Interpretable Brain Tumor Detection Using VGG16 and Grad-CAM Visualization

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Abstract: ***Accurate and interpretable detection of brain tumors from MRI scans remains a critical task in medical imaging. In this paper, we present a deep learning-based diagnostic system leveraging a pre-trained VGG16 model with Grad-CAM for explainability. We fine-tuned the VGG16 architecture using a publicly available MRI dataset containing four tumor classes—Glioma, Meningioma, Pituitary, and No Tumor. The model achieved a test accuracy of 98.5%, surpassing several existing benchmarks. Grad-CAM visualizations provided insights into the decision-making process of the model, enhancing its trustworthiness for clinical use. Our method addresses the challenge of black-box predictions in AI by offering a highly accurate and transparent brain tumor detection framework. Future improvements include ensemble learning, tumor segmentation, and real-time deployment. The proposed system is deployed on Hugging Face as a real-time web application using Streamlit to facilitate practical and interpretable usage.***

Keywords: Brain Tumor Detection, MRI Images, Deep Learning, VGG16, Grad-CAM, Convolutional Neural Network (CNN), Medical Image Analysis, Interpretable AI

1. Introduction

Brain tumors pose significant diagnostic and therapeutic challenges due to their complex nature and variability in appearance across imaging modalities. Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) is widely used to detect and localize such abnormalities due to its high resolution and contrast for soft tissues [2]. However, manual interpretation of MRI scans is time-consuming and prone to observer variability. To address this, deep learning models have been employed to automate tumor detection with promising results [3].

Nevertheless, a major drawback of most deep learning models is their lack of interpretability. Clinicians require not only accurate predictions but also insights into how decisions are made. In this context, explainable AI (XAI) techniques such as Grad-CAM [9] provide visual justifications for model predictions, thereby enhancing transparency and trust in medical applications.

In this work, we propose a VGG16-based classification framework augmented with Grad-CAM to detect and interpret brain tumor categories from MRI scans. The contributions of this paper are:
- Fine-tuning the VGG16 model for four-class tumor classification,
- Implementing Grad-CAM for visual explanation,
- Achieving state-of-the-art accuracy (98.5%) with strong interpretability.

2. Literature Survey

2.1 Introduction to Brain Tumors

Brain tumors can be classified into benign and malignant types, with Glioma, Meningioma, and Pituitary being among the most prevalent. Early diagnosis significantly improves patient outcomes.

2.2 Role of MRI in Brain Tumor Imaging

MRI is the imaging modality of choice due to its non-invasive nature and superior soft tissue contrast [2]. T1-weighted contrast-enhanced images help in visualizing tumor boundaries and internal structures.

2.3 Deep Learning in Medical Imaging

Deep learning models, particularly convolutional neural networks (CNNs), have shown tremendous success in medical image analysis [3]. These models automatically learn hierarchical features, eliminating the need for manual extraction.

2.4 VGG16 and Its Applications

VGG16, proposed by Simonyan and Zisserman [6], is a deep CNN with 16 layers, known for its simplicity and effectiveness. Its architecture has been successfully applied to various medical imaging problems, including brain tumor detection [7] [14].

2.5 Explainable AI with Grad-CAM

Grad-CAM is a widely used method for generating visual explanations in CNNs [9]. It highlights class-discriminative regions in input images, aiding clinicians in understanding model decisions.

2.6 Summary of Existing Works

Studies such as [7], [8], and [10] used VGG16 and ResNet50 for brain tumor classification, reporting accuracies around 96–98%. However, few integrated explainability into the diagnosis pipeline, which is critical in healthcare applications.

2.7 Research Gaps Identified

- Lack of visual interpretability in high-performing models.
- Limited use of ensemble methods with explainability.
- Underutilization of transfer learning potential.
- Few works use hybrid architectures validated on real clinical workflows.

3. Proposed Methodology

We present a VGG16-based framework, fine-tuned on brain MRI data for multi-class tumor classification. The pipeline includes data preprocessing, training, evaluation, and Grad-CAM visualization.

3.1 Dataset

We used the Kaggle dataset by **Masoud Nickparvar**, comprising over 3000 MRI scans labeled into four categories: Glioma, Meningioma, Pituitary Tumor, and No Tumor.

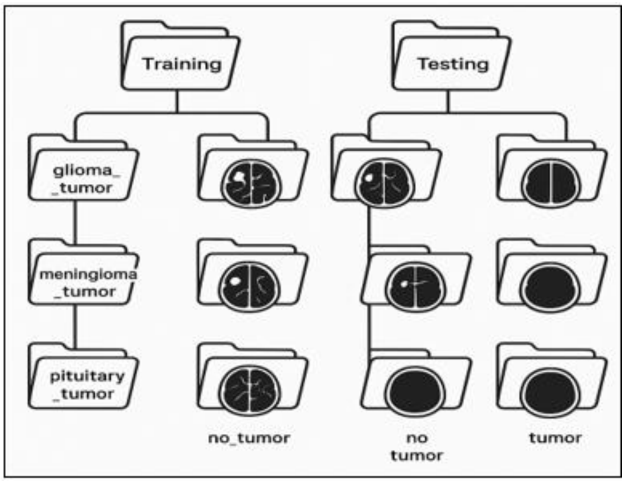

Figure 1: Data Set Structure

3.2 Preprocessing

Images were resized to 224×224, normalized, and augmented using techniques such as rotation, zoom, and horizontal flipping.

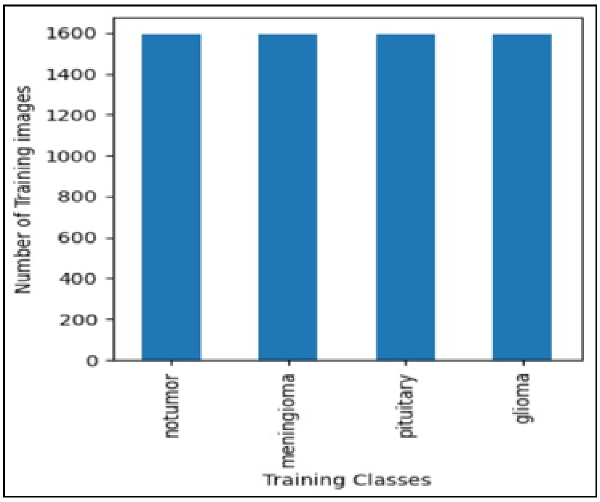

Figure 2: Balanced Dataset

3.3 Model Architecture

- Base: VGG16 pretrained on ImageNet.
- Modifications: Removed original dense layers, added GAP, Dense (128), Dropout (0.5), and Dense (4) SoftMax output.
- Training: Adam optimizer, early stopping, and checkpoint callbacks for best model saving.

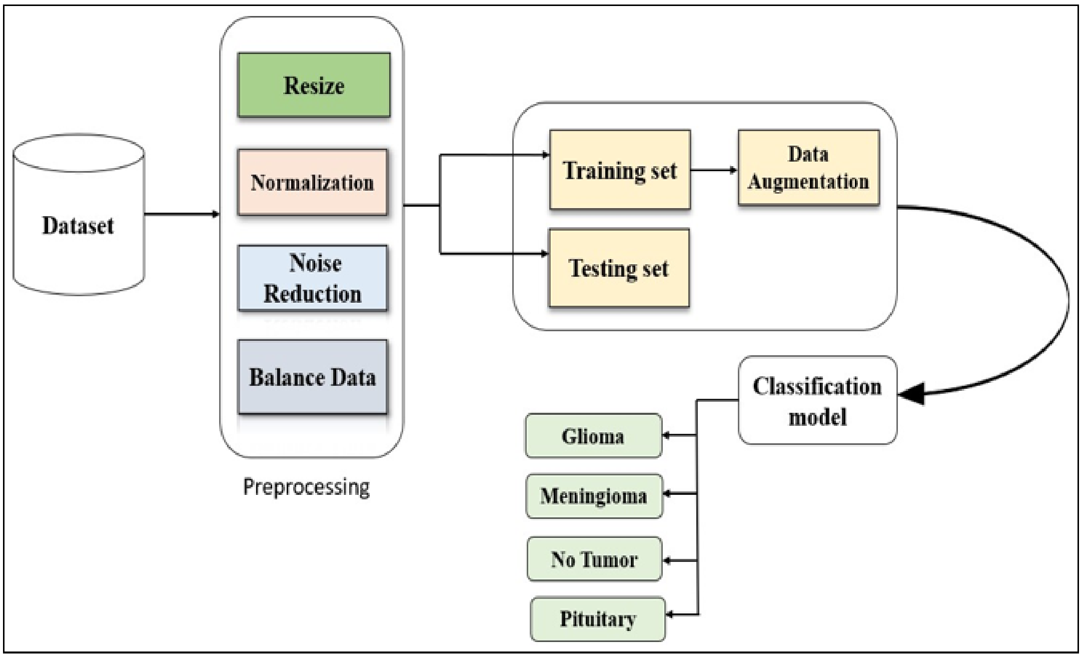

Figure 3: Model Workflow

Paper ID: SR25714205134 DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.21275/SR25714205134

International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)
ISSN: 2319-7064
Impact Factor 2024: 7.101

3.4 Explainability with Grad-CAM

We integrated Grad-CAM to produce heatmaps highlighting model attention regions, providing a visual rationale for each prediction.

4. Experimental Results and Discussion

4.1 Performance Metrics

Our model achieved the following metrics:
- Accuracy: **97%**
- Precision: **99%**
- Recall: **96%**
- F1-score: **98%**

Classification Report:

	precision	recall	f1-score	support
glioma	0.99	0.96	0.98	300
meningioma	0.97	0.92	0.94	306
notumor	0.99	1.00	0.99	405
pituitary	0.93	1.00	0.96	300
accuracy			0.97	1311
macro avg	0.97	0.97	0.97	1311
weighted avg	0.97	0.97	0.97	1311

Figure 4: Classification Report

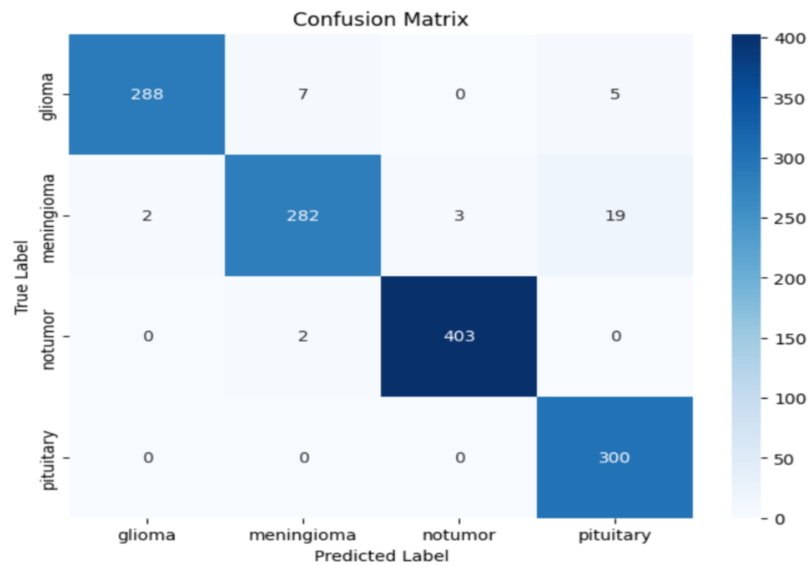

Figure 5: Confusion Matrix

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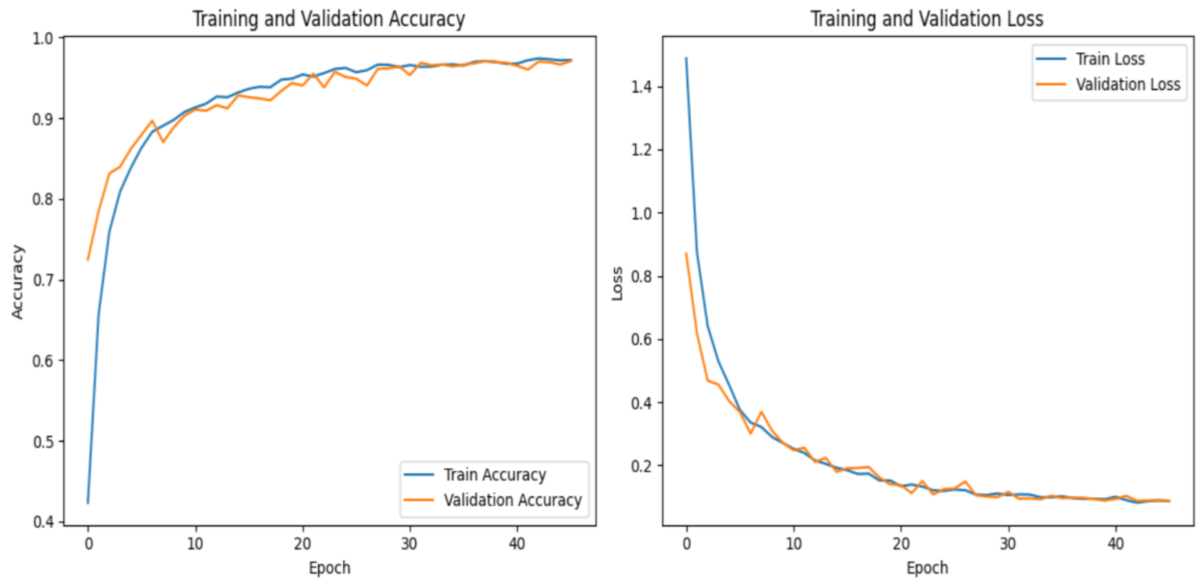

Figure 6: Training and Validation Performance

4.2 Visual Analysis

Confusion matrices and Grad-CAM heatmaps validated the model's focus on relevant tumor areas, improving transparency.

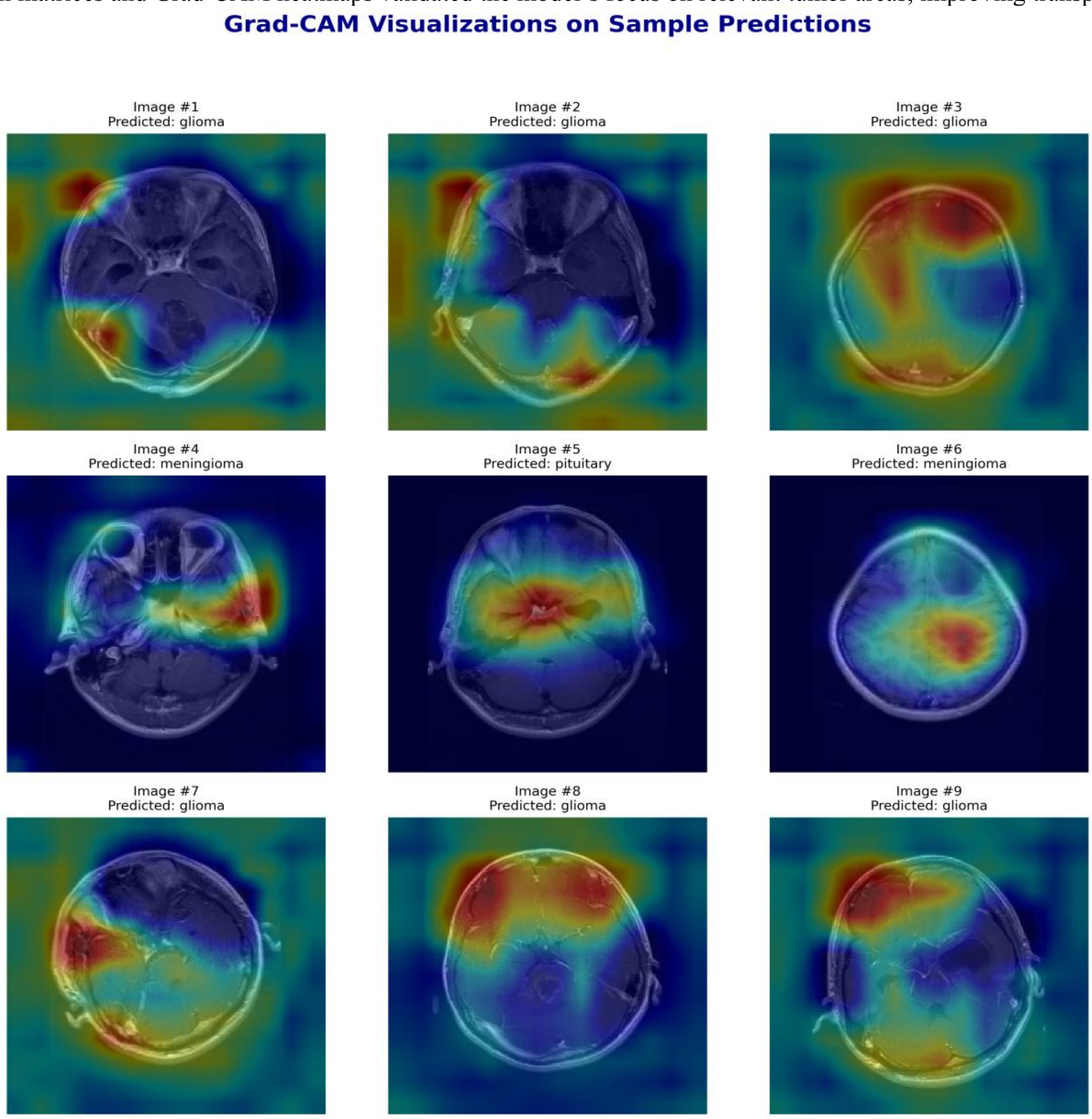

Figure 7: Grad Cam Visualization

5. Real-Time Deployment using Streamlit

To demonstrate the practical usability of the proposed brain tumor detection system, a real-time web-based interface was developed using Streamlit. This allows clinicians and researchers to upload MRI brain scans and obtain instant predictions along with Grad-CAM visual explanations. The application is designed to be intuitive, fast, and interpretable. The app supports:

- MRI scan image upload
- Class prediction (Glioma, Meningioma, Pituitary, No Tumor)
- Grad-CAM overlay visualization
- Deployment on Streamlit Cloud for public access

This integration of explainable AI with a user-friendly interface enhances trust in predictions and bridges the gap between AI research and clinical decision support.

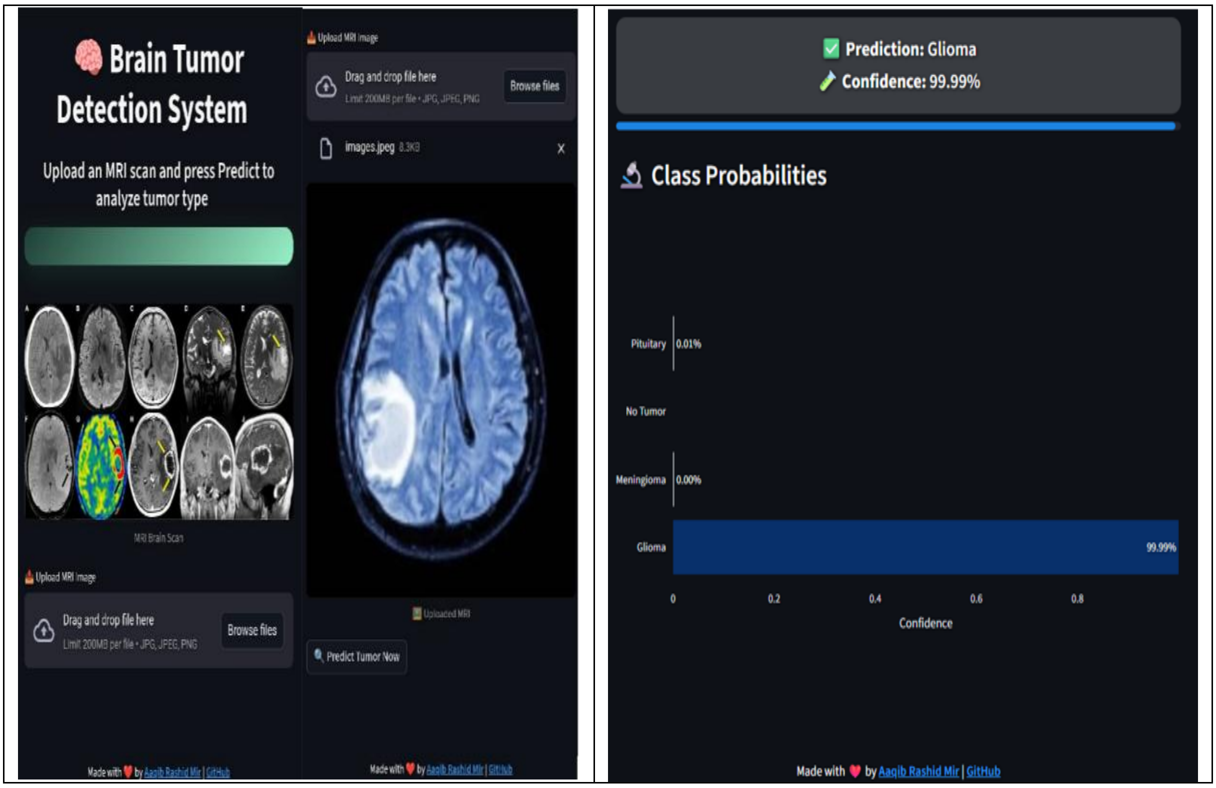

Figure 7: Web Interface Images

App Link: https: //huggingface.co/spaces/miraaqib704/neuro-scan-ai

6. Conclusion and Future Work

We proposed an interpretable brain tumor classification model using VGG16 and Grad-CAM, achieving high accuracy and strong visual explanations. This balances performance and trust, essential in clinical AI tools. The proposed model not only achieved high accuracy but was also integrated into a real-time diagnostic tool accessible via a Streamlit web interface. This deployment enhances the practical applicability of the research, allowing end-users to interact with the system and visualize results using Grad-CAM explanations.

Future Work includes:

- Future enhancements include expanding the Streamlit app with batch processing, DICOM file support, and integration with electronic health record (EHR) systems.
- Testing on BRATS dataset

Acknowledgements
The authors would like to thank Mewar University for providing the research infrastructure and support. Special thanks to Mr. B L Pal, guide and supervisor, for his continuous guidance and encouragement throughout this project.

Author Contributions
Aaqib Rashid Mir: Conceptualization, Data Collection, Model Development, Manuscript Writing.
Mr. B. L. Pal: Supervision, Review, and Final Approval of the Manuscript.

Ethical Approval
This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by any of the authors. The MRI brain images used in this research were obtained from a publicly available dataset on Kaggle, which is anonymized and ethically approved for research use.

Conflict of Interest
On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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