An Optimized Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) For Malaria Parasite Detection in Blood Smear Images

Aishatu Hassan Jibril[1], Dr. Habeebah Adamu Kakudi[*1], Dr. Hadizah Umar[1], Ibrahim Abba[2],
Mohammed Shettima[2], Dr Hafsat Kabir[1]
Department of Computer Science, Faculty of Computing, Bayero University, Kano. Nigeria[1].
Department of Computer Science, School of Computer Science, Mai Idris Alooma Polytechnic Geidam
Yobe state. Nigeria [2]
[*]Corresponding author: hakakudi.cs@buk.edu.ng

ABSTRACT-*Malaria remains a leading cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide, and accurate detection of the malaria parasite in blood smear images is essential for timely diagnosis and treatment, especially in resource-limited settings. This research develops an optimized Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) model for malaria parasite detection, employing Bayesian optimization to fine-tune hyperparameters like learning rate, batch size, dropout rate, and filter sizes for improved performance and computational efficiency. The model is evaluated against pre-trained models (VGG19, ResNet50, and EfficientNet) using metrics such as accuracy, precision, recall, F1 score, specificity, inference time, and memory usage. Results show that the optimized CNN achieved 99% accuracy, with precision and recall of 98.1% and 98.2%, respectively, and reduced inference time to 0.001 seconds per image, outperforming VGG19 and ResNet50 and achieving comparable performance to EfficientNet with lower computational demands. These findings highlight the potential of optimized CNNs for malaria detection in low-resource environments, offering a promising solution for timely and cost-effective diagnosis. Future work may focus on further optimizations and expanding the model's applicability to other diseases.*

INDEX TERMS- *Malaria diagnosis, Deep Learning, Hyperparameter optimization, Bayesian optimization, Transfer learning, Computational efficiency.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Malaria continues to pose a significant global health burden, particularly in tropical and subtropical regions, where it causes over 240 million cases and approximately 627,000 deaths annually (WHO, 2022). Timely and accurate diagnosis is critical in mitigating its impact, yet conventional diagnostic methods such as microscopy and rapid diagnostic tests (RDTs) are often constrained by variability in accuracy, operator dependence, and limited applicability in resource-constrained environments (Mendis et al., 2009; Das et al., 2015). These challenges necessitate the development of automated and robust diagnostic solutions.

Artificial intelligence (AI), particularly deep learning, has demonstrated immense potential in medical image analysis. Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) have emerged as powerful tools for automating diagnostic tasks, including the detection of malaria parasites in blood smear images (LeCun et al., 2015; Litjens et al., 2017). Despite their success, the practical deployment of CNNs in low-resource settings is hindered by high computational demands, long inference times, and suboptimal generalization when applied to domain-specific tasks (Rajaraman et al., 2018). These challenges underscore the importance of optimization to enhance both diagnostic accuracy and computational efficiency.

Optimization plays a pivotal role in refining deep learning models for specific applications, ensuring that they meet performance and efficiency requirements. Techniques such as Bayesian optimization offer systematic ways to tune hyperparameters, significantly improving model performance while minimizing manual effort (Snoek et al., 2012; Shahriari et al., 2016). By integrating such advanced methodologies, this study aims to address the dual challenge of achieving high diagnostic accuracy and computational efficiency, a critical factor for deploying AI-driven solutions in resource-limited environments.

This work contributes to the field by developing a custom CNN architecture tailored for malaria parasite detection in blood smear images. The proposed model is optimized using Bayesian hyperparameter optimization and enhanced with transfer learning to leverage pre-trained knowledge from established architectures such as VGG19, ResNet50, and EfficientNet. Key contributions of this study include:

1. A custom CNN design incorporating techniques like dropout, batch normalization, and ReLU activation to balance accuracy and computational efficiency.
2. Rigorous hyperparameter optimization, including learning rate, batch size, and dropout rate, to achieve optimal model performance.
3. A comparative analysis of the custom model's performance against state-of-the-art pre-trained models in terms of accuracy, sensitivity, specificity, inference time, and memory usage.
4. Demonstration of the model's applicability in resource-constrained settings through extensive evaluation of computational metrics.

The outcomes of this research not only advance the domain of automated malaria diagnostics but also provide a scalable and efficient framework for deploying AI solutions in low-resource healthcare settings. By addressing critical gaps in current diagnostic methods, this study paves the way for a broader adoption of AI in global health interventions.

II. RELATED WORKS

1. Malaria Diagnosis: Traditional Methods and Limitations

The global burden of malaria remains a significant public health challenge, particularly in resource-limited settings. Traditional diagnostic methods, such as microscopic examination of blood smears and rapid diagnostic tests (RDTs), are widely employed but have notable limitations. These include variability in accuracy, dependency on skilled personnel, and their unsuitability for large-scale screening in under-resourced areas (Das et al., 2015; Poostchi et al., 2018). These limitations have catalyzed the development of automated diagnostic tools that leverage advancements in machine learning and deep learning technologies.

2. Deep Learning in Malaria Detection

Deep learning, specifically Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), has significantly impacted medical image analysis, achieving state-of-the-art performance in tasks such as disease classification and segmentation. In the context of malaria detection, several studies have applied CNNs to classify parasitized and non-parasitized cells, yielding high diagnostic accuracy. For example, Rajaraman et al. (2018) used a deep CNN model to analyze blood smear images, achieving exceptional performance. Similarly, Gopakumar et al. (2018) proposed a transfer learning-based approach that outperformed traditional methods. However, the computational demands of these deep learning models remain a challenge, limiting their scalability and deployment in resource-constrained environments.

3. Transfer Learning in Medical Image Classification

Transfer learning has been increasingly used to address the data scarcity problem in medical image classification. By reusing pre-trained models such as VGG19, ResNet50, and EfficientNet, researchers have successfully applied deep learning techniques to medical tasks without requiring large, annotated datasets. Esteva et al. (2017) demonstrated the utility of pre-trained models in skin cancer classification, and studies like Rajaraman et al. (2018) adapted this concept for malaria detection. While these approaches offer significant advantages, they often require extensive fine-tuning, and face challenges like overfitting, particularly when applied to smaller datasets.

4. Hyperparameter Optimization for CNN Models

Optimizing CNN architectures to balance diagnostic accuracy and computational efficiency is a critical area of research. Hyperparameter optimization methods, such as Bayesian optimization, have emerged as effective strategies to improve model performance. Snoek et al. (2012) demonstrated the potential of Bayesian optimization in hyperparameter tuning, and Shahriari et al. (2016) emphasized its advantages over traditional methods like grid search and random search. In the context of malaria detection, hyperparameter optimization is crucial, as it allows the model to operate efficiently while achieving high accuracy, making it suitable for real-time deployment in resource-constrained settings.

5. Custom vs. Pre-Trained Models in Malaria Detection

Despite the successes of transfer learning and pre-trained models, few studies have comprehensively evaluated the trade-offs between custom CNN models and pre-trained architectures in both diagnostic and computational performance. Custom CNN architectures can be tailored specifically to malaria detection tasks but often require significant effort in design and optimization. Pre-trained models, while offering generalized features, tend to be resource-intensive, making them less practical for deployment in low-resource environments. This study seeks to fill this gap by presenting an optimized custom CNN architecture tailored to malaria detection in blood smear images.

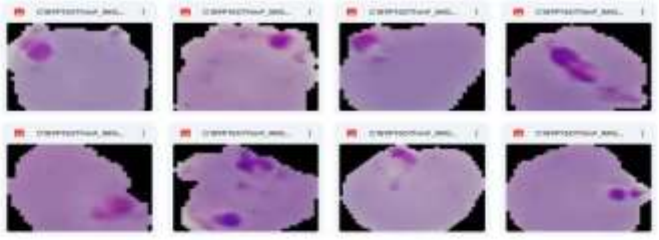
6. Contribution of the Current Study

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by presenting an optimized CNN model specifically designed for malaria detection in blood smear images. The proposed model aims to strike a balance between high diagnostic accuracy and computational efficiency, addressing the need for solutions that are both effective and suitable for resource-limited settings. Furthermore, the study evaluates the performance of the proposed model against widely used pre-trained architectures, providing insights into the practicality and trade-offs of using custom-designed models over pre-trained solutions.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. Dataset Description

This study utilizes a publicly available dataset of digitized microscopic blood smear images for malaria parasite detection. The dataset comprises two classes: *infected* and *uninfected* as shown in figure 1. To ensure consistency and compatibility with the proposed model, all images were resized to 128×128 pixels. Data preprocessing included normalization to standardize pixel intensity values and data augmentation techniques such as flipping, rotation, and brightness adjustments. These steps aimed to enhance the robustness of the model and reduce overfitting by diversifying the dataset.



Parasitized image

Uninfected images

Figure 1 Microscopic view of thin blood smear images

2. Data splitting

Figure 2 shows how the dataset was divided into three subsets: training (70%), validation (15%), and testing (15%). The training set was used for model learning, the validation set for hyperparameter tuning and early stopping, and the testing set for final performance evaluation.

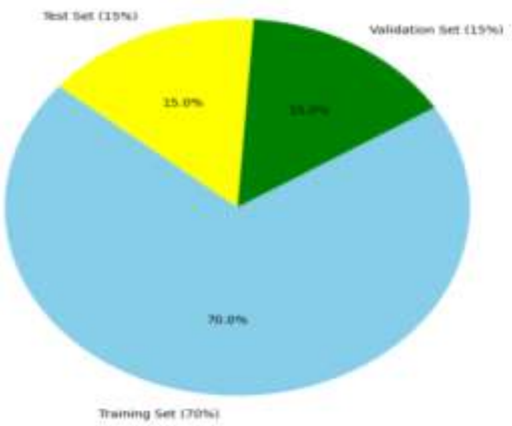
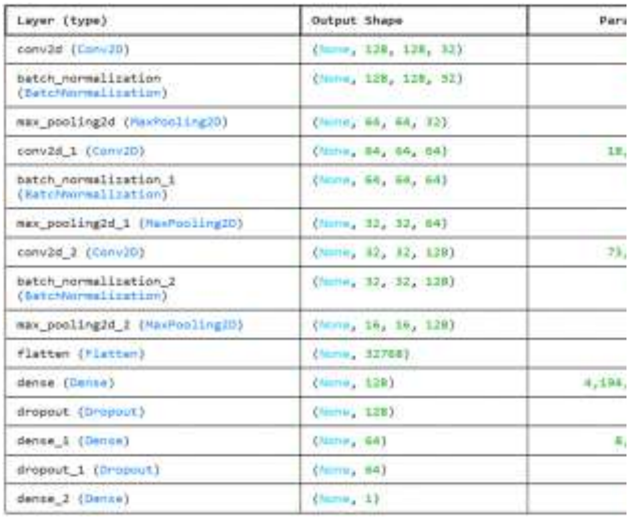


Figure 2 Dataset split for training, testing and validation

3. Proposed Model Architecture

A custom Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) was developed to efficiently and accurately detect malaria parasites in blood smear images.



Layer (type)	Output Shape	Para
conv2d (Conv2D)	(None, 128, 128, 32)	
batch_normalization (BatchNormalization)	(None, 128, 128, 32)	
max_pooling2d (MaxPooling2D)	(None, 64, 64, 32)	
conv2d_1 (Conv2D)	(None, 64, 64, 64)	18,
batch_normalization_1 (BatchNormalization)	(None, 64, 64, 64)	
max_pooling2d_1 (MaxPooling2D)	(None, 32, 32, 64)	
conv2d_2 (Conv2D)	(None, 32, 32, 128)	73,
batch_normalization_2 (BatchNormalization)	(None, 32, 32, 128)	
max_pooling2d_2 (MaxPooling2D)	(None, 16, 16, 128)	
flatten (Flatten)	(None, 32768)	
dense (Dense)	(None, 128)	4,194,
dropout (Dropout)	(None, 128)	
dense_1 (Dense)	(None, 64)	8,
dropout_1 (Dropout)	(None, 64)	
dense_2 (Dense)	(None, 1)	

Figure 3 Summary of layer dimensions

The structure in figure 3 shows the sequential layers of the proposed Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) for malaria parasite detection. The model consists of three convolutional blocks, each followed by batch normalization and max pooling, and two dense layers for classification. Dropout layers are added for regularization. The total trainable parameters are Approximately 4.3 million.

The model architecture includes:

- **Input Layer:** Handles input images with dimensions 128×128×3.
- **Feature Extraction Layers:** Three convolutional layers, each followed by batch normalization, ReLU activation functions, and max pooling layers. These layers extract hierarchical features critical for malaria detection.
- **Flattening Layer:** Converts the 2D feature maps into a 1D vector for subsequent fully connected layers.
- **Fully Connected Layers:** Two dense layers, each activated by ReLU, and regularized using dropout with a rate of 0.5 to prevent overfitting.
- **Output Layer:** A single neuron with a sigmoid activation function for binary classification into *infected* or *uninfected* classes.

This architecture was designed to balance diagnostic accuracy with computational efficiency, facilitating its deployment in resource-constrained environments.

4. Optimization and Training

Hyperparameter optimization was conducted using Bayesian Optimization, targeting key parameters such as learning rate, batch size, dropout rate, number of convolutional filters, and activation functions. The model was trained using the Adam optimizer, with an initial learning rate of 0.001, and binary cross-entropy as the loss function. Training spanned 20 epochs, with early stopping implemented based on validation loss to prevent overfitting.

5. Performance Evaluation

The performance of the proposed model was evaluated using the following metrics:

- **Accuracy:** Overall proportion of correctly classified samples.
- **Precision and Recall:** To assess the model’s ability to correctly identify *infected* and *uninfected* samples, respectively.
- **F1-Score:** The harmonic mean of precision and recall.
- **Specificity:** The ability to correctly identify *uninfected* samples.
- **Inference Time and Memory Usage:** Metrics reflecting the model's computational efficiency during deployment.

6. Implementation Details

The model was implemented in Python using TensorFlow and Keras libraries. Training and evaluation were conducted on Google Colab, leveraging GPU acceleration for computational efficiency. All experiments adhered to reproducibility standards, with code and hyperparameter settings documented comprehensively.

7. Comparative Analysis

The proposed model was benchmarked against state-of-the-art pre-trained models, including VGG19, ResNet50, and EfficientNet. These pre-trained models were fine-tuned using the malaria dataset to ensure a fair comparison. Metrics such as accuracy, sensitivity, specificity, inference time, and memory usage were used to assess relative performance.

8. Ethical Considerations

The dataset used in this research was publicly available, and ethical guidelines for data usage were strictly followed. This study aims to advance healthcare technology while preserving patient privacy and data security.

IV. PERFORMANCE RESULTS

1. Bayesian Optimization and hyperparameter tuning

Bayesian optimization was used to tune key hyperparameters, resulting in the following optimal configuration:

- **Learning Rate:** 0.0001
- **Batch Size:** 32
- **Dropout Rate:** 0.3
- **Filter Sizes:** 32 for Layer 1 and 64 for Layer 2

This configuration optimized the balance between accuracy and computational efficiency, reducing overfitting and enhancing the model's generalization on unseen data. Improvements in performance were evident during training, as shown in the charts illustrating accuracy and loss trends across epochs in figure .

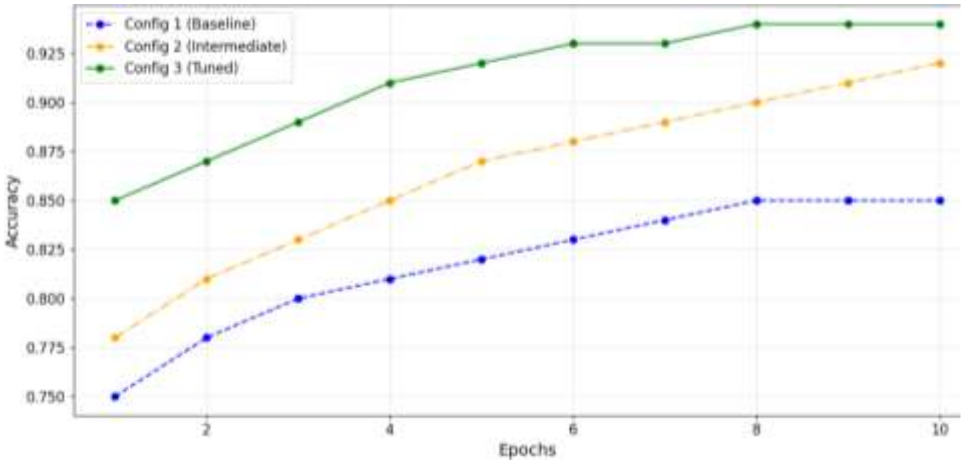


Figure 4 Model's accuracy across epochs during hyperparameter optimization

2. Training and Validation Performance

The model demonstrated consistent reductions in training and validation loss across epochs, reflecting successful error minimization between predictions and true labels. By the 20th epoch, both training and validation accuracy converged at **99%**, showcasing effective training and minimal overfitting. Regularization techniques such as dropout and batch normalization contributed to this performance.

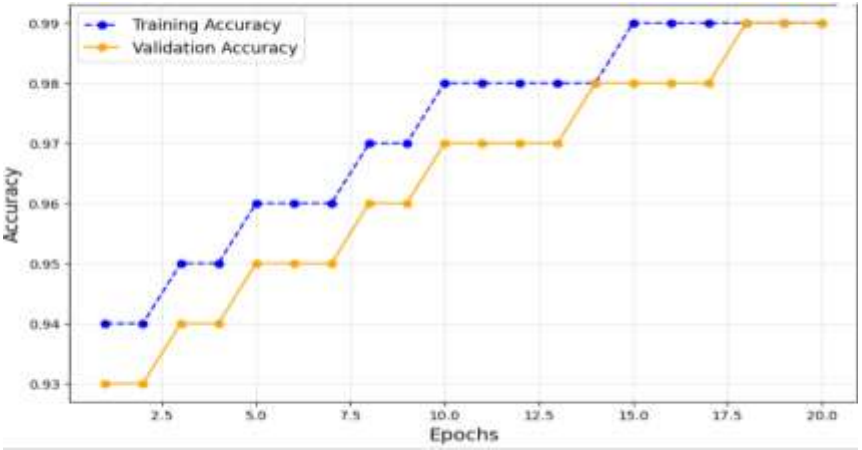


Figure 5 Training and validation accuracy

3. Evaluation Metrics

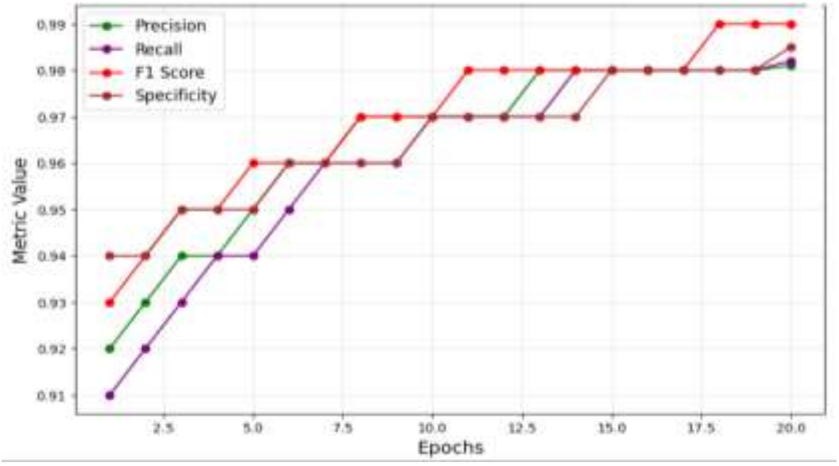
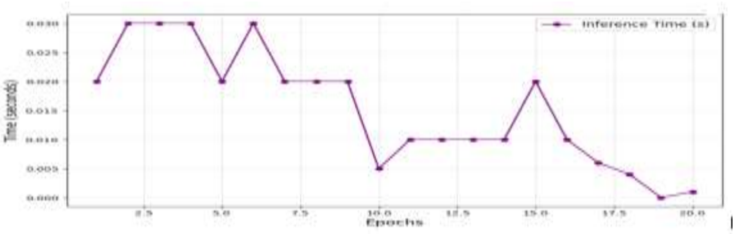


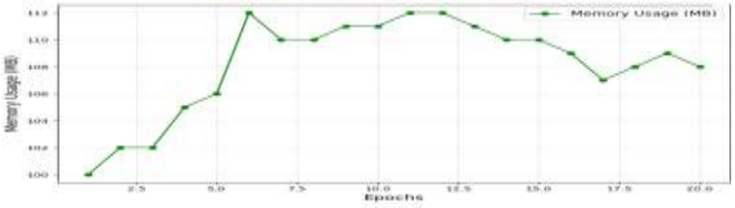
Figure 6 Result of evaluation metrics across epochs

- **Accuracy:** 99.0%
- **Precision:** 98.1%
- **Recall:** 98.2%
- **F1-Score:** 99.0%
- **Specificity:** 98.5%

These metrics confirm the model's ability to accurately classify malaria-infected and non-infected blood smear images. The high F1-score indicates a balanced trade-off between minimizing false positives and negatives, while high specificity reduces the chances of false alarms.



Inference time across epochs



Memory usage across epochs

Figure 7 Inference time and memory usage across epochs

4. Computational Efficiency

- **Inference Time:** 0.001 seconds per image
- **Memory Usage:** 108 MB

The optimized CNN achieved fast inference times and low memory usage, making it suitable for deployment in resource-constrained environments like rural clinics.

5. Comparative Analysis with Baseline Models

The optimized CNN was compared with VGG19, ResNet50, and EfficientNet across key metrics:

Table 1: Comparison table between metrics

Metric	Optimized CNN	VGG19	ResNet50	EfficientNet
Accuracy (%)	99.0	98.0	98.0	99.0
Precision (%)	98.1	98.0	97.9	98.0
Recall (%)	98.2	98.1	98.0	97.0
F1-Score (%)	99.0	98.0	98.0	99.0
Specificity (%)	98.5	98.0	99.0	98.0
Inference Time (s)	0.001	0.005	0.001	0.005
Memory Usage (MB)	108	100.89	130	110

- The optimized CNN achieved competitive performance, matching EfficientNet in accuracy and F1-score while surpassing it in recall and computational efficiency.
- The model tied with ResNet50 in inference speed but required significantly less memory.
- VGG19 had the lowest memory usage but underperformed in accuracy and recall compared to the optimized CNN.

V. Conclusions

The optimized CNN offers a robust solution for malaria parasite detection with the following advantages:

- High accuracy, precision, recall, and F1-score.
- Minimal overfitting, as demonstrated by close alignment of training and validation metrics.
- Exceptional computational efficiency, ensuring suitability for real-time deployment in resource-constrained settings.

This model surpasses pre-trained alternatives like VGG19 and ResNet50 in critical metrics, providing a reliable and efficient tool for automated malaria diagnosis.

The optimized CNN model is a robust and efficient solution for malaria detection, balancing high diagnostic accuracy with computational efficiency. Its performance meets the needs of automated diagnosis, offering a valuable tool for healthcare in resource-limited settings. This study highlights the potential of deep learning in tackling global health challenges while emphasizing the importance of ongoing refinement for real-world applications.

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