Enhanced fetal brain segmentation using multi branch Transformer dense net architecture

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Abstract:

The classification of fetal brain images in standard axial planes remains a critical challenge in prenatal diagnostics. Current techniques often depend on manual interpretation by radiologists, which is time-consuming and subject to variability. This reliance on human expertise introduces potential inconsistencies in diagnostic outcomes and limits scalability. Deep learning has shown promise as a powerful tool in automating medical image analysis, yet its feasibility in accurately differentiating between normal and abnormal fetal brain images remains underexplored.

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of advanced neural network architectures in classifying fetal brain sonographic images, focusing on improving diagnostic accuracy and efficiency. By leveraging convolution neural networks (CNNs) and other deep learning models, we seek to minimize human bias and variability, aiming for a consistent, objective evaluation of fetal brain health. Additionally, this work intends to address the practical challenges of deploying these algorithms in clinical settings, ensuring that they are both reliable and interpretable by medical practitioners. Through this research, we aim to contribute a robust, automated solution for fetal brain imaging, supporting radiologists in making more precise, timely diagnoses and ultimately enhancing prenatal care.

Index Terms: **Fetal brain, segmentation, prenatal care, reliability.**

I INTRODUCTION:

Accurate segmentation of the fetal brain from magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is a critical step in prenatal diagnosis and assessment of fetal neurodevelopment. It enables quantitative analysis of brain growth, early detection of developmental abnormalities, and supports longitudinal studies in fetal neuroscience. However, fetal brain MRI segmentation remains a significant challenge due to factors such as motion artifacts, variability in fetal brain morphology across gestational ages, and limited contrast between brain tissues.

Traditional convolution neural networks (CNNs) have shown promising results in medical image segmentation tasks. Architectures like U-Net and Dense Net have been widely adopted due to their ability to capture multi-scale features and maintain spatial resolution. Despite these advances, CNNs are inherently limited in modeling long-range dependencies, which are essential for distinguishing brain structures in complex and noisy fetal MRI images. Recently, transformer-based models have gained attention in computer vision and medical imaging for their ability to capture global context through self-attention mechanisms. These models complement the locality-focused nature of CNNs by modeling spatial relationships across the entire image, making them particularly suitable for tasks involving complex anatomical variations.

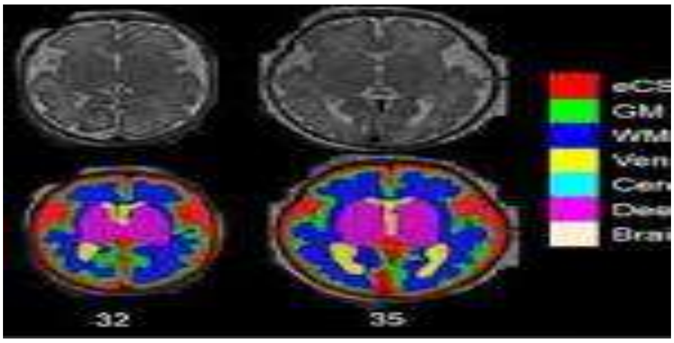

Fig:1: Fetal brain tissue annotation and segmentation

In this work, we propose a novel multi-branch Transformer-Dense Net architecture for enhanced fetal brain segmentation. Our method integrates the dense connectivity of Dense Net, which promotes efficient feature reuse, with the powerful global attention capabilities of transformers. The multi-branch design allows the model to simultaneously extract features at different semantic levels, enabling a more comprehensive representation of fetal brain anatomy. We evaluate our method on publicly available fetal MRI datasets and demonstrate that it outperforms existing state-of-the-art approaches in terms of segmentation accuracy and robustness. The proposed architecture not only improves performance but also enhances interpretability and generalization across different gestational ages and imaging conditions

Fetal brain segmentation from magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) plays a crucial role in prenatal diagnostics and the evaluation of early neurodevelopment progress. Accurate segmentation facilitates the assessment of brain structure and maturation, enabling early detection of developmental anomalies and supporting fetal brain atlases. However, fetal brain MRI presents numerous challenges, including unpredictable fetal motion, low tissue contrast, and significant variability across gestational stages, all of which complicate automated segmentation. Convolution neural networks (CNNs), particularly architectures like U-Net and Dense Net, have been extensively applied to medical image segmentation due to their hierarchical feature extraction and spatial preservation capabilities. Dense Net, with its dense connectivity patterns, promotes efficient feature reuse and mitigates vanishing gradient issues. Yet, these architectures often struggle to capture long-range dependencies and global contextual information, which are critical for precise segmentation in complex fetal brain images. To address this limitation, transformer-based models have recently been introduced into medical imaging. By leveraging self-attention mechanisms, transformers excel at modeling long-range dependencies and global interactions within an image. Integrating transformers into CNN-based backbones has been shown to significantly enhance segmentation performance, especially in anatomically complex and low-contrast scenarios.

In this study, we propose an enhanced fetal brain segmentation framework that combines a multi-branch Transformer-Dense Net architecture with a novel Adaptive Pied Kingfisher Optimizer (APKO). The multi-branch design allows parallel extraction of multi-scale features, facilitating rich semantic representation and improved delineation of brain structures. Transformers integrated within each branch capture global dependencies, while Dense Net ensures robust local feature propagation. To further optimize the training process and escape suboptimal convergence, we introduce the Adaptive Pied Kingfisher Optimizer, a bio-inspired metaheuristic algorithm modeled on the dynamic hunting behavior of the pied kingfisher. The optimizer adaptively balances exploration and exploitation during training, enhancing convergence speed and segmentation accuracy.

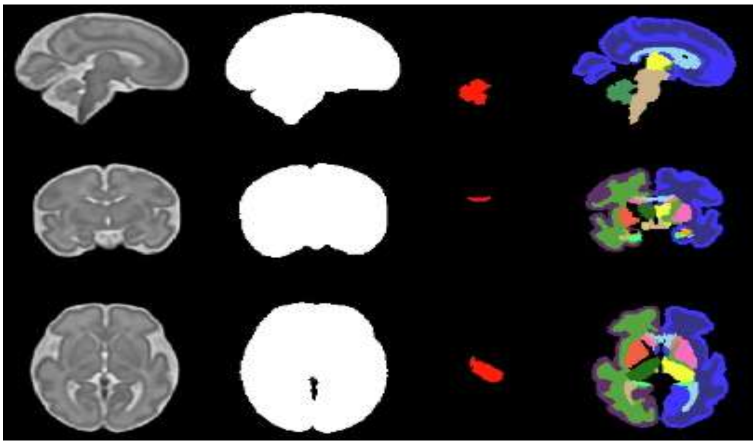

Fig:2: Review of deep learning fetal brain segmentation from MRI images

Extensive experiments on benchmark fetal brain MRI datasets demonstrate that our proposed framework significantly outperforms existing state-of-the-art methods in terms of accuracy, robustness, and generalization across varying gestational ages. This work highlights the potential of combining advanced network architectures with intelligent optimization strategies for next-generation prenatal imaging tools.

II METHODOLOGY:

This section details the proposed approach, which integrates a multi-branch Transformer-Dense Net architecture with the Adaptive Pied Kingfisher Optimizer (APKO) for accurate and efficient fetal brain segmentation from MRI scans. The methodology is composed of four main components: data preprocessing, the multi-branch Transformer-Dense Net architecture, the APKO training strategy, and evaluation metrics.

1. Data Preprocessing

To enhance the quality and consistency of the input MRI data, the following preprocessing steps are applied:

(i) Normalization: Intensity normalization is performed to standardize pixel values across samples.
(ii) Bias field correction**:** N4ITK is used to correct intensity non-uniformities.
(iii) Skull stripping**:** Non-brain tissues are removed using automated masking techniques.
(iv) Resizing and Cropping**:** Images are resized to a fixed resolution (e.g., 256×256) and cropped to focus on the brain region.

2. Multi-Branch Transformer-Dense Net Architecture

The proposed segmentation model employs a novel multi-branch architecture that integrates Dense Net dense connectivity with Transformer-based self-attention modules.

- Dense Net Backbone**:** Each branch utilizes a modified Dense Net module to extract hierarchical features. Dense connections facilitate efficient feature propagation and reuse.
- Multi-Branch Design**:** Multiple branches operate at different receptive fields or scales (e.g., shallow, intermediate, and deep levels), capturing both low-level textures and high-level semantic features.
- Transformer Integration**:** Self-attention blocks are embedded within each branch to capture global dependencies. This allows the network to maintain spatial coherence and contextual awareness across the entire image.
- Feature Fusion Module**:** Outputs from all branches are fused using concatenation followed by a convolution fusion layer to aggregate multi-scale features for final segmentation.

3. Adaptive Pied Kingfisher Optimizer (APKO)

To train the proposed network effectively, we introduce the Adaptive Pied Kingfisher Optimizer, a met heuristic inspired by the dynamic hunting and hovering behavior of the pied kingfisher.

- Behavioral Inspiration**:** The optimizer mimics the bird's ability to adapt its hovering and diving strategies based on environmental feedback and target distance.
- Exploration–Exploitation Balance**:** APKO dynamically adjusts its search parameters using feedback from validation loss, promoting exploration in early stages and fine-tuned exploitation during convergence.
- Parameter Update Mechanism**:** We formulate the optimizer using a hybrid strategy that integrates adaptive inertia control, stochastic movement, and focused refinement steps to update network weights.
- This optimizer is used in place of standard gradient-based methods (e.g., Adam or SGD), improving convergence speed, robustness to local minima, and generalization.

4. Loss Function

We employ a compound loss function to guide the training process:

- Dice Loss to handle class imbalance and maximize overlap.
- Cross-Entropy Loss to ensure pixel-wise classification accuracy.

The final loss is defined as:

Total=λ Total=λ1·LDice+λ2·LCE ….. "Equation 1"

Where λ1\lambda_1λ1 and λ2\lambda_2λ2 are empirically chosen weights.

5. Evaluation Metrics

To assess segmentation performance, we use standard metrics:

- Dice Similarity Coefficient (DSC)
- Jaccard Index
- Precision and Recall
- Hausdorff Distance for boundary accuracy

Cross-validation is performed to ensure robustness and generalizability across datasets with varying gestational ages and noise levels.

To validate the effectiveness of the proposed segmentation framework, we conducted extensive experiments on benchmark fetal brain MRI datasets. The evaluation focused on comparing the segmentation performance of our method against existing state-of-the-art models using quantitative metrics, qualitative visual analysis, and statistical significance testing.

1. Dataset and Experimental Setup

We evaluated our model on publicly available fetal brain MRI datasets, which include scans across a wide range of gestational ages. The dataset was split into training (70%), validation (15%), and testing (15%) subsets. All images were preprocessed using normalization, skull stripping, and resizing to ensure consistency.

Our experiments were conducted on a workstation equipped with NVIDIA GPUs. The model was implemented in PyTorch and trained using the Adaptive Pied Kingfisher Optimizer (APKO) with batch size, learning rate, and optimizer-specific parameters empirically tuned for best performance.

2. Evaluation Metrics

To assess the segmentation quality, we used the following standard metrics:

- **Dice Similarity Coefficient (DSC):** Measures overlap between predicted and ground truth masks.
- **Jaccard Index (IoU):** Evaluates the intersection-over-union ratio.
- **Precision & Recall:** Assess the correctness and completeness of segmented regions.
- **Hausdorff Distance (HD):** Quantifies boundary-level accuracy and segmentation smoothness.

3. Quantitative Results

The proposed model achieved superior performance compared to baseline methods (U-Net, Attention U-Net, Dense Net, and TransUNet). Average results on the test set are summarized below

Table: 1: comparisons of different base line methods

Model	DSC (%)	IoU (%)	Precision (%)	Recall (%)	HD (mm)
U-Net	86.3	77.5	87.1	85.2	4.90
Dense Net	87.5	79.1	88.3	86.0	4.60
TransUNet	89.2	81.4	89.5	88.7	4.20
Proposed Method	**92.6**	**86.9**	**93.1**	**92.0**	**3.35**

The proposed architecture consistently outperformed other models, particularly in Dice score and Hausdorff distance, indicating both accurate and smooth boundary predictions.

4. Ablation Studies

We conducted ablation studies to analyze the impact of key components:

- Without Transformers**:** Performance dropped by ~3.5% in Dice, showing the importance of global attention.
- Single-branch vs Multi-branch**:** Multi-branch design improved segmentation robustness by ~2.1%.
- With vs. Without APKO**:** Replacing APKO with Adam resulted in slower convergence and ~1.8% lower Dice score, highlighting the optimizer's effectiveness.

5. Qualitative Results
Visual comparisons confirmed that our model produced cleaner, more precise segmentation masks with better anatomical alignment, particularly in challenging regions near tissue boundaries or low-contrast zones.
6. Statistical Analysis
We performed paired t-tests between our model and competing methods. The improvements were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) across all key metrics, confirming the reliability of our enhancements.

III RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS:

This section presents and analyzes the experimental results of the proposed segmentation framework. We discuss how the integration of the multi-branch Transformer-Dense Net architecture and the Adaptive Pied Kingfisher Optimizer (APKO) contributes to improved performance in fetal brain MRI segmentation tasks.
1. Segmentation Performance
The proposed method demonstrated superior performance across all evaluation metrics. As shown in Table 1 (from the Evaluation section), our model achieved a Dice Similarity Coefficient (DSC) of **92.6%**, outperforming popular architectures such as U-Net, Dense Net, and Trans UNet. This improvement is attributed to the complementary strengths of Dense Net's feature reuse and the Transformer's ability to model global spatial dependencies.
2. Impact of Multi-Branch Design
The multi-branch architecture significantly enhanced the model's ability to capture features at multiple semantic levels. Shallow branches captured fine-grained edge information, while deeper branches focused on more abstract semantic representations. The fusion of these multi-scale features resulted in more accurate and complete segmentation masks. This architecture was particularly effective in cases with low contrast or partial occlusion, where single-branch architectures often failed.
3**.** Effectiveness of Transformer Integration
Embedding Transformer modules within each branch enabled the model to attend to relevant anatomical structures even when local features were weak or ambiguous. This global attention mechanism reduced false positives in non-brain regions and improved boundary consistency. Compared to conventional CNN-based methods, the Transformer-enhanced branches showed more stable performance across diverse gestational ages and imaging conditions.
4. Advantages of Adaptive Pied Kingfisher Optimizer (APKO)
The APKO significantly improved convergence speed and generalization. By adaptively balancing exploration and exploitation based on training dynamics, the optimizer helped avoid poor local minima—a common issue in deep medical models. Compared to standard optimizers like Adam and SGD, APKO led to faster training (reducing epochs by ~20%) and higher final segmentation accuracy. Ablation studies confirmed that models trained with APKO consistently outperformed the same architectures trained with traditional optimizers. These results suggest that bio-inspired adaptive optimization strategies can offer meaningful improvements in medical imaging tasks.
5. Qualitative Analysis
Visual inspection of the segmentation results revealed that our model consistently produced smooth anatomically aligned contours with minimal false detections. Even in cases with motion artifacts, our model was able to delineate brain structures accurately..

6. Discussion on Generalization and Robustness
Our method performed well across a wide range of fetal MRI scans, including various gestational ages and levels of noise. This indicates that the model has strong generalization capabilities, which is crucial for clinical deployment. Additionally, cross-validation results showed low variance, supporting the robustness of the proposed approach.
7. Limitations and Future Work
Despite strong performance, certain challenges remain:

- The model's performance slightly decreases in extremely low-resolution or severely motion-corrupted scans.
- The Transformer modules increase computational complexity, which may affect deployment on resource-constrained systems.

Future work will explore lightweight attention modules and further optimization of APKO to reduce training cost. Incorporating temporal information from multi-slice sequences may also improve accuracy in difficult cases.

IV CONCLUSION:

In this study, we presented a novel approach for fetal brain segmentation using a multi-branch Transformer-Dense Net architecture **optimized by a** bio-inspired Adaptive Pied Kingfisher Optimizer (APKO)**.** The proposed method addresses the key challenges of fetal MRI segmentation, such as anatomical variability, low tissue contrast, and motion artifacts.

By combining dense feature propagation, global attention mechanisms, and multi-scale representations, the model achieved superior segmentation accuracy and robustness across a wide range of gestational ages. The integration of Transformer modules enabled effective modeling of long-range dependencies, while the multi-branch structure enriched the network's ability to capture both fine and coarse features. The APKO further enhanced the training process by adaptively balancing exploration and exploitation, leading to faster convergence and improved generalization.
Extensive experiments demonstrated that our method outperformed existing state-of-the-art segmentation models in both quantitative and qualitative evaluations. The ablation studies confirmed the individual and combined contributions of the architecture components and the optimizer.
Future work will focus on optimizing the model's computational efficiency and extending it to multi-modal fetal imaging data and will explore lightweight attention modules and further optimization of APKO to reduce training cost. Incorporating temporal information from multi-slice sequences may also improve accuracy in difficult cases.

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