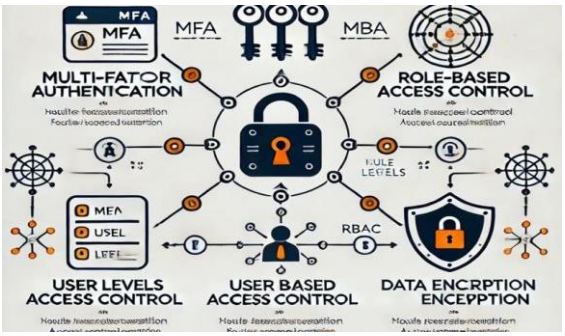

Figure 1 Visualizing network security: transforming complex data into clear, actionable insights.

Literature Survey

Over the past decade, cybersecurity experts and researchers have increasingly adopted visualization as a powerful tool to combat digital threats. Visualization helps cut through the noise of massive security alerts and reveals hidden attack patterns that traditional text-based systems often overlook. When analysts can observe network activity visually—through interactive graphs, color-coded threat maps, or animated traffic flows—they are able to detect anomalies more quickly and make better-informed decisions. [5,10]

The academic community has responded with diverse and innovative solutions. Researchers have proposed real-time visual analytics systems to identify anomalous behaviour in live traffic[6]. Others have built intuitive dashboards that help security teams correlate distributed indicators of compromise across various layers of organizational infrastructure [11]. Several visualization platforms are now tailored to specific challenges such as advanced persistent threats (APTs), data exfiltration, and lateral movement, showing their effectiveness in uncovering complex, multi-stage cyberattacks [3].

This section explores key developments in network security visualization: different approaches, tools translated from research to practice, and their relevance in addressing real-world threats across enterprise and cloud networks. These techniques are transforming the landscape of cybersecurity by empowering professionals with richer, more actionable visual insights.

Flow Based And Time Oriented Visualizations

Flow-based visualization techniques are instrumental in highlighting network anomalies by transforming traffic data into dynamic visual artifacts. Systems like FlowRadar+ and NetFlowLens generate visual maps that depict communication between hosts using color-coded lines, intensity-based animations, and spatial positioning to highlight suspicious patterns [13]. This approach has shown particular promise in identifying port scans, volumetric DDoS attacks, and stealthy data exfiltration.

Time-series visualizations, such as TimeDetect and SecChrono, chart logs and alerts on an interactive timeline to reveal the sequence and correlation of multi-stage attacks [2]. By integrating logs from multiple sources—firewalls, IDS, endpoint monitors—these tools provide a unified view that helps analysts reconstruct attacks and uncover latent threats with greater clarity.

Graph Based And Topology Visualizations

Network graph visualizations bring topology to life by displaying hosts, IPs, and services as nodes connected by edges representing communication links. Tools like GraphScope, AttackGraph+, and NetSecViz use force-directed layouts to highlight suspicious paths and clusters of activity, facilitating faster detection of lateral movement and anomalous communication patterns [1,9].

Systems such as GraphIntrude have been pivotal in visually mapping attacker trajectories in real time, allowing analysts to follow threat actors' pivoting behaviour across subnetworks. These visualizations provide crucial context that is often missing from raw logs or text-based alerts, supporting quicker, more accurate responses to intrusions.

Security Dashboards And Integrated Visual Analytics

Modern security platforms increasingly support integrated dashboards combining multiple visualization types for end-to-end threat monitoring. Tools like ELK Stack (Elasticsearch, Logstash, Kibana), Splunk Enterprise Security, and Microsoft Sentinel offer unified visual analytics that allow analysts to transition seamlessly from summary views to granular data [12].

Academic solutions such as VISUAL-IDS and SECViz++ have introduced integrated environments that combine bar charts for attack patterns, histograms for packet distributions, heatmaps for anomaly timing, and geographic maps for source attribution [7]. These systems emphasize correlation across different views, helping analysts discover complex attack vectors that individual charts may not reveal.

Such platforms also help reduce cognitive overload, enabling security teams to act decisively and with improved situational awareness. They support the full security lifecycle—from real-time alerting to forensic investigation—within a single, interactive visual space.

Limitations Of Existing System

Despite their advantages, current visualization tools face notable limitations. Many are specialized and lack the flexibility to adapt to evolving attack vectors. Tools that excel at detecting DDoS attacks may falter in identifying insider threats or zero-day exploits, forcing reliance on multiple, disjointed systems [8].

Scalability remains another challenge. Visualization systems that work efficiently in research settings often struggle when deployed in enterprise-scale environments. As data volumes grow, even intuitive visualizations can become cluttered or sluggish, reducing their practical utility when timely insight is critical [4].

II. TECHNIQUES AND APPROACHES

Network security visualization techniques serve as powerful translators, converting the overwhelming flood of raw security data into clear visual narratives that human analysts can quickly understand and act upon. In today's threat landscape where security teams face endless streams of alerts and logs, these visual approaches transform abstract numbers and timestamps into intuitive maps, graphs and diagrams that reveal hidden attack patterns and suspicious activities at a glance. This section explores the most impactful visualization methods actually used in security operations centres, examining both their practical applications in real-

world threat detection and the thoughtful design principles behind them. From color-coded network traffic flows that expose brute force attacks to interactive timelines that reconstruct multi-stage breaches, these techniques don't just present data differently - they fundamentally enhance analysts' ability to spot anomalies, connect disparate events, and make critical decisions faster. The best security visualizations act as force multipliers, combining human pattern recognition with machine processing power to detect threats that might otherwise slip through the cracks of automated systems alone.

Topology Based Visualization

Topology-based visualization techniques provide security teams with an intuitive map of their network's structure and communication patterns. By representing devices as nodes and connections as edges in node-link diagrams, these visualizations reveal the complex web of relationships across an organization's digital infrastructure. Modern systems employ intelligent layout algorithms like force-directed graphs that automatically organize nodes to minimize clutter while highlighting critical connections, or circular arrangements that emphasize central devices and potential single points of failure. What makes these tools particularly powerful are their interactive capabilities - analysts can zoom in on suspicious subnets, filter out routine traffic to focus on anomalies, or cluster devices to uncover hidden relationships. These visualizations excel at exposing security threats that manifest in network patterns, such as the telltale star-shaped communication of botnets, the systematic scanning behaviour of reconnaissance attempts, or the unexpected connection paths that indicate lateral movement by attackers. Unlike traditional log analysis that requires piecing together discrete events, topology visualizations present the complete operational picture spatially, allowing security professionals to immediately grasp not just what is happening, but where and how it's occurring across their network's unique architecture. This spatial awareness and ability to visually trace communication paths often enables teams to detect and contain threats that might otherwise go unnoticed in conventional security monitoring systems.

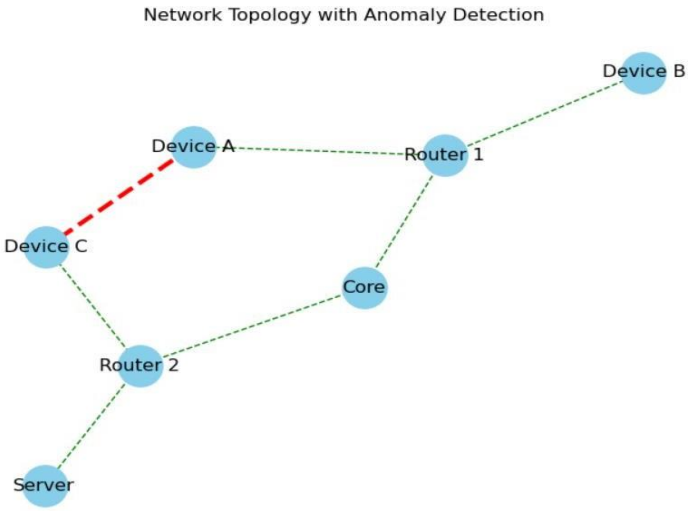

Figure 2 Example of a topology-based visualization highlighting communication between nodes and detection of abnormal paths.

Temporal and Flow Visualization

Time-based visualization techniques act as a digital time machine for security analysts, transforming abstract timestamps and log entries into clear, interactive timelines that reveal how threats develop and spread. These methods use intuitive time-series charts, color-coded histograms, and stacked graphs to expose patterns that would be nearly impossible to spot in raw data - like the rhythmic spikes of a brute force attack or the carefully spaced probes of an advanced persistent threat. By combining alerts from intrusion detection systems with packet captures and flow data on a unified timeline, analysts can finally see the complete story of an attack, from initial compromise to data exfiltration. Interactive playback features take this further, allowing teams to speed through hours of logs in minutes, pause at critical moments, and

zoom in on suspicious sequences. This temporal perspective proves particularly valuable when investigating multi-stage incidents, where understanding the timing between events is as important as the events themselves. Rather than piecing together disconnected alerts, security professionals can watch attacks unfold visually, gaining the context needed to respond effectively and uncover connections that traditional log analysis might miss.

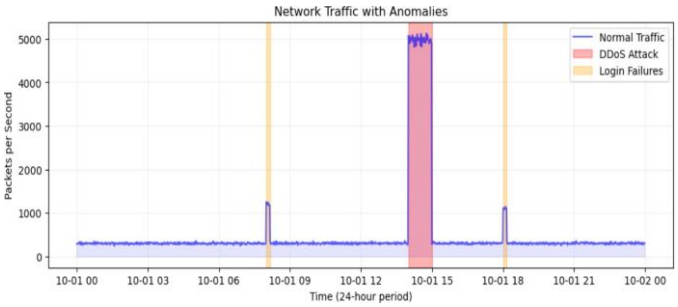

Figure 3 Time-series visualization showing traffic spikes and anomalies over a 24-hour period

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Multivariate and Interactive Dashboards

Modern security dashboards act like mission control centres for cyber defenders, bringing together all the critical data streams into one intuitive visual interface. Imagine having a single screen that combines bar charts showing attack frequency, heatmaps revealing peak threat times, treemaps of vulnerable assets, and even world maps pinpointing where attacks originate - this is the power of multivariate visualization. Security analysts live in these dashboards, using interactive features to slice through the noise: clicking on a spike in the traffic graph to see which countries those connections came from, or filtering to show only suspicious login attempts after business hours. In high-pressure SOC environments, these tools are game-changers - they transform disconnected alerts into a coherent picture, allowing teams to spot correlations they'd otherwise miss (like that flurry of failed logins suddenly followed by a successful access from an unexpected location). The best dashboards don't just display data - they create a dynamic investigation workspace where analysts can pivot between different views as quickly as their suspicions arise, turning what used to be a needle- in-a-haystack search into a streamlined forensic process.

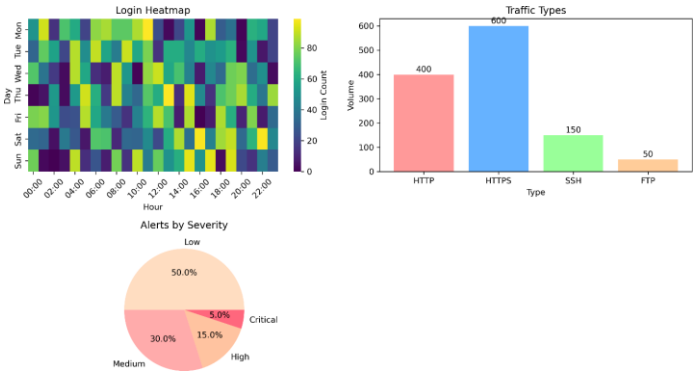

Figure 4 A multivariate dashboard showing traffic summaries, geolocation maps, and alert statistics for enhanced situational awareness.

AI Integrated and Hybrid Visualization Systems

Today's security teams are facing a tsunami of sophisticated attacks, but a new generation of AI-enhanced visualization tools is helping turn the tide. These systems act as force multipliers, pairing the raw processing power of machine learning with the pattern recognition skills of human analysts. Imagine a security dashboard that doesn't just show data, but actually learns from your network

- using smart algorithms to highlight the anomalies that matter most while fading out the noise. Under the hood, these tools employ clever ML techniques like t-SNE and PCA to transform mountains of log data into clear visual patterns. Clustering algorithms automatically group similar events together, while outlier detection spots the odd ones out - all visually represented through intuitive color-coding and spatial layouts. Some even predict trouble before it happens, showing potential attack paths like a weather forecast for cyber threats. What makes these systems truly powerful is their ability to learn from human experts. When an analyst tags a suspicious connection or confirms a false alarm, the system incorporates that feedback to get smarter over time. It's a continuous loop: the AI surfaces potential threats, the human investigator makes judgment calls, and the system learns from those decisions to improve its future recommendations. This symbiotic relationship creates a constantly evolving defence system that gets better at spotting real threats while reducing the alert fatigue that plagues so many SOC teams

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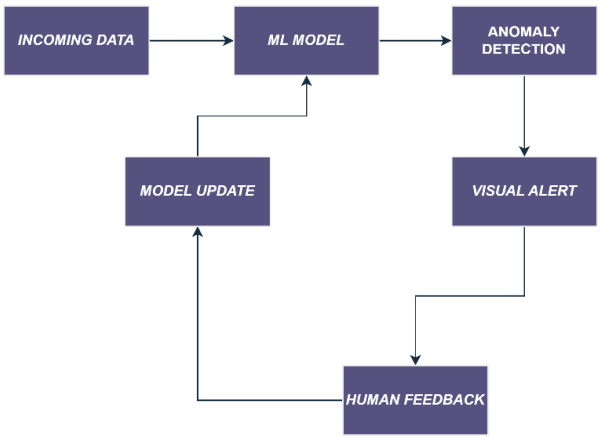

Figure 5 Architecture of an AI-integrated visualization system with user feedback loop for adaptive threat detection.

III. CHALLENGES IN NETWORK SECURITY VISUALIZATION

Despite remarkable advances, network security visualization still faces significant hurdles that limit its real-world effectiveness—a complex interplay of technical limitations and human factors. The fundamental challenge lies in creating visualizations that can keep pace with today's massive, dynamic networks without overwhelming analysts. Many systems struggle to process the deluge of data from modern infrastructures while maintaining responsive, intelligible displays—too often resulting in either oversimplified views that miss critical details or cluttered interfaces that obscure threats. Equally problematic is the integration gap, where visualization tools operate as isolated systems rather than seamless extensions of existing security workflows and SIEM platforms. On the human side, poorly designed visualizations can actually compound rather than alleviate cognitive overload, presenting analysts with dazzling but confusing graphics that hinder rather than help threat detection. The training burden poses another barrier, as security teams already stretched thin must now master specialized visual analysis techniques. Perhaps most critically, many visualization systems fail to account for how security operations actually work—prioritizing aesthetic appeal over actionable insights or forcing analysts to adapt their investigative processes to tool limitations rather than the other way around. These challenges underscore the need for visualization approaches that balance computational scalability with genuine operational utility, developed through close collaboration between security practitioners, data visualization experts, and interface designers.

Scalability and Performance

Modern networks produce a staggering amount of security data—firewalls spew alerts, intrusion detection systems flood analysts with warnings, and endpoints generate endless logs. The problem? Most visualization tools can't handle this deluge in real time, especially in large enterprises or cloud environments. Analysts know the frustration all too well: laggy interfaces, delayed rendering, and overwhelming data loads that make it impossible to spot threats when seconds count.

Figure 6 Different types of challenges in Network Security Visualization

Some solutions—like data aggregation, smart sampling, and stream processing—help ease the burden by simplifying the flood of information without losing critical insights. But these are temporary fixes, not true solutions. The real challenge is designing systems that keep up with modern network speeds while still presenting data clearly—so security teams aren't forced to choose between performance and precision during an active attack. Until then, analysts will keep wrestling with visualizations that stutter when they need them most.

Visual Clutter and Cognitive Overload

There's a fine line between a helpful security visualization and an overwhelming mess. When every node, connection, and metric fights for attention on the same screen, analysts end up squinting at a tangled web of data rather than spotting real threats. This isn't just frustrating—it's dangerous, especially during an active incident when quick, clear decisions are crucial. The best tools combat clutter with smart design: layout algorithms that untangle complex networks, dynamic filters that hide the noise, and customizable views that let analysts focus on what matters. Because in security, a good visualization shouldn't show everything—it should reveal the right things at the right time.

Lack of Standardization

Right now, security visualization feels like a fragmented landscape where every research lab and vendor reinvents the wheel with their own custom designs. One team builds an elaborate node-link diagram, another creates a radial threat

map, and a third develops an entirely different interactive timeline—all solving similar problems in completely different ways. While innovation is valuable, this lack of common standards creates real headaches for security teams.

Without agreed-upon frameworks, these tools often struggle to connect with the SIEMs, ticketing systems, and investigation platforms that analysts rely on daily. The result? Security operations centres either waste time manually transferring data between systems or avoid adopting potentially useful visualizations altogether because integration seems too costly. This inconsistency doesn't just slow down workflows—it prevents the entire field from maturing as analysts can't easily transfer their skills between tools or compare solutions objectively.

The solution isn't stifling creativity, but establishing some fundamental guidelines—common data formats, evaluation metrics, and interoperability standards—that let visualization tools plug into existing security ecosystems while still allowing room for innovation. Until then, we'll keep seeing brilliant visualization concepts that never make it out of the lab and into the hands of the analysts who need them most.

User Expertise and Training

A significant challenge in security visualization lies in the steep learning curve many tools present. Most platforms are designed with an implicit assumption that users possess equally strong expertise in both cybersecurity and data analysis—a combination that is unfortunately rare in practice. When analysts lack specialized training in visual data interpretation, they risk drawing incorrect conclusions from the presented information. Common consequences include false alarms triggered by benign patterns, critical threats overlooked in complex visualizations, and ultimately, security decisions based on incomplete or misunderstood data.

To bridge this gap, visualization platforms must prioritize usability and education alongside technical capabilities. Effective solutions should incorporate intuitive onboarding processes that introduce both the tool's functionality and fundamental visualization concepts. Context-sensitive guidance can help analysts understand what different visual patterns might indicate, while adaptive interfaces could simplify the experience for novice users without limiting functionality for experts. The goal is not to replace technical depth, but to make it more accessible—ensuring that security teams can fully leverage these powerful tools regardless of their visualization background. By designing with real-world users in mind, we can create systems that enhance, rather than demand, human expertise—a crucial step toward more effective and reliable security operations.

Security and Privacy Concerns

The very visualization tools designed to enhance security monitoring can paradoxically introduce new vulnerabilities if not properly secured. By aggregating and displaying sensitive network data—including internal IP addresses, user activity patterns, and system vulnerabilities—these platforms create concentrated repositories of valuable intelligence that could be exploited if compromised. The risk is compounded by how visualization systems typically pull data from across the network, effectively creating additional attack surfaces that bad actors might target. Without adequate safeguards, security dashboards could inadvertently expose confidential information to unauthorized personnel or even serve as entry points for attackers seeking to understand an organization's defences. To maintain operational security while benefiting from visual analytics, these platforms require robust protective measures including strict role-based access controls to limit data visibility according to user privileges, comprehensive encryption for both stored and transmitted visualization data, and detailed audit logs tracking all access and interactions. Additionally, visualization

systems should be designed with privacy-preserving techniques that reveal security insights without unnecessarily exposing raw sensitive data. As these tools become increasingly sophisticated in their ability to correlate and display security information, equal attention must be paid to ensuring they don't become the weak link in an organization's security posture—a concern that demands careful consideration from both vendors implementing these solutions and security teams deploying them in operational environments.

IV. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As cyber threats grow more sophisticated and relentless, security visualization must evolve beyond static dashboards to become truly intelligent, adaptive defence systems. The next generation of tools will need to tackle three critical challenges: handling the explosive growth of security data, detecting increasingly subtle attack patterns, and empowering human analysts with AI-driven insights.

We're moving toward visualization platforms that can automatically scale to process millions of security events while maintaining crisp, actionable visuals—using techniques like edge computing to distribute the analytical load. Machine learning will transform these tools from passive displays into active partners that highlight emerging threats in real-time, predict potential attack paths, and even suggest response actions.

Perhaps most exciting is the potential for immersive analytics through AR/VR interfaces that let analysts "walk through" their network topology or collaboratively investigate threats in virtual war rooms. These advances won't replace human judgment, but enhance it—giving security teams the visual clarity and contextual intelligence they need to stay ahead of tomorrow's threats.

The future belongs to visualization systems that don't just present data, but actively help interpret it—blending AI's

pattern recognition with human expertise to create a more resilient defence posture.

Integration with Threat Intelligence and SIEMs

Future visualization platforms are anticipated to achieve deeper integration with threat intelligence feeds and Security Information and Event Management (SIEM) systems, enhancing their utility in cybersecurity analysis. By incorporating real-time enrichment of visualizations with contextual data—such as Common Vulnerabilities and Exposures (CVE) details, attack signatures, and profiles of threat actors—these platforms will significantly elevate situational awareness and improve the precision of response strategies. This advancement will enable security analysts to transition from relying on static visual dashboards to engaging with dynamic, intelligence-driven security environments that support more informed and effective decision-making.

Adaptive and Personalized Interfaces

Traditional, standardized visualizations often fall short because they don't account for the wide range of skills, roles, and preferences among analysts. A junior data explorer might need guided insights and simplified views, while a senior investigator could require advanced filtering and granular control. To bridge this gap, next-generation systems should leverage adaptive interfaces that dynamically customize their layout, level of detail, and even recommend context-aware actions—all based on real-time user behaviour, historical interactions, and individual preferences. This kind of intelligent personalization not only reduces cognitive overload by surfacing the most relevant information but also enhances engagement and decision-making speed. In high-stakes scenarios, such as cybersecurity incident response or emergency management, these tailored interfaces could be the difference between swift resolution and costly delays, making adaptability a crucial feature for future analytical tool.

Advanced Human – AI Collaboration

Looking ahead, the collaboration between machine intelligence and human judgment is poised to play a pivotal role in the evolution of visualization platforms. Artificial intelligence (AI) will take on the responsibility of pre-processing vast streams of data, detecting anomalies, and producing visual highlights to streamline analysis. Meanwhile, human analysts will leverage their expertise to interpret the contextual nuances and make critical, informed decisions. To ensure trust and usability, it will be essential to design visualization systems that prioritize explainable AI, where model predictions are not only transparent and interpretable but also interactively adjustable by users, fostering a seamless and reliable partnership between technology and human insight.

Immersive and 3D Visualization Technologies

As Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies continue to advance, they are opening the door to immersive visualization techniques that could transform how we explore and understand complex network data. These innovative tools allow for the creation of three-dimensional (3D) environments that can depict intricate, multi-layered architectures or sprawling global- scale infrastructures in ways that feel natural and intuitive. By stepping into these virtual spaces, security professionals might find it easier to quickly grasp complicated relationships and patterns within the data, speeding up their ability to make sense of it all. Beyond individual comprehension, these immersive setups could also enhance teamwork, enabling collaborative threat analysis in a shared, interactive space. While this approach to visualization is still in its early development, it holds tremendous promise to fundamentally change how security teams engage with vast and abstract datasets, making the invisible more tangible and actionable.

Usability Centred Design and Evaluation

Looking to the future, research in this field must prioritize human-centred design principles to ensure that visualization tools are not only robust and powerful but also approachable and user-friendly for those who rely on them. It's not enough for these tools to be technically impressive; they need to fit seamlessly into the workflows of security professionals. To achieve this, greater attention should be directed toward conducting thorough user studies, task-based evaluations, and long-term deployments in real-world settings. These efforts will provide concrete evidence of how visual analytics tools perform under actual conditions, validating their effectiveness and revealing opportunities for improvement. By focusing on the people who use these systems, future advancements can deliver solutions that are both impactful and practical, bridging the gap between cutting-edge technology and everyday usability.

V. CONCLUSION

Network security visualization stands at the intersection of data analytics, cybersecurity, and human-computer interaction. It offers a powerful means to transform raw, high-volume network data into interpretable and actionable insights. This paper reviewed various visualization techniques—from topology-based and temporal visualizations to multivariate dashboards and AI-integrated systems— highlighting their roles in supporting situational awareness and incident response. While these advancements are promising, significant challenges remain, including scalability limitations, visual clutter, lack of standardization, and usability concerns. Addressing these issues will require interdisciplinary collaboration and a renewed focus on user-centred design, performance optimization, and seamless integration with modern security ecosystems. Looking ahead, future directions such as immersive technologies, adaptive interfaces, and human-AI collaboration promise to redefine the role of visualization in securing increasingly complex digital

infrastructures. With continuous innovation and thoughtful implementation, visualization will remain a critical pillar of effective and intelligent network defence

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