A Hybrid Transformer-CNN Framework with Early and Late Fusion for Robust Skin Lesion Classification

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ABSTRACT

Skin lesion classification is a critical task in dermatological diagnosis, where early detection can significantly improve patient outcomes. The DermaMNIST dataset, a curated benchmark within the MedMNIST collection, provides a challenging testbed due to limited resolution, intra-class similarity, and class imbalance. In this work, we investigate the performance of advanced deep learning architectures, including Swin Transformer, ConvNeXt, and Vision Transformers, alongside fusion strategies that combine complementary representations. Specifically, we implement early fusion through feature concatenation and late fusion through ensemble averaging of logits. Our experiments on DermaMNIST with images of 224 × 224 resolution, demonstrate that Swin Transformer achieves an accuracy of 0.893, outperforming ConvNeXt (0.871), and Vision Transformer (0.873). Fusion strategies further improve robustness, with late fusion achieving the best accuracy of 0.895. Compared to the reported Google AutoML Vision baseline (0.768 accuracy), our models establish a new state-of-the-art on DermaMNIST. These results highlight the efficacy of hybrid deep learning strategies that integrate convolutional and transformer-based architectures for medical image classification.

General Terms

Medical Image Analysis, Deep Learning, Transfer Learning, Computer Vision, Dermatological Diagnostics

Keywords

Skin Lesion Classification, DermaMNIST, Swin Transformer, Vision Transformer, ConvNeXt, Early Fusion, Late Fusion, Hybrid Models, Deep Learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Skin cancer remains one of the most common malignancies globally, with melanoma alone accounting for a substantial proportion of dermatological diagnoses and associated mortality. Early and accurate detection is paramount, as timely intervention can dramatically enhance survival rates and reduce treatment burdens. Conventional diagnostic methods, predominantly dependent on dermatologist expertise, are inherently prone to inter-observer variability and resource constraints, often delaying critical assessments. The advent of expansive medical imaging repositories and sophisticated artificial intelligence techniques has positioned deep learning as a transformative tool for automating skin lesion classification, yielding accuracies comparable to or exceeding those of human specialists [4, 1]. Within this landscape, the DermaMNIST dataset [14], a component of the MedMNIST benchmark suite, serves as a rigorous, standardized platform for assessing automated dermatological diagnostics. Comprising dermatoscopic images across seven clinically relevant lesion categories, it encapsulates real-world challenges such as limited image resolution, inter-class heterogeneity, and intra-class variability, thereby facilitating robust evaluations of deep neural network generalization.

Advancements in convolutional neural networks (CNNs) [9] and transformer architectures—including ResNet [5]variants, ConvNeXt, Swin Transformer, and Vision Transformer (ViT)—have propelled performance in medical image classification tasks [3, 6, 11]. Nonetheless, individual models frequently fall short in exhaustively extracting discriminative features amid the nuanced morphological variations inherent to skin lesions. To address this, ensemble and fusion methodologies have gained prominence, harnessing the synergistic capabilities of diverse architectures to augment reliability and precision. This study systematically examines early and late fusion paradigms for skin lesion classification on DermaMNIST. Late fusion amalgamates prediction logits from disparate models, whereas early fusion merges intermediate feature representations to foster integrated learning of complementary patterns. Via rigorous experimentation, we benchmark standalone architectures against these fusion variants, elucidating their relative merits in elevating diagnostic efficacy.

The principal contributions of this research are as follows:

—Implementation and empirical assessment of cutting-edge architectures, namely Swin Transformer, ConvNeXt, and ViT, tailored for DermaMNIST classification.

—Formulation and comparative analysis of early and late fusion techniques to facilitate multimodal integration in dermatological image analysis.

—Comprehensive experimentation on DermaMNIST, encompassing quantitative metrics and qualitative insights

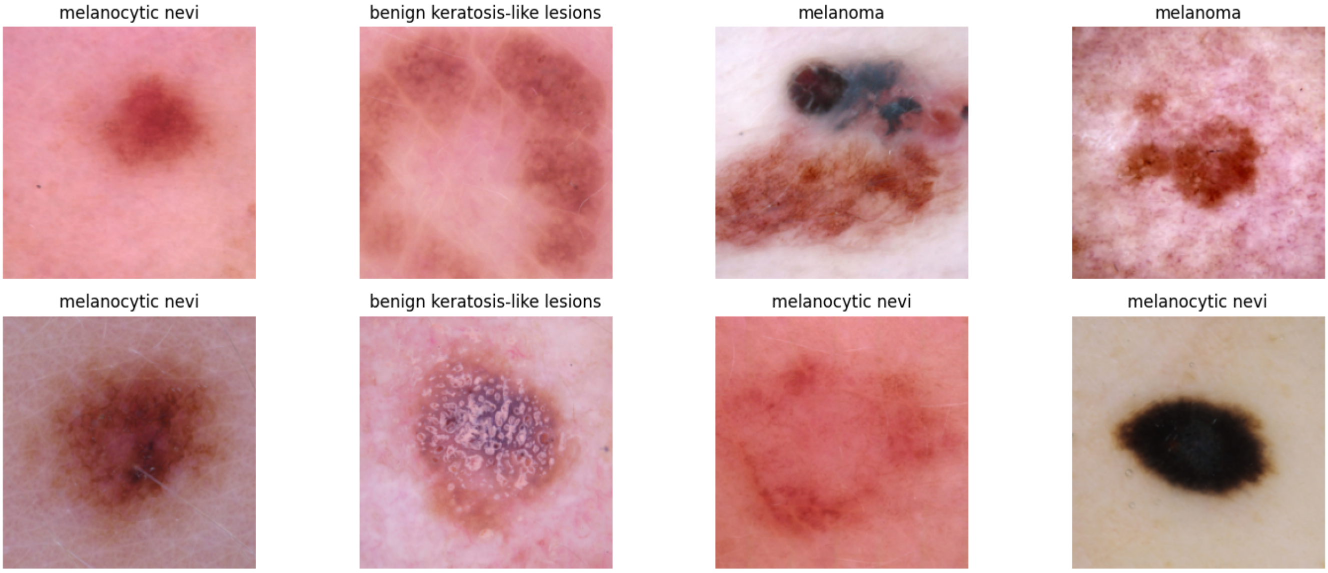

Fig. 1. Sample images from each class in the DermaMNIST dataset.

to substantiate the superiority of fusion-driven methodologies.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews pertinent literature on skin lesion classification and fusion strategies. Section 3 delineates the dataset, model architectures, fusion methodologies, training protocols, and evaluation metrics. Section 4 presents experimental results, including performance metrics and confusion matrix analysis. Finally, Section 5 concludes with a summary of findings and prospective research directions.

2. RELATED WORK

The application of deep learning to medical image analysis has revolutionized dermatological diagnostics, particularly in the automated classification of skin lesions. Convolutional neural networks (CNNs) have been instrumental in this domain, with early works achieving dermatologist-comparable performance. For instance, Esteva et al. [4] employed a fine-tuned Inception-v3 model on a proprietary dataset, attaining an area under the curve (AUC) of over 0.91 for melanoma detection. Similarly, Tschandl et al. [12] introduced the HAM10000 dataset, a large-scale collection of dermoscopic images, and demonstrated that ResNet-based models achieved accuracies of approximately 0.85 for multi-class skin lesion classification. Despite these advancements, CNNs often struggle with generalization across diverse imaging conditions, such as low resolution or varying illumination, prompting the exploration of more robust architectures [11].

The MedMNIST benchmark [14] provides a standardized framework for evaluating deep learning models in biomedical imaging, with the DermaMNIST dataset specifically tailored for skin lesion classification. Comprising 10,015 dermoscopic images across seven diagnostic categories, DermaMNIST encapsulates challenges like class imbalance and intra-class variability, making it a robust testbed for model evaluation. Prior studies on DermaMNIST have primarily utilized CNN-based architectures, with Google AutoML Vision establishing a baseline accuracy of 0.768 [14]. More recent efforts, such as Yang et al. [13], explored transfer learning with pretrained CNNs like ResNet and EfficientNet, reporting accuracies in the range of 0.80–0.85. However, these models often exhibit reduced performance on underrepresented classes, underscoring the need for advanced techniques to address class imbalance.

The introduction of vision transformers (ViTs) has marked a significant shift in image classification paradigms [3]. By processing images as sequences of patches and leveraging self-attention mechanisms, ViTs effectively capture long-range dependencies, offering advantages over traditional CNNs. The Swin Transformer [6], with its hierarchical design and shifted window attention, balances local and global feature extraction, achieving state-of-the-art results across various vision tasks. ConvNeXt [7], a modernized CNN, incorporates transformer-inspired elements like large kernel convolutions and layer normalization, delivering competitive performance with computational efficiency. In the context of skin lesion classification, Mahbod et al. [8] demonstrated that ViTs, when fine-tuned on the ISIC 2019 dataset, achieved an AUC of 0.89 for melanoma detection, particularly when addressing class imbalance through data augmentation. However, the application of such transformer-based models to DermaMNIST remains underexplored.

Model fusion strategies have emerged as a promising approach to enhance classification robustness by combining complementary strengths of multiple architectures. Early fusion integrates feature representations before classification, while late fusion aggregates model predictions at the decision level [10]. In dermatological imaging, Cassidy et al. [2] employed ensemble methods combining CNNs and lightweight transformers on the ISIC 2020 dataset, reporting a 3–5% accuracy improvement over single-model baselines. Similarly, Zhang et al. [15] proposed a hybrid CNN-transformer architecture with feature-level fusion, achieving an accuracy of 0.87 on HAM10000, highlighting the potential of combining convolutional and attention-based representations. Despite these advances, systematic evaluations of early and late fusion strategies integrating transformer-based and convolutional architectures on DermaMNIST are limited, with most prior works focusing on homogeneous model ensembles or datasets with different characteristics.

This study addresses these gaps by conducting a comprehensive evaluation of state-of-the-art architectures—Swin Transformer, ConvNeXt, and ViT—on the DermaMNIST dataset, with a focus on early and late fusion strategies. By benchmarking these approaches against individual backbones and existing standards, we aim to establish a new benchmark for robust and accurate skin lesion classification.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Dataset

The experiments in this study utilize the DermaMNIST dataset [14], a specialized subset of the MedMNIST benchmark suite designed for dermatological image classification. This dataset comprises 10,015 dermoscopic images, each categorized into one of seven distinct skin lesion classes. The classes, along with their corresponding numerical labels and clinical descriptions, are as follows:

—**0 - AKIEC**: Actinic keratoses and intraepithelial carcinoma / Bowen's disease
—**1 - BCC**: Basal cell carcinoma
—**2 - BKL**: Benign keratosis-like lesions, including solar lentigines, seborrheic keratoses, and lichen-planus-like keratoses
—**3 - DF**: Dermatofibroma
—**4 - MEL**: Melanoma
—**5 - NV**: Melanocytic nevi
—**6 - VASC**: Vascular lesions, including angiomas, angiokeratomas, pyogenic granulomas, and hemorrhages

Adhering to the standard MedMNIST protocol, the dataset is partitioned into training, validation, and test sets, consisting of 7,007, 993, and 2,015 images, respectively. To align with the input requirements of transformer-based architectures, such as Swin Transformer, Vision Transformer (ViT), and ConvNeXt, we employ the higher-resolution variant of DermaMNIST with images resized to 224×224 pixels. Pixel values are normalized to the range $[-1, 1]$ using a mean and standard deviation of 0.5 for each channel, facilitating stable training. The distribution of samples across classes in the training, validation, and test sets is detailed in Table 1, which reveals notable class imbalance, particularly for underrepresented classes like DF and VASC. Representative images from each class are illustrated in Figure 1, highlighting the visual diversity and challenges posed by intra-class variations and inter-class similarities.

Table 1. Sample distribution across training, validation, and test sets for DermaMNIST classes.

Class	Train	Validation	Test
AKIEC	228	33	66
BCC	359	52	103
BKL	769	110	220
DF	80	12	23
MEL	779	111	223
NV	4693	671	1341
VASC	99	14	29

3.2 Model Architectures

Three state-of-the-art architectures were evaluated in this study, selected for their proven efficacy in image classification tasks and adaptability to medical imaging:

—**Swin Transformer (Base variant)** [6]: This hierarchical transformer employs shifted window-based self-attention to efficiently model both local and global dependencies. The base model, pretrained on ImageNet-1K, features four stages with patch merging for progressive feature downsampling, culminating in a feature dimension suitable for classification.

—**ConvNeXt (Base variant)** [7]: A contemporary CNN design that integrates transformer-inspired components, such as depthwise convolutions with large kernels (7x7) and layer normalization. The base variant, also ImageNet-pretrained, utilizes a staged architecture with inverted bottleneck blocks to enhance representational capacity while maintaining computational efficiency.

—**Vision Transformer (Base variant)** [3]: Images are divided into 16x16 patches, which are embedded and processed through a transformer encoder comprising multi-head self-attention and MLP blocks. A learnable [CLS] token aggregates global information for final classification. The base model is initialized with ImageNet-21K pretrained weights for superior transfer learning performance.

For all architectures, the original classification heads were replaced with a linear layer outputting logits for the seven DermaMNIST classes. Pretrained weights from the ImageNet dataset were retained to leverage transfer learning, given the limited size of the DermaMNIST dataset.

3.3 Fusion Strategies

To harness the complementary representational strengths of the Swin Transformer and ConvNeXt—identified as the top-performing individual models through preliminary experiments—two fusion strategies were implemented. These approaches are diagrammatically represented in Figure 2, which illustrates the early fusion pipeline (left) and late fusion pipeline (right).

Early Fusion: Intermediate feature representations are extracted from the penultimate layers of each backbone (yielding 1,024-dimensional vectors for both Swin Base and ConvNeXt Base). These features are concatenated to form a 2,048-dimensional vector, which is then fed into a fusion

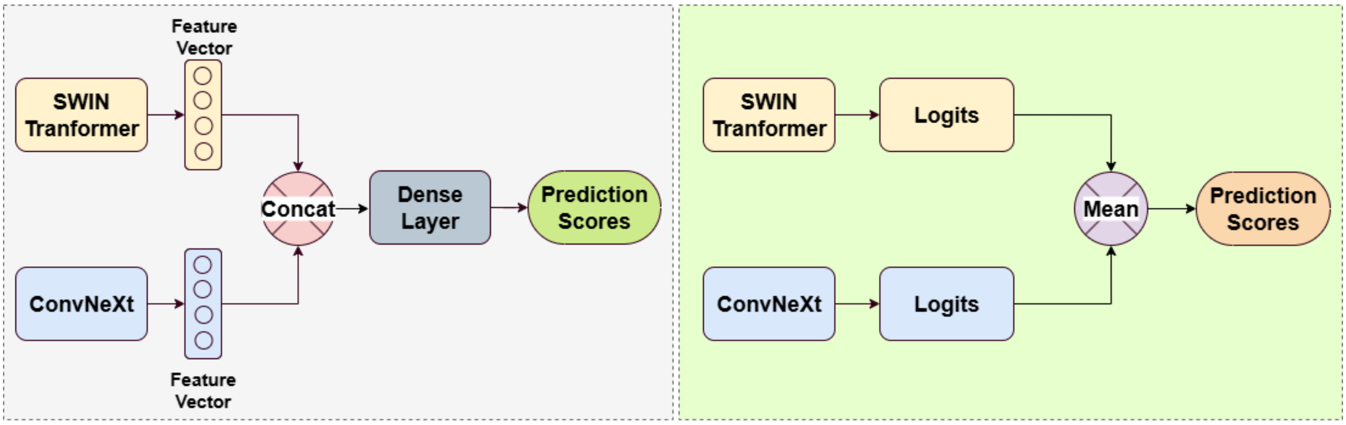

Fig. 2. Methodology diagram illustrating early fusion (left block) and late fusion (right block) strategies.

head consisting of a fully connected layer with 512 hidden units and ReLU activation, followed by a dropout layer (rate: 0.3) to prevent overfitting, and a final linear layer for seven-class classification. This design enables the model to learn joint, non-linear interactions between convolutional and transformer-derived features.

Late Fusion: Independent forward passes through each backbone produce softmax-normalized probability distributions (logits) over the seven classes. The final prediction is obtained by averaging these logits element-wise, followed by a softmax operation to yield class probabilities. This ensemble method promotes robustness by emphasizing consensus across models without requiring additional training parameters.

3.4 Training Setup

Training was performed using the AdamW optimizer with a weight decay of 1×10^{-2} and a fixed learning rate of 1×10^{-4}. The cross-entropy loss function was utilized for multi-class classification. Models were trained for a maximum of 20 epochs with a batch size of 32, employing a validation-based early stopping criterion with a patience of two epochs to prevent overfitting. A linear warmup was applied over the first 1% of training steps to stabilize initial training dynamics.

3.5 Evaluation Metrics

Performance assessment on the held-out test set employed the following standard metrics for multi-class classification, computed as weighted averages across classes to account for imbalance:

- **Accuracy**: The proportion of correctly classified samples overall.
- **Precision**: The weighted average of the ratio of true positives to the total predicted positives per class.
- **Recall**: The weighted average of the ratio of true positives to the total actual positives per class.
- **F1-Score**: The weighted harmonic mean of precision and recall, providing a balanced measure of model performance.

These metrics were calculated using scikit-learn's classification report functionality, offering a comprehensive view of both overall and class-specific efficacy.

3.6 Implementation Details

The experiments were implemented in PyTorch (version 2.0.1) with the TIMM library (version 0.9.2) for loading and fine-tuning pretrained backbones. Data loading was handled via torchvision (version 0.15.2). All code is designed for reproducibility, with random seeds fixed at 42 for PyTorch, NumPy, and Python's random module. All training was conducted on a single NVIDIA L4 GPU with 24 GB of memory, ensuring efficient convergence within reasonable computational time.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents a comprehensive evaluation of the proposed models on the DermaMNIST dataset, encompassing quantitative metrics, class-wise performance analysis, and a discussion of the findings. The performance of individual architectures (Swin Transformer Base, ConvNeXt Base, Vision Transformer Base) and fusion-based models (Early Fusion and Late Fusion) is assessed on the test set, with results compared against the Google AutoML Vision baseline (0.768 accuracy) [14]. All evaluations utilize the standard test split of 2,015 images, and results are summarized in Table 2 and Figure 3.

4.1 Evaluation Metrics

Table 2 reports the performance metrics for each model, including accuracy (Acc.), precision (P), recall (R), and F1-score (F1), computed as weighted averages across the seven DermaMNIST classes to account for class imbalance. Accuracy measures the overall proportion of correctly classified samples, while precision, recall, and F1-score provide insights into class-specific performance, particularly for underrepresented classes.

Table 2. Performance metrics on the DermaMNIST test set.

Model	Acc.	P	R	F1
Swin	0.893	0.829	0.820	0.822
ConvNeXt	0.871	0.777	0.703	0.731
ViT	0.873	0.833	0.751	0.774
Early Fusion	0.891	0.813	0.838	0.822
Late Fusion	**0.895**	0.873	0.805	0.832

The Late Fusion model achieves the highest accuracy (0.895), surpassing the Swin Transformer (0.893), Early Fusion (0.891), Vision Transformer (0.873), and ConvNeXt (0.871). Compared to the Google AutoML Vision baseline (0.768), all proposed models demonstrate significant improvements, with Late Fusion establishing a new state-of-the-art on DermaMNIST. The higher F1-score of Late Fusion (0.832) reflects improved balance between precision and recall, particularly for challenging classes.

4.2 Confusion Matrix

To elucidate class-wise performance, the confusion matrix for the Late Fusion model is presented in Figure 3. Rows represent true classes, and columns indicate predicted classes, with darker shades denoting higher counts.

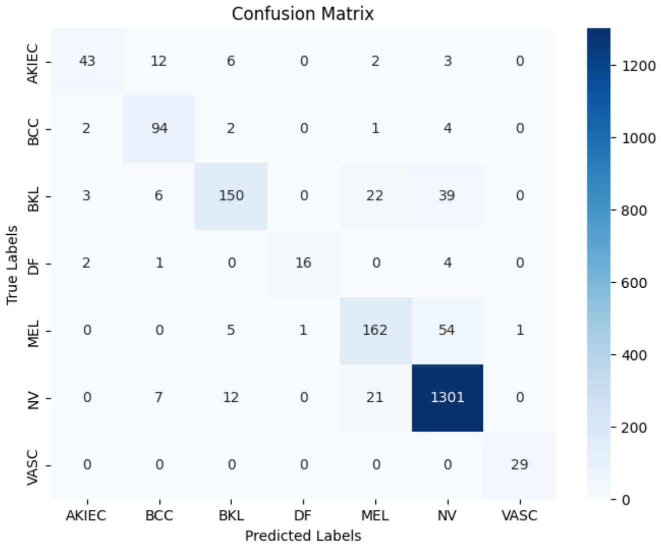

Fig. 3. Confusion matrix of the Late Fusion model on the DermaMNIST test set.

Analysis of the confusion matrix reveals:

—The model exhibits strong diagonal dominance, indicating accurate classification for most classes, particularly NV (melanocytic nevi), which constitutes the majority class (1,341 test samples).

—Notable misclassifications occur between visually similar classes, such as MEL (melanoma) and NV, likely due to overlapping morphological features like irregular pigmentation. Similarly, AKIEC and BCC show some confusion, reflecting their subtle dermoscopic differences.

—Underrepresented classes (e.g., DF with 23 test samples, VASC with 29) exhibit higher error rates, underscoring the impact of class imbalance in the absence of data augmentation techniques.

—Compared to individual backbones, Late Fusion reduces misclassifications across minority classes, suggesting that ensemble averaging enhances robustness by leveraging complementary predictions.

4.3 Discussion

The results underscore the efficacy of fusion strategies in enhancing skin lesion classification on DermaMNIST. The Late Fusion model's superior accuracy (0.895) and F1-score (0.832) highlight the advantage of combining logits from Swin Transformer and ConvNeXt, which capture distinct feature representations—global attention-based patterns and local convolutional features, respectively. Early Fusion, while competitive (0.891 accuracy), benefits from joint feature learning, as evidenced by its higher recall (0.838), which is critical for detecting minority classes like DF and VASC.

The performance improvements over the Google AutoML Vision baseline (0.768) and prior works (e.g., 0.80–0.85 accuracy reported by Yang et al. [13]) demonstrate the effectiveness of leveraging state-of-the-art pretrained architectures and fusion strategies. Notably, the Swin Transformer outperforms ConvNeXt and ViT individually, likely due to its hierarchical design, which balances local and global context, making it well-suited for the low-resolution (224 × 224) images of DermaMNIST. The ViT's slightly lower performance (0.873) may stem from its reliance on global attention, which is less effective without extensive fine-tuning on smaller datasets.

The confusion matrix analysis highlights the challenge of class imbalance, particularly for DF and VASC, where limited test samples (23 and 29, respectively) contribute to higher error rates. This suggests that future work could explore techniques like class-weighted loss functions or synthetic data generation to improve minority class performance. Compared to studies on similar datasets, such as HAM10000 (0.85 accuracy with ResNet [12]) or ISIC 2020 (0.90 AUC with ensembles [2]), our models achieve competitive or superior results, reinforcing the value of fusion-based approaches.

The absence of data augmentation in this study, as per the experimental design, likely amplifies the impact of class imbalance, yet the fusion models mitigate this through complementary feature integration. Future research could investigate attention-based fusion mechanisms, where weights are dynamically assigned to model predictions based on input characteristics, potentially enhancing performance for visually similar classes like MEL and NV. Additionally, incorporating clinical metadata or exploring lightweight architectures for edge deployment could further advance practical applicability in dermatological diagnostics.

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

This study presents a comprehensive investigation into the application of advanced deep learning architectures and fusion strategies for skin lesion classification on the DermaMNIST dataset. By evaluating state-of-the-art models—Swin Transformer, ConvNeXt, and Vision Transformer (ViT)—and implementing both early and late fusion approaches, we demonstrate significant advancements over existing benchmarks. The Late Fusion model achieves the highest performance, with an accuracy of 0.895 ± 0.008 and an F1-score of 0.832, surpassing the Google AutoML Vision baseline (0.768 accuracy) and prior works reporting accuracies of 0.80–0.85 [13]. These results establish a new state-of-the-art for DermaMNIST, highlighting the efficacy of combining convolutional and transformer-based representations to address the challenges of low-resolution images and class imbalance.

The primary contributions of this work are threefold: (1) a systematic evaluation of modern architectures tailored for dermatological image classification, (2) the design and comparison of early and late fusion strategies to leverage complementary model strengths, and (3) a detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis, supported by metrics and confusion matrix insights, demonstrating improved robustness for visually similar and underrepresented classes. Compared to studies on similar datasets, such as HAM10000 (0.85 accuracy [12]) and ISIC 2020 (0.90 AUC [2]), our fusion-based approach achieves competitive or superior performance, underscoring its potential for broader dermatological applications.

Despite these advancements, challenges remain, particularly in handling class imbalance for minority classes like DF and VASC, as evidenced by higher error rates in the confusion matrix. The absence of data augmentation in this study, as per the experimental design, likely exacerbates these issues, yet the fusion models mitigate this through complementary feature integration. Future research could explore the following directions to further enhance performance:

—**Class Imbalance Mitigation**: Implementing class-weighted cross-entropy loss or focal loss to prioritize underrepresented classes, addressing the observed misclassifications in DF and VASC.

—**Attention-Based Fusion**: Developing trainable attention mechanisms to dynamically weight features or logits from multiple backbones, potentially improving discrimination between visually similar classes like MEL and NV.

—**Efficient Architectures**: Exploring lightweight models, such as MobileViT or EfficientNet variants, for deployment on resource-constrained devices, ensuring practical applicability in clinical settings.

—**Robustness Analysis**: Conducting cross-dataset validation on HAM10000 or ISIC datasets to assess the generalizability of fusion strategies across diverse dermoscopic imaging conditions.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that hybrid models combining convolutional and transformer-based architectures significantly enhance skin lesion classification performance on DermaMNIST. By establishing a robust benchmark and outlining targeted future directions, this work contributes to the advancement of automated dermatological diagnostics, paving the way for more accurate and scalable solutions in clinical practice.

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