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MJTI: Multidisciplinary Journal of Technology and Informatics
Vol. 1 No. 2. December 2025, pp. 66-72 DOI. XX.XXXXX/mjti.vxix.xxx

Research Article

LITERATURE REVIEW: CYBERSECURITY RESEARCH TRENDS IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS

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Article Info
Received: October 10, 2025
Revised: November 20, 2025
Accepted: November 25, 2025
Online Version: December 30, 2025

Abstract
This literature review synthesizes major cybersecurity research trends from 2020 through 2025, focusing on thematic shifts, methodological advances, domain-specific concerns (e.g., cloud, IoT/IIoT, critical infrastructure), the rise of AI/ML both as a defense and an offensive enabler, human and socio-technical aspects (training, awareness, insider threats), and policy and governance developments. The review draws from systematic reviews, surveys, industry threat reports, and empirical studies to map recurring topics, gaps, and directions for future work. Findings highlight rapid growth in AI-driven detection and automation research, escalating interest in adversarial ML and LLM-related risks, persistent concerns about data availability for empirical cyber-risk research, increased focus on ransomware and supply-chain incidents, and growing attention to socio-technical mitigation strategies such as security training and organizational resilience. Implications for researchers include the need for reproducible datasets, interdisciplinary methods, long-run impact studies, and ethical frameworks for dual-use AI research.

Keywords: Cybersecurity, Literature Review, Research Trends

Journal Homepage https://journal.zmsadra.or.id/index.php/mjti
How to cite: Takahashi, H., Nakamura, Y., Santos, L., & Reyes, M. C. (2025). Literature Review: Cybersecurity Research Trends in the Last Five Years. *MJTI: Multidisciplinary Journal of Technology and Informatics, 1*(2), 66–72. https://doi.org/XX.XXXXX/mjti.v1i2.1420
Published by: Yayasan Zia Mulla Sadra

INTRODUCTION

Over the last five years (2020–2025), cybersecurity research has accelerated in volume and broadened in scope, spurred by the expanding attack surface of cloud infrastructure, Internet of Things (IoT) devices, and the rapid adoption of remote work technologies; this period also saw a notable shift toward data-driven and AI-augmented security approaches that aim to automate detection and response at scale (Cremer, 2022; Salem, 2024). Concurrently, adversaries have adopted more sophisticated tactics — ransomware-as-a-service, supply-chain compromise, and social-engineering campaigns amplified by generative AI — prompting research emphasis on threat intelligence, attribution, and proactive defense strategies; industry threat reports from 2023–2025 reflect the operational realities that shape research priorities (CrowdStrike, 2025; Dragos OT review, 2025).

A distinct research strand has focused on AI/ML for cybersecurity: from supervised deep-learning models for malware/IDS to unsupervised anomaly detection and self-supervised techniques; alongside this growth, there is rising scholarship about adversarial ML, model robustness, and the potential misuse of large language models (LLMs) in cyber operations (Salem, 2024; recent systematic reviews on AI-driven security). Another enduring research theme concerns data availability and reproducibility: systematic reviews underscore a scarcity of high-quality, shareable datasets for cyber-risk modeling and empirical evaluation, which constrains benchmarking and cross-study comparisons; this has motivated calls for standardized datasets, synthetic data generation, and responsible sharing protocols (Cremer, 2022).

The Internet of Things (IoT) and Industrial IoT (IIoT) domains have attracted concentrated attention due to their heterogeneity and criticality; literature since 2020 documents specific attack vectors, defense architectures, and the intersection of safety and security for cyber-physical systems, producing both domain-specific taxonomies and practical mitigation frameworks (Alnajim, 2023). Socio-technical research has progressed beyond mere awareness surveys to richer ethnographic and mixed-methods studies examining organizational behavior, insider threats, security culture, and the human factors that mediate technology effectiveness; training methods and the measurement of behavioral change are prominent subtopics (Prümmer, 2024).

Supply-chain security and software integrity emerged as urgent research foci, especially after widely publicized incidents that highlighted transitive trust failures; researchers have explored provenance tracking, SBOM (software bill of materials), and automated dependency analysis as mitigation strategies (industry and academic literature 2021–2025). Critical infrastructure and operational technology (OT) security studies surged as utilities, transportation, and manufacturing sectors reported an uptick in targeted attacks; such work combines cyber incident analysis, resilience metrics, and domain-aware intrusion detection adapted for OT constraints (Dragos OT review, 2025).

Privacy and governance research has engaged with regulatory shifts, data-protection regimes, and debates about lawful interception, balancing security needs with civil liberties; comparative policy analyses and legal-technical approaches appear increasingly in the literature. Taken together, these trends show a field that is increasingly interdisciplinary, with methodological pluralism (ML/AI, formal methods, human factors, legal analysis) and a growing bridge between academic research and operational practice through industry reports and datasets. (Zaid, 2024; CompTIA, 2025).

RESEARCH METHOD

This literature review synthesizes peer-reviewed articles, systematic reviews, technical reports, and major industry threat analyses published between January 2020 and mid-2025; sources were identified via database searches (Scopus, PubMed/PMC, IEEE Xplore, ScienceDirect), targeted journal issues, and authoritative industry reports to capture both scholarly and operational perspectives (Cremer, 2022; Salem, 2024). Search strings combined keywords such as “cybersecurity review”, “systematic review malware detection”, “AI in cybersecurity”, “ransomware trends”, “supply chain security”, and “IoT security”, with date filters set to 2020–2025; inclusion criteria favored synthesis papers, empirical studies with clear methodology, and high-impact industry reports that shaped research agendas (CrowdStrike, 2025; CompTIA, 2025).

Data extraction captured bibliographic details, thematic focus, methods used, datasets, key findings, limitations, and suggested future directions; special attention was given to papers offering systematic mappings, bibliometric analyses, or meta-analyses because these provide higher-level trend signals (Admass, 2024; Büyüközkan, 2025). Thematic coding followed an iterative approach: open coding identified initial nodes (AI/ML, malware, ransomware, IoT/IIoT, supply chain, human factors, datasets, OT security, policy), which were then clustered into higher-level themes and cross-validated across multiple source types (academic + industry). Triangulation with threat reports was used to align academic signals with real-world incident patterns.

Limitations of this methodological approach include publication bias (industry incidents sometimes precede peer-reviewed analysis), heterogeneity of study designs (limiting meta-analytic aggregation), and the rapidly evolving nature of threats and AI capabilities which can outpace slower academic publication cycles; where possible, the review emphasizes convergent findings across multiple credible sources. The output structure of results and discussion organizes themes by technological domain (AI/ML, malware, IoT/IIoT, OT), socio-technical factors (human factors, training, governance), and research infrastructure (datasets, reproducibility), concluding with cross-cutting gaps and recommended directions for the next five years.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

AI/ML proliferation and methodological sophistication. Research applying AI and ML techniques to intrusion detection, malware classification, phishing detection, and anomaly detection has grown markedly; studies increasingly use deep learning architectures, graph-based methods, and self-/semi-supervised models to handle label scarcity and evolving malware families (Salem, 2024). Adversarial ML and model robustness. Parallel to defensive AI work, there is a robust stream investigating adversarial examples, poisoning attacks, and model extraction—research that highlights fragility in ML-based defenses and calls for robust training, certified defenses, and explainability mechanisms (systematic and empirical studies, 2020–2025).

Malware evolution and detection research. Malware studies continue to be a central theme: between 2020–2025, research documents increasingly fileless techniques, living-off-the-land attacks, and sophisticated obfuscation; detection research has moved from static-signature approaches to dynamic behavior profiling and hybrid models combining static and dynamic features. Ransomware and extortion economics. The literature now embeds ransomware within economic and organizational perspectives—studies mapping attacker economics, ransom negotiation patterns, and organizational impacts—informing both technical mitigation and policy debates about ransom payments and insurance incentives.

Supply chain and software integrity. Research on software supply chains has expanded after high-impact incidents; literature covers SBOMs, dependency analysis, build/release pipeline security, and runtime provenance techniques to detect tampering or malicious upstream packages. Cloud-native security. As cloud adoption accelerated, so did studies on cloud misconfigurations, identity and access management (IAM) weaknesses, and detection of lateral movement in cloud environments; research proposes cloud-aware detection approaches and emphasizes infrastructure-as-code security.

IoT/IIoT security: domain-specific challenges. IoT research emphasizes heterogeneity, constrained devices, and long lifecycles; IIoT research stresses the overlap of safety and security concerns, proposing tailored intrusion detection and risk assessment frameworks that respect real-time operational constraints. OT and critical infrastructure focus. Studies on OT emphasize asset discovery, network segmentation, and anomaly detection adapted for industrial protocols; incident case studies have pushed research toward resilience-oriented metrics and human-in-the-loop detection strategies (Dragos OT review).

Human factors and security training. The literature shows a movement from one-off awareness campaigns to more evidence-based training interventions, testing pedagogical methods and behavioural-change measurement; systematic reviews synthesize which training modalities show durable effects. Privacy-preserving and federated learning approaches. To address data sharing and privacy limitations, research explores federated learning, differential privacy, and secure multi-party computation for distributed threat detection while preserving sensitive telemetry.

Threat intelligence and automated orchestration. Work on automating threat intelligence ingestion, standardizing indicators (STIX/TAXII), and integrating threat feeds into SOAR platforms has advanced; research debates center on reliability of open feeds and automating triage without generating analyst overload. Explainability and ML interpretability. Given high-stakes decision-making, research increasingly demands explainable models for security analysts to trust alerts and reduces false positives; explainability aids investigation workflows and supports regulatory transparency.

LLMs and generative AI: dual-use concern. The recent rise of large language models (LLMs) has produced research on their potential use in automating attack creation (e.g., phishing content generation), on defenses (e.g., augmenting SOC analysts), and on emergent vulnerabilities such as prompt-injection or model leakage; this is an active and urgent research frontier. Benchmarking, datasets, and reproducibility. Multiple reviews flag dataset scarcity and nonstandardized benchmarks as bottlenecks; the community calls for curated, realistic datasets (with privacy protections) and for reproducibility standards across ML-for-security research.

Interdisciplinary methods and socio-technical framing. Increasingly, studies combine technical analyses with organizational, economic, or legal perspectives to produce more actionable insights—e.g., combining threat modeling with cost-benefit analysis or examining insurance markets' effect on security investments. Policy, regulation, and disclosure research. Scholarship on mandatory breach disclosure, cyber incident reporting, and regulation of critical services has grown, examining policy impacts, reporting asymmetries, and the interplay between transparency and operational security.

Operationalization and deployment research gaps. While many papers propose high-performing models in lab settings, fewer studies examine operational deployment challenges: data drift, model maintenance, analyst workflows, and SOC resourcing—all crucial for real-world impact. Emerging emphasis on resilience and business continuity. Beyond detection, literature increasingly addresses resilience: incident response maturity, tabletop exercises, and continuity planning metrics have become common, reflecting practitioner concerns about minimizing business disruption.

Metrics and evaluation standards. There is growing attention to more meaningful evaluation metrics that reflect operational utility (e.g., time-to-detect, analyst effort) rather than solely classification accuracy, encouraging research designs aligned with SOC needs. Economic and behavioral models of attacker-defender interactions. Game-theoretic and economic models that examine incentives, investment trade-offs, and attacker economics have expanded, providing frameworks for policy and insurance design.

Security of developer toolchains and CI/CD pipelines. Research has increased on securing development pipelines, detecting malicious commits, and integrating security scans into automation, aligning with supply-chain integrity concerns. Education, workforce, and skills research. The cybersecurity skills gap motivates studies on curriculum design, training efficacy, and alternative talent pipelines (e.g., apprenticeship, automation-assisted analysts), with industry reports documenting persistent shortages.

Global and regional research disparities. Reviews note asymmetries in research focus and dataset availability between high-income and low-/middle-income countries, calling for more inclusive research agendas and localized datasets to reflect diverse threat landscapes. Ethics, dual-use, and publication norms. As cyber research increasingly involves potentially dual-use findings (e.g., vulnerability disclosure, offensive techniques), scholarly discourse addresses responsible disclosure, red-teaming ethics, and publication norms to mitigate misuse.

Future directions flagged by the literature. Synthesis papers and experts recommend: (a) investment in shared, privacy-aware datasets; (b) longitudinal field studies of deployed defenses; (c) robust evaluation frameworks for ML models in operational contexts; (d) interdisciplinary research bridging technical, legal, and social domains; and (e) governance frameworks for AI-enabled cyber tools.

CONCLUSION

The past five years of cybersecurity research (2020–2025) reveal rapid methodological evolution—especially in AI/ML—coupled with widening scope toward socio-technical, policy, and operational concerns; the field is maturing but faces reproducibility and deployment gaps that limit practical impact. Critical unmet needs include standardized, privacy-preserving datasets, evaluation metrics aligned with SOC workflows, more longitudinal and deployment-centered studies, and research attention to governance and dual-use risk management; addressing these will enhance the translational value of academic work.

Interdisciplinary collaboration—bringing together ML researchers, security practitioners, legal scholars, and social scientists—is essential to produce robust, ethically grounded, and operationally useful cybersecurity research that can respond to evolving threats such as generative-AI-enabled attacks. For researchers and funders, the pragmatic priorities over the coming five years should be to support dataset curation and sharing initiatives, fund field-deployment studies, encourage reproducible research practices, and develop governance mechanisms that balance innovation with responsible disclosure and safety.

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