Hybrid Obfuscation Technique to Enhance Software Protection Against Reverse Engineering

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Received: 12/10/2025
Revised: 13/12/2025
Accepted: 14/11/2025

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Abstract— Reverse engineering has been a major challenging factor in software security since unauthorized analysis and manipulation of applications are made possible. This paper introduces a novel hybrid obfuscation technique intended to enhance the security of software against all such threats by means of a combined application of control flow and data obfuscation techniques. Our methodology systematically transforms software code to increase the complexity and obscure the functionality of code such that reverse engineering becomes challenging. This was developed in a prototype tool authored in C# and tested on the various metrics associated with execution time, code size, and resistance to decompilation. Results indicate that our hybrid technique achieves only a modest increase in execution time, in the order of up to 13%, but it makes a significant contribution to security as indicated by increases in cyclomatic complexity and reduced clarity regarding static analysis. Also, our technique demonstrates superiority over existing tools since, while incorporating a greater level of obfuscation complexity, it maintains fewer lines of code. This research elucidates the importance of hybrid obfuscation strategies for the protection of software against increasingly advanced reverse engineering techniques.

Keywords: *Control Flow, Obfuscation, Reverse Engineering, Cyclomatic Complexity*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Reverse Engineering

Reverse engineering is a systematic procedure for understanding the components, functionalities, and design of a software application. It can be used in the service of legitimate goals such as debugging, maintenance, and interoperability. However, more often, reverse engineering serves as a vehicle for malicious acts. To their advantage, attackers may use reverse engineering to clone software, exploit vulnerabilities, and circumvent licensing, placing an impact on the original creator's market position and possibly leading to breaches in security [1]. The growing complexity of software systems, along with the ever-increasing possession of sophisticated reverse engineering tools, places the relative ease of software analysis and manipulation in the hands of attackers, thereby further necessitating robust protection mechanisms [2].

1.2. Obfuscation Techniques

Obfuscation is one of the main methods that ensure protection of software from reverse engineering. The basic idea behind it is to make the program hard to read and understand so that some potential enemy might lose interest. Control Flow Obfuscation: Control flow obfuscation changes the execution path of programs to hide program logic. Some of the methods utilized are opaque predicates that insert conditions that are always true or false and control flow flattening, which changes the program structure in such a way that the normal execution order is obscured [3]. These techniques therefore hinder the analysis of reverse engineers. Data Obfuscation: Protection obfuscation deals with protection of the data within the software through transformation of its representation. This involves renaming variables as non-descriptive, encoding sensitive data, and changing the arrangement of data structures. Such techniques protect against data extraction and manipulation, thereby making it difficult for attackers to understand the purpose of the data. Code transformation: This means rewriting code that has the same functionality but is made harder to analyze [3]. Techniques such as inlining functions, loop unrolling, and inserting dead code [3] are employed. Such transformations can reduce the understanding and static analysis of the code, therefore enhancing the protection of the software. Challenges of Software Protection: Notwithstanding the various obfuscation techniques, several challenges remain pending. Many obfuscation methods may lead to performance overheads that could influence software performance. The improvement of reverse engineering tools will evolve together with obfuscation methods and therefore require continuous updates of protection plans [3]. Developers must strike a balance between protection and usability so that obfuscation does not turn into an impediment for legitimate users who try to comprehend and use the software [3].

1.3. Literature Review

With the advent of reverse engineering techniques, software security faced some challenges that have helped determine key factors for implementing effective protection strategies. Most researchers have opted to explore various obfuscation methods to secure software from unauthorized analysis and consequent manipulation.

Obfuscation, according to Collberg and others [4], is a technique to transform the code in such a way that makes it difficult for the attacker to understand how the logic of the application operates and the functions it performs. Some transformation methods include control flow, data, and code obfuscation, all of which contribute uniquely to software protection and employ opaque predicates and control flow flattening as some of the examples. Wang and Wang [5] showed how complicated control-flow obfuscation can make

code while enabling it to resist static analysis tools. These findings suggest that combinations of different control flow techniques could build an even more robust defense. Karp et al. [6] assessed advanced obfuscated control flows for threat prevention, revealing high potentials in complexity derivation even from minimal changes in program logic. In Singh et al. [6], advanced methods of data obfuscation, such as dynamic data encoding and polymorphic data structures, were found to have the ability to foil data extraction and manipulation attempts. Chen et al. [7] also came up with a brand-new data obfuscation technique where encryption is combined with data transformation to provide very high security while sacrificing performance at some point. Jain et al. [8] validate this assertion by concluding that transformations obscure logical flow within the program as well as introduce nonfunctional code, thereby resulting in an increase in complexity but without changing the program's intended functionality. According to their research, this is important in deciding what transformation techniques to use in a balanced way with respect to performance versus security. Supporting this, Guo et al. [9] stated that proper code transformation could yield quite significant benefit both in security and reduction of latency during execution.

Making researchers realize that only one obfuscation technique will not produce a desired effect, they turned to research into mixtures of techniques for a hybrid approach. Li et al. [10] proposed a hybrid obfuscation framework integrating control flow, data, and code transformation. Findings made revealed how this approach was able to provide not only significantly improved security against reverse engineering but also reasonable performance levels, making it feasible for developers with an interest in incorporating strong protection mechanisms. Zhang et al. [11] similarly proved the effectiveness of hybrid obfuscation in different software environments, which had a significant reduction in successful reverse engineering attempts.

1.4. Objectives

This research aims at

1. **Designing Hybrid Technique**: The main goal is to develop a new hybrid obfuscation technique that combines control-flow obfuscation and renaming obfuscation techniques.
2. **Implementation**: This step will involve the implementation of the proposed technique in a software prototype tool.
3. **Evaluation**: This will entail investigating the effectiveness of the proposed hybrid technique in terms of security, performance, and resilience against reverse engineering.
4. **Comparison**: The hybrid obfuscation tool will be compared against existing obfuscation tools like ConfuserEx to showcase its advantages and improvements attained in performance and security.

2. METHODS

This section outlines the research methodology employed to develop and evaluate a hybrid obfuscation technique aimed at enhancing software protection against reverse engineering. The research adopts an experimental design, utilizing a combination of theoretical analysis and practical implementation.

2.1 Techniques Used

Our hybrid obfuscation technique employs both control flow and renaming obfuscation techniques at the same time to unify their advantages in strengthening software end-product security. In an attempt to use complexity that stems from control flow obfuscation to obscure the logical structure of the code, with semantic confusion created by data obfuscation, we want to be able to make reverse engineering a very fortified offense against which to contend. This dual action makes the analysis process a bit harder for the potential attackers and makes sensitive algorithms and data processing routines much better protected. The overall design is illustrating the proposed hybrid obfuscation technique in Figure 1.

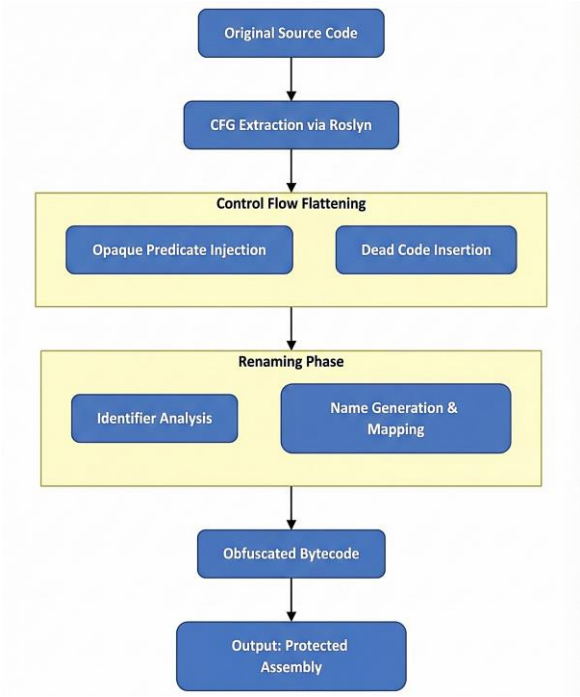


Figure 1. The proposed hybrid obfuscation technique phases.

2.1.1 Control Flow Obfuscation Phase – Detailed Algorithm

The control flow obfuscation is implemented via a three-step algorithm:

Step 1: Control Flow Flattening via State Machine

We convert each method's control flow graph (CFG) into a finite state machine (FSM). Let $G = (V, E)$ be the original CFG, where V represents basic blocks and E represents edges. We map each basic block $vi \in V$ to a state si. A dispatcher loop is inserted, which uses a state variable state to determine the next block to execute.

The transformation follows this pseudocode:

Original Code:

```
if (condition)
    { A(); }
else { B(); }
    C();
```

Transformed Code:

```
int state = 0;
while (true) {
  switch (state) {
    case 0: if (opaque_predicate()) state = 1; else state = 2; break;
    case 1: A(); state = 3; break;
    case 2: B(); state = 3; break;
    case 3: C(); state = -1; break;
    case -1: return;
  }
}
```

Step 2: Opaque Predicate Generation

Opaque predicates are generated using mathematical invariants. For example, let x be an integer variable from the original code. We create a predicate:

$$P(x)=(x^2+2x+1)\ \%2==1$$

Which always evaluates to false for any integer x. These predicates are inserted into conditional branches to obscure the real flow.

Step 3: Dead Code Insertion Strategy

In this step, three types of dead code are inserted to increase code complexity without affecting the program's output:

1. **Arithmetic dead code:**

Operations that cancel out and have no real effect on the program. Example:

```
int t = x * 5;          t = t / 5;
```

Purpose:

Adds unnecessary operations to confuse static analysis tools.

2. **Loop-based dead code:**

A loop that runs only once and does not change any actual behavior. Example:

```
for (int i = 0; i < 1; i++) { // meaningless operations}
```

Purpose:

Increases control-flow complexity and raises the cyclomatic complexity metric.

3. **Method Call Dead Code:**

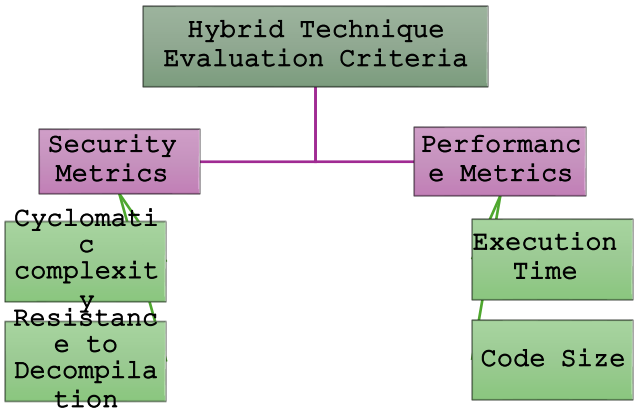
Calling a method whose return value is either constant or unused.

Step 4: Branch Manipulation

We modify existing branches by adding complementary conditions derived from opaque predicates and insert indirect jumps via computed goto statements using switch-case structures.

2.1.2 Renaming phase:

Renaming thus comes in as an essential part of the obfuscation methodology that entails changing the names of types, methods, and parameters used in your code. Renaming obfuscates the original meaning and purpose of these identifiers, making it more difficult for someone to read or reverse-engineer the code.



Renaming obfuscation phase steps:

1) **Identifying Renaming Candidates**: The analysis of the code should Systematically identify all types (classes, structs), methods, and parameters that could be affected by renaming, excluding specific members whose original names must be retained (i.e., public APIs, framework types).

2) **New name generation**: Depending on the chosen naming scheme: Randomized Names: Employ a list of words or a random name generator to come up with the new, unique names.

3) **Checking for Name Conflicts**: Make sure the new names do not coincide with any existing names in the codebase or libraries. The intention is to eliminate such instances that might create headaches at compile or run time.

4) **Executing the Renaming**: This is where all the old names are substituted with the new names generated by the renaming mechanisms in the code: Types: Change class and struct names; change method names; rename method parameters and local variables.

5) **Preservation of Original Logic**: Verify that the logic and behavior of the code remain unaltered, which is critical to making sure that the application runs successfully.

2.2 Implementation

We have used C# and Windows Forms for a prototype of our mixed obfuscation mechanism displayed in figure 2. The advantages of this programming language and framework offer an easy environment to implement the obfuscation methods through a user-friendly interface useful for testing and evaluation. This provides an opportunity to apply the true capabilities of C# in combination with Windows Forms to demonstrate in the real sense the act of working and the correctness of the hybrid solution.

Figure 2. *The proposed Hybrid obfuscation technique prototype.*

2.3 Evaluation Criteria

The performance of the hybrid obfuscation technique was evaluated against a well-defined set of key evaluation criteria, including both performance metric evaluation and security measure criteria, as depicted in Figure 3. These criteria thus provide a measure of the overall success of the obfuscation methods that were applied.

Figure 3. *Evaluation Criteria.*

2.3.1 Performance Metrics

Execution Time: It will record how much time is required for an execution of obfuscated versus its original software. Consideration of this parameter would help us assess any overhead of the obfuscation process. Code Size: The obfuscated source code will be measured against the original. In many cases, a big increase in the size of obfuscated code might mean more complex obfuscation; however, this must be levied against performance impacts. Determine how many extra lines or instructions were included in the obfuscated outcome.

1. 2.3.2 Security Metrics

Resistance against Reverse Engineering: We shall evaluate the effectiveness of the hybrid obfuscation technique against reverse engineering attempts. This evaluation will entail measuring the success rate of Static Analysis Tool decompilers or reverse engineering tools in interpreting the obfuscated code. In addition, we will evaluate the success rate of dynamic analysis tools in extracting meaningful data from the obfuscated program. Complexity Analysis: Complexity will be analyzed in terms of the control flow and data representation, applying various metrics (cyclomatic being one of them) to quantify understanding difficulty.

. Cyclomatic Complexity can be calculated as **E - N + 2P**, where:

- E = Number of edges in the code.
- N = Number of nodes in the code
- P = Number of connected components (usually 1 for a single function).

Complexity increases with additional conditions, loops, and branches, making the control flow graph harder to analyze.

2.3.3 Comparison with Existing Techniques

We carried out the performance and security cost of our hybrid obfuscation technique against an available obfuscation tool called ConfuserEx [12].

3. Experimental Setup

In this section, an elaborate description of the configuration involved in creating and testing our hybrid obfuscation technique is provided. This encompasses the environment, software applications, and tools associated with the actual experimentation.

3.1 Environment

Hardware Specifications: The experiments were conducted on a system with the following specifications: Processor: [Intel Core i7], RAM: [16 GB DDR4], Storage: [512 GB SSD], Operating System: [Windows 10 Pro, 64-bit]

Development Tools: The prototype of the hybrid obfuscation technique was developed using: Programming Language: C#, Framework: .NET Framework [.NET 5], Integrated Development Environment (IDE): Visual Studio [2022]

3.2 Sample Software Applications

To evaluate the obfuscation technique, we created two sample applications for testing purposes: a login application and a registration application making use of a serial number. This commonly encountered functionality was chosen as the basis of our application tests applied to measure performance and security of our obfuscation techniques.

The first application, figure 4, is a login application that authenticates users. Among features included are: User Input Fields: Input username/password by user. Validation Logic: Check the credentials against a pre-defined user name and password. Feedback Mechanism: Inform of successful or failure login attempts. Security features: Some basic security features such as password masking and input validation are implemented to protect user data. This application forms a good test case for us to evaluate how the obfuscation technique performs in protecting sensitive logic and data, such as credential validation.

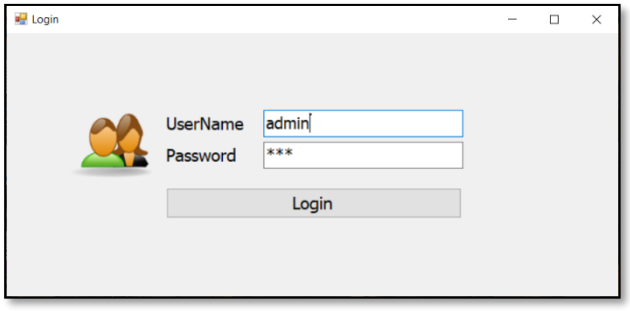


Figure 4. The login application interface.

The second application, figure 5, is a registration application that allows users to register the application using a serial number. Key features include:

- Input fields: users need to enter a valid serial number to enable the application.
- Validation logic: This application verifies the entered serial number with that of all authorized serial numbers.
- Confirmation of activation: When validation is successful, there will be a pop-up confirmation message indicating successful registration of the application.
- Security measures: the application has features to protect it from being accessed illegally by checking duplicate serial numbers and checking that the input format matches that of serial numbers in use.

Selection criteria for applications include topical relevance to use cases in the real world and variation in their complexity and functionality.

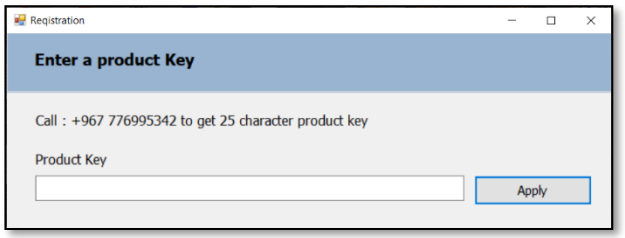


Figure 5. The registration application interface.

3.3. Evaluation Tools

The following tools were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the obfuscation technique:

1. Static Analysis Tools: For decompiling and analyzing the sample programs before and after obfuscation, we use the dotNet Reflector tool [13] and the dotPeek tool [14].
2. Performance Measurement Tools: To measure execution time, we use the stopwatch class in C#. Also, to count the lines of code before and after obfuscation, we use the Visual Studio analysis metrics tool.
3. Complexity Analysis Tools: To evaluate code cyclomatic complexity metrics, a Visual Studio analysis metrics tool was used.

3.4. Testing Methodology

- The evaluation process involved the following steps:
- **Implementation**: The two selected applications were obfuscated using the developed hybrid technique.
- **Performance Testing**: Execution time and code size were measured for both original and obfuscated versions of each application.
- **Security Testing**: Cyclomatic Complexity Analysis and **many reverse** engineering tools were employed to analyze the obfuscated code and assess resistance to decompilation.
- **Comparison: A** comparison is carried out between our hybrid obfuscation tool and a famous available obfuscation tool named ConfuserEx [12] to demonstrate its advantages.

4. RESULTS

In this section, we present the findings from the evaluation of our hybrid obfuscation technique, focusing on its effectiveness in enhancing software security and performance.

4.1. Performance Metrics

4.1.1. Execution Time:

As shown in table 1, The Average execution time of the obfuscated applications was measured and compared to their non-obfuscated counterparts. The results indicate a [6%] increase in execution time for the login application and a [13%] increase for the registration application. The execution times for both clear and obfuscated versions of the applications showed minimal variation, where this variation could be negligible; even if some overhead was introduced, the impact was deemed acceptable for the added security benefits.

The differences in execution time were within ±4 milliseconds, which is negligible. A difference of 4 milliseconds falls well within the range of normal fluctuations caused by factors such as system load, background processes, or hardware variability. Human perception thresholds for noticing delays vary, but research suggests that delays of around 100 milliseconds are often needed for users to perceive a noticeable lag. Therefore, a difference of 4 milliseconds is unlikely to be perceptible to users and would not affect their experience.

Table 1. The Average execution times.

Application Name	Before obfuscation	After obfuscation	Execution time Increment percentage
	Average Execution time (MS)	Average Execution time (MS)	
Login application	**33**	**35**	**6%**
Registration application	**29**	**33**	**13%**

4.1.2. Code Size:

For the proposed hybrid technique, the size of the obfuscated code for login application increased by [44 lines or 488%], also the registration application increased by [84 lines or 442%] (see Table 2 and Figure 3).

For ConfuserEx the Login application increased by [62 lines or 588%], also the registration application increased by [121 lines or 537%].

The results of LOC indicating that the hybrid obfuscation technique produce a less line of code in comparing to ConfuserEx, that means the hybrid obfuscation technique produce better performance especially in case of large applications.

The increment of the LOC is due to the additional natural control flow modifications. This will not affect the code maintenance, debugging, and future development because all these tasks will use the clear version of the code, but this may affect the performance of the application in the case of big or huge applications, so we suggest using the hybrid obfuscation technique only on the sensitive parts of the application.

Table 2. The lines of code (LOC).

Application Name	Before obfuscation	After obfuscation			
	lines of code (**LOC**)	Hybrid Technique (**LOC**)	Increment percentage	ConfuserEX (**LOC**)	Increment percentage
Login application	9	53	488%	62	588%
Registration application	19	103	442%	121	537%

4.2. Security Metrics

4.2.1. Resistance to Reverse Engineering:

Tests conducted using static analysis tools (.NET Reflector, dotPeek) showed that the obfuscated code was significantly harder to decompile and analyze. For instance, the login application, after obfuscation, the .Net Reflector failure in automated analysis and inspect the code. In contrast, the original application was easily decompiled, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. The .Net Reflector Reverse tool.

BEFORE OBFUSCATION	AFTER OBFUSCATION
private void login() { string str = this.textBox1.Text.Trim(); string str2 = this.textBox2.Text.Trim(); if (str != "ali") || (str2 != "123") { MessageBox.Show("Wrong username or password, Try again");} Else { base.Hide(); new frm_main{username = str1}.Show();} }	**private void login() { //Unresolved stack at 000052C } }**

Table 4. The dotPeek Reverse tool.

BEFORE OBFUSCATION	AFTER OBFUSCATION	
private void login() { string str1 = this.textBox1.Text.Trim(); string str2 = this.textBox2.Text.Trim(); if (str1 == "ali" && str2 == "123") { this.Hide(); this.x = new frm_main(); this.x.username = str1; this.x.Show(); } else { int num = (int) MessageBox.Show("Wrong username or password.. Try again"); } }	private void login() {string str1 = this.textBox1.Text.Trim(); label_1: int num1 = -1986970624; while (true) { uint num2; string str2; int num3; switch ((num2 = (uint) (num1 ^ -368291189)) % 12U) { case 0: this.x.Show(); num1 = (int) num2 * -899704227 ^ 195104882; continue; case 1: num3 = str2 == "123" ? 1 : 0; break; case 2: num1 = (int) num2 * 420432 ^ 479259;continue; case 3: if (!(str1 == "ali")) {num3 = 0; break;} num1 = (int) num2 * 856093615 ^ 1653588159; continue; case 4:goto label_3; case 5:int num4 = (int)	MessageBox.Show("Wrong username or password.. Try again"); num1 = -717255647; continue; case 6: this.Hide(); num1 = (int) num2 * 551342047 ^ -1799828681; continue; case 7:str2 = textBox2.Text.Trim(); num1 = (int) num2 * -148987912 ^ -883956640; continue; case 8:goto label_1; case 9:num1 = (int) num2 * -441329225 ^ -2053497; continue; case 10: this.x = new frm_main(); this.x.username = str1; num1 = (int) num2 * 2053231849 ^ -1437937571; continue; case 11:num1 = (int) num2 * -170215 ^ -33055;continue; default: goto label_17;} int num5;num1 = num5 = num3 == 0 ? -1801836646: (num5 = -19034188);} label_3: return; label_17:;}

The results of the dotPeek Reverse tool shown in table 4, the hybrid obfuscation, alter the logical flow of the code, making it difficult to determine the program's actual execution path. Also, the names of methods and variables are changed to meaningless strings, removing any hints about their functionality, which makes it difficult and more time-consuming for attackers to understand the code and confuses automated analysis tools.

4.2.2. Complexity Analysis:

Cyclomatic complexity is a metric used to measure the complexity of a program by quantifying the number of linearly independent paths through the code. A higher cyclomatic complexity indicates a more complex control flow and leads to challenges for the reverse engineering to understand and debug the code. The Visual Studio Analysis tool, figure 6, was used to calculate the cyclomatic complexity of the applications before and after the obfuscation.

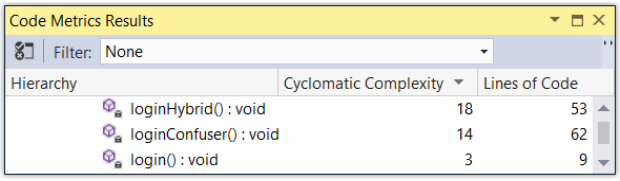


Figure 6. The Cyclomatic Complexity and LOC.

As shown in Table 5, The cyclomatic complexity of the obfuscated applications increased, indicating a more complex control flow. For the proposed hybrid technique, the ***login*** application exhibited a complexity score of (18), while the ***registration*** application showed a complexity score of (39). For ConfuserEx, the login application exhibited a complexity score of (14), while the registration application showed a complexity score of (31).

Table 5. The Cyclomatic Complexity.

Application Name	Before obfuscation	After obfuscation	
	Cyclomatic complexity		
		Proposed Hybrid Technique	ConfuserEx
Login application	3	18	14
Registration application	8	39	31

The results of the cyclomatic complexity indicate that the hybrid obfuscation technique produces a complex obfuscation code with less LOC compared to ConfuserEX. That means the hybrid obfuscation technique effectively enhances software security and leads to a challenge for reverse engineering to understand and debug or analyze the code.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper introduced a novel hybrid obfuscation technique that effectively enhances software protection against reverse engineering. By combining control flow and data obfuscation methods, our approach significantly complicates the analysis process for potential attackers while maintaining acceptable performance levels. The evaluation results demonstrate that our technique, implemented in a practical prototype, not only increases the complexity of the obfuscated code but also improves resistance to decompilation tools compared to existing solutions.

While the increase in execution time is minimal and deemed acceptable given the security benefits, our findings highlight the importance of carefully balancing performance with the need for robust protection mechanisms. The hybrid obfuscation technique's ability to achieve a higher cyclomatic complexity with fewer lines of code further emphasizes its effectiveness in thwarting unauthorized analysis. Overall, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on software security by providing a viable solution that developers can adopt to safeguard their applications against reverse engineering threats. Future work could explore further enhancements to the hybrid technique and investigate its application across diverse software environments to ensure comprehensive protection in an ever-evolving threat landscape.

6.1 Limitations and Future Work

Our method of hybrid obfuscation has the following limitations:

- Currently the technique is implemented only for .NET CIL (Common Intermediate Language). This limits its applicability to other platforms.
- The renaming process might break applications that use a lot of reflection if set up incorrectly.

Future work will target:

- Extending the technique to other platforms.
- Anti-debugging and anti-tampering mechanisms will also be integrated.
- Also include a machine learning-based obfuscation selector that will adapt according to the characteristics of the target application.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.H.B, M.F.A; Methodology, M.H.B, M.F.A, and N.M.; Validation, N.M; Writing Original Draft Preparation, M.H.B.; Writing Review & Editing, M.F.A, and N.M; Supervision, M.F.A.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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