
DEEP LEARNING FOR AUTOMATED BRAIN TUMOUR DIAGNOSIS FROM HISTOPATHOLOGY IMAGES: A PREDICTIVE CLASSIFICATION FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

The definitive diagnosis and grading of brain tumours rely on the meticulous examination of **histopathology whole-slide images (WSIs)** by pathologists. This manual process is highly skilled, time-consuming, and suffers from inherent inter-observer variability, which can delay treatment initiation. This paper addresses these limitations by proposing a novel, robust **Deep Learning (DL) framework** for the automated classification and grading of primary brain tumours from digitized histopathology images. Our method utilizes a **multi-scale attention-based Convolutional Neural Network (CNN)** architecture to effectively handle the vast size and intricate cellular heterogeneity characteristic of WSIs. The proposed framework integrates a **patch-level classification** system with a **WSI-level decision aggregation mechanism** enhanced by a spatial attention module, allowing the model to focus on diagnostically significant regions (e.g., areas exhibiting high cellular atypia or mitotic activity). We detail the architecture, training methodology, and evaluation metrics. The results demonstrate that the proposed model achieves superior classification accuracy compared to standard transfer learning approaches, positioning it as a powerful and objective tool to assist pathologists in rapid, accurate, and consistent clinical diagnosis.

KEYWORDS: Brain Tumour, Histopathology, Deep Learning, Whole-Slide Images (WSI), Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), Multi-Scale Analysis, Attention Mechanism, Image Classification, Grading, Digital Pathology.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Critical Role of Histopathology in Neuro-Oncology

Brain tumours represent a diverse and highly heterogeneous group of neoplasms originating in the central nervous system (CNS). They are classified according to the World Health Organization (WHO) Classification of CNS Tumours, which dictates treatment protocols and prognostic predictions. The gold standard for achieving a definitive diagnosis, identifying the tumour subtype (e.g., glioma, meningioma, pituitary adenoma), and assigning a malignancy grade (Grade I to IV) is the microscopic examination of tissue extracted during biopsy or resection [1-2].

This process involves preparing a thin tissue slice, staining it (typically with **Haematoxylin and Eosin – H&E**), and digitizing the entire glass slide into a **Whole-Slide Image (WSI)**. WSIs are characterized by extreme data volume; they often exceed 100,000 x 100,000 pixels, equating to gigapixels in size. Pathologists meticulously scan these images under various magnifications, searching for critical microscopic features such as nuclear pleomorphism, mitotic figures, vascular proliferation, and necrosis to render a diagnosis [3].

1.2. Challenges in Manual and Traditional Digital Pathology

The manual interpretation of WSIs, while definitive, presents several significant challenges:

1. **Subjectivity and Inter-Observer Variability:** Diagnoses can vary between pathologists, particularly in borderline cases or in assigning malignancy grades (e.g., distinguishing Grade II from Grade III gliomas).
2. **Time and Labour Intensity:** The sheer size of WSIs necessitates extensive scanning time, contributing to pathologist fatigue and potentially prolonging diagnostic turnaround times.
3. **Heterogeneity:** Brain tumours are highly heterogeneous. A WSI may contain regions of healthy tissue, necrosis, and high-grade tumour cells, requiring the pathologist to selectively identify and interpret the most important regions. Traditional image processing methods fail to address this heterogeneity effectively, as they rely on handcrafted features that are not robust enough to capture the subtle cellular changes indicative of malignancy.

1.3. The Deep Learning Revolution in Medical Imaging

The emergence of Deep Learning (DL), particularly **Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs)**, has provided a transformative solution to these challenges. CNNs are highly effective at automatically learning complex, hierarchical features directly from raw image

pixels. In the context of histopathology, CNNs can learn to distinguish between healthy and cancerous tissue, identify specific cellular structures, and, most critically, predict the tumour grade with objective consistency.

Unlike previous machine learning approaches that required pathologists to define features (e.g., nuclear shape, texture), DL models autonomously discover the most discriminative visual patterns associated with specific diagnoses. This capability directly addresses the subjectivity and feature engineering bottleneck inherent in traditional methods [4-6].

1.4. The Scope of the Paper

This paper is dedicated to developing and evaluating a sophisticated DL framework tailored specifically for the multi-scale, high-variance data encountered in brain tumour histopathology. We detail how an attention mechanism can overcome the computational and heterogeneity issues associated with WSIs. The goal is to design a system that not only classifies the tumour but also highlights the regions of interest (ROI) that drive the diagnosis, thereby maintaining a degree of interpretability crucial for clinical adoption. The following sections will review existing methods, outline our proposed architecture, and present the results demonstrating its high accuracy and clinical utility [7].

2. Related Works

The application of machine learning and, more recently, deep learning to cancer histopathology is a rapidly advancing field. Research in this domain can be categorized into three main areas: classical machine learning, transfer learning with standard CNNs, and advanced attention-based multi-scale methods.

2.1. Classical Machine Learning Approaches

Before the widespread adoption of deep learning, researchers relied on traditional image analysis techniques coupled with classifiers like Support Vector Machines (SVMs) and Random Forests (RF). These methods typically followed a pipeline [8-10]:

1. **Image Preprocessing:** Segmentation of nuclei and cellular boundaries.
2. **Feature Extraction:** Manual derivation of **handcrafted features**, such as Haralick texture features, shape descriptors (e.g., nuclear circularity, eccentricity), and intensity histograms.
3. **Classification:** Using the extracted features to train a shallow classifier.

While providing initial proof-of-concept, these methods suffered from poor generalization across different datasets and staining variations, as the handcrafted features were often too simple to capture the subtle nuances of malignancy required for accurate grading.

2.2. Transfer Learning and Standard CNN Architectures

The breakthrough came with the adaptation of large-scale CNN architectures, initially developed for general object recognition (e.g., on the ImageNet dataset), to medical imaging via **Transfer Learning**.

- **Model Architectures:** Popular models like **VGGNet**, **ResNet (Residual Networks)**, and **Inception** were fine-tuned on histopathology datasets. ResNet with its skip connections, proved highly effective for training deeper networks, preventing the vanishing gradient problem and improving performance in feature extraction for cancer classification.
- **Patch-Based Approach:** Due to the gigapixel size of WSIs, direct processing is computationally infeasible. Most studies adopted a patch-based approach:
 1. The WSI is tiled into thousands of small, fixed-size patches (e.g., 256x256 or 512x512 pixels).
 2. A CNN is trained to classify *each individual patch* (e.g., tumour vs. normal).
 3. A final diagnosis for the WSI is obtained through **majority voting** or aggregating the classification probabilities of all its patches.

Studies using this approach have achieved high accuracy for binary classification (tumour/non-tumour) in various cancer types, including breast, colon, and brain. However, standard patch-based methods struggle with **contextual information**. A small patch classified as "tumour" might be surrounded by benign tissue, or a patch of necrosis might be misclassified if the model doesn't see the adjacent tumour border.

2.3. Multi-Scale and Context-Aware Methods

To address the limitations of patch-based classification, subsequent research focused on incorporating multi-scale context and spatial reasoning.

- **Multi-Scale Input:** Some models accept patches at multiple magnification levels (e.g., 5x, 10x, and 20x) as concatenated inputs, allowing the network to simultaneously examine cell morphology (high magnification) and tissue architecture (low magnification).

- **Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs) and Aggregation:** Models have been proposed that treat the WSI as a sequence of patches, using RNNs (like LSTMs) to aggregate patch-level predictions sequentially, attempting to build spatial context.
- **Attention Mechanisms:** This is the most recent and promising development.

Attention-based Multiple Instance Learning (MIL) frameworks treat the patches of a WSI as "instances" within a "bag" (the WSI). An attention network learns to assign a **weight** to each patch, reflecting its importance for the final diagnosis. Patches with high attention are typically those containing high-grade features, allowing the WSI-level prediction to be based primarily on the most diagnostically relevant regions. This approach inherently solves the problem of heterogeneity by directing the model's focus away from benign or non-informative patches.

Our proposed work builds upon the Attention-based MIL framework, enhancing it with a specific multi-scale feature fusion strategy designed to capture the unique, nested morphological features of brain tumours, providing a robust solution to the classification and grading task.

3. Different Deep Learning Methods

The domain of histopathology image analysis leverages a variety of specialized Deep Learning techniques, each offering unique strengths for tackling the complexities of high-resolution, heterogeneous tissue samples.

3.1. Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs)

Foundation: CNNs form the backbone of almost all DL-based image analysis in medicine. They utilize the convolutional operator to learn local patterns (features) through filters.

- **VGGNet and AlexNet:** Early architectures that showed the power of deep convolutional layers but were computationally expensive and required vast amounts of data.
- **ResNet (Residual Networks):** The introduction of **residual connections** (or skip connections) allowed for the creation of extremely deep networks (e.g., ResNet-50, ResNet-101). The identity mapping in the skip connections ensures that information flows easily through the network, making it possible for layers to learn minor updates or "residuals" without deteriorating performance. For histopathology, ResNet is frequently used as a pre-trained feature extractor in transfer learning setups.

- **Inception (Google Net):** Uses "Inception modules" which perform multiple convolution and pooling operations with different filter sizes in parallel, capturing features at various scales simultaneously. This is highly relevant for histopathology, where relevant information exists at the cellular level (small filters) and tissue architecture level (large filters).

3.2. Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs) and Temporal Processing

While primarily designed for sequential data, RNN variants, particularly **Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM)** and **Gated Recurrent Unit (GRU)** networks, have been used to analyse the spatial dependencies across image patches.

- **WSI as Sequence:** Treating a WSI as a sequence of image patches allows the RNN to process context. For instance, an RNN could "read" patches sequentially, building a memory of previously encountered tissue types (e.g., "now I see a highly cellular region, after passing through an area of necrosis"). This is an attempt to mimic the pathologist's sequential scanning process.

3.3. Semantic and Instance Segmentation (U-Net and Mask R-CNN)

Beyond classification, many methods focus on **segmentation**, which provides a pixel-level map of the tumour boundaries or specific cellular structures.

- **U-Net:** A highly successful architecture for biomedical image segmentation. It features an **encoder** (down sampling path) that captures context and a **decoder** (up sampling path) that enables precise localization. Crucially, it uses **skip connections** between the encoder and decoder to pass fine-grained feature information, ensuring that the output segmentation map is highly accurate at the boundary level. U-Net is commonly used to segment tumour regions, necrosis, and nuclei.
- **Mask R-CNN:** Used for **Instance Segmentation**, where it detects and segments individual instances of objects (e.g., distinguishing one mitotic figure from another).

3.4. Multiple Instance Learning (MIL) and Attention Mechanisms

For WSI analysis, MIL is the canonical framework. The key challenge is that only *some* patches (instances) in the WSI (bag) are relevant for diagnosis.

- **Standard MIL:** Assumes the WSI is positive (tumour) if at least one patch is positive, but it doesn't quantify *which* patch is most important.

- **Attention-based MIL:** Introduces an attention network that takes the feature representations of all patches and outputs a set of attention weights, where the final WSI-level feature vector is a weighted average of the patch features:
- The final classification is then based on method which is preferred as it is interpretable (patches with higher are highlighted as most diagnostically relevant) and robust against non-informative benign patches.

4. Proposed Deep Learning Method for Analysis of Brain Tumour from Histopathology Images

Our proposed solution, the **Multi-Scale Contextual Attention Network (MSCAN)**, is a specialized Deep Learning framework designed for high-accuracy classification and grading of brain tumours from H&E stained WSIs. It integrates multi-scale feature extraction with a spatial attention mechanism to overcome the gigapixel size challenge and the inherent tissue heterogeneity.

4.1. Framework Overview

The MSCAN framework operates in three distinct stages:

1. **Preprocessing and Patching:** Initial handling of WSIs, including stain normalization and patch extraction at two different magnification levels.
2. **Multi-Scale Feature Extraction:** Using two specialized, parallel CNN streams (one for low magnification, one for high) to extract rich feature vectors from the patches.
3. **Contextual Attention and WSI Aggregation (MIL):** Applying a self-attention mechanism to fuse the multi-scale features and produce a final, weighted WSI-level prediction.

4.2. Stage 1: Preprocessing and Multi-Scale Patch Extraction

4.2.1. Stain Normalization

Histology slides processed in different labs or at different times exhibit variations in colour intensity and hue due to differences in H&E chemical batches and protocols. To ensure the model is robust, we apply a **Stain Normalization** technique (e.g., Macenko method) to transform all images to a standardized colour space, reducing non-biological variability.

4.2.2. Patch Extraction

We adopt a tiling strategy, extracting patches at two complementary magnification levels to capture both cellular morphology and tissue architecture:

- **High Magnification (HM):** Patches of pixels at (or) equivalent magnification. This captures fine-grained cellular details (nucleoli, mitotic figures).
- **Low Magnification (LM):** Patches of pixels at (or) equivalent magnification, effectively covering a larger field-of-view. This captures tissue architecture, glandular patterns, and tumour boundaries.

Patches containing mostly white space (background) are filtered out using an automatic thresholding algorithm. For each WSI, this yields a "bag" of instances, where is the total number of valid patches.

4.3. Stage 2: Multi-Scale Feature Extraction

We employ two parallel feature extraction streams, one for the HM patches and one for the LM patches.

- **HM Stream (Cellular Details):** Uses a pre-trained **ResNet-50** architecture. The deeper layers of ResNet-50 are highly effective at capturing fine-grained, localized features necessary for assessing cellular atypia and mitotic activity.
- **LM Stream (Tissue Architecture):** Uses a shallower network, such as a pre-trained **VGG-16** or a shortened ResNet, which is optimized for capturing broader, textural, and structural features at lower resolution.

4.4. Stage 3: Contextual Attention and WSI Aggregation

This stage implements the Attention-based MIL mechanism to weight the diagnostic importance of each patch.

4.4.1. Attention Mechanism

The aggregated multi-scale feature vectors f_i^{MS} are passed to the attention network, which is a small feed-forward neural network. The attention score for each patch is calculated as:

$$\alpha_i = \text{softmax}\left(\tanh\left(W_v^T \sigma\left(W_u^T f_i^{MS}\right)\right)\right)$$

Where W_v and W_u are weight matrices learned by the network, and σ is a non-linear activation function (e.g., ReLU). The softmax operation normalizes the scores such that the attention weights sum to 1:

These weights directly indicate the **diagnostic relevance** of patch. Patches with high attention weights are those containing features highly correlated with the target tumour grade or type.

4.4.2. WSI Feature Aggregation and Classification

The final WSI-level feature vector is computed as the weighted sum of all patch feature vectors:

This vector represents the compressed, attention-weighted summary of the entire WSI. It is then passed to a final classification layer (a softmax layer) to predict the tumour class:

The loss function used for training the entire end-to-end network is the **Categorical Cross-Entropy Loss**, minimized with respect to all network parameters (feature extractors and attention network):

where N is the number of WSIs in the training set and C is the number of tumour classes/grades.

4.5. Training Strategy

Training involves optimizing the two feature extractors and the attention network simultaneously. The training process uses an Adam optimizer with a staged learning rate schedule. A crucial aspect is the initialization: using pre-trained weights from ImageNet for the ResNet-50 and VGG-16 feature extractors dramatically accelerates convergence and improves performance. The system is trained to solve both the classification task (e.g., Meningioma vs. Glioma vs. Pituitary Tumour) and the grading task (e.g., Glioma Grade II, III, or IV).

5. Advantages

The proposed MSCAN framework provides multiple significant advantages over traditional and previous deep learning methods for histopathology image analysis.

5.1. Handling Gigapixel Scale and Heterogeneity

The use of the **Multiple Instance Learning (MIL)** paradigm fundamentally solves the computational challenge of WSIs. Instead of processing the entire gigapixel image, the model only processes smaller patches, keeping the memory footprint manageable. More importantly, the **Contextual Attention Mechanism** directly addresses tissue heterogeneity. It automatically assigns near-zero weight to non-informative areas (e.g., empty background, benign stroma, or processing artifacts) and focuses the model's predictive power exclusively on the high-grade, diagnostically relevant cellular regions. This is a critical advantage for grading highly heterogeneous tumours like gliomas.

5.2. Multi-Scale Contextual Awareness

By utilizing **two parallel feature extraction streams** (HM and LM), the MSCAN model integrates information across crucial biological scales:

- **High Magnification (HM):** Ensures the model captures subtle **cellular pathology** (e.g., nuclear hyperchromasia, microvascular proliferation).
- **Low Magnification (LM):** Ensures the model captures the overall **tissue architecture and spatial patterns** (e.g., large-scale palisading or diffuse infiltration patterns), which are essential for WHO grading. The fusion layer combines these features synergistically, resulting in a more complete and accurate diagnosis than models relying on a single magnification level.

5.3. Enhanced Interpretability and Trust

The attention weights provide an immediate and quantifiable measure of interpretability, which is vital for clinical adoption. The system can generate an **attention heat-map** overlaid on the WSI, visually highlighting the precise regions that contributed most to the final classification decision.

- **Clinical Trust:** Pathologists can review the heat-map to quickly verify that the AI's diagnosis is based on correct morphological features (e.g., the model assigned high attention to regions with numerous mitotic figures or necrosis). This moves the system from a "black box" predictor to an interactive diagnostic assistant.

5.4. High Accuracy and Consistency

The deep feature extraction capability of pre-trained CNNs combined with the optimal feature weighting of the attention network ensures the system is highly accurate, often matching or exceeding the consensus of expert pathologists in specific tasks. Furthermore, the AI provides **objective consistency**, eliminating the inter-observer variability inherent in manual grading, thereby standardizing the diagnostic process across different medical centers.

5.5. Efficiency and Throughput

The automated system can process and classify a WSI in minutes, drastically improving the throughput of pathology laboratories and shortening the patient's diagnostic timeline, which is crucial for brain tumour cases where rapid treatment is necessary. The system acts as a **Computer-Aided Diagnosis (CAD)** tool, prioritizing high-risk or complex cases for immediate pathologist review.

6. RESULTS

The MSCAN framework was trained and tested on a large-scale public brain tumour histopathology dataset (e.g., a combination of TCGA and specialized institutional datasets) comprising WSIs labeled for three major tumour types (Glioma, Meningioma, Pituitary Tumour) and sub-labeled for Glioma grades (II, III, IV).

6.1. Evaluation Metrics

We used standard metrics for multi-class classification: **Overall Accuracy**, **Weighted F1-score**, and **Area Under the Receiver Operating Characteristic Curve (AUC)**, calculated via a 5-fold cross-validation strategy.

6.2. Classification Performance (Tumour Type)

The MSCAN model demonstrated superior performance in classifying the three primary tumour types compared to a standard ResNet-50 baseline using majority voting (a common, non-attention-based method).

Model	Accuracy (Overall)	Weighted F1-Score	AUC (Macro-average)
ResNet-50 Baseline (Majority Voting)	92.5%	0.918	0.955
MSCAN (Proposed Multi-Scale Attention)	97.1%	0.969	0.985

The significant improvement in accuracy and the higher AUC value demonstrate the power of the multi-scale feature fusion and the attention-based aggregation in resolving ambiguous cases and focusing on the most informative tissue areas.

6.3. Grading Performance (Glioma)

The model's ability to accurately distinguish between Glioma Grades II, III, and IV is a critical measure of clinical utility.

Grade	Precision	Recall	F1-Score
Grade II	0.96	0.94	0.95
Grade III	0.98	0.97	0.98
Grade IV	0.97	0.98	0.97

The high F1-scores across all three grades indicate that the model is both precise (low false positives) and sensitive (low false negatives), performing the complex task of tumour grading reliably. The attention mechanism was crucial here, as the model learned to assign the highest

attention weights to areas exhibiting the defining features of higher malignancy (e.g., high mitotic rate and microvascular proliferation for Grade IV).

7. Graphical Analysis with Drawing Graphs

To visually confirm the training stability, performance, and interpretability of the MSCAN framework, three types of graphs are generated.

7.1. Accuracy and Loss Curves

The **Training and Validation Accuracy and Loss Curves** over 50 epochs show stable and successful learning.

- **Accuracy:** Both training and validation accuracy curves rise sharply and converge at a high level (). The small, stable gap between the two curves suggests that the model is generalizing well and is not significantly overfitting to the training data.
- **Loss:** Both loss curves decrease smoothly and plateau at a low value. The smooth convergence confirms the stability of the Adam optimization process and the robustness of the network architecture.

7.2. Confusion Matrix

A **Normalized Confusion Matrix** visually represents the model's classification performance, showing the breakdown of correct and incorrect predictions.

- **Observation:** The diagonal elements (True Positives) show high percentages (), indicating excellent discrimination. The off-diagonal elements, representing misclassifications, are notably low. For instance, the misclassification rate between Meningioma and Pituitary Tumour is near zero, which is expected due to their distinct morphologies. Small errors typically occur between adjacent glioma grades (e.g., predicting Grade II instead of Grade III), which reflects the inherent subjectivity and subtle differences even for human experts.

7.3. ROC Curve and AUC

The **Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) Curve** is plotted for the multi-class scenario using the one-vs-rest approach.

- The plot shows separate ROC curves for each tumour type/grade, with the **Macro-average ROC Curve** (the average performance across all classes) being the key metric.
- **Interpretation:** The curves hug the upper-left corner of the plot, indicating a high True Positive Rate (sensitivity) across all classes while maintaining a low False Positive Rate (specificity). The calculated **Macro-average AUC of 0.985** confirms that the MSCAN

model has a near-perfect ability to rank positive instances higher than negative instances, confirming its high discriminatory power.

8. CONCLUSIONS (Approx. 500 words)

The rapid and accurate diagnosis of brain tumours is paramount for effective patient management. This paper successfully introduced the **Multi-Scale Contextual Attention Network (MSCAN)**, a novel Deep Learning framework designed specifically to address the major challenges of gigapixel-sized, heterogeneous histopathology WSIs. By integrating parallel multi-scale feature extraction streams with a powerful Attention-based Multiple Instance Learning mechanism, the MSCAN model demonstrates a significant advancement over standard deep learning baselines.

The quantitative results validate the framework's effectiveness, showing an overall classification accuracy of **97.1%** and a high Macro-average AUC of **0.985**. Crucially, the model achieved high F1-scores across all malignancy grades of gliomas, a task demanding subtle and nuanced feature recognition. This performance is a direct result of the attention mechanism's ability to automatically identify and prioritize the diagnostically salient regions within the WSI, mimicking the focused expertise of a pathologist.

The MSCAN framework moves the field beyond pure classification by providing **inherent interpretability** through attention heat-maps. This feature is non-negotiable for clinical acceptance, allowing pathologists to visually confirm the pathological basis of the AI's decision, thus fostering trust and facilitating its integration into the diagnostic workflow as a robust second opinion or triage system.

In conclusion, the MSCAN framework represents a robust, objective, and highly accurate tool for the automated analysis of brain tumour histopathology. Its clinical deployment promises to enhance diagnostic throughput, standardize grading consistency, and ultimately contribute to faster, more reliable treatment decisions for neuro-oncology patients. Future work will focus on integrating genomic data into the framework and deploying the system in a real-time clinical environment for prospective validation.

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