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(Review Article)

Extensive Review of Security and Privacy Issues in Heterogeneous Networks

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Abstract

This paper studies advanced network security, privacy, and performance issues for Heterogeneous Networks (HetNets), which combine multiple types of cells to enhance wireless communication coverage and capacity. The coexistence of heterogeneous network elements inherently leads to considerable issues in terms of security, privacy, and performance. Previous research has primarily addressed security issues using common cryptographic techniques including data encryption with AES, secure key exchange with RSA, and handoff security with mutual authentication. Data anonymization methods and regulatory compliance have been used to address privacy concerns. Allocating resources and managing interference are some of the tactics that have been used in performance optimization. Although the current solutions offer a solid base, they frequently have issues with computational overhead, scalability, and continuous maintenance needs. Performance optimization solutions might not sufficiently handle dynamic network conditions, and privacy protections might not be sufficient to mitigate sophisticated data harvesting operations. This study evaluates existing HetNets solutions using a thorough evaluation and analytical technique. It assesses how well they handle issues with security, privacy, and performance, points out any shortcomings, and suggests areas for further investigation. Our analysis emphasizes the need for improved security mechanisms, including quantum-resistant cryptography, AI-driven threat detection, and technologies that improve privacy, such as differential privacy and homomorphic encryption. Innovative resource management and optimization strategies catered to HetNets' dynamic nature are needed to address performance issues. The necessity of developing new security, privacy, and performance solutions to guarantee the stability and dependability of HetNets is emphasized by this study. Stakeholders can promote the broad adoption and smooth integration of HetNet technology by tackling these obstacles. To sum up, this study offers a thorough analysis of the HetNets' architectural, security, privacy, and performance issues. It lists existing remedies, analyses their drawbacks, and suggests new lines of inquiry for future development to advance the area and improve HetNets' operational capabilities.

Keywords: Heterogeneous Networks; Small Cells; Authentication; Encryption; Network Resilience; Machine Learning for Security.

1 Introduction

Wireless networks have evolved from the 1G to the current Fifth Generation (5G) and beyond due to the constant need for fast wireless communication and the rapid expansion of mobile devices [1]-[3]. Data rates, latency, and capacity have all significantly improved with each new iteration. However, due to the growth of connected devices and data traffic, traditional network architectures—which are mostly focused on homogenous networking and macro cells—are finding it increasingly difficult to handle the explosive increase in capacity demand [4]-[6]. This challenge has spurred the deployment of Heterogeneous Networks (HetNets). According to [7], particularly in the context of 5G and beyond, heterogeneous networks (HetNets) integrate numerous information and communication technologies (ICTs) to deliver high-quality service for a variety of consumers. These networks offer distributed communication modes through device-to-device (D2D) characteristics and cutting-edge technology like massive MIMO and interference cancellation. These

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systems combine different ICTs to improve QoS (quality of service) for different user classes, especially concerning 5G and beyond [8]. These networks may comprise gateway devices to enable smooth network connectivity as well as other data networks, including those that use the Time Slotted Channel Hopping (TSCH) and Carrier Sense Multiple Access (CSMA) protocols [9]. Because of their intricate structures and content, heterogeneous networks present both opportunities and difficulties for creating specialized machine learning solutions to solve a range of problems in complex systems [10]. These networks may also include techniques like utilizing several connection channels, such Multiprotocol Border Gateway Protocol (MP-BGP) and OpenFlow, to synchronize messages across distinct domain devices [11]. The heterogeneous networks seek to raise the flexibility and universality of communication systems while lowering costs, minimizing delays, and increasing data transmission efficiency [12], [13] . These HetNets have substantial obstacles when it comes to privacy, security, and performance enhancement.

HetNets' security issues are increased by the integration of many technologies and devices, leaving networks vulnerable to dangers including data interception, eavesdropping, and illegal access [14]-[15]. These flaws erode user confidence in the network architecture in addition to compromising data integrity and secrecy. These security issues must be resolved to protect sensitive data and guarantee the dependable operation of vital services, including public safety communications, healthcare applications, and financial transactions [16], [17]. HetNets' massive gathering, transfer, and processing of personal data raises privacy issues [18], [19]. The interchange of data between devices over heterogeneous network elements increases the danger of privacy violations and data breaches. Maintaining user privacy rights and adhering to legal obligations (such as the GDPR) depend on having strong privacy safeguards. HetNets can reduce these risks and increase user confidence in the secure handling of their personal data by putting in place privacy-enhancing technologies and strict data protection policies [20]. The intricate interactions between various network components and technologies, which affect data throughput, latency, and reliability, are the source of performance problems in HetNets. Managing smooth handovers and optimizing resource allocation become essential when HetNets include numerous small cells, macro cells, and other network parts [21]-[24]. This is necessary to guarantee constant service quality over a range of user densities and traffic patterns. Performance on traditional centralized networks is frequently compromised during hours of high demand due to inefficiencies in managing network load and resource allocation. HetNets use technologies like dynamic spectrum allocation and network slicing to optimize resource utilization and boost spectral efficiency to overcome these issues [25]-[30]. HetNets' integration of edge computing allows for reduced latency and localized data processing, which is beneficial for latency-sensitive applications like autonomous vehicles and real-time video streaming [31].

With an emphasis on the privacy, security, and performance in heterogeneous networks, this research significantly focuses on:

- Thorough examination of the privacy problems and the solutions in heterogeneous networks.
- Assessment of heterogeneous networks security risks and practical solutions.
- Analysis of the performance issues and the existing solutions in heterogeneous networks.
- Identification of research gaps and future research scopes.

2 Hetnets Architecture

The term heterogeneous networks describe the inter-working of different radio network layers (the macro cell layer and one or more small cell layers). HetNets increase network capacity by adding more cell sites; i.e., radio access networks, macro sites, in-building wireless and small cell deployments. As shown in Figure 1, HetNets use a combination of macro, pico, and femto cells to offer network densification. HetNets appear as one ubiquitous, seamless network that incorporates different access technologies like 4G, 5G, and Wi-Fi [32]. Heterogeneous networks are distinguished by a variety of nodes and edges, providing a more thorough depiction of the connections between various entities. These networks are essential for many applications because they allow data from different platforms and data sources to be combined [33].

HetNets not only significantly improve network coverage, they can also reduce power consumption and improve overall spectral efficiency [34]. HetNets offer relief and optimally benefit operators and users alike, but only if their installation is close to where additional capacity is required (i.e., close to the people) and a higher Signal-to-Interference-and-Noise-Ratio (SINR) can be achieved compared to the existing (macro-cell) deployment [35], [36]. A high SINR results in high additional indoor capacity created by the new base stations [37]. By combining lower-power small cells (femto, pico, and micro cells) with higher-power macro cells, HetNets offer advantages such as lower costs, more efficiency and better coverage.

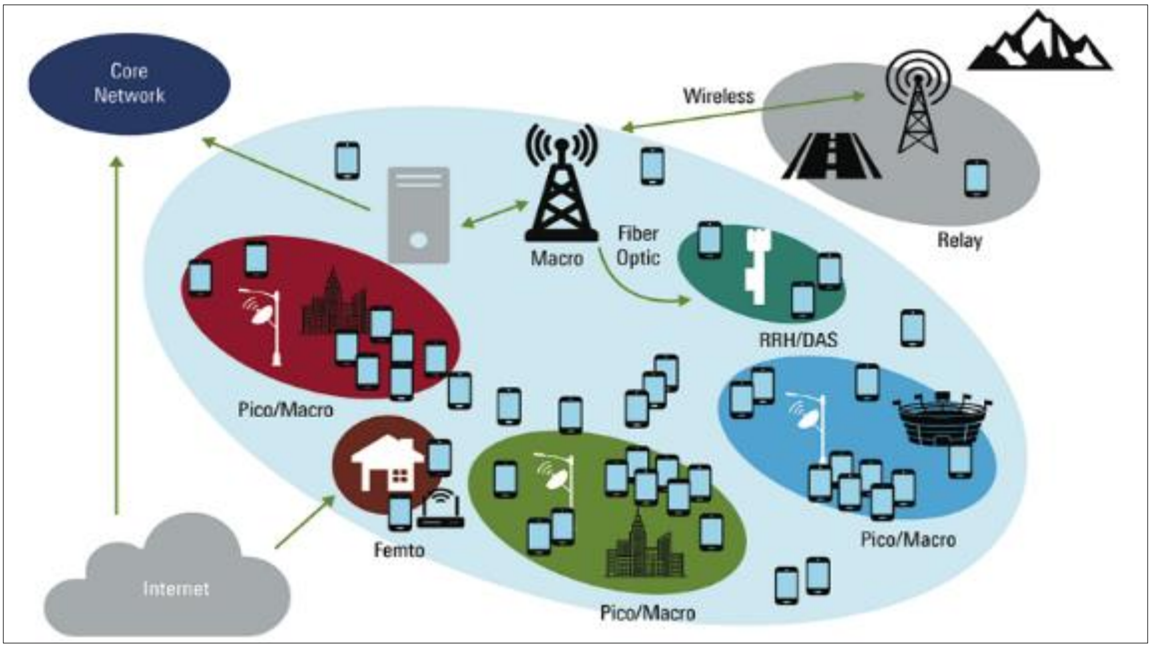

Figure 1 Heterogenous Network

Nevertheless, issues with energy management and interference arise when dense HetNets are deployed [38]. However, the implementation of dense HetNets has several challenges, including severe interference, inadequate energy management, and a lack of adaptability and flexibility. As the authors in [39] explain, Heterogeneous C-RANs (H-CRANs) [40] present a promising alternative for achieving high energy and spectrum efficiency [41], [42]. While MEC can offer substantial computing resources for low-latency applications, H-CRANs can also offer wide coverage and good energy efficiency. By merging these two essential technologies, 5G will provide additional applications. Considering the computational and storage resources in the BBU pools as well as the deployment of the RRHs, H-CRAN may be connected with MEC to facilitate the MEC system's installation [43], [44].

2.1 Elements of HetNets

The following are the basic building blocks of heterogeneous networks:

a). Macro cells: As in other cellular networks, a high-power base station (BS) is used to cover a wide area in a macro cell network [45]. The Base Station is always located at a high location, like the top of a mountain or tower, from where it can offer a clear view of the surrounding structures and barriers, and therefore it has a long transmission distance and a vast coverage area, with a cell radius ranging from 1 km to 25 km [7]. Macro cells are also characterized by:

Large Coverage Area: They are made to cover a wide geographic area with a high degree of coverage. Their diameter usually spans several kilometres, which makes them perfect for providing wide-area cellular service in rural, suburban, and urban settings [46].

High Transmit Power: Compared to small cells, macro cells operate at higher transmit power levels because of their broader coverage footprint [47]. They can span greater distances and more successfully through walls and other obstructions.

Lower Frequencies: Mainly utilized for 2G, 3G, and lower-frequency 4G LTE deployments, macro cells operate in lower frequency bands, usually below 6 GHz. These frequencies provide superior long-distance propagation characteristics as well as improved obstacle penetration [48], [49].

Capacity Handling: High amounts of data traffic and numerous simultaneous connections can be handled by macro cells. Within their service region, they act as the main infrastructure that facilitates data downloads, video streaming, and phone conversations for a large number of users [50].

Network Backbone: Macro cells frequently act as the network's anchor points or backbone in HetNets. They offer basic coverage and capacity, which are supplemented by smaller cells (such as Wi-Fi access points and small cells) that improve coverage and capacity in certain places, including inside or busy areas [51].

b). Small Cells: Small cells come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Their range, power, and capacity for handling many users all differ. They almost always contain LTE and Wi-Fi, the carrier's two key 3G technologies. They also have a backhaul link to the cellular network and a power source [52]. Femtocells, picocells, and microcells are the small cell types that supplement the core cellular coverage that microcells provide in HetNets. Femtocells are the smallest units and the macrocells are the largest, covering tens of Kilometers. To address network capacity and coverage challenges, mobile operators provide targeted cellular coverage in smaller regions through the use of femtocells, picocells, and microcells. Femtocells cover up to 10 meters, picocells cover up to 200 meters, while the macrocells cover up to 2 Km [53].

i) Femtocells: these are affordable base stations that increase coverage over time and offer high bit rates in demanding settings like indoors [54], [55]. They are the smallest of the small cells and mobile operators frequently employ them to improve signals. Customers can directly handle them and they are simple to install and run. With a maximum range of ten meters, femtocells are a component of a mobile operator's core network. They are often referred to as "coverage" or "signal booster,". Femtocells are typically sold as plug-and-play products that need to be plugged into a power outlet and connected to a LAN or WiFi router at home for consumers to use them. They can use a gateway to connect to the mobile operator's main network once they are online. As shown in Figure 2, femtocells give mobile consumers coverage and extra capacity, just like other tiny cells do [56].

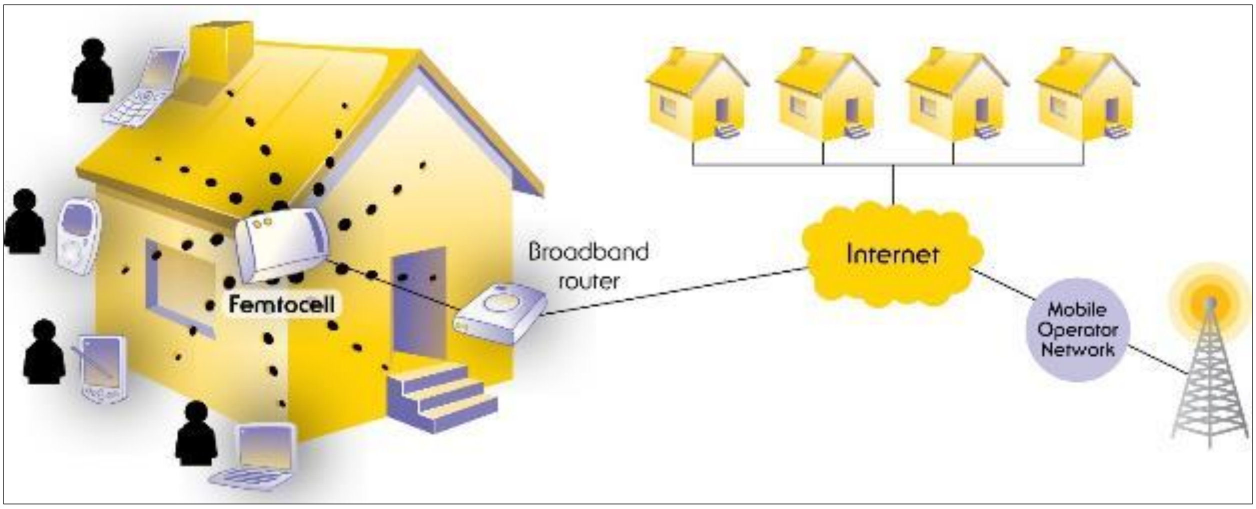

Figure 2 Femtocell

Femtocells are characterized by:

Small Coverage Area: Femtocells improve indoor cellular connectivity in regions with inadequate macrocell signals by providing small, often tens to hundred-meter coverage zones [57]. They provide steady signal strength and little interference for customers in the vicinity while relieving network congestion by unloading capacity from the macro network.

Low Transmit Power: Femtocells are compact, and therefore they minimize interference with nearby cells by operating at far lower power levels than standard macrocells [58]. Because of the low transmit power, customers can optimize their tailored deployment while also improving indoor coverage and consuming less energy.

Self-Organizing Networks (SON): These networks handle planning, configuration, and optimization autonomously, reducing the need for human interaction [59]. Since users frequently deploy femtocells without doing conventional RF planning, SON guarantees plug-and-play functionality.

Licensed and Unlicensed Spectrum: Femtocells can function in licensed or unlicensed spectrum, each with its own set of implications. Licensed bands follow rules, work with macrocells, and offer exclusive usage of particular frequencies within predetermined geographic zones [60]. Conversely, unlicensed frequencies (like Wi-Fi) are accessible to the general public, enabling femtocells to supplement current cellular networks. Femtocells operate in both spectrums, which balances capacity, cost [61], and coverage.

Subscriber Initiated Deployment: By enabling end users to build femtocells on their own in their homes or businesses, Subscriber Initiated Deployment (SID) improves interior mobile coverage without requiring direct MNO involvement [62]. By using a plug-and-play setup, this method streamlines activation and enhances voice and data connectivity in places where macrocell signals are poor.

ii) Picocell: This refers to a tiny cellular base station that usually covers a limited area. As show in Figure 3, a picocell can be found in place of an office, a store, a train station, a stock market, or, more recently, an airplane. Picocells are commonly used in cellular networks to increase network capacity in locations with high phone usage density, like train stations or stadiums, or to extend coverage to indoor regions where external signals are not as strong. In locations that are costly or challenging to access with the more conventional macrocell method, picocells offer coverage and capacity [63].

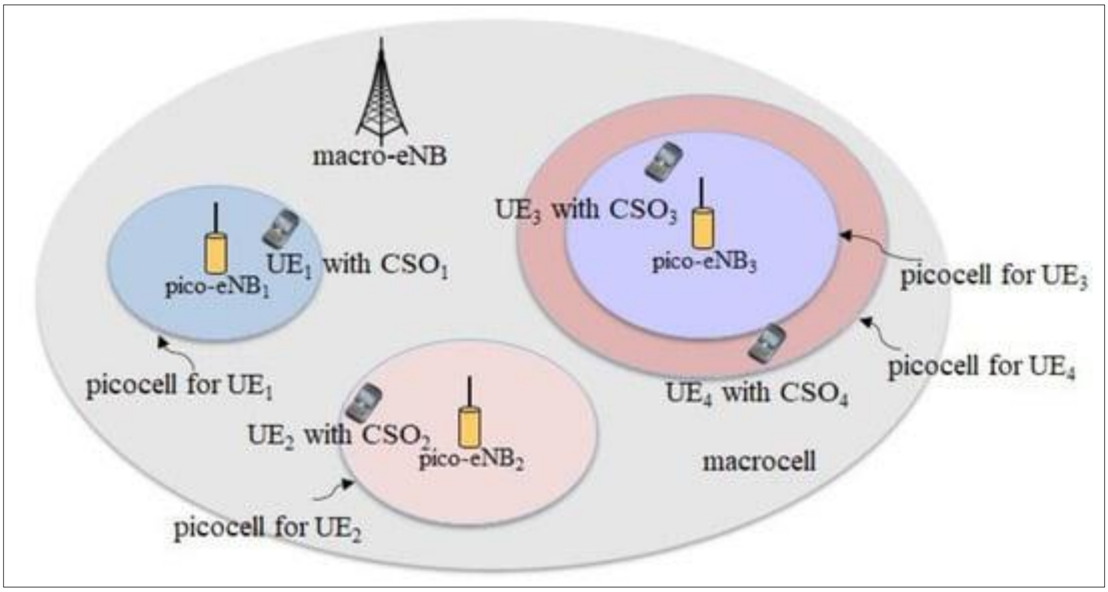

Figure 3 Picocell

Picocells are characterized by:

Coverage Area: Picocells have a limited coverage area; usually, they may cover up to 820 feet (250 meters) [64]. In locations like workplaces, retail centers, railroad stations, and stock markets, they are frequently used indoors. Nevertheless, they can also be utilized outside.

User Capacity: A picocell can accommodate up to 64 people at once. They offer targeted coverage where it's most required, however not as much as macrocells [65].

Deployment Locations: Picocells are installed within buildings as well as on utility poles, streetlights, and the sides of buildings [66]. Because of their small size, carriers can improve signal strength in places with spotty or non-existent coverage.

Backhaul: Depends on the wireless carrier or operator; often uses hybrid fiber-coaxial (HFC) technology [67] (e.g., DOCSIS 3.0/3.1).

iii). Microcells: Usually larger than a femtocell but smaller than a macro cell, this type of small-scale cellular base station is used in telecommunications networks to offer localized coverage over a relatively small geographic area [68]. They can go the furthest, around two kilometers, of any species. In addition to macrocells, microcells can expand the mobile network's coverage and capacity. Microcells have a range of up to 2 kilometers, which makes them a viable option for places like major rail stations. They can also take care of short-term capacity requirements for big public events like concerts and sporting events. In any mobile network, macrocells continue to offer the primary network coverage, but microcells can be added to the main network to cover gaps in capacity and coverage [69].

Microcells are characterized by:

- Coverage Area: Microcells have a specific coverage area, which may include transportation hubs or shopping malls [70]. Usually, their range reaches several hundred meters.
- Indoor Coverage: In areas where outdoor signals might not be as strong, they are utilized to increase mobile network coverage indoors.
- Network Capacity: Microcells expand the capacity of the network in places where phone usage is high. In comparison to larger base stations (macrocells), they can manage fewer simultaneous sessions [71].
- Cost-Effectiveness: Because microcells consume less power and have a smaller coverage area than typical macrocells, their deployment is more economical [72].
- Frequency Reuse: Reusing the same frequencies within a certain geographic area allows microcells to maximize available spectrum and improve overall network efficiency [73].
- Backhaul: Depends on the wireless carrier or operator; often uses hybrid fiber-coaxial (HFC) technology (e.g., DOCSIS 3.0/3.1).

Table 1 presents a summary of the various networks within hetnets.

Table 1 Characteristics of the HetNet Elements

Cell Type	Coverage Area	Height	Use Cases	Deployment Locations	Backhaul
Macrocell	Large (Tens of Kilometres)	>100 ft	Wide coverage, rural areas	Outdoor (cell towers)	Fiber-based or wireless microwave
Microcell	Small (Hundreds of Meters)	>100 ft	Urban areas, high traffic	Outdoor (streetlights, utility poles) or indoor	Fiber-based or hybrid fiber-coaxial
Picocell	Very Small (Tens of meters)	>100 ft	Densely populated areas, hotspots	Indoor (offices, malls) or outdoor	Fiber-based or hybrid fiber-coaxial
Femtocell	Extremely Small (Meters)	>100 ft	Residential or small office coverage	Indoor (homes, small offices)	Broadband internet (DSL, cable)

2.2 **HetNets Variations**

The following are the variants of hetnets:

2.2.1 Single-Radio Access Technology (RAT) Multi-Tier Network Components

Single RAT Multitier Network Component refers to a network architecture [74] within Heterogeneous Networks (HetNets) that utilizes a single Radio Access Technology (RAT) across multiple tiers or layers. This approach aims to simplify network management by standardizing the RAT used throughout different network components [75].

They are characterized by:

- *Dual-Band Deployment*: Small cells are deployed in both the mm-wave and sub-6GHz frequency bands via single RAT multitier networks [76]. Large route loss and directional antennas are obstacles faced by mm-wave small cells; the sub-6GHz spectrum helps with initial access operations.
- *Optimizing Coverage*: Dual-band small cell deployment aids in improving coverage. mm-wave cells have a high bandwidth, however beamforming is needed to compensate for route loss [77]. By aiding in early access, the sub-6GHz frequency enhances coverage.
- *Load balancing*: Biases are applied to tier and RAT selection to balance loads. These biases affect user throughput, cell load, and the distribution of the signal-to-interference plus noise ratio (SINR) [78]. Either user downlink throughput or SINR coverage are maximized by optimal biases.

- *Cell Density Considerations*: Dual-band small cells are essential, particularly when placed sparingly or during periods of high traffic density [79]. Through the management of overloading and outage possibilities, they improve system performance.

2.2.2 Multi-Radio Access Technology Multi-Tier Network Components

Multi-RAT Multi-Tier Component refers to the many components and architecture of a communications network that include different radio access technologies (RATs) and coverage tiers. This covers several base station tiers (such as macrocells, microcells, and small cells), Wi-Fi networks, small cells (like femtocells and picocells), and several generations of cellular technologies (including LTE and 5G). Together, these parts give wireless communication networks better capacity, efficiency, and coverage [80], [81].

They are characterized by:

- *Heterogeneity*: To maximize coverage and capacity in a variety of settings and user densities, these networks combine several radio access technologies (RATs) and cell types, such as LTE, 5G, Wi-Fi, and tiny cells [82].
- Coverage and Capacity Optimization: To optimize traffic management and user experience, they deploy different tiers of cells (macrocells, microcells, and small cells) to give seamless coverage over varying distances and areas [83].
- *Interference Management*: To reduce interference between various RATs and cells and improve spectral efficiency and network performance, sophisticated techniques including adaptive beamforming and interference coordination are used [84].
- *Flexibility and Scalability*: Because these networks are built for modular deployment and scalability, operators can gradually increase capacity and coverage without having to completely rebuild their infrastructure [85].
- Optimized Resource Allocation: They dynamically allocate resources (like spectrum and power) based on real-time network conditions [86] and user demand, ensuring efficient use of network resources and minimizing operational costs [87].

Table 2 below provides the comparisons between single rat multi-tier and multi-rat multi-tier.

Table 2 Comparison between single rat multi-tier and multi-rat multi-tier

Aspect	Single rat mlti-tier	Multi rat multi-tier
Elements	Consists of multiple tiers (e.g., macrocells, small cells) using the same radio access technology (RAT)	Involves multiple tiers using different RATs (e.g., LTE, Wi-Fi, 5G-NR)
Link	Homogeneous link properties within each tier	Heterogeneous link properties due to different RATs
Opportunistic Use	Limited to the same RAT	Opportunistically utilizes overlapping RATs
Service Management	Simplified due to uniform RATs	Complex due to diverse RATs
Quality of Service	Easier to manage QoS within a single RAT	Complex due to diverse RATs
Application Areas	Well-suited for Homogeneous Services	Enables diverse applications and improved connectivity
Examples	LTE-only multi-tier network	5G-NR + Wi-Fi multi-tier network

3 Security challenges in HetNets

A HetNet is a type of network architecture that integrates different types of cells, i.e. macrocells and small cells (microcells, picocells, and femtocells) to improve coverage, capacity, and user experience [88]. The integration of this range of tools often brings about several security issues. These issues need to be resolved. The heterogeneous character of the network itself is one of the main security issues with HetNets. In contrast to conventional homogenous networks, which usually depend on standardized protocols and infrastructure [89], HetNets integrates many technologies and interfaces. The complexity of maintaining security policies and configurations across many network nodes is increased by this variety [90], which also increases the attack surface.

3.1 Interference

Due to the presence of different cell types, such as femtocells and macrocells, interference provides a significant difficulty in heterogeneous networks (HetNets), resulting in inter-cell interference (ICI) concerns that affect user throughput and Quality of Service [91]. When considering co-channel HetNet deployment—where the macrocells and small cells share the same frequency spectrum—interference management emerges as one of the most significant issues [92], [93]. There are overlapping coverage areas, and therefore the cells operating nearby may cause interference. Controlling interference becomes essential to prevent signals from one cell from severely impairing the functionality of nearby cells [94]. HetNet interference can result in eavesdropping attacks against mobile users, jeopardizing their secrecy rate. By using interference as a covert channel, attackers might evade conventional security measures and send malicious signals or intercept confidential information [95]. The risk of eavesdropping and unlawful data interception is increased when signals are weaker owing to interference, endangering user privacy and organizational security. Interference increases the risk to device security and operational integrity in HetNets integrating IoT devices, which could allow attackers to take advantage of weaknesses and compromise more extensive network infrastructure [96].

3.2 Virtual Resource Security

Due to the complexity of virtualization, virtual resource allocation in HetNets presents difficulties and may result in security risks and vulnerabilities. Research that is now available mostly concentrates on optimizing network services without sufficiently addressing virtual resource security issues, which could lead to problems with performance and information leakage [97]. Although virtualization technology in 5G HetNets allows for flexible resource allocation, the additional complexity [98] and layers between systems provide security problems [99]. These difficulties show up as four primary categories of security threats: attacks on physical linkages, attacks among virtual elements, attacks among physical elements, and physical elements attacking virtual elements. Physical components could undermine the management of virtual nodes, opening the door to manipulation or sniffer assaults. On the other hand, susceptible physical nodes may be attacked by virtual nodes, which could result in denial-of-service (DoS) assaults. Virtual nodes that share physical resources may establish hidden channels that are vulnerable to side-channel attacks [100]-[104]. Finally, weaknesses in substrate linkages are brought to light by physical link attacks, like as man-in-the-middle attacks. To provide secure operations in 5G HetNets, it is imperative to design strong virtualized resource allocation frameworks that prioritize security. To comprehend the possible dangers associated with security threats targeting virtual resource allocation, it is necessary to model and categorize them [105]. Virtual resources in HetNets are so diverse and complicated, therefore securing them raises considerable issues. Several entities share resources like bandwidth, processing power, and storage by using virtualization techniques like Software-Defined Networking and Network Function Virtualization. Strict isolation measures are also required due to the increased danger of unwanted access, data leakage, and interference between virtual instances. The security of virtual resources can be jeopardized by exploiting flaws in virtualization technologies like hypervisors and virtual switches [106].

3.3 End-to-End Communication Security

Communication networks' end-to-end (E2E) security faces several challenges. A significant concern is the susceptibility to single points of failure, wherein the compromise of a solitary component may compromise the security of the entire network, hence enabling potential exploitation by malicious actors [107]-[110]. Identity privacy leakage is a serious issue as well since insufficient security measures could expose private user data, which could result in privacy violations and illegal access to personal information [111]. Furthermore, the scalability and adaptability of many current E2E security solutions are limited by their lack of generality across various network domains and technologies. To maintain high-security standards, smooth coordination of intricate operations such as user equipment registration, key management, authentication protocols, and session key generation is necessary for ensuring secure E2E connections [112]. Also, maintaining both security integrity and communication speed requires careful design and optimization to strike a balance between strong security measures and optimal performance efficiency [113]-[116].

3.4 Edge Security Risks

The HetNet's edge interfaces with numerous networks, making it susceptible to attacks. Edge computing is distributed and integrates a variety of network technologies [117]-[119]. Due to their lack of security features and irregular update schedules, edge devices, which are frequently placed at network edges for better performance, are susceptible to attacks including malware penetration and denial-of-service attacks. HetNets have been viewed as a viable solution to satisfy the rapidly growing needs of mobile services and applications. To cache multimedia material for mobile users, numerous caching-enabled small-cell-based stations (SBSs) are deployed within the coverage of a macro-cell base station (MBS). However, because untrusted SBSs pose security risks, the proprietors of these SBSs may get unauthorized access to the cached material, compromising the privacy of its users [120]- [122]. Because different network types and vendors have inconsistent protocols and configurations, heterogeneous networks make security management more difficult. These concerns are made worse by the growth of IoT devices, which increase the attack surface by adding more devices that can be remotely exploited and used with default credentials [123]. To offer complete protection against ever-evolving threats in HetNets, addressing these difficulties requires strong measures including intrusion detection systems, network segmentation, strong encryption, and collaborative vendor adherence to security regulations [124].

4 Privacy challenges in HetNets

HetNets presents privacy issues because of the intricate and multifaceted architecture, which combines several network domains and access methods [125]. As people interact via more channels and gadgets, issues including data security, location privacy, and regulatory compliance come to light. Because HetNets are scattered, it is more difficult to protect user data across different network domains [126]-[128]. To properly protect user information, strong privacy controls and adherence to regulatory frameworks are necessary.

4.1 Insecure Access Points

Significant privacy difficulties are introduced by the complicated network topology of HetNets, which has a variety of base station (BS) types and elaborate network topologies. This heterogeneous environment's insecure access points put user privacy and data security at risk and could compromise sensitive data. The existence of highly concentrated base stations and diverse access technologies exacerbate security weaknesses in many network segments, raising the probability of intrusions that may jeopardize user data and network stability [129] . An important security risk is presented by the existence of insecure access points, particularly in public hotspots where users value convenience over security. The vulnerability of untrusted small-cell-based stations (SBSs) in HetNets can result in unauthorized access and privacy breaches of cached multimedia material due to the exponential proliferation of mobile services and applications [130].

4.2 Privacy Preservation in Handover Authentication

Privacy preservation in handover authentication in HetNets, such as 5G HetNets and integrated terrestrial-satellite networks (ITSN), is a crucial concern due to the increasing risk during user mobility support and network densification [131]-[134]. The intricacy emerges from the requirement to preserve service continuity while shielding private user data—like location—during handovers. The need for standardized and compatible authentication frameworks arises from the added complexity of privacy protection measures caused by interoperability among BSs from different operators or technologies [135]. User tracking, identity disclosure, location privacy, contextual data, and the trade-off between privacy and authentication delays also contribute to the complexity of this problem.

5 Performance challenges in HetNets

HetNets integrate several access points and a variety of network technologies to improve coverage and capacity [136]. This represents a paradigm shift in wireless communication systems. Despite offering considerable advantages including increased spectral efficiency and better user experience, the implementation of HetNets presents several performance issues. These comprise problems with mobility management, resource allocation, interference control, and providing quality of service (QoS) across diverse network parts [137]. For HetNets to fulfil the ever-increasing needs for flawless connectivity and high-speed data services in contemporary wireless communications, these obstacles must be overcome.

5.1 Interference Management

HetNets have special requirements and characteristics, and therefore authentication presents a serious security risk [138]-[140]. Ensuring End-to-End (E2E) communication security is critical in the context of Large-Scale HetNets (LS-HetNets), as current research highlights problems such as identity privacy leakage and single points of failure [141]. HetNets pose a complex challenge in terms of securing access control and secure authentication across heterogeneous network parts like Wi-Fi access points, macro cells, small cells, and Internet of Things devices. The administration of user identities and access privileges is made more difficult by the possibility that multiple authentication procedures and protocols be used by each type of network element. Network compromises, illegal access, and data breaches can result from improperly configured access control settings or weak authentication procedures [142]-[146]. It is essential to integrate safe and easy authentication methods throughout HetNets to stop unwanted access attempts and safeguard private information sent over the network. Furthermore, HetNets' subset of vehicular networks has difficulties with authentication because of their great mobility and variety of security approaches. The dynamic structure, which causes devices to connect and disengage frequently as they travel between various network nodes, makes it more difficult to maintain continuous access control and authentication [147]. Since HetNets integrate several devices, interference results from multiple networks coexisting on the same frequencies and overlapping coverage areas. The user experience and overall network efficiency are ultimately jeopardized by this interference, which results in lower throughput, higher packet loss rates, and increased delay. We examine a co-channel HetNet deployment scenario, as seen in the figure below, where Q number of small cells, each consisting of a low power transmitter, are superimposed on a macro cell M with high power base station. It is expected that every base station and user equipment has Nt and Nr antennas configured, correspondingly. High cross-tier and co-tier interference coexist because all cells inside the macro cell coverage reuse the same frequency band and because cell coordination was not initially anticipated [148]. Figure 4 gives an illustration of interference in HetNets.

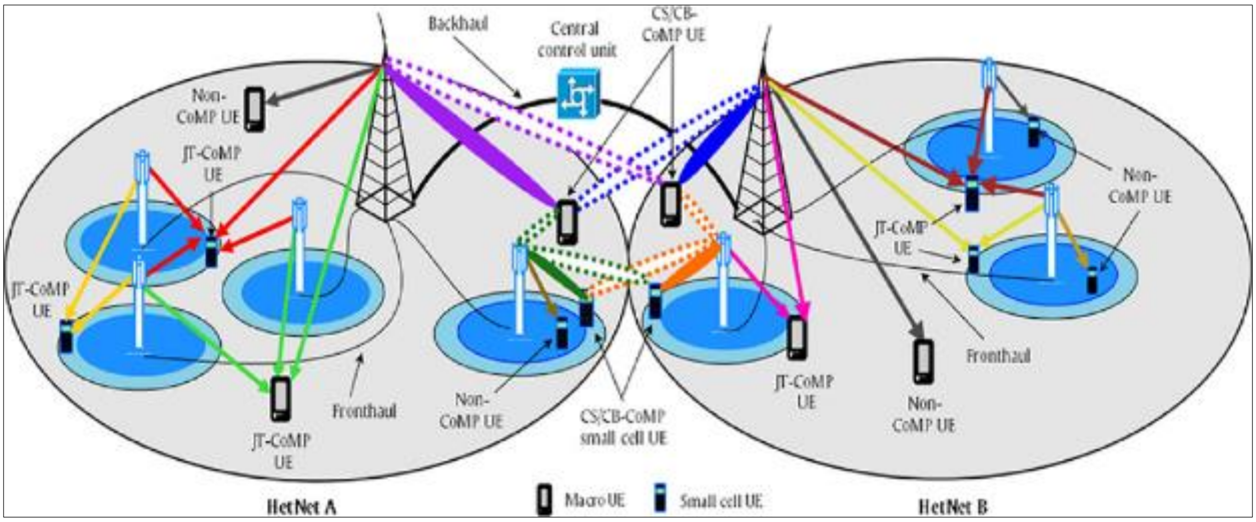

Figure 4 Interference in HetNets

The performance of HetNets is largely dependent on interference levels. Uplink transmission power control (PC) is crucial to reducing interference and improving system performance in 5G relay-based HetNets because interference from co-channel User Equipment (UEs) and Relay Nodes (RNs) can severely reduce the User Equipment (UE) signal [149], [150]. Furthermore, co-tier interference is introduced by the deployment of femtocells in HetNets, which affects the performance of different 5G applications.

5.2 Mobility Management

Because small cells are deployed in Heterogeneous Networks (HetNets), managing mobility presents a major challenge that necessitates effective mobility solutions and more handovers [151]. The different cell sizes and coverage areas in HetNets make handover and mobility management difficult. HetNets' mobility management can degrade performance [152] by complicating resource allocation, adding to signaling overhead, and generating disruptions during network handovers. Transitions between distinct network types, such as cellular to Wi-Fi, may result in poor connectivity and reduced service quality, whereas frequent mobility may put stress on network nodes and complicate general network administration. Efficient changeover techniques and protocols are necessary for seamless mobility between different cell types (such as switching from a macro cell to a small cell) to retain connectivity without experiencing service interruptions or quality deterioration [153]-[155]. HetNets have distinct mobility and connection problems from a variety of mobile user types, including pedestrians, vehicular users, and high-speed users. High-speed users may encounter a higher rate of Radio Link Failure (RLF) because of their rapid movement and the short amount of time the network has to create and sustain connections, whereas pedestrian users may suffer Handover Ping-Pong (HOPP) because of their slower speed. There are several reasons why an incorrect cell handover occurs in HetNets including insufficient signal strength, network congestion, interference from nearby cells, etc [156], [157]. Figure 5 below shows several mobile user types and associated difficulties in the context of a 5G HetNet.

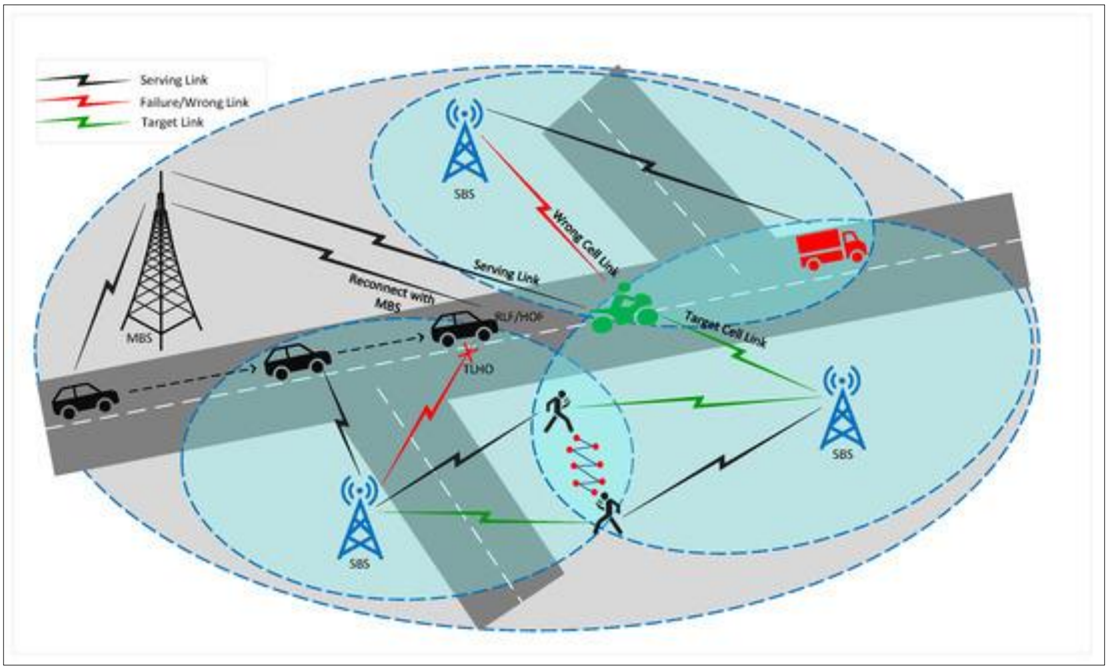

Figure 5 Mobility users and their related issues in a HetNet

5.3 Resource Allocation and Load Balancing

Resource Allocation [158] and Load Balancing: Because of the intricate interference scenarios and the growing number of base stations and users in HetNets, resource allocation, and load balancing provide substantial hurdles [159]. It is difficult to allocate resources (such as frequency spectrum, time slots, and transmit power) among different types of cells in an efficient manner to manage diverse and dynamic traffic loads. HetNets are designed to increase network capacity and support more users; however, this makes quality of service (QoS) challenging to achieve. Furthermore, resource allocation in high mobility networks is further complicated by the mobility feature, which renders standard optimization solvers unfeasible [160]-[163]. Insufficient resource distribution can result in underuse or congestion of network resources, which lowers service quality and creates inefficiencies. Similar to this, ineffective load balancing can cause an uneven traffic distribution, which can cause bottlenecks [164] and higher latency in specific network regions. Because they result in lost connections, sluggish speeds, and inconsistent performance throughout the heterogeneous network environment, these problems can have a substantial negative effect on user experience.

5.4 Heterogenous Deployment and Management

It is difficult to integrate different technologies and devices. Mobility and changeover problems impede the growing need for high-speed data transmission and low latency, while the swift expansion of data traffic and mobile devices demands dependable services during mobility [20], [165]. HetNet deployment and management require a variety of hardware, software, and settings for various cell types. It can be difficult to configure heterogeneous networks, effectively coordinate these components, and guarantee that different pieces of equipment and protocols work together [166].

5.5 Interoperability and Standards

There are many different types of devices, protocols, and systems in heterogeneous networks (HetNets), interoperability and standards which provide considerable issues. The variances in standard quality, implementation variances, and operational context variations are the sources of the complexity [167], [168]. Interoperability in the Internet of Things (IoT) space is further complicated by integrating sensors and devices with different standards and protocols from different vendors [169], [170].

6 Discussion

6.1 **Current Solutions to Security Challenges in HetNets**

Current solutions to security challenges in Heterogeneous Networks (HetNets) include advanced encryption protocols, multi-factor authentication, and network slicing. Encryption protocols such as AES and RSA ensure data confidentiality and integrity across diverse network components. Multi-factor authentication enhances access control by requiring multiple forms of verification, reducing the risk of unauthorized access. Network slicing isolates different network segments, allowing customized security measures for each slice and minimizing the impact of potential breaches. Additionally, machine learning algorithms are employed for real-time threat detection and mitigation, adapting to evolving security threats and ensuring robust protection for HetNets. In the following sub-sections, the current solutions to each of the issues in HetNets are described.

6.1.1 Interference

The authors in [171] proposes an approach that focuses on using estimated interference levels to inform the implementation of interference mitigation measures in HetNets. These tactics, which include the best pilot-based vector perturbation precoding, are meant to reduce interference as much as possible while maximizing network efficiency. This method shapes transmitted signals in wireless communication networks by using pilot signals and precoding, which lowers interference and improves signal quality at receivers. To optimize signal transmission based on estimated channel information, the procedure uses pilot signals for channel estimation and designs a precoding matrix (MMSE precoding matrix in multi-user systems). This method efficiently reduces interference from other signals or devices, increasing the total capacity of the system and the quality of the signals received by HetNets. By minimizing interference between cells and antennas through optimal signal shaping based on pilot signals and channel predictions, PB-VPP in HetNets enhances network performance. According to [172], PB-VPP facilitates dependable data transmissions that are essential for availability and confidentiality in HetNets, and this improves signal integrity. The effective use of resources by PB-VPP increases network resilience by reducing vulnerabilities and supporting protection against assaults such as jamming. When combined with strong security protocols, PB-VPP improves overall defenses against online threats and guarantees safe network operations in a variety of scenarios.

6.1.2 Virtual Resource Security

Resource management in virtual networks is essential, especially when it comes to preventing Distributed Denial-of-Service (DDoS) attacks. Load-balancing strategies are used in Software-Defined Networking (SDN) to efficiently counter DDoS attacks [173]-[176]. An optimization-driven approach to resource allocation is presented for 5G mobile networks to protect against malicious co-residency and defeat DDoS attacks to enhance security. This all-encompassing resource allocation architecture strengthens the network's overall security posture and preserves the integrity of the network, guaranteeing strong protection in virtualized environments [99]. Using a comprehensive approach, the VRA-RL secAwa framework tackles the problem of virtual resource security in HetNets [131]. To ensure that only authorized entities can use resources, it uses capability-based access control mechanisms to provide access to virtual resources based on assigned permissions, prohibiting unauthorized access. Based on network conditions and real-time security measurements, reinforcement learning (RL) optimization dynamically modifies resource allocation algorithms to maximize efficiency while reducing security concerns. By giving security requirements first priority when allocating resources, security-aware resource allocation reduces vulnerability to threats. The framework keeps an eye out for irregularities in the network environment and uses automated reactions to quickly neutralize threats that are detected. Network operators can share information and coordinate responses by collaborating on security management, and uniform policy enforcement across heterogeneous networks guarantees consistent security standards. By combining access control, dynamic optimization, threat detection, policy enforcement, and cooperative defensive mechanisms within HetNets, VRA-RL secAwa improves virtual resource security overall.

6.1.3 End-to-End Communication Security

Sec-E2E, a decentralized secure end-to-end communication architecture for LS-HetNets that makes use of blockchain technology, as proposed in [111]. Through the use of BAN-Logic, Scyther, and Tamarin-prover, their framework's security was assessed, and the satisfaction of crucial security properties such as mutual authentication, privacy preservation, session key secrecy, attack resistance, and forward/backward security was confirmed. To securely store and exchange security parameters for confirming anonymous UE certificates—which are essential for user equipment (UE) authentication at Secure Networks (SN) levels—Sec-E2E uses blockchain. The benefits of the blockchain include openness, minimal maintenance costs, tamper resistance, and the removal of single points of failure [177]-[182]. Sec-E2E is a consortium blockchain that is administered by nodes from various network domains. It enables global scalability and dependable information exchange across large geographic areas by allowing new nodes to join depending on authorization. The framework limits the percentage of bad miners to reduce the dangers of node compromise while adhering to consensus procedures such as Practical Byzantine Fault Tolerance (PBFT). Furthermore, implementing an off-chain storage system with smart contracts maximizes blockchain performance to successfully satisfy the needs of LS-HetNets.

6.1.4 *Edge Security Risks*

the development of the secure edge caching framework takes into consideration the layered aspects of multimedia; the essential base layer subfiles of the contents are given by the trustworthy MBS, while the enhancement layer subfiles are cached on the untrusted SBSs. Additionally, the edge caching problem of SBSs is formulated as a non-convex 0–1 integer programming problem based on the caching capacities of SBSs and the dynamic content needs of mobile users. The ADMM is used to find the best edge caching method for each SBS in order to fix the issue. The outcomes of the simulation demonstrate how well the suggested strategy reduces content transmission latency while safeguarding each piece of material's security. In subsequent research, we will examine the cooperative caching between mobile devices and SBSs.

6.2 **Current Solutions to Privacy Challenges in HetNets**

The current solutions to privacy challenges in Heterogeneous Networks (HetNets) include advanced data anonymization techniques, secure multi-party computation (SMPC), and robust privacy policies. Data anonymization ensures that personally identifiable information (PII) is obscured, protecting user identity while maintaining data utility for analytics. SMPC allows multiple parties to jointly compute a function over their inputs while keeping those inputs private, ensuring sensitive data is not exposed during processing. Implementing strict privacy policies and compliance with regulations like GDPR further safeguard user data. Additionally, differential privacy techniques are used to add noise to data, balancing the trade-off between data utility and privacy, ensuring that individual data cannot be easily re-identified in large datasets.

6.2.1 *Insecure Access Points*

To cache multimedia material for mobile users, numerous caching-enabled small-cell-based stations (SBSs) are deployed within the coverage of a macro-cell base station (MBS) in HetNets. However, because untrusted SBSs pose security risks, the proprietors of these SBSs may get unauthorized access to the cached material, compromising the privacy of its users. According to [120], by dividing content caching duties according to trust levels, the secure edge caching strategy solves security issues in heterogeneous networks. By letting untrusted small-cell base stations (SBSs) cache enhancement layer subfiles while trusted macro-cell base stations (MBS) handle crucial base layer subfiles of multimedia content directly, it protects the privacy and security of material. This division improves overall security by lowering the possibility that SBS owners may gain unwanted access to cached content. The plan uses a distributed alternate direction method of multipliers (ADMM) to optimize SBS caching algorithms, guaranteeing mobile users receive enhancement layer subfiles effectively and securely. Through efficient caching environment management in heterogeneous networks, the scheme reduces security risks related to untrusted SBSs and protects user privacy when accessing multimedia content.

6.2.2 *Privacy Preservation in Handover Authentication*

Using SDN and user capability integration, Cao suggested a unique handover authentication mechanism with user anonymity and traceability for 5G HetNets. The approach enables direct mutual authentication and key agreement between User Equipment (UE) and Base Stations (BS) in 5G HetNets without requiring communication with any other parties, greatly streamlining the authentication handover process. Security analysis techniques, such as the BAN logic and the formal verification tool Scyther have been used to show that the architecture can provide strong security. The outcomes of the performance analysis further demonstrate that the scheme's computational and communication costs are significantly lower than those of the conventional handover scheme and other comparable

According to [126], strong privacy features are offered by XAuth on heterogeneous networks (HetNets). By preserving the identity of User Equipment (UE) during authentication, it protects user privacy and guarantees anonymity for the user. Additionally, the protocol includes conditional privacy preservation, which permits information to be disclosed selectively in response to certain conditions. This ensures the required authentication while protecting user privacy. With forward secrecy, XAuth further improves privacy by guaranteeing that previous conversations are safe even if long-term keys are later compromised. It also provides backward secrecy, which safeguards session keys from the past and future in the event that a current session key is compromised, preserving the confidentiality of network interactions across time.

6.3 Current Solutions to Performance Challenges in HetNets

The existing solutions to performance challenges in heterogeneous networks include dynamic resource allocation, load balancing, and edge computing. Dynamic resource allocation optimizes the distribution of network resources based on real-time demand, ensuring efficient utilization and reducing bottlenecks. Load balancing techniques distribute traffic evenly across the network, preventing overload on any single node and enhancing overall performance. Edge computing brings data processing closer to the source of data generation, reducing latency and improving response times. Additionally, advanced interference management strategies and the use of software-defined networking (SDN) enable more flexible and adaptive network configurations, further enhancing the performance and reliability of HetNets.

6.3.1 Interference Management

Interference management in HetNets is crucial for maintaining network performance and reliability. Techniques such as interference coordination, power control, and spectrum allocation are employed to mitigate interference. Interference coordination, including coordinated multipoint transmission (CoMP) and enhanced inter-cell interference coordination (eICIC), allows cells to work together, reducing cross-cell interference. Power control dynamically adjusts the transmission power of devices to minimize interference while maintaining communication quality. Spectrum allocation strategies, such as dynamic spectrum access and cognitive radio, enable more efficient use of available frequencies, reducing the likelihood of interference. Additionally, advanced signal processing techniques and machine learning algorithms are increasingly used to predict and adapt to interference patterns, ensuring optimal network performance in diverse and dense environments typical of HetNets.

Spectrum Sharing (Load-Based Shared Spectrum Pool): Mobile Network Operators share spectrum, working together to use a shared pool of resources for their small and macro cell networks. To effectively manage their network resources and meet the growing demand for data services, operators share the available spectrum bands. Operators can increase network capacity, optimize resource allocation, and boost overall performance by sharing spectrum [183]-[185]. The shared spectrum pool is distributed using a load-based methodology, in which each operator's traffic load is taken into account while allocating resources. By coordinating the use of spectrum resources, spectrum sharing seeks to lessen interference across operators, improving user experiences and increasing average data speeds [186], [187]. Because spectrum sharing makes it possible to manipulate interference effectively and maximizes network performance [188], it is essential for interference control in heterogeneous networks (HetNets). Several spectrum-sharing algorithms have been developed by research to manage interference in next-generation networks, such as 6G [189], [190]. Furthermore, research has investigated joint multi-domain resource-aided interference management strategies, demonstrating enhanced throughput and decreased outage probability (Ding et al,) by employing beam and power domains to control co-frequency interference in satellite-ground integrated networks. Moreover, spectrum leasing becomes more advantageous when interference levels are higher, while spectrum sharing proves advantageous for higher data rates under lower interference conditions. Spectrum trading between Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) has also been studied in the context of 5G and beyond to reduce interoperator interference [191], [192].

Spectrum Leasing (Load-Based Leased Spectrum Pool): This method gives dedicated access to particular frequency bands for a predetermined amount of time by having one operator lease spectrum resources to the other [193]. The lessee can use the leased spectrum only for network operations under this arrangement, which gives the leasing operator dedicated access to specific frequency bands. The lease usually specifies details like the length of the lease, the spectrum bands that are allotted, and any associated expenses or fees. Operators can manage network resources more flexibly by renting spectrum, which allows them to meet short-term capacity or coverage demands without committing to anything long-term. With the help of spectrum leasing, operators may increase network efficiency [194], maximize their use of spectrum, and improve subscriber experience. Spectrum leasing is an essential technique for managing interference to improve both the overall performance of the network and spectrum efficiency [195], [196]. Numerous scholarly articles offer valuable perspectives on diverse methods of mitigating interference within these types of networks. In comparison to spectrum sharing, the use of spectrum leasing, as discussed in [197], can be useful in situations when there is greater levels of interference. Furthermore, research such as [4] suggests strategies for reusing spectrum that employ a Stackelberg game technique to lessen cross-tier interference, hence enhancing spectral efficiency in HetNets. According to [198], by lowering interference in primary networks, novel interference management strategies like interference alignment, can optimize spectrum allocation, hence improving network performance and utility.

6.3.2 Mobility Management

Mobility management in heterogeneous networks is essential for ensuring seamless connectivity and optimal performance as users move across different network cells. Key solutions include handover mechanisms, context-aware mobility management, and the use of software-defined networking (SDN). Handover mechanisms, such as hard and soft handovers, allow devices to switch between cells without interrupting ongoing connections. Context-aware mobility management leverages information about user location, speed, and network conditions to make more intelligent handover decisions. SDN enables centralized control of the network, allowing for dynamic and flexible management of mobility. Additionally, the integration of machine learning algorithms helps predict user movement patterns and preemptively adjust network resources, ensuring continuous and efficient connectivity in the heterogeneous and dynamic environments characteristic of HetNets.

Autonomous Mobility Management Control Approaches: HetNets' autonomous mobility management makes use of tile coding function approximation and reinforcement learning [199], [200]. This aims at minimizing needless handovers and failures, improving user equipment (UE) mobility robustness, and optimizing changeover control rules. Through interaction with the environment, the reinforcement learning framework develops the best handover control strategy on its own. When compared to deep Q-learning using neural networks, tile coding ensures higher convergence and computing efficiency [201] by handling the enormous state and action space efficiently. The strategy's key goals are to achieve almost zero handover failure rates, maintain high throughput, low latency, and lower operational expenses. Through sophisticated mobility management control, it establishes smooth communications between the UE and the base station. By integrating Device-to-Device (D2D) communication in HetNets using frameworks such as E-MIS-D2D, the D2D mobility experience is improved, the packet loss ratio is decreased, and the evolved Node B (eNB)'s average throughput, latency, bandwidth utilization, and load rate are all improved [202]. In addition, the integration of Multi-Access Edge Computing (MEC) technology and identity-location separation mechanisms into mobility management resolves problems with handover signal interactions, anchor points, and signaling overhead, leading to better performance than that of conventional cellular handover mechanisms [203]. To provide smooth communication during user mobility in HetNets, auto-tuning optimization techniques based on user speed and received signal reference power aid in lowering the frequency of handovers and handover failure ratios [204].

Context-aware Mobility Management Strategies: This entails leveraging inter-cell coordination and reinforcement learning techniques to enhance user equipment (UE) throughput and handover performance [205], [206]. To schedule user equipment based on their velocities and historical rates exchanged throughout tiers, macro and pico base stations cooperatively study their long-term traffic loads and ideal cell range expansion. To choose the best neighbor cells for handovers, the system takes into account variables including velocity, historical data, and traffic loads [207]. This guarantees smooth connections between the UE and the base station [208]. By resolving the issues raised by HetNets, this method improves small-cell network performance and fairness.

6.3.3 Resource Allocation and Load Balancing

Resource allocation and load balancing in heterogeneous networks are critical for optimizing network performance and ensuring equitable distribution of resources among diverse network elements. Dynamic resource allocation techniques adjust the distribution of bandwidth, power, and other resources based on real-time demand and network conditions, ensuring efficient utilization and minimizing congestion. Load balancing algorithms distribute network traffic evenly across various nodes and cells, preventing any single component from becoming overwhelmed. Techniques such as cell range expansion, carrier aggregation, and small cell deployment help manage load distribution effectively. Additionally, software-defined networking (SDN) and network function virtualization (NFV) provide centralized and programmable control over the network, enabling adaptive and scalable resource management. By balancing load and efficiently allocating resources, HetNets can maintain high performance and quality of service, even in densely populated and highly dynamic environments.

Dynamic Spectrum Management (DSM): This approach allows for the effective distribution and use of spectrum resources among various network technologies. To meet bandwidth demands, networks opportunistically access unused spectrum bands through dynamic spectrum access (DSA) [209]. Through Dynamic Spectrum Management, cognitive radio approaches enable networks to adaptively modify transmission parameters in response to current interference levels and spectrum availability. This increases overall network efficiency and lessens the impact of spectrum shortages [210].

Coordinated Multipoint (CoMP) transmission and Reception Technique: Through the coordination of transmissions and receptions across several base stations or access points, CoMP maximizes network capacity, improves coverage, and maximizes spectral efficiency [211], [212]. By enabling numerous cells to serve a user simultaneously, this technology lowers interference and guarantees flawless connectivity even when users travel between various network locations. CoMP approaches maximize resource consumption while preserving quality of service (QoS) [213] by dynamically allocating resources depending on real-time conditions, such as user location and network load [214].

Dynamic Load Balancing Techniques and Algorithms: With the help of these algorithms, traffic should be intelligently distributed among various cells or network technologies according to user requests and current network conditions [215], [216]. Through constant monitoring of variables including data traffic load, signal strength, and cell congestion, dynamic load balancing guarantees that users are assigned to the best available network resources [217]. This method reduces network congestion and boosts user data rates, which not only optimizes resource usage but also improves the overall quality of service.

Traffic Offloading Techniques: Traffic offloading techniques are crucial tactics for load balancing to maximize resource utilization and improve network performance [218], [219]. Among these methods is WiFi offloading, which uses WiFi's faster data rates to transfer mobile data traffic to WiFi networks when there are hotspots nearby, relieving cellular network congestion [220]. Small cell offloading is the process of increasing capacity and enhancing local service quality in crowded or underserved locations by placing femtocells and picocells. Using unlicensed spectrum resources such as LTE-U/LAA, dynamic spectrum offloading helps to relieve congestion on licensed bands while meeting the increasing demand for data [221].

6.3.4 Heterogenous Deployment and Management

Heterogeneous deployment and management in HetNets involve integrating various types of network nodes, such as macro cells, micro cells, pico cells, and femto cells, to provide seamless and efficient connectivity. This multi-layered network architecture aims to enhance coverage, capacity, and overall performance. Effective management requires advanced coordination and control mechanisms, including centralized and distributed approaches, to handle the complexity and diversity of the network elements. Techniques like self-organizing networks (SON) enable automated configuration, optimization, and healing of the network, reducing operational costs and enhancing reliability. Additionally, software-defined networking (SDN) and network function virtualization (NFV) offer flexible and scalable management solutions, allowing for dynamic adjustments and efficient resource utilization. By leveraging these technologies, HetNets can achieve robust, adaptive, and high-performing network environments that meet the demands of diverse applications and user scenarios.

Multi-Technology Coordination and Optimization: This involves putting into practice rules and algorithms that facilitate the effective coordination and optimization of various network technologies within HetNets [222], [223]. It comprises dynamic resource allocation techniques that modify frequency, power, and bandwidth usage for various technologies like WiFi, LTE, and tiny cells. Operators can maximize user experience and improve network efficiency by dynamically balancing resources and traffic [224], [225].

Self-Organizing Networks (SON): SON capabilities are being used to automate HetNet-wide network configuration, optimization, and healing procedures [226]-[228]. SON automatically monitors network performance, finds problems, and takes immediate corrective action using network intelligence and algorithms [229]. By doing this, operational overhead is decreased, network dependability is increased, and consistent service quality [230] is guaranteed across diverse deployments.

Cloud Radio Access Networks (Cloud-RAN): This entails leveraging and virtualizing network functions by utilizing Cloud-RAN designs and network function virtualization (NFV). By separating the baseband processing operations from the remote radio heads (RRHs), cloud-RAN enables centralized radio resource management and control across various network technologies [231]-[234]. NFV also makes it possible to virtualize network functions, which makes it easier to scale and deliver services across HetNets in a flexible manner [235]. This architecture facilitates the agile deployment of new services in diverse contexts while also enhancing resource consumption [236] and streamlining management.

6.3.5 Interoperability Standards Solutions

Interoperability standards solutions in heterogeneous networks are crucial for ensuring seamless communication and integration among diverse network elements and technologies. Standards such as 3GPP, IEEE, and IETF define protocols and interfaces that enable different network components—ranging from macro cells to small cells and various wireless technologies like Wi-Fi and LTE—to work together harmoniously. These standards facilitate compatibility and interoperability, ensuring devices and infrastructure from different vendors can communicate effectively. Interoperability is further enhanced through the use of software-defined networking (SDN) and network function virtualization (NFV), which provide a programmable and flexible framework for managing network resources and services. By adhering to these standards, HetNets can achieve unified operation, simplify network management, and support seamless user experiences across different network layers and technologies.

Agreements and Standardization Organizations: Interoperability standards are defined in large part by standards organizations like the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) for WiFi and LAN standards and 3rd Generation Partnership Project (3GPP) for cellular networks [237]-[239]. They create and disseminate specifications that guarantee various network technologies can interact with one another in HetNets in an efficient manner [240]. Aligning implementations with these standards is facilitated by agreements and collaborations amongst various industry stakeholders, such as network operators, equipment manufacturers, and technology suppliers. This collaboration guarantees seamless device and network interoperability across many vendors.

Technological Solutions: Interworking gateways: These are hardware and software elements that help various network technologies communicate with one another. An interworking gateway, for instance, can facilitate a smooth transition between WiFi and cellular networks, guaranteeing continuous service when a user moves across coverage regions [241]. HetNet components can have dynamic resource [242] allocation and management like virtualization techniques and SDN concepts. This adaptability can improve interoperability by adjusting network configurations according to user needs and real-time situations [243].

7 Research gaps

Important research gaps have surfaced during this investigation, highlighting important chances for innovation in HetNets. The need for integrated frameworks that address security, privacy, and performance issues holistically has been identified as a major gap. The way these components are currently approached often leads to fragmented solutions that do not properly balance trade-offs or work in concert. An integrated framework would allow architects to create HetNets with all-encompassing protections and optimizations, guaranteeing that improvements in one area don't jeopardize other areas. Furthermore, HetNets' dynamic structure [244] poses a significant difficulty.

Because of the constant changes in user needs, environmental factors, and technology improvements, these networks require adaptive solutions that can be adjusted in real-time. This comprises self-optimizing settings [245], dynamic resource allocation [246], and proactive security measures [247] to foresee and thwart incoming threats. Collaboration amongst network engineering, data science, cybersecurity, and privacy advocacy [248] is necessary to achieve this adaptability and create flexible solutions that grow with HetNets. Closing these gaps would improve the security, privacy, and performance of HetNets while also promoting robust, effective networks that can easily accommodate a wide range of applications and user requirements. By giving integrated frameworks and adaptive solutions priority, we may further enhance the capabilities of HetNets and make a substantial contribution to the advancement of contemporary telecommunications infrastructure.

8 Future research scopes

The development of enhanced security measures specifically designed for HetNets is important due to the constantly changing landscape of cybersecurity threats. To proactively detect and neutralize new threats and weaknesses, proactive defensive tactics are essential. This entails putting strong encryption protocols [249] in place to secure data transmission across heterogeneous network elements, utilizing machine learning and artificial intelligence to detect anomalies in network behavior [250], and integrating threat intelligence frameworks to keep up with changing cyber threats.

When it comes to HetNets, where private and sensitive data is transferred between various network nodes and interfaces, protecting user privacy [251] while preserving service quality is critical. Strong privacy solutions ought to include privacy-enhancing technologies (PETs) including homomorphic encryption [252], anonymization, and differential privacy. These technologies support the anonymization of user data, restrict data gathering to what is required, and impose stringent access controls to stop illegal data breaches. Furthermore, maintaining legal obligations in data handling methods inside HetNets and fostering user trust depend on compliance with privacy legislation and standards (e.g., GDPR, CCPA) [253].

In the future, research on improved performance for dynamic HetNet systems should concentrate on creating novel methods for managing QoS and allocating resources. This entails investigating novel dynamic spectrum allocation algorithms, adaptive modulation methods, and sophisticated load balancing schemes that can instantly react to changing user demands and network conditions. Efficiency and customer experience will also be improved by incorporating machine learning techniques to forecast traffic trends and optimize network configurations. By putting an emphasis on network slicing technologies, operators will be able to adjust service settings and resource allocation to meet the demands of individual applications, guaranteeing reliable performance across a range of HetNet use cases.

9 Conclusion

HetNets, offer a variety of network topologies that combine many technologies to satisfy the increasing demands of contemporary connectivity. They represent a dynamic and expanding paradigm in the field of telecommunications. The basic features of HetNets have been covered in this manuscript, along with their architecture, and the numerous obstacles they must overcome. This study has examined the security, privacy, and performance opportunities and problems presented by heterogeneous networks (HetNets). According to the study, HetNets have inherent vulnerabilities because of their diverse network elements and interfaces. The solutions discussed in this article, while promising, have limits when it comes to their ability to adapt to changing threats and dynamic network conditions. The vast transmission of personal data within HetNets has raised serious privacy concerns, highlighting the need for more privacy-preserving methods. While network performance and user experience have improved, further innovations are needed to realize the full potential of these complex systems and their adoption must be accompanied by robust measures to address security, privacy, and performance concerns.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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