The Use of Texture Descriptors to Improve Automatic Breast Tumor Segmentations in Ultrasound Images

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Abstract

Texture descriptors have been widely used in order to improve the results of automatic breast tumor segmentations in ultrasound images. In this work we present a comprehensive evaluation of the ability of different texture descriptors to enhance the contrast between breast tumors and the surrounding tissue in ultrasound images, and how they affect the outcome in automatic segmentations. We evaluated descriptors extracted from the analysis of the histogram, co-occurrence and run-length matrices. The contrast between the tumor region and the surrounding tissue was evaluated using the signal to noise ratio, contrast to noise ratio, histogram intersection and Minkowski-form Distance between the tumor and background histograms. Also the ability to preserve borders was evaluated for each descriptor using the edge preserving index. We have implemented a probabilistic segmentation method in order to evaluate the changes in the accuracy, sensitivity, specificity, and positive and negative predictive values of the method when using different texture descriptors. The results have shown that the Short Run Emphasis of the run-length matrix has better results in the automatic segmentation of breast tumors in ultrasound images with values of 91.96%, 88.58%, 95.99%, 96.34% and 87.58% respectively; also, according with the results, this texture descriptor was the one with higher values in the contrast indexes.

Introduction

Since breast cancer has become the number one cause of death among women around the world, it is very important to have fast and accurate diagnostic methods to improve the prognosis of a patient1. Although biopsy is the gold standard for cancer diagnosis, minimal invasion methods for diagnosis are preferred in order to reduce further complications. Mammography and ultrasound are the main two medical imaging modalities for breast tumor screening; several diagnostic methods using ultrasound images have been proposed. Currently, ultrasound is responsible for about one in five of all image based diagnosis2. The malignity of a tumor is estimated by the expert ultrasonographer mainly from its shape, echogenicity (which is an indicator of tumor density) and the internal echo pattern (which describes the texture of the tumor), but the visualization of lesions in ultrasound breast images is a difficult task due to some intrinsic characteristics of the images like speckle, acoustic shadows and blurry edges3. Accurate automatic segmentation methods of breast tumors can help the experts to achieve faster diagnoses, and it’s a key stage of fully automatic systems for breast cancer diagnosis using ultrasound images4.

Texture analysis refers to the characterization of regions in an image according to their texture content, quantifying intuitive qualities described as roughness, smoothness, silkiness and bumpiness5. In ultrasound images echo patterns are generally referred as textures6. A good breast tumor segmentation method in ultrasound images should take into account texture features in order to differentiate tumors from other objects with similar gray intensities, like glands and acoustic shadows7; however, texture analysis in ultrasound images is not an easy task and many metrics have been used to described the echo patterns in breast tumors. Several automatic and semi-automatic segmentation methods using pixel intensity along with texture information have been proposed7. Some of these methods use first order texture descriptors obtained from histogram statistics7,8, but these descriptors are not able to give a good texture description because they do not take into account the spatial relation between pixels and gray-levels9; because of this, other proposed methods use second order texture descriptors extracted from co-occurrence matrices statistics10, but the computational cost for computing the co-occurrence matrix is very high and much more demanding while working in per-pixel computation11. Other texture descriptors extracted from run-length matrices statistics (which have lower computational cost than co-occurrence matrices) have been used for breast tumor classification in ultrasound images12.

Texture is a rich source of visual information and there are a number of methods for texture representation, because of this, it is difficult to define the properties than can be used to effectively distinguish textures found in a given image13. On the other hand, image enhancement is a key factor to improve the visual appearance of an image and make it more pleasant for human interpretation or more applicable in some special fields such as computer vision, and image processing14,15. Because of these, it is important to evaluate which texture descriptor is the one that enhances the contrast of the images the most, and how this improves the outcome of an automatic segmentation method. Except for the work done by Liao et al6, where they compare the ability of different texture descriptors extracted from co-occurrence matrices statistics to enhance the contrast between the tumor region and the surrounding tissue and how it affects the results of manual and automatic segmentations, there is no related work that evaluates different descriptors extracted from first and second order statistics. In this work we present a comprehensive and extensive evaluation of the effects of texture descriptors (extracted from histogram statistics, co-occurrence matrices statistics and run-length matrices statistics) on the contrast between the tumor region and the surrounding tissue in breast ultrasound images and how this improves the results for an automatic segmentation algorithm. To evaluate the ability of these descriptors to enhance the contrast we obtained different texture images, using per-pixel computation with each texture descriptor, and compare the signal to noise ratio (SNR), contrast to noise ratio (CNR), histogram intersection and Minkowski-form distance between the tumor region and the surrounding tissue histograms. We also evaluate the ability of these descriptors to improve the segmentation results; we implemented an automatic probabilistic segmentation method based on the work of Madabhushi et al7 and compare the accuracy, sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value (PPV) and negative predictive value (NPV) of the method when using different texture descriptors. We have found that the short run emphasis of the run-length matrices improves the segmentation results previously reported by other authors6,7.

Materials and Methods

A data base of 30 breast ultrasound images with a lesion were acquired with a GE Healthcare Voluson 73 in the Changhua Christian Hospital, Taiwan. The images were processed in the open source software ITK-SNAP for image enhancement and semi-automatic segmentation supervised by an expert sonographer16.

Texture Analysis

Here we evaluate different texture descriptors, extracted from histogram statistic, co-occurrence matrices statistics and run-length matrices statistics, in order to find the ability of each descriptor to enhance the contrast between the tumor and the surrounding tissue in breast ultrasound images and how does this reflects in the results of an automatic segmentation algorithm.

First-order texture descriptors are extracted from the original image gray-level values; they do not consider the spatial relationship with neighborhood pixels17. The most frequently used first-order descriptors are central moments of the histogram18. These descriptors have been used for the segmentation and classification of breast tumors in ultrasound images. Huang et al8 use the Mean (eq. 1) and Entropy (eq. 2) of the histogram to characterize the texture of breast tumors, also the Kurtosis (eq. 3) and Skewness (eq. 4) of the histogram have been used for tumor classification by Piliouras et al19. Another first-order descriptor, called local variance (, eq. 5) and extracted from the image original intensity values, used for automatic segmentation of breast tumors in ultrasound images is the difference of intensity with the mean of its neighborhood7.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | (1) |
|  | (2) |
|  | (3) |
|  | (4) |
|  | (5) |

where is the original image, is the size of the image and is the standard deviation of the gray-level values of .

The gray-level co-occurrence matrix () describes how frequently two gray-levels ( and ) appear in a window separated by a given distance and an angle 18 (eq. 6).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | (6) |

Second order descriptors computed from the analysis of the co-occurrence matrices have been proposed by Haralick20. Some of these descriptors have been used for the segmentation and classification f breast tumors in ultrasound images. Lui et al10 use the Entropy (eq. 7) and Contrast (eq. 8) of the co-occurrence matrix for breast tumor segmentation. Liao et al6 evaluated the ability of the Contrast, Homogeneity (eq. 9), Energy (eq. 10) and Variance (eq. 11) of the co-occurrence matrix to enhance the contrast between the tumor in breast ultrasound images, concluding that the Variance is the best texture descriptor of the four to be used in breast tumor contrast enhancement and segmentation in ultrasound images.

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|  | (7) |
|  | (8) |
|  | (9) |
|  | (10) |
|  | (11) |

Although co-occurrence matrix based descriptors take into account the spatial relationship between pixels, the computational cost of computing the co-occurrence matrix is very high compared to first-order descriptors11. Another method to characterize texture that also takes into account the spatial relationship between pixels, but with lower computational cost than co-occurrence matrices, is based on run-lengths of image gray-levels, were the run-length matrix () of an image is defined as the number of runs with pixels of equal gray-level and a given run inside a maximum distance and a given angle .

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | (12) |

Despite run-length matrix based descriptors have not been widely used as an effective texture classification and analysis method, it has been demonstrated by Tang et al21 that there is rich texture information contained in this matrices. Galloway22 proposed five texture descriptors based on the analysis of run-length matrices: short run emphasis (SRE, eq. 13), long run emphasis (LRE, eq. 14), gray-level nonuniformity (GLN, eq. 15), run-length nonuniformity (RLN, eq. 16) and run percentage (RP, eq. 17); these descriptors have been used for the classification of malignancy of breast tumors in ultrasound images19,23,24.

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| --- | --- |
|  | (13) |
|  | (14) |
|  | (15) |
|  | (16) |
|  | (17) |

where is the number of total runs and is the number of pixels in the image.

A list of the descriptors evaluated in this work, extracted from first-order, co-occurrence and run-length statistics is show in table 1, along with the works that have used them in order to segment or classify breast tumor in ultrasound images.

Table 1. List of evaluated texture descriptors.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| First order | Mean  Entropy  Kurtosis  Skewness  Mean Difference | Huang et al8  Huang et al8  Pilouras et al19  Pilouras et al19  Madabhushi et al7 |
| Co-occurrence | Entropy  Contrast  Homogeneity  Energy  Variance | Liu et al10  Liu et al10  Liao et al6  Liao et al6  Liao et al6 |
| Run-length | Short Run Emphasis  Long Run Emphasis  Gray-Level Nonuniformity  Run-length Nonuniformity | Lefebvre et al24  Lefebvre et al24  Murmis et al23  Murmis et al23 |

Segmentation Method

Because of inherent artifacts in breast ultrasound images such as speckle and blurry edges, the segmentation of tumors is not an easy task3. Several works have been done in order to create semi-automatic and automatic methods. Based on the literature, these methods can be divided in two groups; thresholding based methods and classifiers based methods. The thresholding based methods have low computational cost and usually use only gray-level intensities of the pixels to segment the image3,8,25. The classifier based methods are more robust since they use more than one feature for classification, but the implementation and the computational cost increments considerably compared with thresholding based methods1,7,10,26; the image features used in classifier based methods should appropriately be selected according to the application, texture information might be suitable for ultrasound images3.

We have implemented an automatic segmentation method based on the work of Madabhushi et al7. This method is based on a region-growing algorithm applied to a probability image instead of an intensity image. A probability image refers to the visual representation of the probability of a pixel to belong to the tumor with respect to some predefined features; the echogenicity and the internal echo pattern are used as features in this method to compute the pixel probability. Two density probability functions (*pdf*)are obtained from previously segmented images, one for intensity and one for texture.

The intensity *pdf* is obtained from the extraction of the normalized histogram of the tumor region of pre-processed images. Most of the proposed methods for tumor segmentation in breast ultrasound images use a pre-processing step to obtain more homogenous regions and enhance the contrast of the image. For contrast enhancement some works used the stick method3,25,26, but Madabhushi et al7 proposed the use of histogram equalization because it is a fast method with good results in tumor enhancement. To obtain more homogenous regions a Gaussian filter was used by Chen et al3 and a Butterworth filter was used by Madabhushi et al7, but And et al27 showed that the Gaussian Anisotropic Filter has better results in ultrasound images since it preserves boundaries. Based on this, we implemented a pre-processing step to obtain a contrast enhanced image usin histogram equalization and then a Gaussian Anisotropic Filter to obtain more homogenous regions while preserving borders.

To obtain the texture *pdf,* the normalized histogram of the tumor region is extracted from texture images obtained by per-pixel computation of the original image using a texture descriptor. Because texture parameters in ultrasound images characterize the acoustic properties of the tissue24, the texture image was computed from the original image without any pre-processing step to avoid elimination of any texture related information.

After computing the probability image, using the pre-processed intensity and texture joint probability from the intensity and texture *pdf*s, the method uses a region growing algorithm on the probability image to obtain the region that belongs to the tumor. The seed point of the region is automatically determined by the method using the probability of each pixel, along with the spatial information about the potential seed. Usually the ultrasound probe is placed above the region of interest and trying to put the lesion in the center of the image, while the subcutaneous fat, glands and skin are located in the upper part of the image; for this reason, the pixels that are near the central area of the image have more probability of belonging to the tumor according to spatial location. To quantify the probability of each pixel of being the seed of the region growing method , Madabhushi et al7 proposed a mathematical approach based on eq. 18.

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| --- | --- |
|  | (18) |

where is the joint probability of belonging to the tumor according to texture and intensity features; is the mean of the joint probability in a neighborhood around the pixel; is the vertical position of the pixel and is the Euclidean distance from the center of the image to the pixel. is computed for every pixel in the image and the pixel with the highest value is used as the region growing algorithm seed.

To include one pixel inside the tumor region it should satisfy two conditions: First, the probability of the pixel should be inside a range of values between the mean of the tumor region probability by upper and lower thresholds and; second, at least one pixel in the immediate neighborhood of the pixel should has been included already in the tumor region; these conditions are shown in eq. 19.

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|  | (19) |

After computing the region growing algorithm the borders of the final region are used as the initialization of a Snake in order to find the final segmentation of the tumor. A complete description of the method can be found in the original work by Madabhushi et al7; all the user defined variables of the segmentation method used in this work were extracted from the original work.

Experiments and Results

Contrast enhancement using texture descriptors

Evaluation of contrast enhancement can be done with different indices, the is no standardized solution for this; therefore, it is important to compute several indices for this purpose in order to have a good contrast enhancement evaluation28. To evaluate the ability of the texture descriptors listed in table 1 to enhance the contrast between the tumor region and the surrounding tissue, we used the signal to noise ratio (SNR, eq. 20) and the contrast to noise ratio (CNR, eq. 21), both used by Liao et al6.

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| --- | --- |
|  | (20) |
|  | (21) |

where and are the mean brightness values of the tumor region (ROI) and the surrounding tissue (Background) respectively, and and are the standard deviations.

In addition to the SNR and CNR we computed the Minkowsky-form Distance (MD, eq. 22) and the histogram intersection (INT, eq. 23) between the ROI and the background regions as similarity measurements between histograms. The MD is often used for computing dissimilarities between histograms29. The intersection of the histograms is a useful similarity measurement when the number of pixels is different, and also is well suited to deal with scale changes30.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | (22) |
|  | (23) |

where and are the normalized histograms of the regions.

Along with contrast enhancement, another important aspect to take into account when using texture analysis for image segmentation is the ability of the descriptor to preserve the edges of the structures we want to segment6. To evaluate this, we used the edge preservation index (EPI, eq. 24).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | (24) |

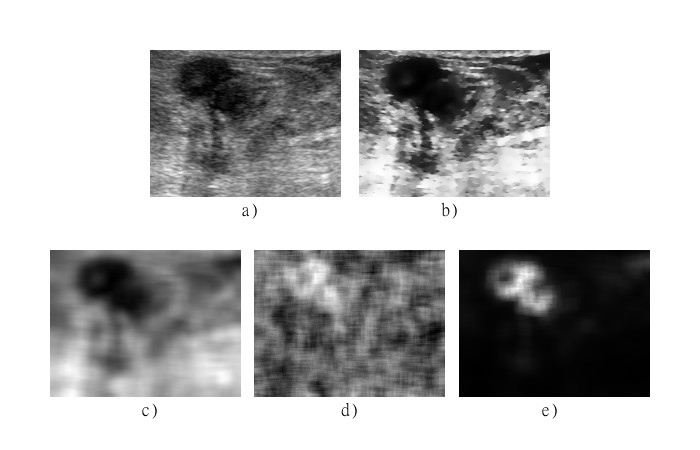
where is the value of the texture image pixel and is the value of the original image; the pixel is in the edge area, previously segmented in the original image31.

We compare the SNR, CNR, DM, INT and EPI of the original images with the texture images obtained using per pixel computation with the descriptors listed in table 1. We also compute these indices for the pre-processing step used in the segmentation algorithm to obtain an intensity image with higher contrast and more homogeneous regions, in order to find out if this step really increases the contrast in the images. Table 2 shows the results for the original image and the pre-processing step, where we can see that the preprocessing step increases all indices except for the SNR and the EPI.

The first-order descriptor that obtained better results enhancing the image contrast was the Mean of the histogram, with higher values of MD, INT and CNR than the original image, however the SNR was lower than in the original image and the ability to preserve borders was low. The results also shows that second-order descriptors based on the co-occurrence matrices are not useful for image enhancement, since none of the descriptors proposed by Haralick20 are able to enhance the contrast of the image, having lower values in all the evaluation indexes excepting for SNR which was significantly higher in the texture images using co-occurrence based descriptors. Although none of these texture descriptors improve the contrast, the co-occurrence matrix based texture descriptor that obtained the higher values in all indexes was the Homogeneity. Of all the rung-length based texture descriptors the SRE had better results improving the MD, INT, SNR and CNR of the image; this texture descriptor is also the one that increases the MD and INT the most of all the descriptors listed in table 1, making easier the differentiation between regions using their probabilities, since the normalized histogram can be used as the probability density function to belong to a region32. Of all the texture descriptors listed in table 1, the only one that was able to preserve borders was the local variance of the original image gray-values, but this descriptor decreased all the other contrast enhancement indices. The values of the contrast indices for the Mean of the histogram, Homogeneity of the co-occurrence matrices and the SRE of the run-length matrices are shown in table 2, figure 1 shows the images for each descriptor and figure 2 shows the normalized histogram of the tumor region (blue) and background (red) in each image of figure 1.

**Table 2**. Contrast indices.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Image | MD | INT | SNR | CNR | EPI |
| Original | 1.4136 ±0.3264 | 0.2932 ±0.1632 | 1.7450 ±0.5285 | 1.0784 ±0.3316 | 1 ±0 |
| Pre-processed | 1.4953 ±0.3132 | 0.2524 ±0.1566 | 1.0644 ±0.2333 | 1.1682 ±0.3610 | 1.4429 ±0.3702 |
| Mean | 1.5460 ±0.3075 | 0.2270 ±0.1537 | 1.5996 ±0.3274 | 1.2495 ±0.3713 | 0.4048 ±0.1019 |
| Homogeneity | 0.8341 ±0.4466 | 0.5829 ±0.2233 | 4.0034 ±0.9603 | 0.5256 ±0.4724 | 0.5491 ±0.2257 |
| SRE | 1.6217 ±0.2944 | 0.1892 ±0.1472 | 1.9031 ±0.4847 | 1.2124 ±0.3924 | 0.3925 ±0.2319 |



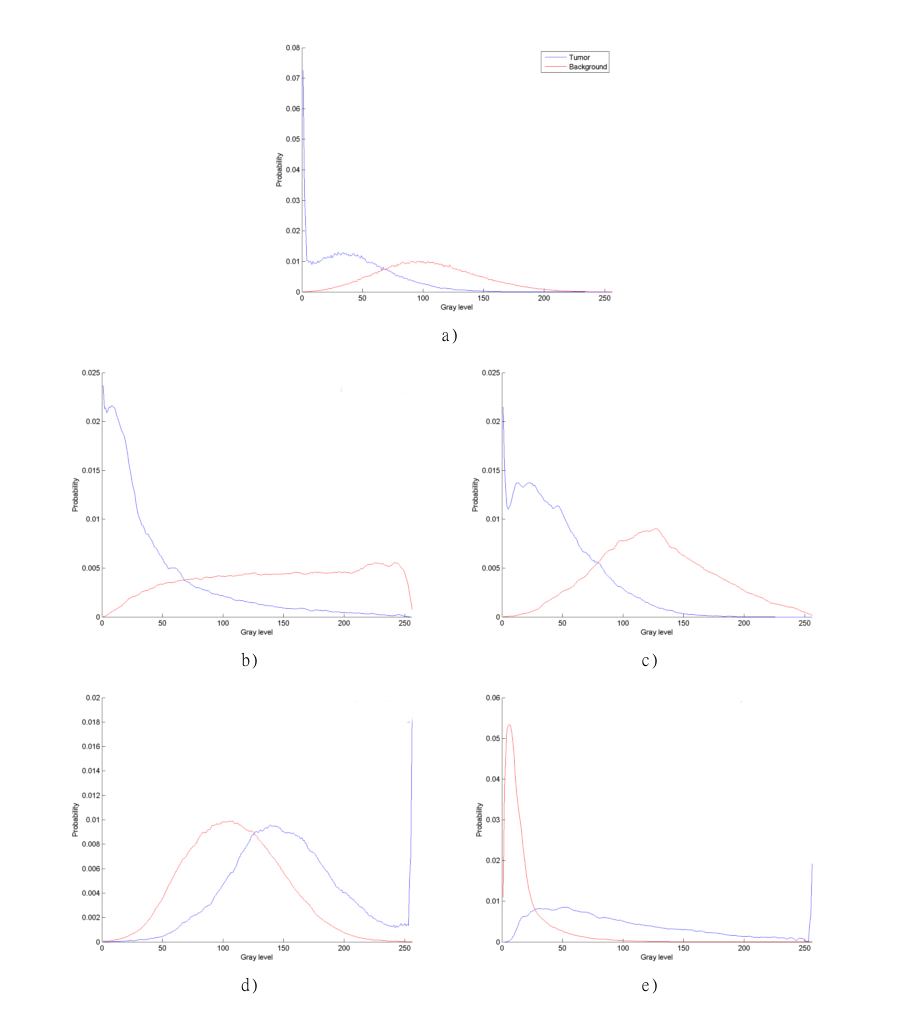
**Figure 1.** Textural analysis of breast ultrasound images; a) original ultrasound image, b) pre-processed intensity image, c) mean of the histogram texture image, d) Homogeneity of the co-occurrence matrix texture image, and e) SRE of the run-length matrix texture image.

Segmentation evaluation

We implemented an automatic segmentation method based on the one reported by Madabhushi et al7, which includes a pre-processing step to obtain an intensity image and a texture image in order to build a probability image to segment the tumor with a region growing algorithm and a Snake. Here we evaluate the results of the segmentation method when using only the original image, only the pre-processed intensity image and using the pre-processed intensity image along with a texture image obtained with one of the descriptors listed in table 1. To evaluate the segmentation results we used the accuracy (eq. 25), sensitivity (eq. 26), specificity (eq. 27), positive predictive value (PPV, eq. 28) and negative predictive value (NPV, eq. 29)33.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | (25) |
|  | (26) |
|  | (27) |
|  | (28) |
|  | (29) |

where , , and are the true positives, true negatives, false positives and false negatives pixels found in the segmentation process. These indices were evaluated for the 30 images using leave-one-out cross-validation.



**Figure 3.** Normalized histograms of textural analysis; a) original ultrasound image, b) pre-processed intensity image, c) mean of the histogram texture image, d) Homogeneity of the co-occurrence matrix texture image, and e) SRE of the run-length matrix texture image.

The accuracy is the ratio of correctly classified pixels ( and ) in the entire area of the image34. The sensitivity and specificity are often used to complement the evaluation of segmentation algorithms; sensitivity is used to measure how many pixels in the region of interest are correctly segmented, it does not tell anything about how many pixels in the background are going to be segmented as tumor35; the specificity measures how many pixels in the background are correctly excluded and does not tell if a tumor pixel is going to be correctly segmented35. The positive and negative predictive values are related with sensitivity, specificity and the size of the region, the predictive values will change between imagesif the tumor region covers a different percentage of the whole image, it is important to take this into account since the size of breast tumors change between patients36.

Conclusiones

Looking at eq. 20 a higher SNR value may imply two things, the mean gray-level of the tumor region increased and/or the standard deviation decreased, making the region brighter and/or more homogeneous, but id the contrast between the region and the background is diminished the visualization of interest is going to be more difficult, since the mean gray-level and the homogeneity of the regions is very similar; figure 1 shows how a breast tumor with high SNR in an ultrasound image does not imply better visualization of the lesion, in this figure the original image has a SNR value of 1.4940 and a CNR value of 1.4882, while the texture image obtained with the correlation of the co-occurrence matrix has a SNR of 3.2322 and a CNR value of 0.0744.