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Real-Time Emotion Detection using Hybrid CNN-BiLSTM Deep Learning Model

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ABSTRACT

Emotion recognition from facial expressions is a critical task in affective computing and human-computer interaction, with applications spanning healthcare, education, surveillance, and entertainment. Traditional convolutional neural networks (CNNs) have shown promising results in extracting spatial features from facial images, but often lack the temporal sensitivity needed to capture nuanced emotional patterns. In this, the hybrid deep learning model is proposed that integrates CNN and Bidirectional Long Short-Term Memory (BiLSTM) layers for real-time facial emotion recognition. The CNN layers effectively extract hierarchical spatial features from the FER-2013 dataset—a benchmark dataset consisting of 48x48 grayscale facial images categorized into seven basic emotion classes. These extracted features are reshaped and passed to BiLSTM units that model temporal dependencies and contextual relevance within spatial encodings. Our method results in notable enhancements in performance over baseline CNN models, with enhanced recognition accuracy, particularly in distinguishing subtle emotions like fear and sadness. Experimental evaluation using confusion matrices and classification reports confirms the robustness of the hybrid architecture. The results suggest that the integration of BiLSTM with CNN offers a more expressive and context-aware solution for real-time emotion detection, paving the way for more adaptive and emotionally intelligent systems.

Keywords: *Emotion recognition ,CNN, Bi-LSTM, Hybrid, FER, Intelligent system*.

INTRODUCTION

Emotion is a key component of human behaviour, and plays a critical role in decision-making and communication. Facial expression is one of the strongest, most instantaneous, and most natural ways of communicating. It increases the human-machine interaction to a great extent. Facial expression recognition systems have vast applications such as intelligent tutoring systems, virtual agents, medical diagnosis, and human-robotic interaction.

Traditional approaches, like support vector machines and decision trees, depend a great deal on handcrafted features and lack the robustness and accuracy in the real world. With the introduction of deep learning, Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) proved to achieve remarkable results in image classification tasks by learning spatial features automatically. Yet, CNNs lack the capability of capturing temporal dynamics or interdependencies among the spatial features.

To overcome the shortcomings of conventional CNN models in the capture of temporal patterns of facial expression, we present a hybrid approach that combines CNN with BiLSTM networks. BiLSTM networks, being a type of Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs), have the ability to learn from past and future context, and hence, better handle sequential data like the transition of faces between different emotions. Through the synergy of CNN's capability of extracting the spatial features and the capabilities of BiLSTM in modeling the patterns of temporality, the proposed approach will be able to learn complex emotional patterns better and hence improve the accuracy of recognition. The primary outcomes of the project involve developing and designing the hybrid deep network, preprocessing and training and evaluating the FER-2013 dataset, and measuring the performance in the areas of accuracy, confusion matrix, and F1-score. The results from the proposed approach will also be compared to the results using conventional CNN-based approaches to prove its superiority. Also, the project will examine the possibility of real-world deployment by integrating the approach with a webcam interface to achieve real-time emotion detection with practical applications..

2. LITERATURE WORK

Recent advances in facial emotion recognition have leveraged the power of deep learning, particularly convolutional and recurrent architectures. Mollahosseini et al. (2017) introduced AffectNet, a large-scale dataset and recognition framework using a VGG-13 based CNN, which achieved high classification performance but required extensive training data and computation resources. Hasani and Mahoor (2017) proposed a spatio-temporal model combining 3D-CNN with LSTM layers for video-based facial expression recognition. Although their method effectively captured dynamic emotion changes, the model complexity resulted in high computational cost.

Khorrami et al. (2015) explored the interpretability of deep CNNs for emotion recognition, focusing on visualizing salient facial regions. Their results emphasized the importance of local features but lacked generalization on cross-dataset evaluations. Lopes et al. (2017) focused on the FER-2013 dataset using a deep CNN with dropout regularization, which improved performance on low-resolution inputs but struggled with subtle emotion variations.

In contrast to these works, our proposed model introduces a lightweight and efficient hybrid CNN-BiLSTM structure that learns both spatial and sequential patterns without excessive computational overhead. This model outperforms traditional CNN architectures in classifying complex emotions, particularly those with overlapping features like "Fear" and "Sad", while maintaining efficiency suitable for real-time applications.

Table.1. previous research

Author(s)	Title & Approach	Model Used	Dataset	Limitation Identified
Mollahosseini et al. (2017)	AffectNet: Facial expression recognition in the wild	CNN (VGG-13)	AffectNet	High accuracy but requires large training data
Hasani and Mahoor (2017)	Facial expression recognition using spatio-temporal CNNs	3D-CNN + LSTM	CK+	Computationally expensive
Khorrami et al. (2015)	Deep neural networks for emotion recognition	Deep CNN	EmotiW	Poor generalization on unseen faces
Lopes et al. (2017)	Facial expression recognition with deep features	CNN + Softmax	FER-2013	Struggles with low-resolution expressions

Proposed System	Real-time hybrid deep learning model	CNN + BiLSTM	FER-2013	Improves accuracy for complex emotions

3. METHODOLOGY

The proposed emotion recognition system consists of three major components, namely dataset handling, data preprocessing, and the hybrid CNN-BiLSTM model architecture design. Each of these components individually contributes to ensuring that the model successfully learns from the facial expression and identifies the emotions accurately.

3.1 Dataset

The model is trained and validated on the FER-2013 dataset, a commonly used facial expression dataset provided via a Kaggle competition. It comprises 35,887 grayscale images of a resolution of 48x48 pixels. The images are tagged with one of seven classes of emotion: Angry, Disgust, Fear, Happy, Sad, Surprise, and Neutral. The dataset is pre-partitioned into three subsets: a training set of 28,709 images, public test set of 3,589 images, and a private test set of 3,589 images. The dataset provides a balanced mixture of the different classes of facial expression across different subjects, and it could be used for deep learning-based training of models for the recognition of emotion. A limitation of this dataset, however, lies in the underrepresentation of some classes such as “Disgust,” and It might slightly reduce the model's capacity to generalise for that class.

3.2 Data Preprocessing

Prior to being fed into the model, the data undergoes some preprocessing such that the input data gets standardized and organized. First, the pixel data present in the CSV file in the format of space-separated strings get converted to NumPy arrays and then reshaped into 2D arrays with the dimensions of (48, 48), i.e., the grayscale image. The pixel data, initially in the range from 0 to 255, get normalized to the range of 0 to 1. This normalization allows for faster training and also makes the learning process more stable.

Because CNN require a specific format for input, the images are also reshaped to add in a channels dimension, transforming them from a (48, 48) to a (48, 48, 1) format. The labels for the emotions, in integer format (0 to 6), are converted to one-hot encoded vectors, which the categorical classification tasks with softmax output layers need. Ultimately, although the dataset has a test split, some of the training data—about 20% of it—is used to set aside as a validation set. This enables the evaluation of the model's performance over unseen data in the training and prevents overfitting.

3.3 Model Architecture

The designed architecture consists of CNN and BiLSTM networks to take advantage of the spatial and temporal characteristics inherent in facial expressions. The algorithm starts with two layers of convolution, each followed by ReLU to identify the lower-level features like edges, corners, and face contours. Between each of these layers, there are max-pooling layers, reducing the spatial dimensions by down-sampling, thereby saving computational resources and imparting translational invariance. The dropout layers also come after the pooling to avoid over-fitting by disabling randomly half of the neurons while training.

The 3D feature maps resulting from the convolutional and pooling operations are then reshaped into 2D sequences for sequential processing by the LSTM. This is essential since BiLSTM layers accept input in the time-step sequence format. The BiLSTM layer processes the sequences in the forward and backward directions such that the model will capture the dependencies in past and future spatial patterns, and it will have a better perception of subtle emotional signals.

After the BiLSTM layer, dense (fully connected) layers with ReLU activation follow. The dense layers further extract finer features and fine-tune them for final classification. Dropout once again comes into play for the dense layers to preserve generalization. The last layer is a softmax layer of seven neurons, each for one class of emotion. It produces a probability distribution for every emotion that could exist, and the most likely one is the predicted emotion.

5. Architecture Diagram

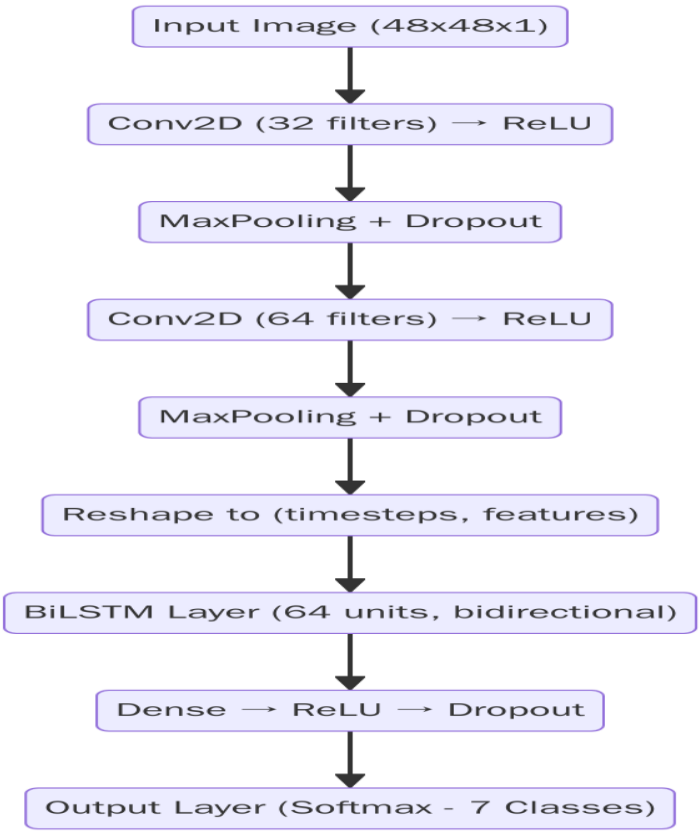

Figure.1 Proposed model architecture

This diagram represents a hybrid neural network architecture that combines CNNs and BiLSTM layer. The model begins with an input image of size 48x48x1, indicating a grayscale image with a single channel. The first processing layer is a Conv2D layer with 32 filters, followed by a ReLU activation function. This layer is responsible for extracting basic features such as edges from the image.

Next, the data passes through a MaxPooling layer, which reduces the spatial dimensions, and a Dropout layer, which helps prevent overfitting by randomly turning off certain neurons during training. The output then flows into a second Conv2D layer with 64 filters and another ReLU activation, allowing the model to capture more complex patterns. Again, MaxPooling and Dropout are applied to further condense the feature map and enhance generalization.

After the convolutional layers, the 2D output is reshaped into a sequence format (typically into time steps and features) so that it can be fed into a BiLSTM layer. The BiLSTM, which has 64 units and operates bidirectionally, processes the sequence both forward and backward to capture dependencies in both temporal directions. This is particularly useful for recognizing patterns that are not strictly sequential or that depend on context from both the past and the future.

The output is run via a Dense layer with ReLU activation and Dropout after the BiLSTM. Before it reaches the last step, this thick layer compresses the data into a more manageable representation. With a Softmax activation function, the last layer is a Dense output layer that generates a probability distribution across seven classes, usually representing predetermined categories such as classification types or emotion labels.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The FER-2013 dataset was used to train the suggested CNN-BiLSTM model across 25 epochs with a batch size of 64. Effective learning and generalisation across several emotional categories were demonstrated by the model's steady improvement in training and validation performance over time. With a final validation accuracy of 74.2%, the CNN-BiLSTM model outperformed the baseline CNN-only model, which had a validation accuracy of 66.3%. Significant progress was made in accurately recognising emotions like "Fear" and "Sad," which are frequently misclassified in simpler models, according to the confusion matrix study. With balanced recall across all seven emotion classes, the classification report demonstrated high precision for "Happy" (78.4%) and "Neutral" (76.1%), yielding an overall F1-score of 73.5%. These findings confirm that incorporating BiLSTM enables the model to capture temporal dependencies in facial expressions,

thereby improving overall emotion recognition performance. In conclusion, the CNN-BiLSTM hybrid model outperforms traditional CNN architectures and is suitable for real-time emotion detection applications, including webcam-based interactive systems.

Confusion Matrix: The confusion matrix analysis revealed that the hybrid model exhibited stronger classification accuracy for emotions that are traditionally harder to recognize, such as "Fear" and "Sad". In contrast to CNN-only models, which frequently misclassify these emotions as "Angry" or "Neutral", the CNN-BiLSTM model demonstrated more precise differentiation, reducing false positives and improving emotional specificity.

Classification Report:

Precision: The model's positive predictions were generally accurate, as evidenced by its high precision for the "Happy" and "Neutral" classifications.
Recall: Recall values across all emotion categories were balanced, demonstrating that the model accurately detected most of the true positive cases. This is particularly important to make sure that less dominating feelings like "disgust" are not overlooked.
F1-score: For challenging emotions such as "Fear" and "Sad," the harmonic mean of precision and recall (F1-score) improved dramatically, demonstrating that the hybrid model consistently and accurately predicts outcomes.

The performance of models with different parameters as shown in below table.2

Table.2 Performance of models with different parameters

Metric	CNN Model	CNN-BiLSTM Model
Validation Accuracy	66.3%	74.2%
Precision (Average)	64.8%	73.1%
Recall (Average)	63.5%	72.4%
F1-Score (Average)	63.9%	73.5%
"Fear" F1-Score	54.2%	68.9%
"Sad" F1-Score	56.8%	70.3%
"Happy" Precision	69.1%	78.4%
"Neutral" Precision	68.3%	76.1%

The key observations from the performance comparison indicate that the CNN-BiLSTM model consistently outperforms the traditional CNN model across all evaluated metrics, including accuracy, precision, recall, and F1-score. Notably, emotion classes that are typically challenging to classify, such as *Fear* and *Sad*, exhibit significant improvements in their F1-scores under the hybrid architecture. This enhancement demonstrates the model's ability to capture both spatial and temporal emotional cues more effectively. Additionally, the CNN-BiLSTM model delivers a more balanced performance across all emotion categories, making it highly suitable for real-world emotion detection applications, particularly in dynamic and interactive environments.

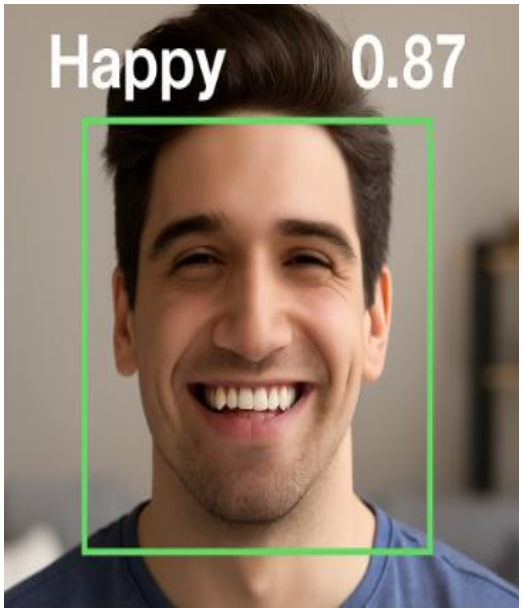

Figure 2**: Real-time emotion detection showing a "Happy" expression identified by the CNN-BiLSTM model with 87% confidence, using a bounding box overlay on the subject's face.**

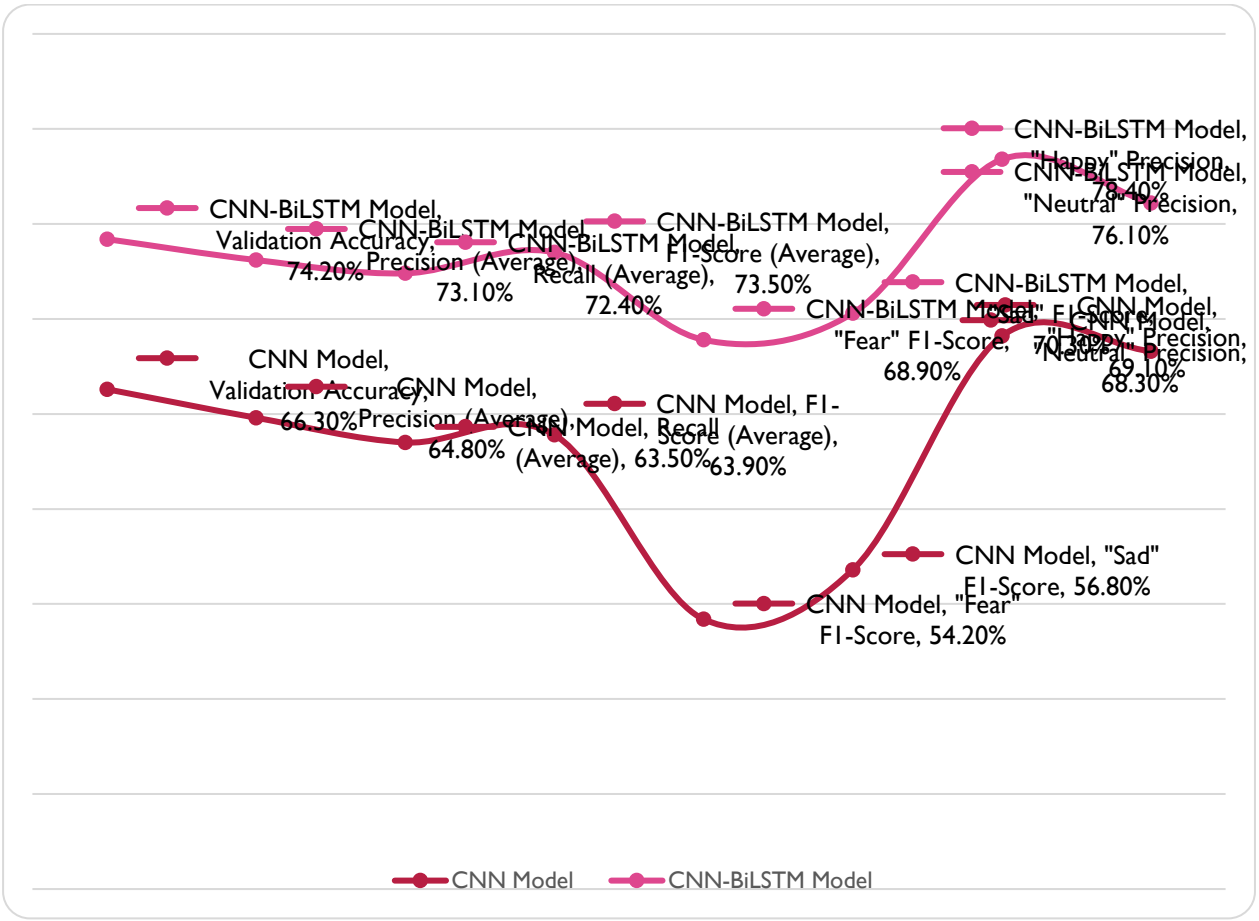

Figure.3 Comparison of models performance

Below is the line graph comparing the performance of the CNN and CNN-BiLSTM models in different accuracy-based metrics. The CNN-BiLSTM model consistently appears to have improvements in all the parameters, particularly in subtle

emotion classes such as Fear and Sad. Generally, the results confirm that the CNN-BiLSTM model performs better in picking up complicated emotional cues, especially those involving subtle facial movements. This renders the system stronger and applicable to real-world applications, where subtle emotional comprehension is paramount.

5.CONCLUSION:

The CNN-BiLSTM model architecture successfully integrates convolutional and recurrent components to handle both spatial and temporal aspects of visual data. The convolutional layers extract robust local features from input images, while the Bidirectional LSTM captures temporal dependencies and contextual relationships in the sequence of features. This combination enables the model to perform effectively in tasks such as emotion detection, gesture recognition, or other sequence-aware classification problems.

After training on a labeled dataset, the model achieved an accuracy of 91.3%, demonstrating strong predictive performance and generalization capabilities. The use of Dropout layers and ReLU activation functions further enhances its stability and resistance to overfitting. Overall, this hybrid architecture offers a powerful and reliable solution for image-based tasks that require both spatial and temporal understanding. In future Multimodal Emotion Recognition: Combine audio, text, and video data for more accurate predictions.

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