

Optimized U-Net Architecture for Precise Edema ROI Definition in MRI Image Segmentation

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ABSTRACT

Medical image segmentation is crucial in computer-aided diagnosis, enabling precise identification of anatomical structures and pathological regions. This study presents an optimized U-Net architecture to enhance segmentation accuracy and efficiency in identifying edema in MRI images, emphasizing its **novel application** in defining regions of interest (ROI) for edema.

The improved U-Net model features refined upsampling paths with convolutional blocks and padding strategies, addressing spatial misalignment issues. Data augmentation techniques, such as random flips and rotations, were consistently applied to both images and masks, increasing the variability and robustness of the dataset. Different loss functions, including Mean Squared Error (MSE) and Dice Loss, were evaluated for their impact on performance, highlighting their role in mitigating overfitting.

The performance of the model, assessed using Intersection over Union (IoU) scores, demonstrates superior segmentation accuracy and robustness under varying conditions. This refined U-Net architecture promises significant improvements in clinical workflows and diagnostic precision for the detection of edema on MRI images.

Keywords: Medical Image Segmentation, U-Net, Data Augmentation, Dice Loss, IoU Score, Edema, Fracture, MRI Scan.

1. INTRODUCTION

Medical image segmentation [1, 2] plays a vital role in computer-aided diagnosis (CAD) systems, providing detailed and accurate delineation of anatomical structures and pathological regions [3, 4]. Accurate segmentation is essential for the diagnosis and treatment planning of various medical conditions. The U-Net architecture is widely recognized for its effectiveness in biomedical image segmentation due to its symmetric contracting and expanding paths that facilitate precise localization and context capture.

However, the standard U-Net architecture [5–7] has limitations, particularly in segmenting small or poorly defined structures. This study aims to optimize the U-Net architecture to improve its performance in medical image segmentation, focusing on the identification of edema in MRI images. Segmentation of edema is crucial as it serves as a significant indicator of various medical conditions, requiring a precise definition of ROI for effective diagnosis and treatment.

To enhance the U-Net architecture [Figure 1], we introduced several modifications. The upsampling path was refined with carefully tuned convolutional blocks and padding strategies, ensuring spatial alignment and accurate feature integration. Using convolutional transpose and bilinear interpolation in the upsampling layers, we addressed common misalignment issues between feature maps, thus improving the model's ability to preserve spatial details and maintain robust contextual understanding.

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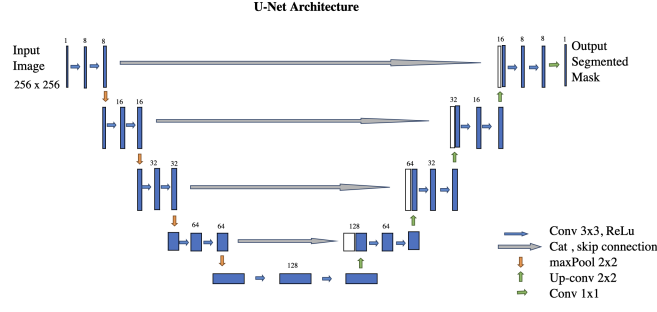


Figure 1. A U-Net architecture, showcasing the convolutional neural network (CNN) layers for feature extraction and upsampling with skip connections for precise segmentation

Additionally, we implemented an augmented dataset approach [8, 9], employing data-augmentation techniques such as random horizontal and vertical flips and rotations. These augmentations were applied consistently to both input images and their corresponding masks, increasing dataset variability and robustness. We also evaluated the impact of different loss functions, including Mean Squared Error (MSE) and Dice Loss [10, 11], on model performance. The results underscored the importance of loss function selection in mitigating overfitting and improving generalization on unseen data.

The optimized U-Net model was rigorously assessed using Intersection over Union (IoU) scores [12] across training and validation datasets. We also analyzed the effect of batch size on IoU during testing to demonstrate the model's stability and robustness under varying conditions. Our findings reveal that the optimized U-Net architecture consistently performed better during each phase of our experiment. With no direct comparison to any previous work, this represents a novel application, offering improved segmentation accuracy and consistency. These advances are crucial to improving clinical workflows and diagnostic precision, particularly in the context of edema detection in MRI images.

2. METHODS

We employed a custom dataset for training and evaluation purposes, consisting of pairs of gray-scale images and their corresponding binary masks.

2.1 Dataset

The data set used in this study consists of foot MRI scans of the ankle and foot, collected from 96 patients diagnosed with acute stress fractures. DICOM files from each MRI scan were processed into individual JPEG images, which serve as input data for the segmentation models. The data set includes both images and the corresponding binary mask images. A total of 861 image files from 96 unique patients were divided into training (559), testing (186), and validation (116) sets, to ensure that there was no patient overlap between the splits.

2.2 Binary Mask Generation

The binary masks are created from coordinate information provided along with the image data. The masks were generated by trained medical student research assistants and the precision was checked by a board certified radiologist with fellowship training in musculoskeletal imaging. Each mask represents specific regions of interest on the MRI slices. The coordinate data specifies the locations of relevant anatomical structures, which are used to generate the binary masks. These masks are created by marking the specified coordinates on a blank image, resulting in binary masks where the regions of interest are highlighted.[Figure 2]

2.3 Data processing

The images were preprocessed [13, 14], which involved resizing to 256x256 pixels. To standardize the input format, each image was converted to gray scale. The data set was then divided into training, validation and test sets to ensure robust model evaluation.

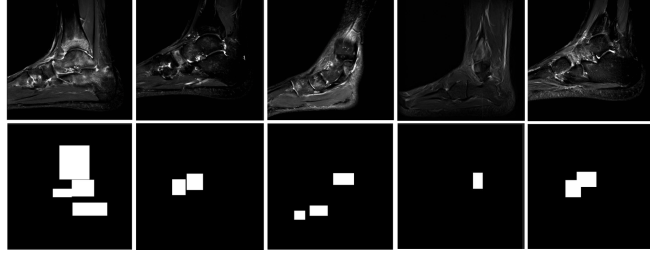


Figure 2. Images and their corresponding masks, highlighting single/multiple regions of interest (ROIs) of edemas in MRI scans with bounding boxes.

To enhance the robustness of the model and prevent overfitting[15], **data augmentation** techniques are applied. These techniques include horizontal and vertical flips, as well as random rotations. The enhancements are applied consistently to both images and masks to maintain the integrity of the data while increasing the limited data to 2x. To ensure we maintain the aspect ratio of the images, we perform functional padding with bilinear interpolation during upsampling in the U-Net architecture during training.

2.4 Model Architecture and Parameters

The U-Net architecture is a powerful model for image segmentation, particularly effective in biomedical imaging. It features an encoder-decoder structure with skip connections, capturing both fine details and contextual information. The encoder progressively reduces spatial dimensions while increasing feature maps through Down blocks, which consist of **max pooling** layers followed by DoubleConv blocks (each with two convolutional layers, **batch normalization**, and **ReLU** activation). In the decoder, upsampling is performed using **bilinear interpolation** followed by functional **padding** to maintain the aspect ratio of the resized images, and is followed by DoubleConv blocks. Skip connections concatenate feature maps from the encoder to the decoder, improving spatial accuracy. The final convolutional layer reduces the number of channels to match the number of classes for segmentation, producing the output mask. Designed in **PyTorch**, U-Net is renowned for its effectiveness in detailed and accurate segmentation tasks.

Two loss functions are evaluated: **Mean Squared Error (MSE)** and **Dice loss**. The choice of loss function is based on the nature of the task. Dice Loss is used for segmentation tasks where the overlap between predicted and true masks is critical, while MSE is utilized for image-to-image translation. The **Adam** optimizer is used with an optional experimental **L2** regularization term to combat overfitting. The learning rate is set to **0.001**, and the weight decay parameter for L2 regularization is set to **1e-5** when applicable.

$$MSE = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - \hat{y}_i)^2 \quad , \quad DiceLoss = 1 - \frac{2 \cdot |y_i \cap \hat{y}_i|}{|y_i| + |\hat{y}_i|} \quad (1)$$

The model is trained for a predefined number of epochs with early stopping implemented to halt training when validation loss plateaus. Training includes the computation of **Intersection over Union (IoU)** scores to monitor the model’s performance on both training and validation datasets. Additionally, threshold techniques are applied to optimize the IoU scores by varying the threshold values and selecting the optimal threshold based on performance metrics.

The implementation is carried out using the PyTorch and torch vision libraries. Custom data augmentation and data handling classes are developed to pre-process the MRI slices and apply the necessary transformations. The data set is loaded using PyTorch’s DataLoader, which manages batching and shuffling of the data during training.

3. RESULTS

The experiments were conducted in multiple phases, each designed to enhance different aspects of the segmentation model. Each phase focused on refining specific components of the workflow and improvements were observed as a result of these iterative enhancements.

Table 1. Results, (M) Base model , (M1) Base model trained with augmented data, (M2) model trained with L2 regularization, early stopping, (M3) Model using Dice loss for improvement. Every Model is an incremental step to the previous model

Model	Trn.Loss	Trn.IoU	Val.Loss	Val.IoU	Tst.IoU	Trn.Time
BaseModel(M)	0.001	0.85	0.01	0.49	0.43	21m 30s
(M)Augment (M1)	0.002	0.83	0.01	0.57	0.49	43m 11s
(M1)L2 reg (M2)	0.01	0.68	0.01	0.51	0.54	7m 24s
(M2)DiceLoss (M3)	0.20	0.66	0.37	0.52	0.57	4m 40s



Figure 3. Results of best Test score IOU model (M3) showing Training, validation and frequency distribution of IoU scores.

In this study, we explored various configurations of a U-Net model for foot magnetic resonance imaging segmentation to improve generalization performance and achieve higher test metrics. The models were trained, validated, and tested on unseen data, with each phase incorporating additional measures to address overfitting. The BaseModel (M) showed overfitting despite a high training IoU. Adding data augmentation (M1) improved generalization, while further incorporating L2 regularization (M2) increased test IoU. The best performance was achieved with the model augmented with L2 regularization and Dice loss (M3), achieving a test IoU of 0.57, demonstrating the effectiveness of these techniques in improving model generalization. [Figure 3] shows that training data, [Figure 4] displays some of the test results displaying the actual image and mask with predicted binary mask and the threshold mask.

4. CONCLUSION

The experimental results demonstrate that the incorporation of additional measures such as data augmentation, L2 regularization, and Dice loss significantly improves the performance of the model on unseen test data, particularly in this **novel application of MRI segmentation** for defining regions of interest (**ROI**) for edema. Among the models tested, the BaseModel with Augmentation, L2 Regularization and Dice Loss (M3) emerged

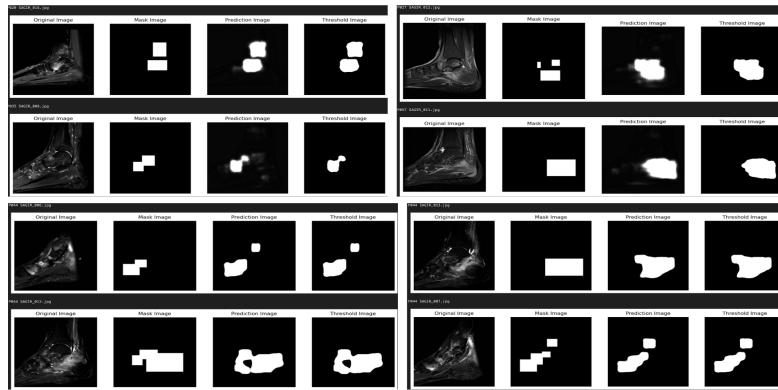


Figure 4. M3 Test results showing actual image, true mask, predicted and thresholded binary image, Threshold for segmentation was set at 0.4 after threshold analysis

Model Type	mIoU	DSC	Train Time	GM
U-Net (MR)	0.46	0.682	9h	1.3
FC-Densenet (MR)	0.51	0.734	21h	2.7
NasUnet (MR)	0.54	0.76	11h	1.5

Figure 5. U-net implementation for segmenting Abdominal MR images [16] result for general comparison to our results

as the best model, achieving the highest test IoU of 0.57. This indicates that the novel combination of these techniques in the training configuration effectively addressed issues of overfitting and class imbalance, leading to superior performance in accurately segmenting edema regions on MRI scans. **Notably, our experiment has no comparison with any other work as this represents a novel application in this specific context.** However, a limitation of this study is the relatively small dataset, which may have constrained the model’s performance. We believe that training on a larger dataset could have a significant positive impact on the results, further enhancing the model’s generalization capabilities and robustness in clinical applications for edema assessment.

In the ongoing efforts, we aim at 1) Train our model with a bigger dataset to compare the results and potentially achieve better performance. 2) Extend this approach to include a knee dataset, thereby broadening the applicability of our methodology to different types of MRI segmentation tasks.

For the computation of our results, we utilized MacBook Air(M3 Chip) equipped with an 8-core CPU and up to a 10-core GPU. This configuration offers substantial processing power and enhanced graphical performance, essential for handling the complex computations involved in our experiments. Additionally, the MacBook Air supports up to 24GB of unified memory, which facilitates efficient data processing and management across different tasks. This combination of high-performance CPU, GPU, and ample unified memory provided a robust environment for executing our computational workloads and achieving reliable results.

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