
Automated Detection and Localization of Abnormalities in Chest X-rays using Weakly-Supervised Learning

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Abstract

Medical AI holds immense promise, yet its widespread clinical adoption is hampered by two persistent challenges: the prohibitive cost of pixel-level annotations and the 'black box' nature of models. We propose a novel, AI-powered diagnostic framework to overcome these critical barriers, combining deep learning with explainable AI(XAI) to achieve both high accuracy and interpretability. The fine-tuned DenseNet-121 model achieved a mean AUROC of 0.610 on the CheXpert dataset, outperforming the comparison model, ResNet-50. Furthermore, the integration of Grad-CAM heatmaps provides compelling visual evidence of our model's interpretability, provides an insight into the model's decision-making process.

1 Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of modern medicine, chest X-rays remain an essential diagnostic cornerstone for multiple cardiopulmonary conditions. However, traditional interpretation is time-consuming and relies heavily on the physician's experience. Benefiting from advances in deep learning, the integration of AI into medical image analysis presents a promising future. Yet, despite the advantages, there are two non-negligible challenges: Challenge 1: High Cost of Data Annotation: Pixel-level annotation for medical images is expensive and time-consuming, a major bottleneck for AI applications. Challenge 2: "Black Box" nature of model: The opaque decision-making process of deep learning models leads to a lack of trust from clinicians. To address these critical challenges, we aim to develop an AI-assisted diagnostic framework with both high accuracy and high interpretability through two main functions: classification and localization. Our research uses the extensive MIMIC-CXR dataset, employing automated weak label extraction from radiology reports using the CheXpert NLP tool to circumvent challenge 1. Concurrently, we integrate advanced Explainability Analysis (XAI) techniques, transforming opaque model decisions into verifiable insights to overcome Challenge 2. In addition, we compare the performance of two widely adopted Convolutional Neural Networks in medical imaging, DenseNet-121 and ResNet-50, in this project. Through this comparative analysis, we aim to not only enhance diagnostic efficiency and accuracy but, crucially, to provide clinicians with transparent and reliable visual evidence, thereby fostering profound confidence in AI-driven diagnostic assistance.

2 Related work

Our project pipeline is built upon several state-of-the-art studies in the field of multi-label categorization of medical images like chest X-rays (CXR). The two primary inspirations are: Tanno and Barrett (2025)[1] and Thapa and Kaur (2025)[2]. Tanno and Barrett[1] pioneered a Vision-Language Model (VLM) framework designed for the automated generation of structured radiology reports. Our

project took inspiration from their NLP methodology and structural report processing for the efficient extraction of image-level ‘weak labels’, thus circumventing the prohibitive cost of pixel-level manual annotation, addressing ‘Challenge 1’ outlined in our introduction. Thapa and Kaur (2025)[2] proposed a deep-learning model (DenseNet121) for multi-label image classification of chest X-rays with three distinct techniques: Grad-CAM, LIME, and DeepLIFT, to offer comprehensive discernment into the model’s decision-making process. This study serves as a direct and invaluable reference for our explainable deep-learning-based multi-label image classification approach for chest X-rays. Collectively, these two studies provide a robust theoretical and practical foundation for our project, guiding our choices in automated weak labeling and the integration of explainability.

3 Methodology

Our project flow is segmented into four main stages: Dataset Acquisition and Weak Labeling, Deep Learning Model Training, Explainability Analysis, along with Evaluation and Validation (Figure 1).

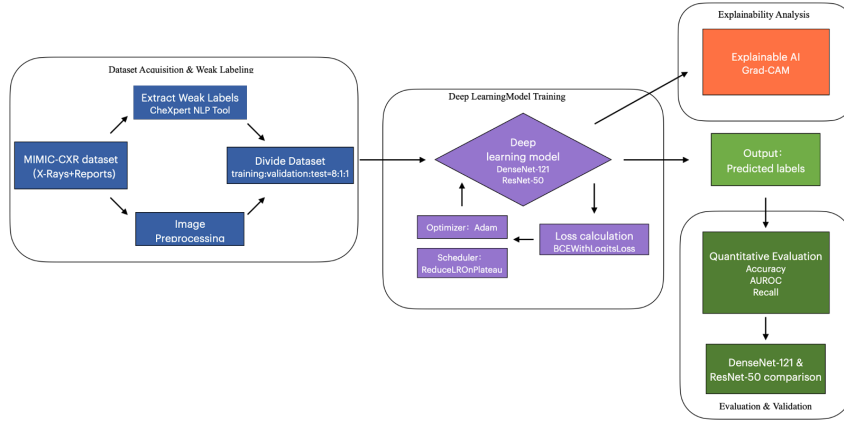


Figure 1: Deep Learning Model Training Workflow for Medical Image Analysis

3.1 Dataset Acquisition and Weak Labeling

Our project used the publicly available MIMIC-CXR dataset[3], a comprehensive collection of chest X-ray images and their corresponding free-text radiology reports from 1,000 patients, comprising 5,534 DICOM images. We employed the CheXpert NLP tool[4] to automatically extract image-level ‘weak labels’ from the free-text radiology reports. This powerful tool provides annotations for 14 distinct thoracic pathologies, allowing us to generate a rich, multi-label dataset without any manual pixel-level annotation effort. Before feeding into the deep learning models, all images were resized to 224x224 pixels and normalized using ImageNet’s mean and standard deviation values. The dataset was divided the dataset into training (80Our data pipeline included a notable technical innovation: a custom PyTorch Dataset class that directly loads DICOM images. This method bypassed the slow pre-conversion process, significantly speeding up training setup and ensuring the preservation of original image integrity.

3.2 Deep Learning Model Training

We fine-tuned two state-of-the-art Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) widely recognized for their efficacy in medical imaging: DenseNet-121[5] (approximately 7M parameters) and ResNet-50[6] (approximately 23.5M parameters) for our multi-label classification task. A comprehensive comparison between DenseNet-121 and ResNet-50 can be found in section 4.2.

DenseNet-121 was selected as our primary architecture due to its unique dense connectivity pattern, which promotes feature reuse and significantly enhances parameter efficiency while achieving high accuracy. This efficiency is crucial for potential deployment in resource-constrained clinical environments and helps mitigate overfitting risks. The architecture of DenseNet-121 is composed of 121 layers and approximately 7 million parameters, making it significantly more parameter-efficient

than many other deep learning models. It is structured around four DenseBlocks, with 6, 12, 24, and 16 layers respectively, interspersed by three Transition Layers(Figure 2, left).

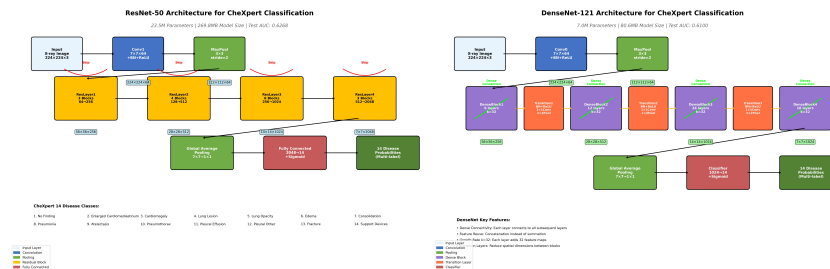


Figure 2: DenseNet-121(left) and ResNet-50(right) architecture

The training objective for our multi-label classification task was defined by the Binary Cross-Entropy Loss with Logits (BCEWithLogitsLoss). This loss function is particularly well-suited for scenarios where multiple independent labels can be present in a single image, providing stable gradients for learning. Uncertain labels (-1) were treated as positive (1), following the CheXpert convention. To iteratively minimize this loss and guide model convergence, we employed the Adam (Adaptive Moment Estimation) optimizer. This was paired with a ReduceLROnPlateau scheduler to dynamically reduce the learning rate when validation loss plateaued, further optimizing the training process.

To directly confront challenge 2: the 'black box' nature, we integrated advanced Explainable AI (XAI) techniques, which are crucial for providing clinicians with insights into the model's decision-making process and enhancing trust. Specifically, we focused on Grad-CAM (Gradient-weighted Class Activation Mapping)[7] as our primary method for visual interpretability. Grad-CAM facilitates local interpretability by generating visual activation heatmaps. These heatmaps highlight the decisive regions of interest (ROIs) in the chest X-rays that most strongly influence the model's classification decisions, thereby offering a crucial visual understanding of where the model is 'looking' and aiding in lesion localization.

The model checkpoint with the highest validation Area Under the Receiver Operating Characteristic Curve(AUROC) was saved for final evaluation, model performance was rigorously evaluated on an independent test dataset (441 images), processed following the same pipeline as the training data to ensure consistency and prevent bias. Key quantitative evaluation metrics included the AUROC, which serves as our primary metric for assessing the model’s discriminative ability across different pathologies. Additionally, F1-Score, Accuracy, Precision, and Recall were calculated at a 0.5 probability threshold to provide a comprehensive understanding of classification performance. Confusion matrices were also generated to visualize per-class classification performance and identify potential biases.

4 Experimental Results and Analysis

4.1 Experimental Setup

All models were trained on an NVIDIA GeForce RTX 4060 GPU, using the PyTorch 2.0+ framework for deep learning operations. We utilized torchvision for accessing pre-trained models, scikit-learn for comprehensive metric calculation, and pydicom for efficient DICOM image processing, ensuring a streamlined and optimized workflow. Our training configuration employed an initial learning rate of 1×10^{-4} , a batch size of 16, and the Adam optimizer for efficient convergence. Models were trained for 10 epochs using Binary Cross-Entropy Loss with Logits (BCEWithLogitsLoss). Furthermore, a ReduceLROnPlateau scheduler (with patience=2 and factor=0.5) was implemented to dynamically reduce the learning rate when validation loss plateaued, strategically optimizing the training process and preventing overfitting.

4.2 Results

Our experiments on the CheXpert dataset showed: a mean AUROC of 0.610, a mean F1-Score of 0.211, a mean Recall of 0.188, and an Accuracy of 0.806 on the test set were achieved in the DenseNet-121 model (shown in Figure 3. a. A). The mean AUROC was achieved with a model size of 80.6MB and training convergence in 4 epochs, while ResNet-50 achieved a Mean AUROC of 0.595, a F1-score of 0.198, and an Accuracy of 0.789 on the test set, with a model size of 269.8MB and training convergence in 5 epochs. As our primary architecture, DenseNet-121 consistently outperformed ResNet-50 across key metrics, highlighting its superior efficiency and diagnostic accuracy for this task. (comparison shown in Figure 3. a. B, C, and Figure 3. b)

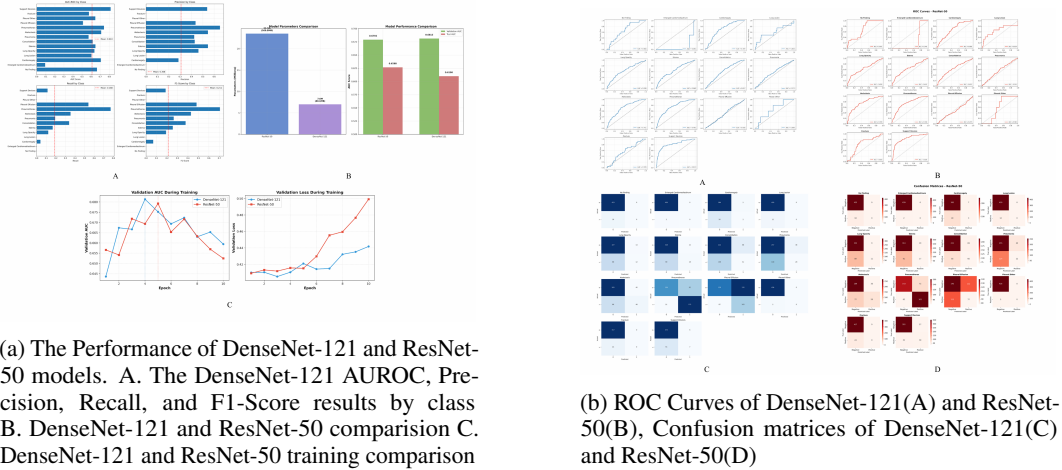


Figure 3: Comparative Analysis of DenseNet-121 and ResNet-50: Performance Metrics and ROC Evaluation

To provide a granular understanding of our final model’s (DenseNet-121) diagnostic capabilities, we also report the AUROC for each of the 14 individual thoracic pathologies, presented in Table 1. The model’s performance varies discriminatively across different conditions, with particularly strong performance on common and well-defined abnormalities. The overall performance is further summarized by a Macro-average AUROC of 0.610 and a Weighted accuracy of 0.806.

Grad-CAM heatmaps provided compelling visual evidence of our model’s interpretability. The heatmaps consistently demonstrated that the model correctly focused on anatomically relevant regions for its diagnostic decisions. For instance, in cases of Cardiomegaly, the heatmaps prominently highlighted the cardiac silhouette; for Pneumothorax, attention was drawn to the pleural space (see Figure 4).

Table 1: AUROC Performance Results for Different Pathological Conditions

Pathology	AUROC	Pathology	AUROC
Support Devices	0.815	Lung Opacity	0.636
Pneumothorax	0.742	Consolidation	0.617
Atelectasis	0.711	Lung Lesion	0.603
Cardiomegaly	0.707	Fracture	0.576
No Finding	0.665	Pneumonia	0.572
Edema	0.648	Pleural Effusion	0.510
Pleural Other	0.646	Enlarged Cardiomedastinum	0.092

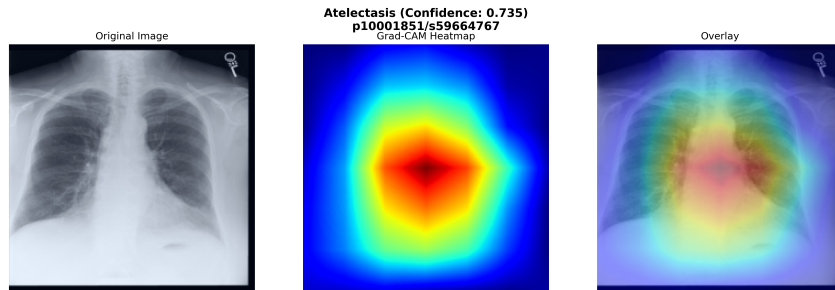


Figure 4: Grad-CAM visualization showing model attention on the lung apex for Pneumothorax detection

5 Conclusion and Future Direction

5.1 Discussion

The comparative results indicate that DenseNet-121 demonstrated superior performance compared to ResNet-50 on our test set. This aligns with our initial hypothesis that DenseNet-121, with its unique dense connectivity and efficient parameter utilization (7M vs 23.5M parameters), is better suited for this multi-label classification task in resource-constrained clinical settings.

A deeper analysis of the confusion matrices (Figure 3. b) reveals complex performance trade-offs across the 14 individual pathologies, indicating distinct diagnostic preferences between the two architectures. For instance, ResNet-50 exhibited higher Recall (lower false negative rate) for specific categories such as Atelectasis and Consolidation. Conversely, DenseNet-121 showed stronger detection capabilities for other key pathologies, including Pneumothorax and Pleural Effusion.

The variability observed in AUROC scores across different CheXpert classes (e.g., extremely low scores for Enlarged Cardiomedastinum or Pleural Other) is primarily due to intrinsic dataset limitations. Specifically, severe class imbalance (rare pathologies providing few positive samples) leads to unstable model learning, while the NLP-based labeling introduces noise and uncertainty, particularly for ambiguous findings like Pneumonia or Lung lesions. The relatively high AUROCs in frequent classes (e.g., Support Devices) further suggest partial overfitting to dominant categories. Overall, these results highlight the critical need for class-balanced loss functions and label uncertainty modeling in future work, rather than indicating model instability.

Regarding the Grad-CAM result, the consistent alignment of highlighted regions with clinically relevant anatomical structures provides compelling evidence of the model’s decision-making process. Even though the visualization results demonstrate broad patterns rather than precise and localized identification, this outcome precisely highlights the value of interpretability, as it reveals the model’s true behavior, including both its strengths and limitations. This level of transparency is crucial for the clinical adoption of medical artificial intelligence.

5.2 Future Work

Several promising avenues for future research can emerge to further enhance the model’s capabilities and clinical utility: First of all, advanced models can be explored, such as Vision-Language Models (VLMs), inspired by works like Tanno and Barrett (2025)[1]. These models can not only classify and localize but also generate radiology reports directly from images, thereby providing a more comprehensive AI assistant.

Future efforts will also be focused on refining the localization capabilities, which can also be combined with the possibility of translating these visual insights into radiological findings or full image-to-text reports, to provide a more transparent decision-making process and enhance clinicians’ trust. In addition, to qualitatively validate the Grad-CAM results, experts’ confirmation is expected to be integrated. Moreover, to translate this project from lab to clinic, future work will involve conducting longitudinal studies and initiating pilot deployments in real-world clinical settings, allowing for continuous feedback and iterative improvement.

5.3 Limitations

Despite the significant advancements achieved, our current framework has several limitations. This project is designed to automatically extract the weak labels from reports by the CheXpert NLP tool, however, this is more of a trade-off solution. While it is highly resource-efficient compared to traditional manual annotation, these labels do not offer the same exact precision, which might lower the model’s final performance. It can also lead to mistakes if the original radiology reports are vague or misinterpreted. Our model’s ability to generalize depends heavily on the MIMIC-CXR dataset’s diversity. Even though the dataset is large, it might not fully cover all patient types, imaging methods, or disease variations seen in different hospitals. Therefore, the confirmation of external and diverse datasets is essential. Although Grad-CAM[7] is great for visualizing the model’s focus, it only gives us broad localization (coarse heatmaps) instead of precise, pixel-level boundaries. This can be an issue for finding small or subtle abnormalities. Also, like many XAI tools, Grad-CAM’s explanations are based on the model’s learned patterns, it’s hard to truly measure how accurate these explanations are. Last but not least, as discussed in section 5.2, this project lacks validation from clinicians, which is essential to fully evaluate the framework’s impact on diagnostic efficiency, accuracy, and workflow in a live clinical environment.

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