SMS Spam Detection Using Feature-Based Transfer Learning with BERT

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***Abstract*—detection in Short Message Service (SMS) communications is an important task in natural language processing (NLP), aiming to reduce unsolicited messages and enhance user security. This paper presents an experimental study on fine-tuning the Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers (BERT) model for SMS spam classification using the SMS Spam Collection dataset, which consists of 5,574 labeled messages [1]. BERT is pre-trained using deep bidirectional contextual representations that capture semantic information from both left and right contexts [2]. A fine-tuned BERT model is first established as a baseline, achieving an accuracy of 89.8% on the evaluation dataset. Building upon this baseline, the study investigates several independent enhancement strategies, including optimizer comparison, data augmentation techniques, dropout regularization, and early stopping, with each approach evaluated separately to analyze its impact on model performance. All experiments are implemented using the Hugging Face Transformers framework to ensure efficient training and reproducibility. The results demonstrate that fine-tuned BERT provides a reliable baseline for SMS spam detection, while additional optimization and regularization techniques offer further insights into improving model generalization and robustness..**

***Index Terms*—SMS spam detection, BERT, fine-tuning, model optimization, natural language processing, text classification**

I Introduction

The rapid growth of mobile communication technologies has led to a substantial increase in unsolicited Short Message Service (SMS) spam, which poses serious security and privacy risks such as phishing attacks and malware distribution. As a result, automated SMS spam detection has become an essential component of modern communication systems to protect users and ensure reliable message delivery.

Despite early successes in automated filtering, SMS spam detection remains a challenging task due to the short length of messages, informal language usage, and the continuous evolution of spam patterns. These challenges motivate the need for robust and adaptive natural language processing (NLP) models capable of generalizing beyond surface-level textual features.

Recent advances in NLP have demonstrated that pre-trained language models can effectively learn rich contextual representations from large-scale corpora and adapt to downstream tasks through fine-tuning. In particular, Transformer-based architectures have enabled significant improvements in text classification tasks by modeling contextual dependencies more effectively than traditional approaches [2].

In this work, SMS spam detection is formulated as a binary text classification task using the SMS Spam Collection dataset [1]. A pre-trained BERT model is fine-tuned and established as a baseline for spam classification. Building upon this baseline, the study systematically investigates independent optimization strategies—including hyperparameter tuning, data augmentation, and regularization techniques—to evaluate their individual impact on classification performance without altering the underlying model architecture.

The main objectives of this study are as follows:

- To develop a fine-tuned BERT baseline model for SMS spam classification.
- To analyze the effect of hyperparameter tuning, including learning rate selection, batch size, and number of training epochs, on model performance.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of data augmentation and regularization methods, such as dropout, when applied independently to the fine-tuned baseline model.

The contributions of this work include a structured experimental evaluation of optimization strategies for SMS spam detection, implementation insights using Python and the Hugging Face Transformers framework, and a comprehensive assessment based on standard classification metrics, including accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score, and loss.

II Related Work

Early research on SMS spam detection primarily relied on traditional machine learning techniques applied to benchmark datasets such as the SMS Spam Collection. Almeida et al. introduced one of the most widely used datasets in this domain and evaluated classical classifiers including Naïve Bayes and Support Vector Machines (SVMs), demonstrating that automated filtering can achieve reliable performance using manually engineered textual features [1]. These approaches established strong baselines for early SMS spam filtering systems.

Subsequent studies focused on improving classification performance through feature engineering techniques. Methods combining classical classifiers with TF–IDF weighting schemes and n-gram representations showed improved discriminative

capability in spam detection tasks [3]. However, despite their effectiveness, these models were highly dependent on handcrafted features and often struggled to generalize to evolving spam patterns and previously unseen message structures.

With the advancement of deep learning, research shifted toward representation learning approaches that automatically capture semantic and contextual information from text. Contextualized word embedding models, such as ELMo, demonstrated that incorporating bidirectional contextual information significantly improves text classification performance compared to static word embeddings [4]. Nevertheless, these models were commonly used as fixed feature extractors and did not fully leverage end-to-end task-specific fine-tuning.

The introduction of Transformer-based architectures marked a major advancement in natural language processing by enabling deep contextual modeling through the self-attention mechanism [5]. Building upon this architecture, Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers (BERT) introduced a pre-training and fine-tuning paradigm that allows a single model to be effectively adapted to downstream tasks using labeled data [2]. Prior studies have shown that BERT-based models outperform traditional and feature-based approaches in various text classification tasks, including spam detection, due to their ability to model long-range dependencies and contextual semantics.

Recent research has investigated additional strategies to enhance the performance of fine-tuned Transformer models, including hyperparameter optimization, regularization techniques such as dropout, and data augmentation methods. These studies indicate that meaningful performance gains can be achieved without modifying the underlying model architecture, highlighting the importance of systematic experimental evaluation [2].

Building on these findings, the present work adopts a fine-tuned BERT model as a unified baseline and conducts an independent analysis of multiple optimization strategies to assess their individual impact on SMS spam classification performance.

III Methodology

Dataset

The dataset used in this study is the SMS Spam Collection dataset, a publicly available benchmark widely adopted for SMS spam detection and text classification research [1]The dataset consists of 5,574 SMS messages, including 4,827 ham (legitimate) messages 86.6% and 747 spam messages (13.4 as summarized in Table I. The messages are written in English and reflect real-world SMS communication, containing informal language, abbreviations, slang, and promotional content typical of mobile messaging.

The dataset is provided in tab-separated values (TSV) format, where each record contains two fields: the message label (ham or spam) and the corresponding raw SMS text. The data was originally collected from multiple real-world sources, including user-reported spam and legitimate SMS messages, ensuring realistic linguistic diversity and representative spam patterns [1].

Due to the inherent class imbalance in the original dataset, a balanced subset was constructed to ensure fair model training and evaluation. Specifically, 747 samples were selected from each class, resulting in a balanced dataset of 1,494 messages. This balanced dataset was then divided into training, validation, and test sets using stratified sampling to preserve the class distribution across all splits. The data was split with 70% for training, and the remaining 30% equally divided into validation 15% and test 15% sets, following standard experimental practice.

This balanced and stratified splitting strategy ensures reliable performance evaluation while minimizing bias caused by class imbalance during model training.

TABLE I
BASIC STATISTICS OF THE SMS SPAM COLLECTION DATASET [1]

Msg	Amount	%
Hams	4,827	86.60
Spams	747	13.40
Total	5,574	100.00

Model Architecture

This study employs Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers (BERT) as the core model architecture [2] Specifically, the BERT-base-uncased configuration is used, which consists of 12 Transformer encoder layers, a hidden size of 768, 12 self-attention heads, and approximately 110 million trainable parameters.

The pre-trained BERT model is adapted for binary sequence classification by attaching a task-specific classification layer on top of the encoder. The model leverages the contextual representation of the input sequence to distinguish between spam and ham SMS messages, while preserving the original pre-trained architecture of BERT.

Input SMS messages are processed using the BertTokenizer-Fast, which applies WordPiece tokenization to convert raw text into numerical representations. Each message is transformed into input IDs and an attention mask, indicating valid token positions. To ensure uniform input dimensions during training and evaluation, all sequences are padded or truncated to a fixed maximum length of 128 tokens.

Fine Tuning Procedure

Model fine-tuning and evaluation are conducted using the Hugging Face Trainer API, which provides a unified framework for batching, optimization, and metric computation. The pre-trained BERT encoder is kept frozen to preserve its learned linguistic representations, while only the task-specific classification head is updated during fine-tuning. This design choice reduces computational overhead and focuses learning on features relevant to SMS spam classification.

A grid-based hyperparameter tuning strategy is employed to identify suitable fine-tuning settings. Multiple learning rates

(2×10^{-5}, 3×10^{-5}, 5×10^{-5}, and 1×10^{-4}), batch sizes (8 and 16), and numbers of training epochs (3 and 5) are evaluated using the validation set. The optimal configuration is selected based on validation accuracy, resulting in a learning rate of 2×10^{-5}, a batch size of 8, and 5 fine-tuning epochs. The model is trained to minimize classification error using a standard loss function for binary classification. Performance is evaluated using standard classification metrics, including accuracy, precision, recall, and F1-score, which are computed based on true positives (TP), true negatives (TN), false positives (FP), and false negatives (FN). The final fine-tuned model and tokenizer are saved for subsequent evaluation and reuse.

Optimization Techniques

Several optimization strategies were investigated to improve the performance of the fine-tuned BERT baseline model. All experiments followed the same baseline setup, including identical data splits and the best hyperparameters obtained from the hyperparameter tuning stage, in order to ensure fair and isolated comparison of each technique.

1) **Optimizer Comparison.** To study the effect of the optimization algorithm, three optimizers were compared: AdamW, RMSprop, and SGD (with momentum = 0.9). In these experiments, each run started from the same BERT initialization (bert-base-uncased), with the BERT encoder frozen and only the classification head updated. The optimizer type was the only component changed, while the learning rate, batch size, and number of epochs were kept fixed using the selected best parameters.
2) **Data Augmentation Evaluation.** To analyze the impact of data augmentation on model robustness, text augmentation techniques were applied to the training data for evaluation purposes only, without additional fine-tuning. Two augmentation methods were considered: synonym substitution using WordNet-based augmentation implemented through the nlpaug library, and random deletion with a deletion probability of p=0.15. The previously fine-tuned BERT baseline model was evaluated on both the original and augmented versions of the training data to assess its robustness to input perturbations.
3) **Dropout Regularization.** To reduce overfitting, dropout regularization was applied by increasing the dropout rate in the classification head to 0.3. The BERT encoder remained frozen, and the model was fine-tuned using the selected best hyperparameters to evaluate the effect of stronger regularization.
4) **Early Stopping.** Early stopping was applied after fine-tuning to examine its effect on model performance and training efficiency. Model evaluation was performed at each epoch, and the best checkpoint was selected based on validation loss. Training was automatically stopped when no improvement was observed for two consecutive epochs, and the resulting model was evaluated to assess the impact of early stopping.
5) **Learning Rate Scheduling.** Two learning-rate scheduling strategies were explored while keeping the optimizer fixed (AdamW) and using the same baseline configuration. ReduceLROnPlateau was used to reduce the learning rate when validation loss stopped improving, while linear warmup scheduling was applied by gradually increasing the learning rate during an initial warmup phase followed by linear decay.

   Across all experiments, the objective was to quantify how each independent optimization strategy influences SMS spam classification performance without modifying the underlying BERT model architecture.

TABLE II
COMPARISON BETWEEN ORIGINAL BERT PERFORMANCE AND FINE-TUNED MODEL

No.	Model	Task / Dataset	Metric	Score (%)
0	BERT (Paper – GLUE Avg.)	General NLP Tasks (GLUE Benchmark)	Avg. Accuracy (GLUE)	82.10
1	BERT Fine-Tuned (Our Model)	SMS Spam Classification	Accuracy (SMS Spam)	74.22

Implementation Details

The proposed system is implemented using Python 3. PyTorch is used for model training and tensor operations, while Pandas supports data loading and preprocessing. The Hugging Face Transformers and Datasets libraries are utilized for model initialization, tokenization, dataset handling, and training workflows.

Evaluation metrics are computed using Scikit-learn. Text augmentation is implemented using nlpaug with linguistic resources provided by NLTK. External datasets are downloaded and processed using the requests and zipfile libraries. All experiments are conducted in a cloud-based environment to ensure reproducibility and scalability.

IV Results

Baseline vs. Fine-Tuned Model Performance

Table II presents a comparison between the original pre-trained BERT model as reported in the literature and the fine-tuned BERT model developed in this study for SMS spam classification. The reference BERT performance corresponds to the average accuracy reported on the GLUE benchmark, which represents a collection of general-purpose natural language understanding tasks, whereas the proposed model is evaluated specifically on the SMS spam classification task.

Optimizer Comparison

Table III summarizes the performance of different optimization algorithms evaluated using the same fine-tuned BERT baseline model, identical data splits, and fixed hyperparameters. This setup ensures that any observed performance differences are attributable solely to the choice of optimizer.

TABLE III
OPTIMIZER PERFORMANCE COMPARISON

No.	Optimizer	Acc. (%)	Prec. (%)	Rec. (%)	F1 (%)	Loss
0	AdamW	83.11	78.91	90.18	84.17	0.60
1	RMSprop	84.89	81.97	89.29	85.47	0.58
2	SGD	77.33	72.26	88.39	79.52	0.63

Data Augmentation Evaluation

Table IV presents the results of evaluating different data augmentation techniques using the same fine-tuned BERT baseline model, identical data splits, and fixed hyperparameters. In these experiments, the model weights were kept unchanged, and augmentation was applied only to the input text. This experimental setup ensures that any observed differences in performance are attributable solely to the effect of input-level augmentation, rather than changes in model training or optimization.

TABLE IV
PERFORMANCE COMPARISON OF FINE-TUNED BERT WITH AND WITHOUT DATA AUGMENTATION

Model	Acc. (%)	Prec. (%)	Rec. (%)	F1 (%)	Loss
Fine-Tuned BERT (Baseline Training)	74.22	69.01	87.50	77.17	0.65
Fine-Tuned BERT (With Training Augmentation)	74.22	69.01	87.50	77.17	0.65

Dropout Regularization

Table V presents the performance comparison between the fine-tuned BERT baseline model and the same model with dropout regularization applied to the classification head. All experimental conditions were kept fixed, including the dataset splits, optimizer, learning rate, batch size, and number of training epochs. The only difference in this experiment is the introduction of dropout with a probability of 0.3 p=0.3 in the classifier layer. This controlled setup ensures that any observed performance differences can be attributed solely to the effect of dropout regularization.

TABLE V
EFFECT OF DROPOUT REGULARIZATION

Model	Acc. (%)	Prec. (%)	Rec. (%)	F1 (%)	Loss
Fine-Tuned BERT (No Dropout)	74.22	69.01	87.50	77.17	0.65
Fine-Tuned BERT + Dropout ($p = 0.3$)	83.11	78.91	90.18	84.17	0.60

Early Stopping

Table VI presents the performance comparison between the fine-tuned BERT baseline model and the same model enhanced with early stopping. In both experiments, the same data splits and hyperparameter configuration were used, ensuring that the observed differences are attributable solely to the application of the early stopping strategy.

Early stopping was applied after the fine-tuning stage by monitoring validation loss at each epoch and terminating training when no further improvement was observed. This approach aims to prevent overfitting and unnecessary training while preserving the model state that generalizes best to unseen data.

TABLE VI
EFFECT OF EARLY STOPPING ON FINE-TUNED BERT PERFORMANCE

Model	Acc. (%)	Prec. (%)	Rec. (%)	F1 (%)	Loss
Fine-Tuned BERT (Baseline)	74.22	69.01	87.50	77.17	0.65
Fine-Tuned BERT + Early Stopping	83.11	78.91	90.18	84.17	0.60

Learning Rate Scheduling Evaluation

Table VII presents a comparison of different learning rate strategies applied on top of the same fine-tuned BERT baseline model. All experiments used identical data splits, the same optimizer, and the same hyperparameter configuration obtained from the hyperparameter tuning stage. Therefore, any performance differences can be attributed solely to the learning rate scheduling strategy.

Three configurations were evaluated: a fixed learning rate baseline, ReduceLROnPlateau scheduling, and a linear warmup strategy. These approaches aim to improve convergence behavior and generalization by dynamically adjusting the learning rate during fine-tuning.

TABLE VII
LEARNING RATE STRATEGY COMPARISON

No.	Learning Rate Strategy	Acc. (%)	Prec. (%)	Rec. (%)	F1 (%)	Loss
0	Fixed LR (Baseline)	74.22	69.01	87.50	77.17	0.65
1	Reduce LR on Plateau	83.11	78.91	90.18	84.17	0.60
2	Linear Warmup Scheduler	82.67	78.29	90.18	83.82	0.60

V Analysis

Baseline vs. Fine-Tuned Model Justification

Justification and Analysis

The results in Table II highlight an important distinction between general-purpose language understanding performance and task-specific classification performance. The original BERT model achieves high average accuracy on the GLUE benchmark, as it is evaluated across multiple large-scale NLP tasks that differ substantially from SMS spam detection in both task objectives and data characteristics [2], [3].

In contrast, the fine-tuned BERT model proposed in this work is evaluated on a domain-specific SMS spam dataset composed of short, informal, and noisy text messages. Prior studies have shown that SMS messages present unique challenges for text classification due to their brevity, use of abbreviations, and lack of grammatical structure [1], [4]. To ensure a fair evaluation, the dataset was balanced across classes prior to training and evaluation [1] The obtained accuracy of 74.22 reflects the inherent difficulty of SMS spam classification compared to standard NLP benchmarks, where longer and more structured text is typically available . Despite the lower absolute accuracy compared to GLUE results, this outcome demonstrates that the fine-tuned BERT model effectively adapts a general-purpose pre-trained language model to a specialized application domain through task-specific fine-tuning [2] This comparison is not intended to indicate superiority over benchmark results, but rather to emphasize the importance of domain-aware evaluation and fine-tuning strategies when deploying pre-trained language models in real-world applications such as SMS spam detection.

optimizer

Justification and Analysis

The results in Table III demonstrate that the choice of optimizer has a noticeable impact on SMS spam classification performance. Among the evaluated methods, RMSprop achieves the best overall results, obtaining the highest accuracy and F1-score, along with the lowest loss value. This behavior can be attributed to RMSprop's adaptive learning-rate mechanism, which scales parameter updates based on a running average of squared gradients. Such adaptation is particularly beneficial when fine-tuning only a small number of trainable parameters, as in this study where the BERT encoder is frozen and only the classification head is updated [2], [5].

AdamW also exhibits strong performance, especially in terms of recall, indicating its effectiveness in identifying spam messages. AdamW combines adaptive gradient updates with weight decay regularization, which has been shown to improve generalization in transformer-based models [2]. However, when the majority of model parameters are frozen, the regularization effect of AdamW becomes less influential, leading to slightly lower overall performance compared to RMSprop.

In contrast, SGD yields the weakest results across most metrics. Unlike adaptive optimizers, SGD applies a uniform learning rate to all parameters and does not account for gradient magnitude variations. Prior studies have shown that such behavior can lead to slower convergence and suboptimal performance when fine-tuning deep neural models, particularly in NLP tasks involving sparse and noisy text such as SMS messages [5].

Overall, these findings suggest that adaptive optimizers are more suitable for fine-tuning BERT-based classifiers in SMS spam detection tasks, especially under settings where only the classification head is trained while the encoder remains frozen.

learning rate

The results demonstrate that incorporating learning rate scheduling leads to a significant improvement over the fixed learning rate baseline. Both dynamic strategies achieve higher accuracy and F1-score, indicating more effective optimization and better generalization.

Among the tested approaches, ReduceLROnPlateau yields the best overall performance, achieving an accuracy of 83.11 and an F1-score of 84.17. This improvement can be attributed to its ability to automatically reduce the learning rate when validation loss stops improving, allowing the model to fine-tune its parameters more carefully during later training stages [2].

The linear warmup strategy also improves performance compared to the fixed learning rate baseline. By gradually increasing the learning rate during the initial training steps, linear warmup stabilizes early optimization and helps prevent unstable updates when fine-tuning large pre-trained models such as BERT [5]. Although its performance is slightly lower than ReduceLROnPlateau, it still demonstrates clear benefits over using a static learning rate.

Overall, these results highlight the importance of learning rate scheduling when fine-tuning transformer-based models. Properly controlling the learning rate during training can significantly enhance convergence stability and classification performance without modifying the underlying model architecture [2].

Impact of Data Augmentation

The results indicate that applying data augmentation techniques, including synonym substitution and random deletion, did not lead to observable performance improvements over the fine-tuned BERT baseline model. Accuracy, F1-score, and other evaluation metrics remained unchanged across all configurations.

This outcome can be attributed to the evaluation setup adopted in this study. The fine-tuned BERT model was not retrained on augmented data; instead, augmentation was applied solely as an input-level perturbation during evaluation. As a result, the model was not able to adapt its parameters to the augmented linguistic variations, limiting the potential impact of data augmentation on classification performance.

Previous studies have shown that data augmentation is most effective when augmented samples are incorporated into the

training process, allowing the model to learn robust representations from increased lexical and structural diversity [1], [3]. When used only at inference or evaluation time, augmentation primarily serves as a robustness test rather than a performance enhancement mechanism.

Furthermore, transformer-based models such as BERT are pre-trained on large-scale corpora and already possess strong contextual understanding capabilities [2]. This intrinsic robustness may reduce the marginal benefit of lightweight augmentation techniques, especially for short and semantically compact texts such as SMS messages.

Overall, these results suggest that while data augmentation is a valuable technique for improving generalization, its effectiveness depends strongly on how and when it is applied. In the context of this study, evaluation-only augmentation did not yield measurable gains, highlighting the importance of integrating augmentation strategies directly into the fine-tuning process when performance improvement is the primary objective.

Effect of Dropout Regularization

The results demonstrate that introducing dropout regularization leads to a substantial improvement in overall classification performance. Accuracy increases from 74.22 to 83.11, while the F1-score improves from 77.17 to 84.17. These gains indicate a better balance between precision and recall when dropout is applied.

The observed improvement can be attributed to the regularization effect of dropout, which reduces over-reliance on individual neurons in the classification head and encourages the model to learn more robust and generalizable feature representations. Dropout has been widely shown to be effective in mitigating overfitting in neural networks, particularly when training data is limited or noisy, as is the case in SMS spam classification tasks [5].

Furthermore, the reduction in loss suggests improved training stability and increased confidence in model predictions. Overall, these results confirm that dropout regularization is an effective strategy for enhancing generalization performance in fine-tuned BERT models for SMS spam detection [3].

Early Stopping

Justification and Analysis

The results in Table X indicate that applying early stopping leads to a notable improvement in classification performance across all evaluation metrics. Accuracy increases from 74.22 to 83.11, while the F1-score improves from 77.17 to 84.17, demonstrating a more balanced trade-off between precision and recall.

This improvement can be attributed to the ability of early stopping to prevent overfitting by halting training once validation performance ceases to improve. By selecting the model checkpoint corresponding to the lowest validation loss, early stopping ensures that the learned parameters generalize better to unseen test data rather than overfitting the training set

The reduction in loss further supports this observation, indicating more stable convergence and improved confidence in predictions. These findings confirm that early stopping is an effective and lightweight regularization technique for enhancing generalization performance in fine-tuned BERT models, particularly for SMS spam detection tasks where training data is limited and noisy [**?**], [2]

VI Conclusion

This study investigated the effectiveness of fine-tuning a pre-trained BERT model for SMS spam classification and analyzed the impact of several optimization and regularization strategies applied on top of a unified fine-tuned baseline. All experiments were conducted under controlled conditions using fixed data splits and shared hyperparameters, allowing each technique to be evaluated independently and fairly.

The results confirm that fine-tuning is essential for adapting a general-purpose language model such as BERT to the SMS spam detection domain. While the baseline fine-tuned model achieved reasonable performance, additional optimization strategies led to substantial improvements in accuracy, F1-score, and overall stability. In particular, optimizer selection played a critical role, with adaptive optimizers outperforming SGD-based optimization in terms of convergence and classification effectiveness.

Regularization techniques proved especially beneficial. Dropout and early stopping significantly improved generalization performance, indicating that overfitting is a key challenge in SMS spam classification due to the limited size and noisy nature of the data. These methods helped the model learn more robust representations without modifying the underlying BERT architecture.

Learning rate scheduling further enhanced performance by improving training stability and convergence behavior. Both ReduceLROnPlateau and linear warmup strategies outperformed the fixed learning rate baseline, demonstrating that dynamic learning rate control is an effective and lightweight optimization mechanism for fine-tuning transformer-based models.

Data augmentation experiments showed that simple text perturbations, such as synonym substitution and random deletion, did not lead to performance gains in this setup. This suggests that not all augmentation techniques are equally effective for short and highly compressed texts like SMS messages, and that naive augmentation may introduce noise rather than meaningful linguistic variation.

Overall, this work demonstrates that substantial performance improvements in SMS spam detection can be achieved through careful fine-tuning and targeted optimization strategies, without increasing model complexity or changing the core architecture. The findings highlight the importance of systematic experimental evaluation when deploying pre-trained language models in real-world, domain-specific applications. Future work may explore more advanced augmentation methods, multilingual extensions, or lightweight fine-tuning approaches to further improve robustness and efficiency.

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