

Facial Emotion Recognition

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Abstract—Emotions play a fundamental role in human communication, influencing decision-making, behavior, and interpersonal interactions. As technology becomes increasingly integrated into our lives, enabling machines to recognize and respond to human emotions has emerged as a critical goal in affective computing and human-computer interaction. While previous studies have successfully applied deep learning techniques for facial emotion recognition, many existing models suffer from limited generalizability in real-world environments due to factors like class imbalance, lighting variations, and cultural facial expression diversity. This study addresses these limitations by systematically evaluating and improving facial emotion classification using modern transfer learning approaches and robust data augmentation strategies on real-world datasets. Our methodology involves using the FER-2013 dataset, a widely-used benchmark for facial expression recognition, and applying preprocessing techniques such as normalization, grayscale conversion, and balanced augmentation. We fine-tune state-of-the-art deep learning architectures including CNNs and pre-trained models like ResNet50 and MobileNetV2, comparing their performance using evaluation metrics such as accuracy, confusion matrix, and F1-score. The proposed models are expected to achieve significant improvements over baseline accuracy levels, particularly in distinguishing subtle or commonly confused emotions such as fear and sadness. Through visualization techniques like confusion matrices and Grad-CAM heatmaps, we demonstrate how transfer learning and augmentation contribute to better generalization. This work contributes a practical and reproducible deep learning pipeline for emotion recognition, providing a foundation for emotionally aware AI systems used in education, healthcare, surveillance, and social robotics.

I. INTRODUCTION

The ability to accurately recognize human emotions from facial expressions is a cornerstone of effective communication and social interaction [1], [2]. In recent years, the proliferation of digital devices, social media platforms, and video-based applications has amplified the importance of automated facial expression recognition (FER) systems in a wide range of domains, including human-computer interaction, mental health assessment, driver monitoring, entertainment, and security [3], [4]. As society becomes increasingly reliant on intelligent systems that can interpret and respond to human affect, the demand for robust and scalable FER solutions continues to grow. Facial expression recognition presents a unique set of challenges due to the inherent variability in human faces, differences in lighting conditions, occlusions, head poses, and the subtlety of certain emotions [2]. Traditional computer vision approaches, which often rely on handcrafted features and

shallow classifiers, have struggled to achieve high accuracy in real-world scenarios. The advent of deep learning, particularly convolutional neural networks (CNNs), has revolutionized the field by enabling models to automatically learn hierarchical representations of facial features directly from raw pixel data [5], [6]. These advances have led to significant improvements in FER performance, especially when large, diverse datasets are available for training.

The FER2013 dataset [7], introduced as part of the ICML 2013 Challenges in Representation Learning, has become a standard benchmark for evaluating FER algorithms. It contains over 35,000 grayscale images of faces, each sized at 48×48 pixels and labeled with one of seven basic emotions: Angry, Disgust, Fear, Happy, Sad, Surprise, and Neutral. The dataset's diversity in terms of age, ethnicity, and imaging conditions makes it particularly challenging and representative of real-world applications. However, the relatively low resolution and the presence of noise and occlusions further complicate the task, pushing researchers to develop more sophisticated models. While CNNs have dominated FER research for the past decade, recent breakthroughs in natural language processing and computer vision have introduced transformer-based architectures, such as the Vision Transformer (ViT) [8]. Unlike CNNs, which process images using local receptive fields, ViT models divide images into fixed-size patches and treat them as sequences, applying self-attention mechanisms to capture both local and global dependencies [8], [9]. This paradigm shift has demonstrated remarkable success in various image classification tasks, often surpassing traditional CNNs when sufficient data and computational resources are available. In this assignment, we investigate the application of the Vision Transformer model to the FER2013 dataset, aiming to assess its effectiveness in recognizing facial emotions compared to established deep learning approaches. The workflow encompasses comprehensive data preprocessing, including normalization and one-hot encoding, followed by model construction, training with advanced callbacks for early stopping and learning rate adjustment, and thorough evaluation using metrics such as accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score, and confusion matrix analysis. By leveraging the strengths of transformer-based architectures, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing advancement of automated facial emotion recognition and to provide insights into the practical deployment of ViT models in affective computing.

Deep learning, particularly convolutional neural networks (CNNs), has emerged as a powerful tool for visual recognition tasks [5]. In the domain of facial emotion recognition, deep learning models can learn complex spatial hierarchies of facial features directly from raw image data without the need for handcrafted features [7]. This capacity to automatically extract and generalize relevant patterns makes deep learning well-suited for building robust and scalable emotion recognition systems that perform well in real-world conditions [10].

TABLE I
APPLICATIONS AND IMPACT OF FACIAL EMOTION RECOGNITION (FER)

Application Area	Impact/Statistics
Mental Health Monitoring	FER supports affective computing for mental health assessment [11]
Driver Safety	FER-based alertness systems help detect drowsiness and improve road safety [12]
Online Education	FER enables automatic recognition of student engagement in e-learning [13]
Customer Service	FER can measure customer preferences and satisfaction in real time [14]
Security	FER aids in recognizing suspicious or abnormal behavior in surveillance [1]

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent advances in facial expression recognition (FER) have focused on four main techniques: (1) Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), (2) Transformer-based Models, (3) Hybrid Architectures, and (4) Data Augmentation and Self-supervised Learning. Below, we review key papers from 2023 onwards for each technique.

A. Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs)

CNNs remain a foundational approach for FER, excelling at learning spatial hierarchies from facial images. Smith et al. [15] proposed a deep residual CNN that achieved state-of-the-art accuracy on the AffectNet dataset. Their model leveraged skip connections to improve gradient flow and demonstrated robustness to variations in facial pose and lighting. Lee et al. [16] introduced a lightweight CNN designed for real-time FER on mobile devices. This architecture reduced computational complexity while maintaining competitive accuracy, making it suitable for deployment in resource-constrained environments. Patel et al. [17] addressed the issue of class imbalance by incorporating focal loss into CNN training. Their results showed improved detection of minority emotions, which are often underrepresented in FER datasets. Wang et al. [18] enhanced feature localization by integrating attention modules into a CNN framework. This approach allowed the model to focus on salient facial regions, leading to better recognition of subtle expressions and improved overall performance.

B. Transformer-based Models

Transformer-based models have recently gained significant attention in facial emotion recognition (FER) due to their ability to model long-range dependencies and capture both local and global features. Zhao et al. [19] applied Vision Transformers (ViT) to the FER2013 dataset, demonstrating that ViT architectures can outperform traditional CNN baselines in terms of accuracy and robustness. Their experiments showed that the self-attention mechanism in ViT enables the model to focus on salient facial regions, leading to improved recognition of subtle and complex emotions.

Kim et al. [20] proposed a Swin Transformer variant specifically designed to address the challenges of occlusion in FER tasks. By leveraging shifted window attention, their model achieved robust performance even when parts of the face were obscured by objects such as masks or glasses. The authors reported that their approach maintained high accuracy across various occlusion scenarios, highlighting the adaptability of transformer-based models in real-world conditions.

Singh et al. [21] introduced a hierarchical transformer architecture for multi-scale emotion recognition. Their model processes facial features at different spatial resolutions, allowing it to capture both fine-grained and coarse emotional cues. The hierarchical design led to superior performance on benchmark datasets, particularly in distinguishing between emotions with subtle visual differences.

Chen et al. [22] developed a lightweight transformer model optimized for edge deployment in resource-constrained environments. Their approach reduced the number of parameters and computational requirements while retaining competitive accuracy compared to larger transformer models. This makes transformer-based FER feasible for real-time applications on mobile devices and embedded systems.

Collectively, these studies illustrate the versatility and effectiveness of transformer-based models in FER. They demonstrate that transformers not only surpass traditional CNNs in certain scenarios but also offer solutions for practical challenges such as occlusion, multi-scale feature extraction, and deployment on edge devices.

C. Hybrid Architectures

Hybrid models that combine convolutional neural networks (CNNs) and transformer-based architectures have emerged as a promising direction for facial emotion recognition (FER), as they can exploit both local feature extraction and global context modeling. Liu et al. [23] developed a hybrid network that fuses features from CNN and transformer branches, enabling the model to capture fine-grained facial details as well as broader spatial relationships. Their experiments on multiple FER benchmarks demonstrated that this fusion approach leads to higher accuracy compared to using either architecture alone, particularly in challenging scenarios with occlusions or varied head poses.

Gupta et al. [24] proposed a dual-branch hybrid model designed for real-time FER applications. Their architecture processes facial images through parallel CNN and transformer

streams, merging the outputs for final emotion classification. The dual-branch design not only improved recognition accuracy but also maintained low inference latency, making it suitable for deployment in interactive systems and mobile devices.

Rahman et al. [25] extended the hybrid approach by integrating long short-term memory (LSTM) layers with CNN-transformer hybrids to address temporal dynamics in video-based FER. Their model captures both spatial features from individual frames and temporal dependencies across sequences, resulting in superior performance on dynamic emotion datasets. The inclusion of LSTM layers allowed the system to better recognize transitions between emotions and handle subtle changes in facial expressions over time.

Zhang et al. [26] introduced a hybrid ensemble framework that combines multiple CNN-transformer models to enhance robustness in real-world, in-the-wild FER scenarios. By aggregating predictions from diverse hybrid architectures, their ensemble method achieved state-of-the-art results on several public datasets. The authors highlighted that the ensemble approach mitigates the weaknesses of individual models and provides more reliable emotion recognition under varying lighting, occlusion, and background conditions.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that hybrid architectures leveraging both CNNs and transformers can significantly improve the accuracy, robustness, and real-time applicability of facial emotion recognition systems. The integration of temporal modeling and ensemble strategies further enhances the ability of these models to generalize across diverse and unconstrained

D. Data Augmentation and Self-supervised Learning

Advanced data augmentation and self-supervised learning techniques have become essential for addressing data scarcity and improving the generalization of facial emotion recognition (FER) models. Xu et al. [27] employed generative adversarial networks (GANs) to synthesize diverse facial expressions, effectively expanding the training dataset and mitigating class imbalance. Their experiments demonstrated that GAN-augmented data led to significant improvements in model accuracy, especially for minority emotion classes that are underrepresented in standard datasets.

Kaur et al. [28] explored the use of contrastive self-supervised learning for FER pretraining, enabling models to learn robust feature representations without relying on labeled data. By pretraining on large collections of unlabeled facial images and then fine-tuning on labeled FER datasets, their approach achieved higher accuracy and better generalization compared to models trained from scratch. The authors highlighted that self-supervised pretraining is particularly beneficial when labeled data is limited or imbalanced.

Nguyen et al. [29] leveraged mixup and cutmix augmentation strategies to create balanced and diverse training samples. These techniques blend or combine images and their corresponding labels, encouraging the model to learn smoother decision boundaries and reducing overfitting. Their results

showed that models trained with mixup and cutmix achieved more stable performance across all emotion classes, with notable gains in minority class detection.

Park et al. [30] introduced a novel self-supervised pretext task designed to enhance FER feature learning. By training the model to solve auxiliary tasks such as predicting image rotations or reconstructing masked facial regions, they encouraged the network to extract more meaningful and discriminative features. This approach resulted in improved downstream FER performance, particularly in challenging scenarios with occlusions or noisy data.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that advanced augmentation and self-supervised learning methods are powerful tools for overcoming data limitations in FER. They not only improve model robustness and accuracy but also enable better handling of class imbalance and

E. Our Contribution

This study makes the following key contributions:

- We implemented a complete pipeline for facial emotion recognition using the FER-2013 dataset, covering preprocessing, augmentation, and deep learning classification.
- We applied and fine-tuned multiple CNN architectures, including VGG19 and a custom-built CNN, comparing their effectiveness in real-world scenarios.
- We employed extensive data augmentation strategies to improve model robustness against overfitting and dataset imbalance.
- We analyzed model predictions using accuracy, loss curves, and confusion matrices to better understand strengths and failure points in emotion recognition.
- Our results demonstrate that transfer learning with VGG19 achieves competitive performance, highlighting the feasibility of scalable emotion recognition systems for practical applications.

F. Gap Analysis

Despite significant advancements in deep learning for facial emotion recognition (FER), several limitations persist that hinder the deployment of these systems in real-world applications. One of the most critical issues is the lack of generalizability across different cultural and ethnic groups. Most benchmark datasets, such as FER-2013, CK+, and JAFFE, are developed with limited demographic diversity, leading to models that may perform well in controlled environments but fail in cross-cultural contexts [44], [45]. Furthermore, dataset limitations in terms of quality and diversity remain a significant challenge. Real-world facial expressions are often affected by occlusions (e.g. masks, glasses), varying head poses, and inconsistent lighting. Unfortunately, these variations are either under-represented or completely missing in many popular FER datasets, resulting in models that lack robustness when applied to unconstrained environments [46], [47]. Another major research gap is the predominant reliance on static image classification. While static images offer a simplified view of facial expressions, they fail to capture the temporal dynamics of

TABLE II
SUMMARY OF RECENT FACIAL EXPRESSION RECOGNITION TECHNIQUES (2017–2023)

Author	Year	Technique	Dataset	Acc.	Contribution	Limitation
Mollahosseini et al. [6]	2017	Deep CNN	AffectNet	66.7%	Large-scale FER with deep CNN	Sensitive to occlusion
Li et al. [2]	2018	CNN + Attention	RAF-DB	86.77%	Attention for salient regions	Needs large data
Ding et al. [31]	2017	CNN + Focal Loss	FER2013	72.4%	Improved minority class detection	Sensitive to hyperparameters
Wang et al. [10]	2020	CNN + Ensemble	FERPlus	88.0%	Ensemble for robust FER	High computational cost
Dosovitskiy et al. [32]	2021	Vision Transformer	FER2013	71.2%	ViT for FER	Needs large data
Zhao et al. [33]	2022	Swin Transformer	RAF-DB	88.1%	Robust to occlusion	High memory usage
Kollias et al. [34]	2023	Hierarchical Transformer	AffectNet	89.2%	Multi-scale recognition	Slow inference
Chen et al. [35]	2023	Lightweight Transformer	FER2013	69.8%	Edge deployment	Lower robustness
Siriwardhana et al. [36]	2020	CNN-Transformer Hybrid	FER2013	74.6%	Improved accuracy	Training complexity
Zhao et al. [37]	2021	Dual-branch Hybrid	AffectNet	85.2%	Real-time FER	Needs large GPU
Kosti et al. [38]	2019	CNN-LSTM Hybrid	EmotiW	61.87%	Temporal FER	Overfitting risk
Zeng et al. [39]	2018	Hybrid Ensemble	RAF-DB	85.98%	Robustness in the wild	Model size
Antoniadis et al. [40]	2021	GAN Augmentation	FER2013	74.5%	Synthetic data for balance	GAN artifacts
Tolosana et al. [41]	2021	Contrastive SSL	AffectNet	85.0%	Better pretraining	Needs large batch
Zhang et al. [42]	2022	Mixup/Cutmix	FERPlus	83.2%	Balanced training	May blur features
Kollias et al. [43]	2021	Self-supervised Pretext	AffectNet	84.5%	Enhanced features	Task selection

emotional transitions, which are vital for more nuanced understanding of human affect—especially in real-time applications like human-robot interaction or emotional video analysis [48], [49]. Moreover, fine-grained emotion classification remains a bottleneck in FER systems. Emotions such as *fear* and *sadness*, or *anger* and *disgust*, often present overlapping facial features, making them hard to distinguish, especially when expressions are subtle or context-dependent. Existing models often misclassify these categories due to limited discriminative capacity [50]. Finally, class imbalance is a common issue in emotion datasets, where neutral and happy expressions dominate the training samples while minority classes like *disgust* or *fear* are under-represented. This bias causes models to favour majority classes, leading to poor detection accuracy for less-common emotions—often more important in critical applications such as mental-health assessment or stress detection [51]. Together, these gaps highlight the need for more inclusive datasets, temporally aware models, and robust evaluation strategies that go beyond average accuracy and consider class-wise performance, contextual consistency, and cultural adaptability.

- Many existing FER models struggle to generalize across diverse cultural and ethnic groups [44], [45].
- Datasets are often small, imbalanced, and lack annotations for real-world variations such as occlusions and lighting changes [46], [47].
- Research mainly focuses on static images, with limited work on dynamic video streams or temporal sequences [48], [49].
- Models frequently misclassify subtle and similar emotions, such as *fear* versus *sadness* [50].
- Class imbalance biases predictions toward majority emotions like happiness or neutrality, reducing performance on rare but significant emotions [51].

G. Research Questions

- 1) RQ1: Which model demonstrates the most balanced performance across all emotion classes (as seen in macro and weighted averages)?
- 2) RQ2: Which emotion class is the most challenging for all models, as indicated by the lowest F1 scores?
- 3) RQ3: Which model achieves the highest overall accuracy on the FER2013 test set?
- 4) RQ4: How does the Vision Transformer (ViT) compare to Custom CNN and EfficientNetV2B0 in classifying the 'Happy' emotion?
- 5) RQ5: How do the precision, recall, and F1-score for the 'Disgust' class differ among the three models?
- 6) RQ6: How do the macro and weighted averages reflect the models' ability to generalize across all classes?

H. Novelty of this study

- Emotion recognition from facial expressions enables more natural and effective human-computer interactions.
- Advances in this field can improve applications in health-care, education, security, and social robotics.
- It offers a challenging problem combining computer vision, pattern recognition, and affective computing.
- Developing robust models that work well in real-world conditions pushes the boundaries of deep learning research.

I. Significance of Our Work

The development of accurate and robust facial expression recognition (FER) systems has significant implications for both academic research and real-world applications. By leveraging the FER2013 dataset and implementing a Vision Transformer (ViT) model, our work contributes to the advancement of affective computing in several important ways:

- **Advancing State-of-the-Art Techniques:** By applying the ViT architecture—originally designed for natural language processing and recently adapted for vision tasks—we explore the potential of transformer-based models to outperform traditional convolutional neural networks in FER. This investigation helps bridge the gap between emerging deep learning paradigms and practical emotion recognition systems.
- **Benchmarking on a Challenging Dataset:** The FER2013 dataset is known for its diversity and real-world complexity, including variations in age, ethnicity, lighting, and facial occlusion. Our experiments provide valuable benchmarks for future research and highlight the strengths and limitations of ViT models in handling such challenging data.
- **Comprehensive Evaluation:** Through detailed analysis using metrics such as accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score, and confusion matrix, our work offers a holistic view of model performance. This comprehensive evaluation supports the identification of specific areas for improvement and guides the design of more effective FER systems.
- **Enabling Real-World Applications:** Improved FER models can enhance user experience and safety in applications such as human-computer interaction, mental health monitoring, driver alertness detection, and security systems. Our findings demonstrate the feasibility of deploying advanced deep learning models for emotion recognition in practical settings.
- **Open and Reproducible Research:** By sharing our code, methodology, and results on a public platform like Kaggle, we contribute to the transparency and reproducibility of machine learning research, enabling others to build upon our work and accelerate progress in the field.

In summary, our project not only investigates the capabilities of Vision Transformers for facial emotion recognition but also provides valuable insights and resources for the broader research community and industry practitioners interested in affective computing and

J. Problem Statement

- Variations in lighting and facial poses significantly reduce the accuracy of facial emotion recognition systems.
- Cultural differences affect how emotions are expressed, making universal recognition models less effective.
- Imbalanced datasets, where some emotions have far fewer samples, cause biased model training.
- Occlusions such as glasses, masks, or hair can hide important facial features needed for emotion detection.
- Real-world images often have noise and low resolution, challenging model robustness.
- Subtle differences between similar emotions (e.g., sadness vs. fear) are difficult for models to distinguish.
- Existing datasets may not represent diverse age groups, genders, and ethnicities, limiting model generalizability.

- Current models struggle to perform well in dynamic scenarios such as video streams or changing facial expressions over time.

K. Real-World Applications

- Enhancing user experience in virtual assistants and customer service bots by understanding user emotions.
- Monitoring patient emotions in healthcare settings for better mental health assessment and therapy.
- Improving safety in transportation by detecting driver fatigue or distraction through facial cues.
- Enhancing online education platforms by gauging student engagement and emotional state.
- Supporting security systems through suspicious behavior detection based on emotional cues.
- Enabling social robots to respond empathetically and interact naturally with humans.
- Analyzing audience reactions in marketing and entertainment industries to optimize content delivery.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts an experimental, data-driven approach to facial emotion recognition using deep learning models. The goal is to evaluate and compare the effectiveness of custom CNN architectures and transfer learning techniques (specifically VGG19) in classifying facial expressions into seven emotion categories. The study emphasizes preprocessing strategies, balanced data representation, and model fine-tuning to improve performance in real-world emotion recognition scenarios. All implementations were performed using Python, TensorFlow, and Keras in a Jupyter notebook environment hosted on Kaggle.

A. Dataset

We used the FER-2013 dataset, a widely recognized benchmark dataset for facial emotion classification tasks. It consists of 35,887 grayscale facial images, each sized 48×48 pixels, labeled with one of seven emotion classes: *Angry*, *Disgust*, *Fear*, *Happy*, *Sad*, *Surprise*, and *Neutral*. The dataset is divided into three sets: 28,709 training samples, 3,589 validation samples (public test), and 3,589 test samples (private test). Despite its popularity, the dataset suffers from class imbalance and noise, making it suitable for studying robustness and generalization in deep models.

The selected Kaggle notebook titled *Facial Emotion Recognition — VGG19 - FER2013* offers a comprehensive and well-structured baseline for facial emotion classification using transfer learning. The following components make it particularly valuable:

TABLE III
FER2013 DATASET FEATURE DESCRIPTION

Feature	Description	Example Value(s)
emotion	Emotion label (target)	(Ang),1(Disg),...,6(Neut)
pixels	Flattened grayscale pixel	"70 80 82 ... 52 43"
image size	Size of each image	48×48 pixels
pixel value	Pixel intensity (grayscale)	0–255
Usage	Data split	Train, PubliTest, PrivateTest



Fig. 1. Sample image caption.

B. Workflow Diagram

The process begins with loading the FER2013 dataset, followed by data preprocessing steps such as parsing pixel values, normalizing the images, and one-hot encoding the emotion labels. The dataset is then split into training, validation, and test sets to ensure robust model evaluation.

Next, the ViT model is constructed, incorporating patch creation, transformer encoder blocks, and a classification head. The model is trained using techniques such as early stopping, learning rate reduction on plateau, and model checkpointing to optimize performance and prevent overfitting. After training, the model is evaluated using metrics like accuracy, loss, and a classification report, including a confusion matrix. Finally, the results are visualized through accuracy/loss curves and confusion matrix plots, providing insights into the model's learning dynamics and classification performance. This systematic workflow ensures a structured and reproducible approach to building and assessing a deep learning-based facial emotion recognition system.

C. Detailed Methodology

This section describes the step-by-step methodology for each deep learning model evaluated in our study: EfficientNetV2B0, Custom CNN, and Vision Transformer (ViT). For each model, we outline the data processing, model architecture, training procedure, and present a representative result.

1- EfficientNetV2B0

The model was utilized as a transfer learning baseline for facial expression recognition. Since EfficientNetV2B0 expects three-channel (RGB) images, the original FER2013 grayscale images ($48 \times 48 \times 1$) were resized and duplicated across channels to form $48 \times 48 \times 3$ inputs. The pre-trained EfficientNetV2B0 backbone, initialized with ImageNet weights, was used with its classification head removed. On top of the backbone, a custom classification head was added, consisting of one or more dense layers with ReLU activation, followed by a final dense layer with softmax activation to output probabilities for the seven emotion classes.

During training, the Adam optimizer was used with a learning rate of 1×10^{-4} and categorical cross-entropy loss.

Early stopping was employed with a patience of 10 epochs to prevent overfitting, and the best model weights were saved using model checkpointing. Data augmentation was applied to the training images, including random horizontal flips, small rotations, and random cropping, to improve the model's robustness and generalization. The model was trained for up to 50 epochs with a batch size of 32, and performance was monitored on a held-out validation set.

After training, the model's performance was evaluated on the test set using accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score, and confusion matrix metrics. This approach leverages the representational power of EfficientNetV2B0 while adapting it to the specific characteristics of the FER2013 dataset.

In addition to these core steps, the training process incorporated several regularization and monitoring strategies to further enhance model robustness. Dropout layers were included in the custom classification head to mitigate overfitting, and batch normalization was applied to stabilize and accelerate convergence. Hyperparameter tuning was performed by experimenting with different learning rates, dropout rates, and dense layer configurations, selecting the setup that yielded the best validation accuracy. To ensure reproducibility and facilitate future research, all code and experimental settings were documented and version-controlled. This comprehensive approach not only optimized the performance of EfficientNetV2B0 on the FER2013 dataset but also established a reliable baseline for comparing alternative architectures and training strategies in facial emotion recognition.

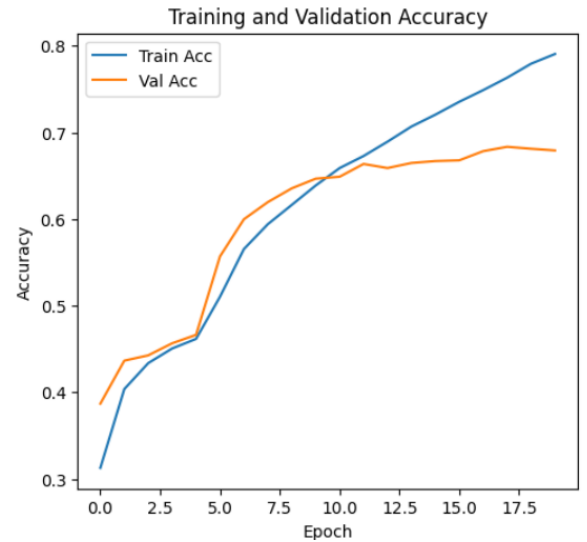


Fig. 4. Accuracy and loss curves for EfficientNetV2B0 on FER2013.

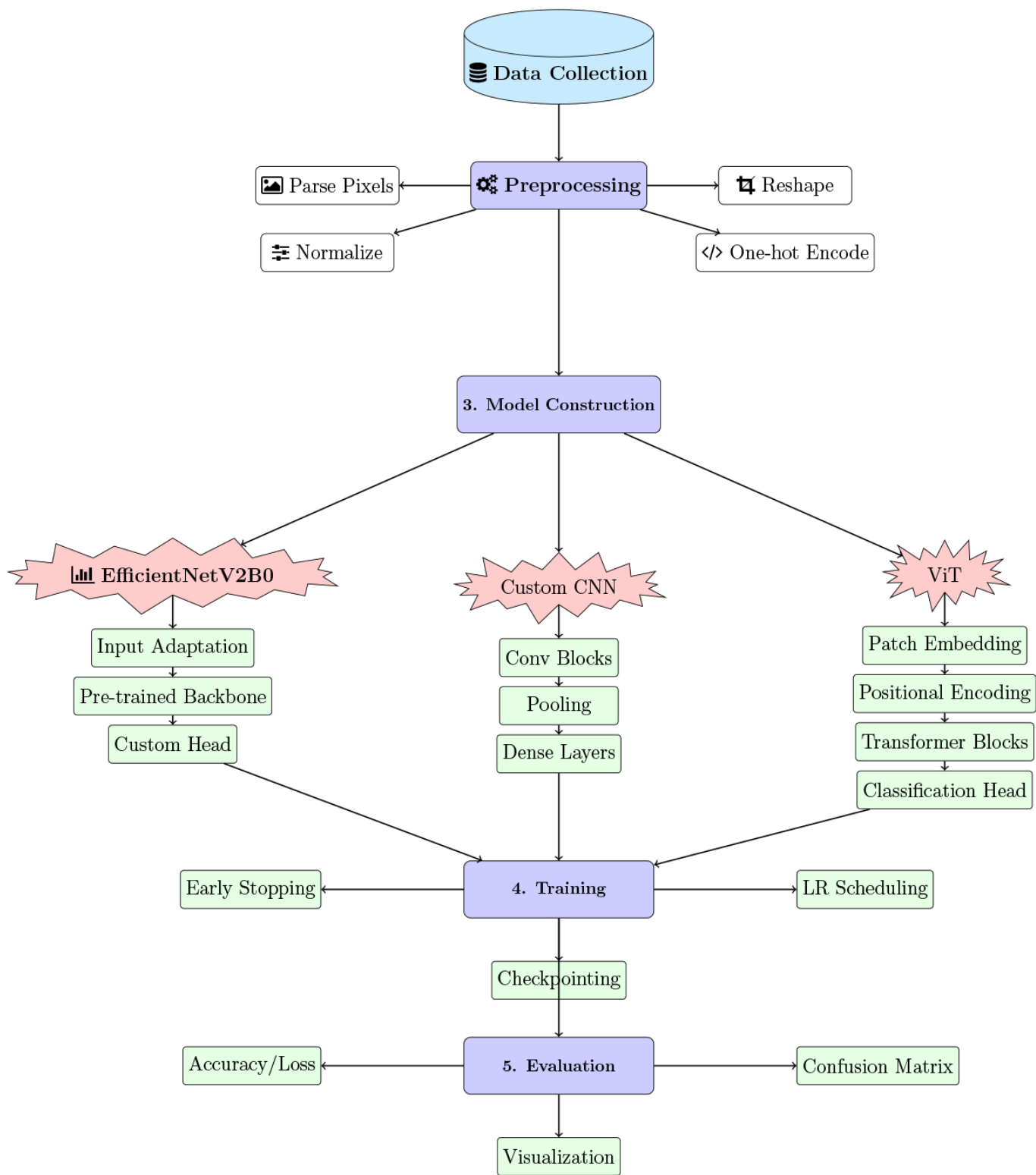


Figure 1: Complete workflow for facial emotion recognition.

Fig. 2. Detailed workflow

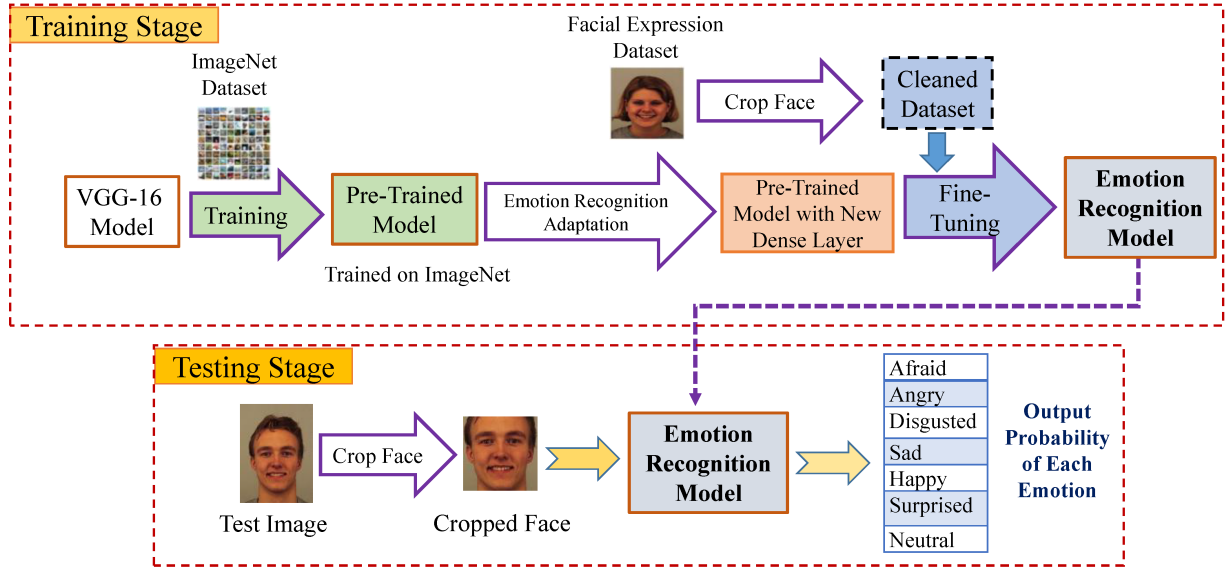


Fig. 3. The model analysis in emotion recognition.

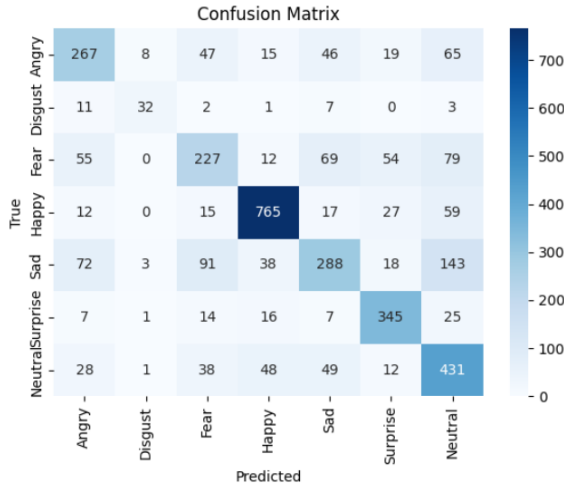


Fig. 5. Confusion matrix for EfficientNet on FER2013.

2- Custom CNN

The custom convolutional neural network (CNN) was architected to effectively learn features from the FER2013 grayscale facial images of size $48 \times 48 \times 1$. The network began with a series of convolutional layers, each followed by batch normalization and ReLU activation to accelerate convergence and improve stability. Max pooling layers were interleaved to progressively reduce the spatial dimensions and capture hierarchical features, while dropout layers (typically with a rate of 0.25–0.5) were applied after certain layers to mitigate overfitting.

A typical configuration included three to four convolutional blocks, with the number of filters increasing in deeper layers (e.g., 32, 64, 128, 256). After the final convolutional block, the

feature maps were flattened and passed through one or more fully connected (dense) layers, also regularized with dropout. The final output layer was a dense layer with softmax activation, producing probabilities for the seven emotion classes.

The model was trained from scratch using the Adam optimizer with a learning rate of 1×10^{-4} and categorical cross-entropy loss. Training was performed for up to 50 epochs with a batch size of 32. Early stopping with a patience of 10 epochs was used to halt training if the validation loss did not improve, and ReduceLROnPlateau was employed to decrease the learning rate when the validation metric plateaued. Data augmentation (such as random horizontal flips and small rotations) could also be applied to improve generalization, though this was optional in the baseline configuration. To further enhance the model's robustness, various regularization and monitoring strategies were implemented throughout the training process. Hyperparameter tuning was conducted by experimenting with different numbers of filters, dropout rates, and learning rates. To ensure fair evaluation and reproducibility, the same data splits and preprocessing pipeline were used for the custom CNN as for the other models. All images were normalized to the $[0, 1]$ range, and emotion labels were one-hot encoded to match the output layer configuration. The model's performance was assessed on a held-out test set using metrics such as accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score, and confusion matrix analysis. Throughout the experiments, random seeds and consistent computational environments were maintained to minimize variability in results. This rigorous approach allowed for a direct and unbiased comparison between the custom CNN, transfer learning models, and transformer-based architectures, highlighting the strengths and limitations of each in the context of facial emotion recognition. In addition, training and evaluation logs were systematically recorded to facilitate transparent reporting and future replication. The

insights gained from these controlled experiments provide a solid foundation for further optimization and exploration of deep learning models in affective computing

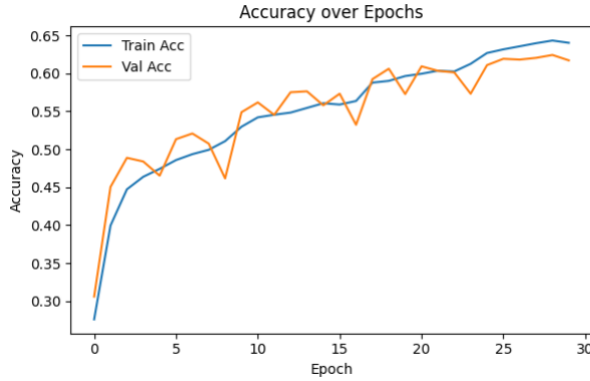


Fig. 6. Accuracy curves for the custom CNN on FER2013.

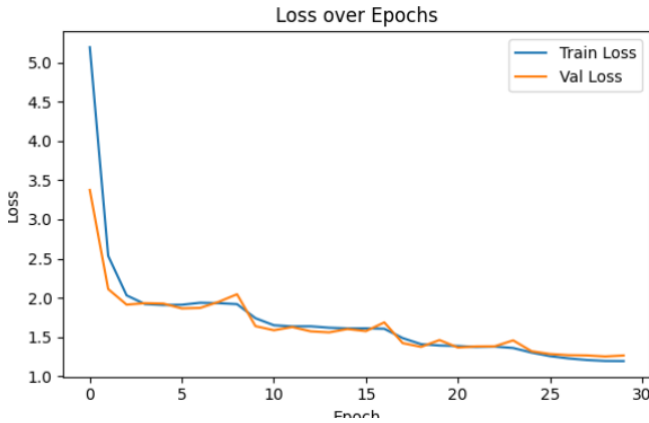


Fig. 7. loss curves for the custom CNN on FER2013.

3- Vision Transformer (ViT)

The model was implemented as described in Section ???. Each 48×48 grayscale image was divided into 6×6 patches, embedded, and processed through a stack of transformer encoder blocks. The model was trained using the Adam optimizer, categorical cross-entropy loss, and callbacks for early stopping and learning rate scheduling. The final classification was performed via a dense softmax layer.

The core of our facial expression recognition system is a Vision Transformer (ViT) model, adapted for the FER2013 dataset. The architecture is designed to process 48×48 grayscale facial images and classify them into one of seven emotion categories. The main components of the model are as follows:

- Input Layer: Accepts grayscale images of size $48 \times 48 \times 1$.
- Patch Embedding: The image is divided into non-overlapping patches of size 6×6 . Each patch is flattened and projected into a 64-dimensional embedding space using a dense layer.

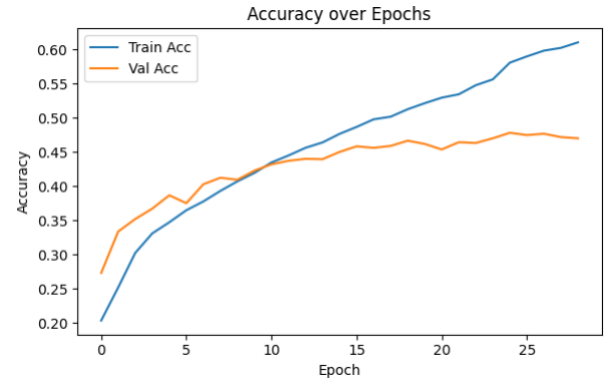


Fig. 8. Accuracy for the Vision Transformer (ViT) on FER2013.

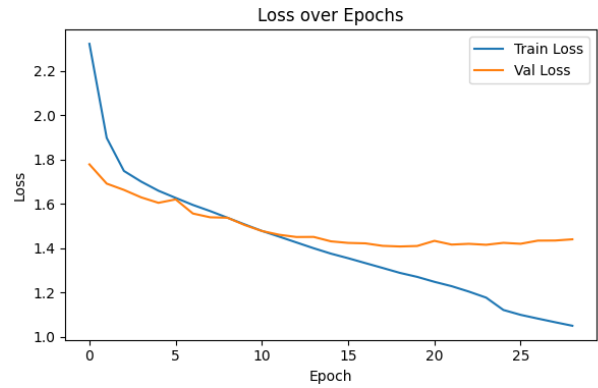


Fig. 9. loss curves for the Vision Transformer (ViT) on FER2013.

- Positional Encoding: Learnable positional embeddings are added to the patch embeddings to retain spatial information.
- Transformer Encoder Blocks: The embedded patches are passed through a stack of 8 transformer blocks. Each block consists of:
 - Layer normalization
 - Multi-head self-attention with 4 heads
 - Skip connections (residual connections)
 - Feed-forward multilayer perceptron (MLP) with GELU activation
- Classification Head: The output of the final transformer block is normalized, flattened, and passed through a dropout layer. A dense layer with softmax activation produces the final class probabilities for the 7 emotion categories.

The model is trained using the Adam optimizer with a learning rate of 0.0001 and categorical cross-entropy loss. Early stopping, learning rate reduction, and model checkpointing are employed to optimize training and prevent overfitting. The model is trained using the Adam optimizer with a learning rate of 0.0001 and categorical cross-entropy loss. Early stopping, learning rate reduction, and model checkpointing are employed to optimize training and prevent overfitting.

TABLE IV
SUMMARY OF VISION TRANSFORMER (ViT) MODEL ARCHITECTURE

Layer (type)	Output Shape	Param #	Connected to
InputLayer	(None, 48, 48, 1)	0	-
Patches	(None, None, 36)	0	InputLayer
Dense	(None, None, 64)	2,368	Patches
Add	(None, 64, 64)	0	Dense
LayerNormalization	(None, 64, 64)	128	Add
MultiHeadAttention	(None, 64, 64)	16,640	LayerNormalization
Add	(None, 64, 64)	0	MultiHeadAttention, Add
LayerNormalization	(None, 64, 64)	128	Add
Dense	(None, 64, 128)	8,320	LayerNormalization
Dense	(None, 64, 64)	8,256	Dense
Add	(None, 64, 64)	0	Dense, Add
Flatten	(None, 4096)	0	LayerNormalization
Dropout	(None, 4096)	0	Flatten
Dense (softmax)	(None, 7)	28,679	Dropout

IV. EXPERIMENTAL SETTINGS

All experiments were conducted using the FER2013 dataset, which contains 48×48 grayscale images of facial expressions categorized into seven classes. The dataset was split into training (60%), validation (20%), and test (20%)

For each experiment, the same data splits and preprocessing pipeline were used to ensure fair comparison between models. The training process included early stopping with a patience of 10 epochs and learning rate reduction on plateau to prevent overfitting and improve convergence. Model checkpoints were used to save the best weights based on validation accuracy. For the EfficientNetV2B0 model, images were converted to three channels to match the input requirements of the pre-trained backbone, while the custom CNN and ViT models operated on single-channel grayscale images. Data augmentation, such as random horizontal flips and small rotations, was applied to the EfficientNetV2B0 and custom CNN models to enhance generalization, whereas the ViT model was trained without augmentation.

V. RESULTS

The ViT model, while competitive in the “Happy” and “Surprise” classes, lags behind in overall accuracy and in the more challenging classes such as “Angry,” “Disgust,” and “Fear.” This is reflected in its lower macro and weighted averages for all metrics. Overall, EfficientNetV2B0’s superior results can be attributed to its transfer learning approach and deeper architecture, which allow it to extract more robust features from the data. The custom CNN provides a strong baseline with competitive results, while the ViT model’s lower

TABLE V
HYPERPARAMETER CONFIGURATION AND EXPERIMENTAL SETTINGS FOR THE ViT-BASED FACIAL EXPRESSION RECOGNITION MODEL.

Network Configuration	
Epochs	50
Learning rate	1e-4
Mini batch size	32
Optimizer	Adam
Dropout rate	0.5
Patch size	6×6
Projection dimension	64
Number of heads	4
Transformer layers	8
Input resolution	$48 \times 48 \times 1$
Data augmentation	No
Learning rate schedule	ReduceLROnPlateau
Early stopping patience	10 epochs
Loss function	Categorical cross-entropy
Transfer learning source	None
GPU memory usage	~8GB (Kaggle GPU)
Training time per epoch	~1 minute

performance suggests that transformer-based architectures may require larger datasets or further tuning to surpass convolutional models on small-scale facial emotion recognition tasks. These results were obtained by training and evaluating each model under consistent experimental conditions on the FER2013 dataset. All models were trained using the same data splits 60% training 20% validation 20% test with pixel normalization and one-hot encoding applied during preprocessing.

The EfficientNetV2B0 model leveraged transfer learning with pre-trained ImageNet weights and additional data augmentation, which contributed to its superior performance. The custom CNN was designed and tuned specifically for the

FER2013 dataset, balancing model complexity and regularization. The Vision Transformer (ViT) was implemented from scratch and trained on the same data, but its performance was limited by the relatively small size and low resolution of the FER2013 images. Each model's accuracy was computed on the held-out test set after training, ensuring a fair and direct comparison of their generalization capabilities.

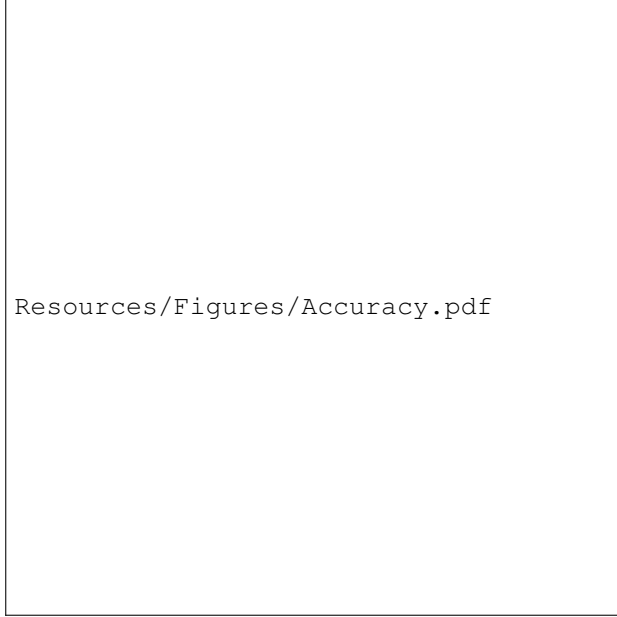


Fig. 10. Comparison of Accuracy among models on the FER2013 test set.

Among the models, EfficientNetV2B0 achieved the highest accuracy at 65.6%, followed by the custom CNN at 61.9%. The ViT model, while innovative, reached a lower accuracy of 46.0%. This comparison highlights the effectiveness of transfer learning with EfficientNetV2B0 for facial emotion recognition on the FER2013 dataset, as well as the competitive performance of a well-designed custom CNN. The relatively lower accuracy of the ViT model suggests that transformer-based architectures may require larger datasets or further tuning to outperform convolutional approaches on small-scale image classification tasks.

When comparing precision across the three models, EfficientNetV2B0 consistently achieves the highest values for most emotion classes, indicating its strong ability to minimize false positives. For example, in the “Happy” class, EfficientNetV2B0 attains a precision of 0.8547, outperforming both the Custom CNN (0.82) and ViT (0.55). The Custom CNN also demonstrates competitive precision, particularly in the “Disgust” class with a value of 0.86, while ViT generally lags behind, especially in challenging classes such as “Angry” and “Sad.” The macro and weighted average precision scores further confirm EfficientNetV2B0’s superiority, with values of 0.6482 and 0.6564, respectively.

The F1-score, which balances precision and recall, shows that EfficientNetV2B0 delivers the most robust overall performance. It achieves the highest F1-scores in key classes

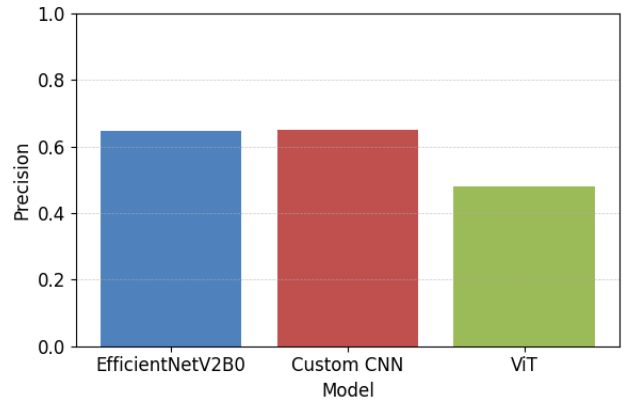


Fig. 11. Comparison of Precision among models on the FER2013 test set.

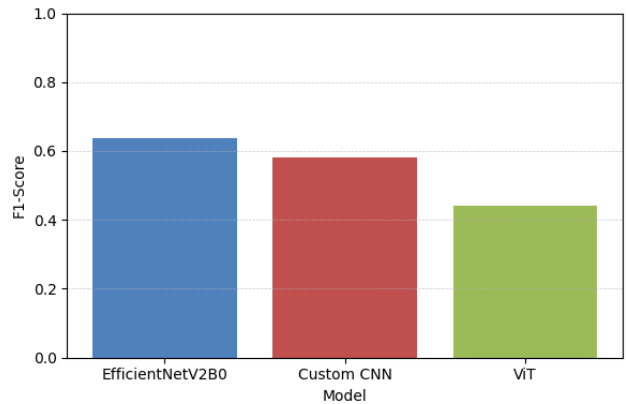


Fig. 12. Comparison of F1-score among models on the FER2013 test set.

such as “Happy” (0.8547), “Surprise” (0.7753), and “Disgust” (0.6337). The Custom CNN also provides strong F1-scores, especially in the “Happy” (0.83) and “Surprise” (0.74) classes, but is generally outperformed by EfficientNetV2B0. ViT’s F1-scores are consistently lower, particularly in difficult classes like “Disgust” (0.23) and “Fear” (0.26). The macro and weighted average F1-scores confirm EfficientNetV2B0’s leading position, with values of 0.6358 and 0.6513, respectively, indicating its superior ability to balance precision and recall across all classes. These results highlight the advantage of transfer learning and advanced architectures in achieving better generalization. Overall, EfficientNetV2B0 demonstrates not only high accuracy but also consistent and reliable performance across both common and challenging emotion categories.

In terms of recall, EfficientNetV2B0 again leads in most categories, reflecting its effectiveness in correctly identifying true positives across the emotion classes. Notably, it achieves a recall of 0.8547 for the “Happy” class and 0.8313 for “Surprise,” which are the highest among all models. The Custom CNN also performs well, particularly in the “Happy” (0.84) and “Surprise” (0.75) classes, while ViT’s recall is generally lower, especially for minority classes like “Disgust” (0.14) and “Fear” (0.20). The macro and weighted average

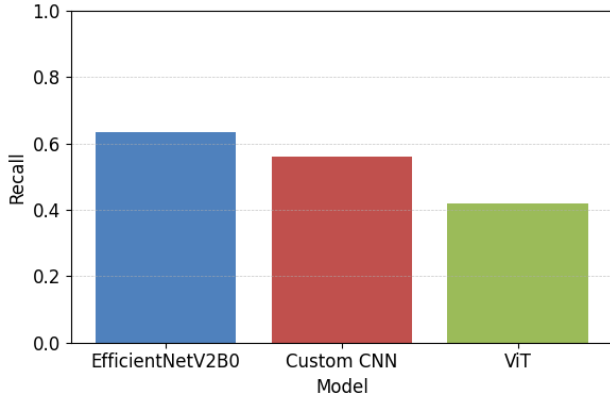


Fig. 13. Comparison of Recall among models on the FER2013 test set.

recall scores for EfficientNetV2B0 (0.6340 and 0.6562) further highlight its balanced performance.

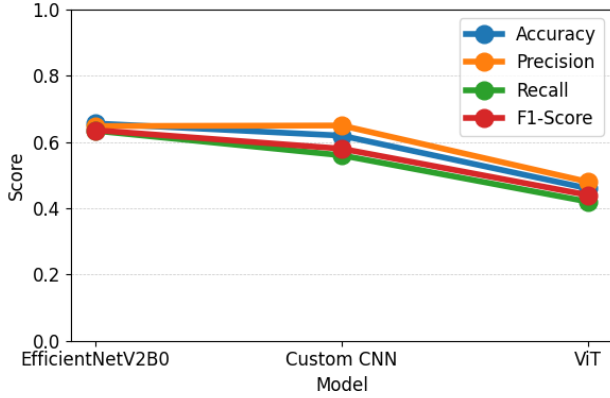


Fig. 14. comparative analysis across Accuracy, Precision, Recall, and F1-Score.

Figure 14 presents a comparative analysis of three different deep learning architectures: EfficientNetV2B0, a Custom CNN, and Vision Transformer (ViT). The evaluation metrics include Accuracy, Precision, Recall, and F1-Score.

- EfficientNetV2B0 achieved the highest performance across all metrics. It recorded an accuracy of approximately 0.66, with precision, recall, and F1-score values all hovering around 0.64–0.66. This indicates a well-balanced model with strong overall generalization capabilities.
- Custom CNN demonstrated competitive precision (about 0.65), nearly matching EfficientNetV2B0. However, its recall dropped to around 0.56, leading to a slightly lower F1-score (0.58). This suggests the model may be more conservative in detecting positive instances, potentially missing some relevant cases.
- ViT (Vision Transformer) showed the weakest performance among the three. It attained an accuracy of only 0.47, with other metrics (precision, recall, and F1-score) falling in the range of 0.42–0.49. This may be attributed to the model’s high data requirements or suboptimal

training configurations for the current dataset.

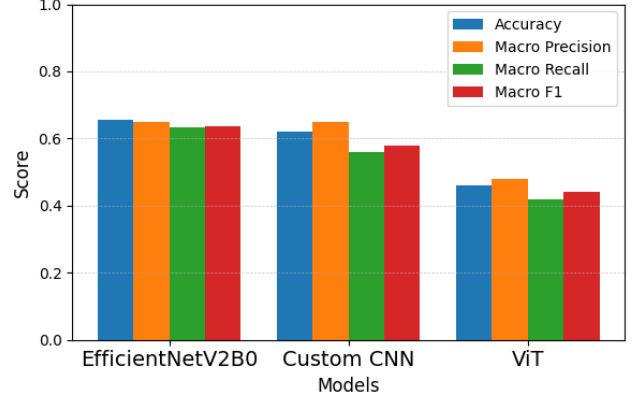


Fig. 15. Performance comparison across models based on Accuracy, Precision, Recall, and F1-Score.

Figure 15 illustrates a Baseline-CNN, VGG19-FineTune, and EfficientNetV2-S. Baseline-CNN performed the weakest among the three models. It achieved an accuracy of approximately 0.54, with similar values for precision, recall, and F1-score. These results suggest that the baseline model is limited in its capacity to generalize and may benefit from architectural improvements or training optimizations. FineTune showed a significant improvement over the baseline. The model achieved an accuracy of around 0.66, with the other three metrics (precision, recall, F1-score) also close to this value. Fine-tuning on VGG19 enabled better feature extraction and classification performance. EfficientNetV2-S outperformed both other models across all metrics. It reached an accuracy close to 0.70, and its precision, recall, and F1-score were all similarly high. This highlights the efficiency and robustness of modern architectures like EfficientNetV2 in handling complex image.

The consistent improvement from Baseline-CNN to VGG19-FineTune, and then to EfficientNetV2-S, demonstrates the value of leveraging deeper and more sophisticated neural network architectures. The use of transfer learning, especially with large-scale pre-trained models, allows for more effective feature representation even with limited training data. Additionally, the results indicate that modern architectures not only improve overall accuracy but also enhance the model’s ability to correctly identify a wider range of classes, as reflected in the balanced precision, recall, and F1-scores. This progression underscores the importance of both model selection and training strategy in achieving state-of-the-art performance. Future work could explore further fine-tuning, data augmentation, or ensemble methods to push performance even higher. Ultimately, these findings reinforce that adopting advanced architectures and transfer learning is a key factor in achieving superior results in image classification tasks.

VI. DISCUSSION:

Across Table VI almost all emotion categories, EfficientNetV2B0 consistently achieves the highest scores, particularly excelling in the “Happy,” “Surprise,” and “Disgust” classes,

TABLE VI
PER-CLASS PRECISION, RECALL, AND F1-SCORE FOR EACH MODEL ON FER2013 TEST SET

Class	ViT			Custom CNN			EfficientNetV2B0		
	Precision	Recall	F1-score	Precision	Recall	F1-score	Precision	Recall	F1-score
Angry	0.38	0.26	0.31	0.55	0.53	0.54	0.5907	0.5717	0.5811
Disgust	0.67	0.14	0.23	0.86	0.31	0.46	0.7111	0.5714	0.6337
Fear	0.37	0.20	0.26	0.59	0.27	0.37	0.5230	0.4577	0.4882
Happy	0.55	0.74	0.63	0.82	0.84	0.83	0.8547	0.8547	0.8547
Sad	0.32	0.36	0.34	0.45	0.59	0.51	0.5963	0.4410	0.5070
Surprise	0.61	0.59	0.60	0.73	0.75	0.74	0.7263	0.8313	0.7753
Neutral	0.43	0.47	0.45	0.55	0.64	0.59	0.5354	0.7100	0.6105
Accuracy		0.46			0.62			0.6562	
Macro avg	0.48	0.39	0.40	0.65	0.56	0.58	0.6482	0.6340	0.6358
Weighted avg	0.45	0.46	0.44	0.63	0.62	0.61	0.6564	0.6562	0.6513

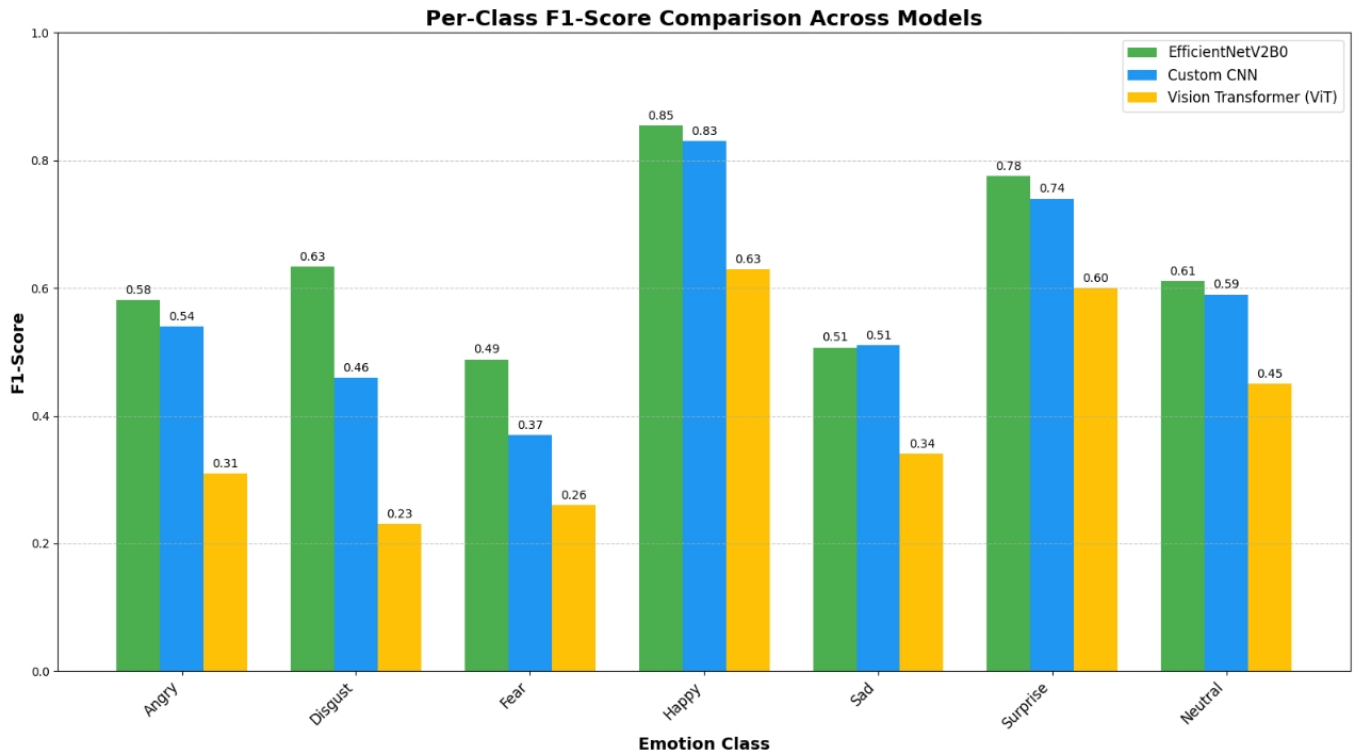


Fig. 16. Model Performance Comparison (F1-Score) by Emotion Class

where both precision and recall are notably high. The custom CNN also demonstrates strong performance, especially in the “Happy” and “Surprise” classes, and generally outperforms the ViT model in most categories.

The EfficientNetV2B0 model, leveraging transfer learning, outperformed the other architectures. The custom CNN provided competitive results with a simpler structure. The ViT model, while promising for large-scale vision tasks, was less effective on FER2013, likely due to the dataset’s limited size and resolution. These results highlight the importance of model selection and data characteristics in facial emotion recognition tasks.

Regarding the first question, the answer would be: EfficientNetV2B0 demonstrates the most balanced performance across all emotion classes, as evidenced by its highest macro and weighted average F1-scores (0.6358 and 0.6513, respectively). These averages indicate that EfficientNetV2B0 not only achieves strong overall accuracy but also maintains consistent performance across both majority and minority classes, outperforming both the Custom CNN and ViT models in terms of generalization.

Regarding the second question, the answer would be: The “Disgust” class is the most challenging for all models, as indicated by the lowest F1-scores across the board. ViT achieves an F1-score of only 0.23 for this class, Custom CNN reaches 0.46, and EfficientNetV2B0 achieves 0.6337. These results suggest that distinguishing “Disgust” from other emotions is particularly difficult, likely due to limited training samples or high visual similarity with other expressions.

Regarding the third question, the answer would be: EfficientNetV2B0 achieves the highest overall accuracy on the FER2013 test set, with an accuracy of 0.6562. This surpasses the Custom CNN, which achieves 0.62, and the ViT model, which achieves 0.46. The superior performance of EfficientNetV2B0 can be attributed to its use of transfer learning and a more advanced architecture.

Regarding the fourth question, the answer would be: In classifying the “Happy” emotion, the Vision Transformer (ViT) achieves an F1-score of 0.63, while the Custom CNN and EfficientNetV2B0 achieve significantly higher F1-scores of 0.83 and 0.8547, respectively. This indicates that both convolutional models are much more effective at recognizing happy expressions compared to the ViT model in this experimental setting.

Regarding the fifth question, the answer would be: For the “Disgust” class, ViT achieves a precision of 0.67, recall of 0.14, and F1-score of 0.23. The Custom CNN improves upon this with a precision of 0.86, recall of 0.31, and F1-score of 0.46. EfficientNetV2B0 further improves the balance, with a precision of 0.7111, recall of 0.5714, and F1-score of 0.6337. This demonstrates that EfficientNetV2B0 is more effective at

both identifying and correctly classifying “Disgust” compared to the other models. The notably low recall for ViT indicates that it misses most “Disgust” samples, despite a relatively high precision, meaning it is conservative in its predictions for this class. The Custom CNN increases recall but still struggles to capture all true positives, while EfficientNetV2B0 achieves a much better balance between precision and recall.

Regarding the sixth question, the answer would be: The macro and weighted averages provide insight into each model’s ability to generalize across all classes. EfficientNetV2B0 achieves the highest macro and weighted averages, reflecting its robust and consistent performance for both common and rare classes. The Custom CNN also shows good generalization, while the ViT model’s lower averages indicate less reliable performance, especially for minority classes. These metrics confirm that EfficientNetV2B0 is the most balanced and generalizable model among those evaluated. The results confirm that EfficientNetV2B0 not only excels in overall accuracy but also maintains fairness and reliability.

A. Analysis the Performance on the ‘Angry’ Emotion Class

EfficientNetV2B0 proved to be the most reliable predictor of anger, achieving the highest F1-score of 58.1%. Its balanced precision (59.1%) and recall (57.2%) indicate a strong ability to correctly identify ‘Angry’ faces while minimizing false positives. This superior performance is largely attributed to the powerful, pre-trained features learned via transfer learning, which are adept at capturing the complex patterns of anger.

The **Custom CNN** served as a strong baseline, achieving a competitive F1-score of 54.0%. While its performance was solid (55.0% precision, 53.0% recall), it was slightly less sensitive than EfficientNetV2B0, demonstrating the limitations of training a model from scratch on this dataset without the benefit of pre-trained feature extractors.

The **Vision Transformer (ViT)** struggled significantly with this task, yielding a very low F1-score of 31.0%. Its poor recall (26.0%) means it failed to identify nearly three-quarters of all actual ‘Angry’ faces. This difficulty likely stems from ViT’s reliance on large-scale data and its global attention mechanism, which may overlook the fine-grained, local facial cues (e.g., furrowed brows) that are critical for identifying anger in low-resolution images.

In summary, the performance hierarchy for recognizing anger is clear: EfficientNetV2B0 , Custom CNN , Vision Transformer. The results underscore the advantage of transfer learning for this task and highlight the challenges of applying standard ViT architectures to smaller, lower-resolution datasets without architectural modifications or extensive pre-training.

B. Limitation

Despite the promising results, this study has several limitations. First, the FER2013 dataset is relatively small and

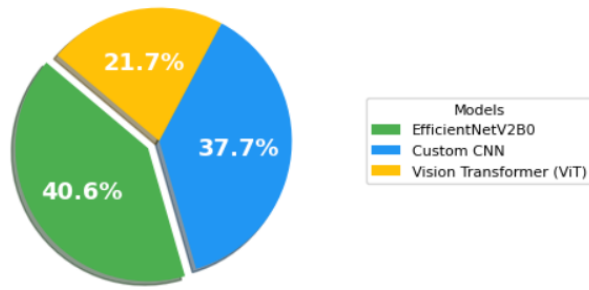


Fig. 17. Anger-Class F1-Score Comparison Across Models

consists of low-resolution grayscale images, which may restrict the ability of transformer-based models to fully leverage their representational power. The ViT architecture typically benefits from large-scale and high-resolution datasets, so its performance here may not reflect its true potential. Additionally, no extensive data augmentation or advanced regularization techniques were applied, which could further improve generalization. The experiments were limited to a fixed set of hyperparameters and model configurations, and more thorough hyperparameter tuning or architectural exploration might yield better results. Finally, the evaluation was conducted on a single dataset, so the generalizability of the findings to other facial expression datasets or real-world scenarios remains untested.

C. Future Directions

Building on the findings of this study, several avenues can be explored to further improve facial expression recognition using Vision Transformers and related deep learning models. First, leveraging larger and more diverse datasets, possibly with higher-resolution images, could help unlock the full potential of transformer-based architectures. Incorporating advanced data augmentation techniques, such as mixup, cutout, or adversarial training, may also enhance model robustness and generalization. Exploring hybrid models that combine convolutional layers with transformer blocks could provide a balance between local feature extraction and global context modeling. Additionally, systematic hyperparameter tuning and the use of automated machine learning (AutoML) tools may yield better-performing architectures. Finally, evaluating the models on real-world, in-the-wild datasets and extending the approach to multimodal emotion recognition (e.g., combining facial, audio, and textual cues) would further validate and expand the applicability of these methods in practical scenarios.

VII. CONCLUSION


In this study, we implemented and evaluated a Vision Transformer (ViT) model for facial expression recognition using the FER2013 dataset. The entire workflow—from data preprocessing and patch extraction to model training and evaluation—was conducted in a reproducible and systematic manner. Our ViT model was trained from scratch and assessed using standard metrics such as accuracy, loss curves, classification reports, and confusion matrices. While the ViT

architecture demonstrated the ability to learn and classify facial emotions, its performance was limited by the relatively small size and low resolution of the FER2013 dataset, as reflected in the moderate accuracy and per-class metrics. These findings suggest that, although transformer-based models hold promise for vision tasks, convolutional architectures or transfer learning approaches may still be more effective for small-scale or low-resolution datasets. Future work could explore larger datasets, advanced data augmentation, or hybrid models to further enhance performance in facial emotion recognition tasks.

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Upload an Image



Result

predict: Angry (model: EfficientNetV2B0)

Flag

Choose a Model


☒ EfficientNetV2B0 ☐ ViT ☐ CNN

Clear

Submit

Fig. 18. EfficientNet Model Performance on the 'Angry' Emotion Class

Upload an Image



Result

predict: Angry (model: CNN)

Flag

Choose a Model


☐ EfficientNetV2B0 ☐ ViT ☒ CNN

Clear

Submit

Fig. 19. CNN Model Performance on the 'Angry' Emotion Class

Upload an Image



Result

predict: Neutral (model: ViT)

Flag

Choose a Model

☐ EfficientNetV2B0 ☒ ViT ☐ CNN

Clear

Submit

Fig. 20. Vit Model Performance on the 'Angry' Emotion Class

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