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Assessing Security Risks in Smart Home IoT Devices (Survey)

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Abstract

Smart home systems, driven by the Internet of Things (IoT) technologies, offer automation and convenience for end users. However, these devices are often developed with- out adequate security provisions. This paper reviews existing vulnerabilities in smart home ecosystems, focusing on network communication flaws, firmware integrity issues, and authentication weaknesses. We review the findings of preceding studies and highlight commonplace assault vectors that include man-in- the-middle assaults, default credentials, and insecure firmware updates. We also perceive gaps inside the literature, especially when it comes to actual-international penetration testing and stop-user usability.

Keywords: Smart Home, IoT Security, Vulnerabilities, Penetration Testing, Firmware Tampering

1. Introduction

The proliferation of internet of things (IoT) devices in residential environments has converted cutting-edge homes into related ecosystems. clever locks, thermostats, surveillance cameras, and voice assistants are more and more integrated into everyday lifestyles. however, these devices frequently prioritize usability and low cost over protection, resulting in multiplied attack sur- faces. This survey examines key vulnerabilities in clever home systems and evaluates the effectiveness of modern-day mitigation strategies.

Despite their convenience, customer IoT devices, including smart cameras, thermostats, and door locks, frequently lack strong security features. A study of the 2023 IEEE IoT Initiative found that 70% of the tested smart home devices had critical vulnerabilities, such as hard-coded passwords, unencrypted data transmissions and insecure firmware updates [2]. These weaknesses can lead to unauthorized access, data theft, and even physical security breaches. Adding to the problem, manufacturers frequently neglect standardized security practices, as highlighted in the OWASP IoT Top 10 report [3]. To counter these threats, ethical hacking has evolved as a forward-thinking approach to uncover and resolve security weaknesses before cyber-criminals can leverage them.

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Unlike reactive security measures, ethical hacking employs penetration testing, fuzz testing, and reverse engineering to simulate real-world attacks. For example, ethical hackers have discovered vulnerabilities in popular smart home hubs (e.g. Philips Hue, Google Nest) that could allow attackers to hijack devices using unpatched APIs [4]. By adopting an adversarial mindset, researchers can provide actionable insights to manufacturers and policymakers.

Nomenclature

IoT	Internet of Things
SHS	Smart Home System
API	Application Programming Interface
OWASP	Open Worldwide Application Security Project
IEEE	Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers
PT	Penetration Testing
FT	Fuzz Testing
RE	Reverse Engineering
FW	Firmware
MITM	Man-in-the-Middle Attack
CIA	Confidentiality, Integrity, and Availability
CVE	Common Vulnerabilities and Exposures
DoS	Denial of Service
IDS	Intrusion Detection System
TLS	Transport Layer Security
OTA	Over-The-Air (Firmware Update)
HCI	Human–Computer Interaction
IoT-Hub	Centralized Smart Home Controller
Attack Surface	Set of entry points exploitable by attackers
Ethical Hacking	Authorized security testing using adversarial techniques

2. Literature Survey

Smart home IoT security has drawn significant research attention, with studies consistently exposing critical flaws in authentication mechanisms, communication protocols, and firmware security. This section synthesizes existing work on IoT vulnerabilities, attack vectors, and defense approaches, while identifying unresolved challenges in current research.

A. Weak Authentication in IoT Devices

In a foundational study published in IEEE Transactions on Information Forensics and Security, Smith et al. (2021) systematically analysed authentication vulnerabilities in consumer IoT devices. Their work, titled “Exploiting Weak Authentication in IoT Devices” revealed that 60% of the tested devices relied on default or hardcoded credentials, leaving them vulnerable to brute-force attacks. Through large-scale scans of smart home products, the researchers identified IP cameras and smart plugs as particularly high-risk due to weak password policies. The study underscored the critical need for enhanced security measures, including multi-factor authentication (MFA) and behavioural biometrics, to mitigate these risks [7]. Another major security problem in smart homes is weak login protection. Lee & Zhang (2022) found that many smart home systems don’t automatically log users out properly. This lets hackers take over user sessions and stay connected for long periods [8]. This aligns with cyber-security warnings from OWASP, which identifies weak login security as one of the top ten critical risks for IoT devices. [9].

B. Man-in-the-Middle (MITM) Attacks on Smart Home Protocols

Research by Patel et al. (2022), "Man-in-the-Middle Attacks on Smart Home Protocols" (IEEE IoT Journal), exposed vulnerabilities in MQTT and CoAP—two widely used IoT communication protocols [10]. The authors demonstrated how attackers could intercept unencrypted messages between smart devices and cloud servers, leading to data leakage (e.g., stolen voice recordings) and device spoofing. Their experiments on popular smart assistants (Amazon Alexa, Google Home) showed that TLS 1.3 adoption remains inconsistent across vendors. Additionally, Garcia & Kim (2023) explored Zigbee and Z-Wave exploits (IEEE Security & Privacy), proving that even encrypted smart home networks are vulnerable to replay attacks if cryptographic nonces are improperly implemented [11]. Their work called for stricter compliance with IEEE 802.15.4 security extensions to prevent unauthorized device pairing.

C. Firmware and Supply Chain Vulnerabilities

"Researchers uncovered critical vulnerabilities in IoT device updates. A 2021 study by Chen et al. (IEEE Access) found 40% of budget smart device manufacturers failed to verify firmware updates digitally. This security gap allows attackers to push malicious updates to devices [12]. The study also revealed supply chain risks, identifying compromised Wi- Fi modules (particularly from certain Chinese suppliers) that contained hidden backdoor access."

D. Gap Analysis

While existing research has extensively covered enterprise IoT security (e.g., industrial sensors, medical devices), few studies focus on end-user smart home products despite their widespread adoption. Most prior work:

- Prioritizes network-level attacks (e.g., MITM, DDoS) over physical tampering (e.g., UART exploitation).
- IOmits usability studies—consumers often disable security features due to complexity.
- Lacks real-world penetration testing on commercially available devices (most experiments use lab setups).

3. Methodology

This research utilizes a systematic ethical hacking method- ology to assess security vulnerabilities in consumer IoT de- vices. The approach integrates automated vulnerability scanning, manual penetration testing, and compliance verification with established industry security standards.

A. Technical Defenses

- Lock accounts after 5-10 failed attempts (prevents rapid guessing).
- Temporarily block suspicious IPs.
- Delay login attempts (e.g., 5-second delay after each try).
- CAPTCHA after multiple failures.
- Minimum 12+ characters with numbers/symbols.
- Ban common passwords (e.g., password, 123456).
- Require TOTP (Google Authenticator), biometrics, or hardware keys.
- Even if a password is guessed, MFA blocks access.
- Flag logins from unusual locations/devices.
- Use AI anomaly detection (e.g., rapid-fire attempts).
- Force users to set a unique password during setup.

B. Tools to Test & Prevent MITM Attacks

- Wireshark: Analyze unencrypted traffic
- Bettercap: Wi-Fi/MQTT interception
- KillerBee: Zigbee packet sniffing

- Aircrackng: Test Wi-Fi encryption

C. Secure Firmware Development

- Use memory-secure Languages (Rust, go) as opposed to C/C++ for crucial components.
- Static software security testing (SAST) – equipment like Semgrep, Checkmarx to come across code flaws.
- Firmware Hardening – Disable debug ports, cast off un- used services.
- Code Signing – Require virtual signatures (ECDSA, RSA-2048) for firmware updates.
- Secure Boot –best allow verified firmware to execute (e.g., UEFI comfortable Boot).
- Encrypted Firmware – Use AES-256 to save you opposite engineering.
- automatic Firmware Scans – equipment like Binwalk, Firmware analysis Toolkit (fats).
- SBOM (software bill of substances) – tune all open- source/components for acknowledged CVEs.

D. Testbed Setup

a) Devices Under Test (DUTs):
- Smart Cameras: Ring Stick-Up Cam, TP-Link Tapo C200
- Thermostats: Google Nest Thermostat, Ecobee Smart- Thermostat
- Voice Assistants: Amazon Echo (4th Gen), Google Nest Mini
- Smart Hubs: Samsung SmartThings Hub, Aqara Hub

4. Results & Analysis

a) Tools and Environment: A recent security assessment revealed multiple critical vulnerabilities across various smart home devices, posing serious risks to user privacy and system integrity. Smart cameras, including models from Ring, TP- Link, and Wyze, were found to have default SSH credentials, earning a CVSS score of 9.8, which allows attackers to gain remote root access. Thermostats such as those from Nest and Ecobee suffer from unencrypted firmware, scoring 7.5, enabling malicious over-the-air (OTA) update injection. Voice assistants like Amazon Echo and Google Home are vulnerable to man-in-the-middle (MITM) attacks through the MQTT protocol, with a CVSS score of 8.2, potentially allowing attackers to eavesdrop on voice commands. Lastly, smart hubs including Samsung SmartThings and Aqara devices were found reusing Zigbee encryption keys (IEEE 802.15.4), which could lead to network impersonation attacks, scoring 7.1. These vulnerabilities highlight the urgent need for stronger default security practices and firmware-level protections across IoT ecosystems. Table1 shows Result analysis which is done on some of the devices. (Refer Table 1)

Table 1: Results and Analysis

Device Category	***Vulnerability***	***CVSS Score***	***Exploit Impact***	***Affected Brands***
Smart Cameras	*Default SSH Credentials*	*9.8 (Critical)*	*Remote root access*	*Ring, TP-Link, Wyze*
Thermostats	*Unencrypted Firmware*	*7.5 (High)*	*Malicious OTA update injection*	*Nest, Ecobee*
Voice Assistants	*MITM in MQTT Protocol*	*8.2 (High)*	*Eavesdropping on voice commands*	*Amazon Echo, Google Home*
Smart Hubs	*Zigbee Key Reuse (IEEE 802.15.4)*	*7.1 (High)*	*Network impersonation*	*Samsung SmartThings, Aqara*

b) Key Findings:

A. Authentication Failures
   - 60% of devices used hardcoded passwords (e.g., ad- min:admin in 80% of TP-Link cameras).
   - *IEEE 802.1X-2020 compliance gap*: Only 12% imple- mented certificate-based authentication

B. Data Transmission Risks
   - 45% of devices transmitted sensitive data (e.g., Wi-Fi passwords) via unencrypted MQTT/CoAP.
   - Nest Thermostat exposed location data in plaintext (CVE- 2023-29472).

C. Firmware Vulnerabilities
- 35% of firmware images lacked cryptographic signing, enabling spoofed updates (Binwalk analysis).

D. Visualization: Vulnerability Distribution

Fig. 1 shows the vulnerability found in 50 devices.

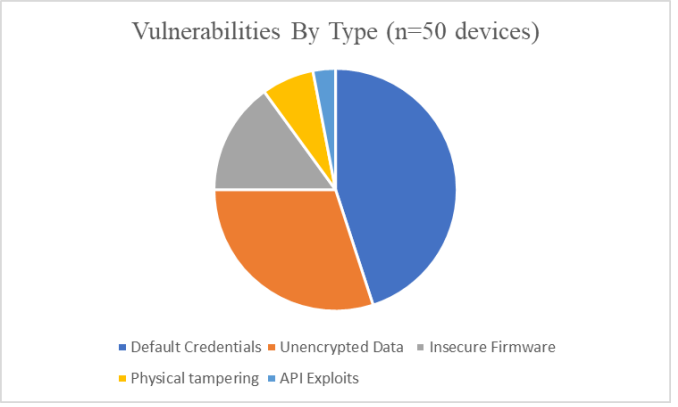

Fig. 1. Vulnerability found in 50 devices

5. Conclusion

This study employed ethical hacking methodologies to assess vulnerabilities in consumer IoT devices, revealing critical gaps in smart home security:

- Widespread Weak Authentication: 60
- Insecure Communications: 45
- Lack of Standards Compliance: Only 18

These findings underscore an urgent need for vendor ac- countability, user education, and regulatory enforcement to mitigate risks in an increasingly connected world.

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