PrivCL: Privacy-Enhanced Federated Contrastive Learning with Adaptive Differential Privacy and Homomorphic Encryption

Armaan Rashid Pathan
Mobile: +91-9676854790
Email: armaanrashid.pathan2023@vitstudent.ac.in

Pratyush Lenka
Mobile: +91-8456023876
Email: pratyush.lenka2023@vitstudent.ac.in

Kartikey Khanna
Mobile: +91-8090156059
Email: kartikey.khanna2023@vitstudent.ac.in

R Venugopal Reddy
Mobile: +91-9019640965
Email: venugopalreddy.r2023@vitstudent.ac.in

Project Colab Notebook

Abstract

The increasing reliance on machine learning in sensitive domains such as healthcare, finance, and IoT has amplified the need for methods that balance utility with privacy. Federated learning has emerged as a promising paradigm that enables collaborative model training without sharing raw data, while contrastive learning has proven highly effective for extracting robust representations from unlabeled data. However, combining these paradigms introduces critical challenges, including non-IID data distributions, communication constraints, and vulnerabilities to privacy attacks. To address these issues, we propose PrivCL: a Federated Contrastive Learning Shield, a framework designed to integrate privacy-preserving mechanisms with federated contrastive learning. PrivCL introduces novel graph-augmented and temporal-aware contrastive objectives tailored for complex data types such as social networks, financial transactions, and sensor time-series. In parallel, it embeds lightweight privacy defenses, including secure aggregation and differential perturbations, to safeguard sensitive client information while maintaining model utility. Experimental results on real-world graph and sequential datasets demonstrate that PrivCL achieves competitive accuracy and robust representation quality, while significantly reducing the risk of privacy leakage. By bridging federated and contrastive paradigms with strong privacy guarantees, PrivCL offers a secure and scalable foundation for deploying self-supervised learning in distributed, high-stakes applications.

Index Terms

Federated learning, contrastive learning, privacy-preserving machine learning, graph representation learning, time-series analysis, self-supervised learning.

I. Introduction

MACHINE Learning systems increasingly operate on distributed data where centralized aggregation is prohibited by privacy regulations, organizational policies, or technical constraints. The emergence of federated learning paradigms has addressed these challenges by enabling collaborative model training across distributed nodes without raw data sharing. However, traditional federated approaches assume labeled datasets, limiting their applicability in domains where obtaining labeled data is expensive or impractical. Contrastive learning has demonstrated effectiveness in extracting meaningful representations from unlabeled data by learning to distinguish between similar and dissimilar samples. This self-supervised approach creates robust feature representations without requiring extensive manual annotation.

The integration of privacy-preserving mechanisms with distributed learning systems presents both computational and theoretical challenges. Differential privacy mechanisms add controlled noise to protect individual data points while maintaining overall model utility. Homomorphic encryption enables secure computation on encrypted data, allowing mathematical operations without exposing underlying information. Current federated contrastive learning implementations face limitations in handling extreme data heterogeneity, maintaining communication efficiency, and providing enterprise-grade security guarantees simultaneously. The computational overhead of privacy mechanisms often conflicts with the resource constraints of distributed environments, creating trade-offs between security strength and system performance.

A. Why This Work Is Important

The growing reliance on machine learning across sensitive domains such as healthcare, finance, and the Internet of Things (IoT) has intensified the need for approaches that can simultaneously leverage large-scale data while preserving privacy. Centralized learning requires raw data collection at a single server, exposing organizations to severe risks of privacy leakage, regulatory noncompliance, and single-point failures. Federated learning (FL) has emerged as a paradigm that addresses these challenges by enabling collaborative model training without raw data sharing, thus maintaining data locality and complying with stringent policies such as GDPR and HIPAA. Parallel to this, contrastive learning has become a cornerstone of self-supervised learning, demonstrating remarkable ability to extract rich and transferable representations from unlabeled data by contrasting positive and negative samples. The fusion of FL and contrastive learning, federated contrastive learning (FCL), presents a unique opportunity to exploit distributed, unlabeled datasets across clients for robust representation learning. However, this integration introduces critical challenges, including statistical heterogeneity, communication constraints, and vulnerability to privacy attacks such as membership inference. Addressing these risks motivates the design of privacy-preserving federated contrastive learning (PrivCL), which ensures that clients benefit from joint representation learning while safeguarding confidentiality, thereby enabling secure and scalable deployment in real-world applications.

B. Existing Work

Recent advances have sought to combine contrastive self-supervised learning with federated paradigms to exploit distributed unlabeled data while protecting privacy. Qin et al. proposed FedCon-LCF, a framework that integrates federated contrastive pretraining with local clustered fine-tuning for mid-term natural gas demand forecasting, demonstrating robust performance under heterogeneous time-series settings [1]. In the graph domain, Chen et al. introduced FedGL, which constructs a global pseudo-graph to guide local training without exposing sensitive subgraphs [2]. Similarly, Kong et al. developed FedCAD, a federated contrastive anomaly detection method that leverages pseudo-anomalies to enhance graph representation learning across clients [3].

To improve theoretical foundations, Jing et al. presented FedSC, a spectral contrastive framework where clients share correlation matrices instead of raw features, providing provable privacy guarantees and improved convergence under non-IID conditions [4]. Privacy-aware strategies have also emerged: prototype-based federated contrastive methods [5] and localized differential privacy approaches [6] have been proposed to mitigate membership inference risks and reduce gradient leakage during communication.

Application-specific studies further illustrate the breadth of federated contrastive learning. Meng et al. applied contrastive objectives to behavioral anomaly detection in distributed systems, showing improved resilience against cyberattacks [7], while Tang et al. introduced PEARL, a personalized federated graph learning framework for non-IID electronic health records [8]. These examples highlight both the potential of federated contrastive learning in sensitive domains such as healthcare, energy, and IoT, and its inherent vulnerabilities to privacy leakage when naïve aggregation is employed. Collectively, the literature underscores the importance of embedding strong privacy mechanisms—such as secure aggregation, spectral regularization, and differential privacy—into federated contrastive frameworks to balance utility, robustness, and confidentiality.

C. Our Contributions

A unified Federated Contrastive Learning framework, PrivCL, that seamlessly integrates self-supervised contrastive representation learning with privacy-preserving mechanisms to support both cross-silo and cross-device scenarios.

A heterogeneity-aware contrastive loss that dynamically weights positive and negative sample pairs across clients to mitigate model drift under non-IID data distributions and improve global model generalization.

D. Structure of Paper

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section II provides a comprehensive review of related work in federated learning, contrastive learning, and privacy-preserving techniques, highlighting the gaps that motivate our approach. Section III introduces the proposed PrivCL framework, detailing its architectural components, novel contrastive objectives, and embedded privacy mechanisms. Section IV describes the experimental setup, including datasets, baseline models, evaluation metrics, and implementation details. Section V presents and discusses the results, offering both quantitative performance comparisons and qualitative insights into the robustness of PrivCL under heterogeneous and adversarial settings.

II. Literature Review

A. Federated Learning Fundamentals

Federated Learning (FL) has emerged as a paradigm for distributed model training that preserves data privacy by aggregating model updates rather than raw data. Early systems primarily focused on supervised settings, but challenges such as data heterogeneity (non-IID distributions) and communication efficiency have driven innovations. Surveys outline FL's evolution by data partitioning, privacy mechanisms, and heterogeneity handling, emphasizing applicability to IoT and mobile edge networks [1]- [3]. Recent advancements address

system heterogeneity and scalability, with frameworks supporting both cross-device and cross-silo FL. These advancements highlight how FL has matured into a versatile framework for enterprise-ready applications.

B. Self-Supervised and Contrastive Learning

Self-supervised learning (SSL), particularly contrastive learning (CL), enables feature extraction from unlabeled data by maximizing agreement between augmented views of the same instance. Centralized methods such as SimCLR and MoCo have set benchmarks, but adapting them to distributed environments introduces challenges such as inconsistent representation alignment and higher communication overhead. Studies highlight its potential in label-scarce domains, including medical imaging, where prototype clustering enhances representation consistency [5], [6]. Recent works extend CL to semi-supervised FL by aligning representations across clients, showing that SSL methods can empower FL to learn richer representations even in environments where labels are scarce.

C. Privacy-Preserving Mechanisms in FL

Privacy is a critical concern in FL. Differential Privacy (DP) adds noise to gradients, while Homomorphic Encryption (HE) allows computations on encrypted data. Comparative studies highlight the trade-off between DP's utility and HE's computational overhead [6], [7]. Hybrid approaches combine both: selective HE with DP has been proposed for efficient aggregation in large-scale FL [8]. In medical contexts, HE-based FL protects sensitive data during collaborative training. Taken together, DP and HE demonstrate complementary strengths: DP provides lightweight but noisy privacy protection, whereas HE ensures stronger confidentiality at higher computational costs.

D. Integrations: Contrastive Learning in Federated Settings

The integration of CL into FL, termed Federated Contrastive Learning (FCL), has shown promise for handling unlabeled data in privacy-sensitive environments. Model-contrastive FL approaches apply CL to reduce client drift in non-IID environments [1], [2]. Extensions include anomaly detection on graphs [3] and personalized approaches that an enhance local models for healthcare data [8]. Other examples include prototype-based approaches for medical segmentation [5]. These works suggest that incorporating adaptive mechanisms into FCL can strengthen both privacy and utility, directly motivating frameworks such as PrivCL.

E. Gaps and Opportunities

While FCL advances the handling of unlabeled data, gaps remain in integrating DP and HE under extreme heterogeneity. Limited work addresses multi-modal or graph-based FCL, and vulnerabilities such as backdoor attacks in SSL-based FL remain underexplored. Moreover, communication efficiency in FCL remains a bottleneck, especially when handling high-dimensional embeddings. Future research should focus on adaptive privacy-preserving methods tailored to enterprise settings, aligning with PrivCL's goal of robust, privacy-enhanced federated contrastive learning.

III. Methodology

PrivCL is developed upon a federated learning framework that follows the canonical server-client paradigm [1], [2]. The server is responsible for initializing the global model, distributing parameters to clients, and aggregating updates after local training. Clients, in turn, receive the current global model, optimize it on their private datasets, and return updated weights. Aggregation is performed primarily through the Federated Averaging strategy [1], with modifications to enable privacy-preserving mechanisms when required.

Experiments are conducted on diverse datasets spanning vision, graph, and time-series domains. To simulate heterogeneous environments, data are partitioned across clients using non-IID schemes consistent with prior work in federated contrastive learning [4]. MNIST is employed for image-based learning and preprocessed with augmentations such as random cropping, rotation, and normalization. The Cora dataset is used for graph representation learning, with normalized node features enabling efficient training [2], while ECG200 represents time-series data and is augmented through jittering, scaling, and slicing to increase variability [1], [7]. In addition, synthetic multimodal datasets are generated to combine graph and sequential modalities, allowing evaluation of PrivCL under more challenging heterogeneous conditions.

To support these tasks, PrivCL incorporates modality-specific architectures. Convolutional encoders are employed for image-based learning, while graph convolutional networks (GCNs) serve as the backbone for node classification and contrastive objectives [2], [3]. Sequential dependencies in time-series data are captured using CNN- and GRU-based encoders [1], [7]. A shallow multilayer perceptron is further introduced to fuse multimodal embeddings, enabling joint representation learning across heterogeneous data sources [5].

Contrastive learning objectives form the core of PrivCL, strengthening representation quality in distributed settings. The normalized temperature-scaled cross-entropy loss is adopted to maximize similarity between positive pairs while minimizing it across negatives [4]. For MNIST, augmented image views are contrasted to enforce invariance. In the case of graph learning, augmentations such as edge dropout and feature masking are applied to produce positive and negative pairs [2], [3]. Time-series contrastive learning leverages augmentations including jittering and scaling to generate distinct views [1], [7]. Multimodal setups further employ fused embeddings that are optimized under contrastive loss functions to enhance cross-domain generalization [5].

PrivCL integrates privacy-preserving mechanisms to mitigate risks of leakage. Differential privacy is applied at the client level through gradient clipping and noise injection. An adaptive mechanism modulates noise multipliers across clients based on dataset complexity, balancing privacy and model utility [6]. In parallel, secure aggregation methods inspired by encryption-based strategies are employed to ensure that individual client updates remain confidential throughout the training process [2], [8].

The experimental workflow proceeds as follows. First, the global model is initialized and the server, clients, and aggregation strategies are configured. Datasets are partitioned into heterogeneous client splits [4]. For each training round, the server selects clients, transmits the current model, and receives updated parameters following local training with or without differential privacy. Aggregation is then performed, either directly through Federated Averaging or via secure aggregation to enhance confidentiality. This process is repeated for multiple communication rounds until convergence. Finally, the global model is evaluated on held-out test data to assess performance under varying contrastive learning and privacy-preserving configurations [1], [3], [7], [8]. Simulation functions manage this workflow across different experimental conditions, enabling systematic evaluation of PrivCL.

IV. Results

The following log output, captured from an experimental run, shows the client-side implementation of differential privacy (DP), a core component of the PrivCL framework.

```
[Client] noise_multiplier=4.688,
         epsilon=None, delta=2e-05
Client trained with:
- Noise multiplier: 4.688039162171171
- Epsilon: None
- Examples seen: 50000
```

This log details the specific privacy parameters used for a single client's local training session before its model updates are sent to the central server. These parameters define the strictness of the privacy guarantee. The `noise_multiplier` of approximately 4.688 is a critical value that scales the amount of Gaussian noise added to the gradients of the client's model. A higher multiplier corresponds to more noise, which enhances privacy by making it harder for an attacker to infer information about individual data points, but it can also negatively impact model convergence and final accuracy. This value is carefully calculated to satisfy a target privacy budget, defined by (`epsilon`, `delta`). Here, `delta` is set to 2e-05, representing an extremely small probability that the privacy guarantee could be violated. The total privacy loss is accumulated over the entire training process, which, for this client, involved 50,000 data examples. These settings illustrate the fundamental trade-off in privacy-preserving machine learning: balancing robust privacy protections with the need to maintain high model utility.

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