Deep Learning for the Heart: ECG Analysis and Arrhythmia Detection

Ms Samruddhi Ingole
CSE (AI ML)
Ramdeobaba University
Nagpur, India
ingolesa@rknec.edu

Ms Bhumi Maheshwari
CSE(AIML)
Ramdeobaba University
Nagpur,India
maheshwaribs@rknec.edu

Ms Sakshi Parate
CSE(AIML)
Ramdeobaba University
Nagpur,India
paratesr@rknec.edu

Ms Aarya Raut
CSE (AI ML)
Ramdeobaba University
Nagpur, India
rautaa_3@rknec.edu

Mr Mandar Wagh
CSE (AI ML)
Ramdeobaba University
Nagpur, India
waghms@rknec.edu

Ms Pranali Dandekar
Project Guide
CSE (AI ML)
Ramdeobaba University
Nagpur.India
dandekarpr@rknec.edu

Abstract

The advent of machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL) has significantly improved the automation and precision of ECG analysis, particularly in detecting cardiac arrhythmias. The project aims to develop an advanced system for real-time detection of cardiac arrhythmias using both machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL) techniques. Leveraging datasets from the MIT-BIH Arrhythmia Database, the system combines ML classifiers like Support Vector Machines (SVM), Random Forest (RF), and Decision Trees (DT) with deep learning models such as Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN) and Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks. LSTM, particularly effective in analyzing sequential ECG data, enhances heartbeat classification and arrhythmia detection with accuracy exceeding 95%, and a reduced false positive rate below 5%. The system is designed in phases, covering data preprocessing, feature extraction, model training, and the integration of an ensemble approach for optimal performance. The final deliverables include trained models.

Keyword

ECG Analysis; Arrhythmia Detection; Recurrent Neural Networks(RNN); Long Short-Term Memory(LSTM); Heartbeat Classification.

1. Introduction

Electrocardiography (ECG) is a vital diagnostic tool used to detect arrhythmias—irregular heart rhythms that can lead to conditions such as stroke, heart failure, and sudden cardiac arrest. Traditional ECG analysis requires manual interpretation by cardiologists, which is time-consuming, subjective, and prone to human error, particularly in large datasets or continuous monitoring. With cardiovascular diseases being a leading cause of mortality, accurate and timely detection of arrhythmias is essential for effective intervention.

These AI-driven approaches can enhance diagnostic accuracy, improve processing speed, and reduce the variability associated with manual ECG interpretation. This research explores the application of ML models, such as Support Vector Machines (SVM), Random Forest (RF), and Decision Trees (DT), alongside DL architectures, including Feedforward Neural Networks (FNN), Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN), and Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) ,Recurrent Neural Network(RNN), for arrhythmia classification using the MIT-BIH Arrhythmia dataset.

Automated ECG analysis has the potential to overcome limitations like data imbalance and false-negative errors, which are common in traditional methods. By leveraging AI techniques, this project aims to create a real-time, scalable system for arrhythmia detection that offers improved accuracy, reduced false-positive rates, and faster diagnostic processing. The primary objective is to develop and evaluate hybrid ML and DL models, particularly LSTM-based architectures, for superior performance in classifying heartbeats and detecting arrhythmias in real-time.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Overview of ECG Analysis

Shallow learning models such as decision trees and Support Vector Machine (SVMs) are inefficient for many modern applications, meaning that they require a large number of observations for achieving generalizability, and imposing significant human labour to specify prior knowledge in the model.[3]

2.2 Machine Learning Models:

Support Vector Machines (SVM): In SVM, data is plotted in an l- dimensional space, where l denotes the number of features. After plotting the data, classification is performed by finding a hyperplane that differentiates between different classes. The maximization of the margin optimizes the hyperplane. Then, the hyperplane, that is at a higher distance from the closest data points among other hyperplanes, is chosen (Aziz et al., 2021, 9).[9] In ECG classification, SVMs are particularly useful because they can effectively handle the non-linear boundaries that distinguish between different types of heartbeats.

Random Forests (RF): Random Forest is an Ensemble Learning algorithm Random Forest combines many Decision Trees built randomly and combined into one model based on the Bagging technique. Bagging enhances the diversity of base learners by employing random sampling, thereby improving the algorithm's overall generalization performance [10] .

2.3 Deep Learning Approaches:

Deep learning, particularly Recurrent Neural Networks **(RNNs)** such as Long Short-Term Memory **(LSTM)**, has become a powerful tool for time-series analysis and classification.

Feedforward Neural Network (FNN): A basic neural architecture with unidirectional flow, consisting of an input, hidden, and output layer. FNNs are suitable for simple classification tasks but lack the capability to capture spatial or sequential patterns, making them less effective for complex data like ECG signals. It is used because of its superior feature extraction capabilities, among which FNN is used as the basic model for theoretical research. (Hao, 2024, 8)[5]

Convolutional Neural Network (CNN): A specialized neural network designed for pattern recognition in data. CNN uses convolutional and pooling layers to extract spatial features, making it highly effective in ECG signal analysis for classifying heartbeat types. It identifies spatial hierarchies or patterns using stacked trainable small filters called kernels (Hong et al., 2020). These kernels may effectively extract local information from the context of ECG data, such as the shape and duration of heartbeats, which are essential for diagnosing arrhythmias (St & Kuhl, 2023). [1]

Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM): LSTM networks play a crucial role in classifying heartbeats into five distinct categories: Normal (N), Supraventricular ectopic beat (S), Ventricular ectopic beat (V), Fusion beat (F), and Unclassifiable beats. LSTMs possess unique components, such as memory cells that hold information and gates that regulate the input and output of this data. These mechanisms allow LSTMs to learn and preserve longer sequences, which is particularly important for processing ECG data, as it tends to reveal critical patterns over longer time intervals. (Ansari et al., 2023, 1)[1]. The inclusion of an Unclassifiable beats category ensures the system's transparency and reliability for further expert analysis. It is a type of recurrent neural network (RNN) well-suited to study sequence and time-series data. An LSTM network can learn long-term dependencies between time steps of a sequence. The LSTM layer can look at the time sequence in the forward direction, while the bidirectional LSTM layer can look at the time sequence in both forward and backward directions (*Classify ECG Signals Using Long Short-Term Memory Networks - MATLAB & Simulink*, n.d.)[11] .

Deep learning models, particularly those based on **LSTMs**, have demonstrated state-of-the-art performance in cardiac arrhythmia detection. The LSTM model's ability to **accurately detect** irregularities in heartbeat sequences enhances its diagnostic precision, providing better support for real-time cardiac event prediction and monitoring.

2.4 Challenges in ECG Analysis Using Deep Learning

Despite the advancements in deep learning for ECG analysis, challenges remain in accurate heartbeat classification and arrhythmia detection due to:

- **Varied Arrhythmia Patterns**: Diverse and evolving ECG patterns make detection challenging.
- **Need for Large Datasets:** As the size of the ECG data set increases, existing, anonymization techniques may not be effective (chung & lee, n.d.) [7]. Acquiring high-quality labeled ECG data, particularly for rare arrhythmia types, can be a major constraint.
- **High Computational Demand**: Deep learning models like LSTMs require significant computational resources for both training and real-time analysis.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection and Preprocessing

The **MIT-BIH Arrhythmia Dataset** contains **1,09,446 ECG samples** across five categories ('N', 'S', 'V', 'F', 'Q'), (**Normal, Supraventricular, Ventricular, Fusion, and Unclassifiable Beats)** sampled at **125Hz**. The data is read using **pandas** from a CSV file.

Preprocessing:

1. **Data Splitting**: Divided into training, validation, and test sets.
2. **Feature Separation**: ECG datasets (features) are separated from their labels.
3. **Normalization**: Applied using **Standard Scaler** on the training data to ensure consistency across datasets.

3.2 Model Training

1. A **Convolutional Neural Network (CNN)** was employed for arrhythmia detection, designed with two **Conv1D layers** (16 and 32 filters, respectively) followed by **MaxPooling** layers and **Dropout** (0.5) for regularization. **L2 regularization** was applied to prevent overfitting. The network concludes with a fully connected layer and a softmax output for multiclass classification.

The model was trained with the **Adam optimizer** and **sparse categorical cross-entropy** loss function. To prevent overfitting, **early stopping** and a **learning rate scheduler** were used, reducing the learning rate when validation loss plateaued.

Results showed stable accuracy and reduced validation loss, confirming effective model generalization.

2. The **recurrent neural network (RNN)** model was designed to handle the sequential nature of ECG data, utilizing Long **Short-Term Memory (LSTM)** units for capturing temporal dependencies between heartbeats.

3. The model consists of **two LSTM layers**, each with **40 units**, followed by **dropout layers for regularization** to prevent overfitting. Dense layers with **ReLU activation** were employed, culminating in a **softmax layer** for multiclass classification across **five arrhythmia categories.**

To ensure reproducibility, random seeds were set across Python, NumPy, and TensorFlow. The model was trained using **sparse categorical cross-entropy** as the loss function and optimized using the **Adam optimizer**. This method is really efficient when working with large problem involving a lot of data or parameters as it requires less memory and is efficient. **Early stopping**, based on validation loss with a patience of 6 epochs, was used to avoid overfitting (Boob et al., 2022, 8).[4]

The model demonstrated robust performance during training and validation, achieving stable accuracy and generalization across the validation dataset.

4. Mathematical Equation

4.1 Recurrent Neural Network (RNN) Basics:

In an RNN, the output at time step *t*, denoted as h*t*, depends on both the current input x*t* and the hidden state from the previous time step h*t*-1 This is expressed as:

$$h_t = \sigma(W_h + x_t + U_h h_{t-1} + b_h)$$

where Wx matrix for the input, Uh is the weight matrix for the recurrent connection, bh is the bias term, and σ is the activation function (commonly tanh or ReLU).

4.2 LSTM Equations:

The **LSTM** architecture includes memory cells, input gates, forget gates, and output gates, which help it manage information over time.

Forget Gate:

$$f_t = \sigma(W_f x_t + U_f h_{t-1} + b_f)$$

Input Gate:

$$i_t = \sigma(W_i x_t + U_i h_{t-1} + b_i)$$

Cell State Update:

$$\bar{c}_t = tanh(W_c x_t + U_c h_{t-1} + b_c)$$

$$c_t = f_t \odot c_{t-1} + i_t \odot \bar{c}_t$$

Output Gate:

$$o_t = \sigma(W_o x_t + U_o h_{t-1} + b_o)$$

$$o_t = f_t \odot tanh(c_t)$$

4.3 Dropout Regularization:

- Dropout is a widely used regularization technique to prevent neural networks from overfitting during training (Salehin, n.d.) [8] . It works by randomly setting a fraction p of the input units to zero during each update in the training process, helping the network generalize better.

$$dropout(h_t) = \{0 \; with \; probability \; p\}$$

$$h_t \; with \; probability \; (1 - p)$$

4.4 ReLU Activation:

In the **dense layer**, a **ReLU (Rectified Linear Unit)** activation function is used, defined as:

$$f(x) = max(0, x)$$

The popular neural network architecture uses ReLU activations on hidden layers in deep learning due to its simplicity and ability to mitigate vanishing gradient problems.[4]

4.5 Softmax for Multi-Class Classification:

The output layer uses **softmax** for multi-class classification, where the probability distribution over the 5 output classes is computed as:

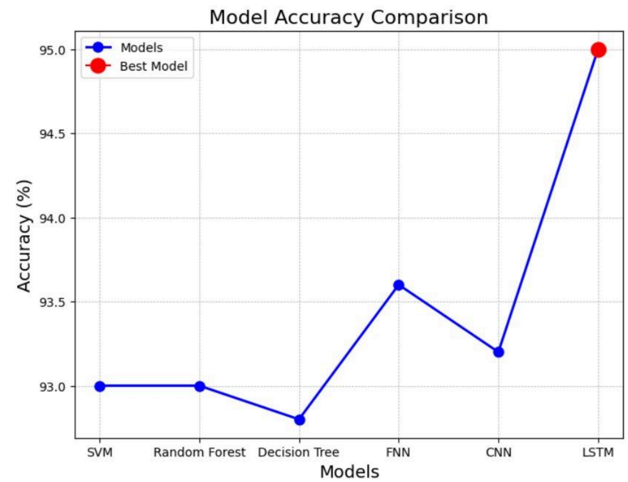
$$\overline{y}_i = \frac{e^{zi}}{\sum_{j=1}^{5} e^{zj}}$$

where z_i is the logit (output of the dense layer before softmax) for class i.

5. Results

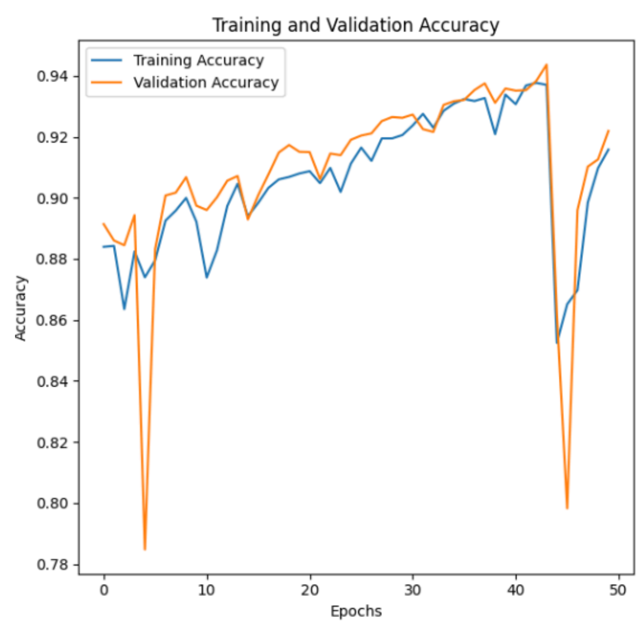
5.1 Trained Models Performance Evaluation

Achieved accuracies of trained models are as mentioned:



Although multiple models were trained, the **RNN (LSTM)** model was selected for deployment due to its **superior accuracy**.

The final deliverables included the trained RNN (LSTM) model and evaluation metrics (accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score, and confusion matrices), demonstrating a robust system for improved diagnostic accuracy and patient care, with potential for real-time monitoring and prediction of cardiac events.



The plot shows the **Training and Validation Accuracy(LSTM model)** across 50 epochs for the Recurrent Neural Network (RNN) model. Both curves show a general upward trend, indicating that the **model is learning** and **improving its ability** to classify ECG data correctly over time.

The accuracy of the model is **0.95**, meaning that 95% of the total predictions made by the model are correct. Both **precision** and **recall** are also **0.95**, indicating a balanced performance. The **F1-score**, which balances precision and recall, is also **0.95**, confirming that the model maintains a **consistent balance** between precision and recall, leading to an **excellent** overall classification performance.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates the successful application of both machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL) techniques for real-time ECG analysis and arrhythmia detection. The system leverages ML models like Support Vector Machines (SVM), Random Forest (RF), and Decision Trees (DT), alongside deep learning architectures such as Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN) and Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks. Among these, the LSTM model achieved the highest accuracy (95%) due to its superior capability in handling sequential ECG data.

The results validate that LSTM, designed for time-series analysis, outperforms other models, making it ideal for real-time arrhythmia detection. Challenges like data imbalance and high computational demands were addressed through techniques such as dropout regularization and feature scaling.

This system accurately classifies ECG data into five categories (Normal, Supraventricular, Ventricular, Fusion, and Unclassifiable Beats), providing precise predictions. It will output the predicted class label (0-4) for each input sample.

7. Applications

This real-time ECG analysis system can be deployed in various medical and healthcare environments. Provides second-opinion diagnostic support to clinicians for accurate identification of abnormal heart rhythms.

It can be integrated into portable monitoring devices or mobile health platforms, allowing continuous heart activity monitoring and alerting users or healthcare providers to any detected arrhythmias.

Hospitals and telemedicine platforms can also utilize this system to monitor patients remotely, providing early detection of life-threatening conditions such as atrial fibrillation or ventricular tachycardia. Furthermore, the system can be implemented in clinical settings for efficient cardiac health screening, reducing the need for hospital visits for routine evaluations.

8. Future Scope

The future scope of this system includes integration with real-time monitoring and the expansion of datasets to improve accuracy, especially for rare arrhythmias. Personalized diagnostics, cloud-based real-time processing, and hybrid models could enhance scalability and performance. Explainable AI will increase trust by making model decisions more interpretable. Further, expanding its capabilities to detect a broader range of cardiac conditions, integrating with telemedicine platforms, and developing early warning systems for critical cardiac events can significantly impact patient care. Clinical trials and regulatory approvals will enable widespread adoption in healthcare settings.By leveraging API keys, the project can expand its reach, enhance functionality, and create new revenue streams.

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