International Journal of Innovative Research in Technology and Science
ISSN: 2321-1156 www.ijirts.org Volume 12 Issue 3, May 2024

Bio-Inspired Feature Selection and Deep Neural Networks for Accurate Diabetes Prediction

Sangram Bahadur, Saurabh Mandloi
Department of Computer Science and Technology, SAM Global University
sangramdhurve96@gmail.com, saurabhm.research@gmail.com

Abstract: Accurate and early prediction of diabetes is critical for effective disease management and timely intervention. This study proposes a hybrid deep learning framework that integrates a bio-inspired feature selection technique with a deep neural network (DNN) classifier to enhance predictive performance. An improved Shuffled Frog Leaping Algorithm (SFLA) is employed to select the most informative features using a multi-objective fitness function combining classification accuracy and feature subset compactness. The optimised features are then input into a regularised DNN equipped with dropout layers and a softmax-based attention mechanism to improve generalisation and interpretability. Bayesian hyperparameter tuning and early stopping further refine the training process. The model is evaluated on the PIMA Indians Diabetes Dataset using stratified 10-fold cross-validation. The proposed method achieves 86.4% accuracy, 82.1% F1-score, and 0.91 AUC, outperforming traditional classifiers such as SVM, Random Forest, and standard DNNs. This approach provides a robust, scalable, and explainable framework for effective diabetes prediction in clinical environments.

Keywords- Diabetes Prediction, Deep Neural Networks (DNN), Shuffled Frog Leaping Algorithm (SFLA), Feature Selection, Bayesian Optimisation, Attention Mechanism

1. Introduction

Diabetes mellitus is a globally prevalent chronic metabolic disorder that significantly contributes to morbidity and mortality, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. As of 2017, the estimated number of people living with diabetes stood at 451 million, a figure projected to rise to 693 million by 2045, with nearly half remaining undiagnosed [4]. In the same year, global healthcare expenditures related to diabetes were reported to be approximately USD 850 billion [5]. These alarming statistics underline not only the clinical significance of early diagnosis but also the economic urgency of improving predictive capabilities in healthcare systems. Despite advancements in clinical diagnostics and biological research, traditional diabetes diagnosis relies heavily on manual interpretation by healthcare professionals, which is prone to variability and human error.

Additionally, the growing volume of health-related data collected via electronic health records (EHRs), wearable devices, and screening programs has created new opportunities to enhance medical decision-making using computational approaches. Predictive analytics, particularly through machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL), has emerged as a promising solution for automating and improving the accuracy of disease detection, including diabetes. Machine learning techniques such as Support Vector Machines (SVM), Decision Trees (DT), and Random Forests (RF) have been successfully employed in several clinical applications due to their ability to model non-linear relationships and handle diverse data types. In diabetes prediction, these models have demonstrated moderate success when applied to datasets with structured features such as glucose levels, BMI, age, and family history [1, 6]. However, traditional ML models often fall short in scalability and performance when dealing with high-dimensional, imbalanced, or noisy data, a common occurrence in medical datasets. To overcome these limitations, researchers have turned toward deep learning, particularly Deep Neural

Networks (DNNs), for their superior capacity to learn complex hierarchical patterns from raw data. DNNs have achieved state-of-the-art performance in a range of healthcare tasks, including image-based diagnostics, time-series analysis, and disease progression modelling [6].

Nevertheless, their high computational demands, sensitivity to overfitting, and lack of interpretability pose significant barriers to clinical deployment. A key challenge in using DNNs for medical diagnostics lies in the quality and relevance of input features. Many features in clinical datasets may be redundant, irrelevant, or noisy, reducing model performance and increasing training time. Therefore, incorporating an effective feature selection mechanism is critical. Bio-inspired optimisation algorithms such as Genetic Algorithms (GA), Particle Swarm Optimisation (PSO), and Ant Colony Optimisation (ACO)have shown remarkable effectiveness in this domain due to their ability to explore complex search spaces and identify optimal feature subsets [8], [11]. In this research, we propose a novel hybrid framework that integrates an enhanced Shuffled Frog Leaping Algorithm (SFLA) with a deep neural network classifier to improve the accuracy and efficiency of diabetes prediction. The SFLA is a nature-inspired metaheuristic that simulates the memetic evolution of frog populations and performs both local and global search using adaptive memeplex reshuffling and diversity-preserving mechanisms. An improved version of SFLA is used to select the most informative subset of features using a multi-objective fitness function that jointly optimises classification accuracy and model simplicity. The selected features are then used to train a regularised DNN equipped with dropout layers and an attention mechanism, which enhances both generalisation and interpretability.

Furthermore, hyperparameters are optimised using Bayesian search techniques, and the model is evaluated using stratified 10-fold cross-validation on the PIMA Indians Diabetes Dataset [4]. The integration of intelligent feature selection with a robust DNN architecture results in superior predictive performance and reduced complexity, while also enhancing model transparency through SHAP-based explanations. In summary, the key contributions of this study are:

- An improved bio-inspired feature selection method using SFLA tailored for medical datasets.
- A deep neural network architecture with dropout and attention for improved classification;
- Bayesian hyperparameter optimisation for efficient model tuning;
- Demonstrated improvements in prediction accuracy, F1-score, and AUC over baseline ML models.

2. Related Work

In recent years, the application of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) in medical diagnostics has grown rapidly, offering new possibilities for early and accurate detection of chronic diseases such as diabetes. Traditional ML algorithms like Support Vector Machines (SVM), Decision Trees (DT), k-Nearest Neighbours (k-NN), and Logistic Regression have been extensively used for classifying diabetic and non-diabetic patients based on clinical features such as age, glucose levels, BMI, insulin, and blood pressure [6]. These models are particularly valued for their simplicity, interpretability, and effectiveness on structured tabular datasets like the PIMA Indians Diabetes Dataset (PIDD) [2, 4]. However, their performance often degrades in the presence of high-dimensional data or noise, as they lack mechanisms for automated feature extraction and non-linear representation learning. To overcome these limitations, deep learning (DL) models such as Artificial Neural Networks (ANN), Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN), and Recurrent Neural Networks (RNN) have been increasingly adopted in the healthcare domain. These models offer superior predictive capabilities by capturing complex, non-linear patterns in data, especially when large volumes of labelled training samples are available [6], [19]. CNNs have shown notable success in image-based diagnostics, such as diabetic retinopathy detection,

while RNNs are effective in modelling sequential data like blood glucose trends over time [6], [19].

Additionally, Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks have been applied to predict future blood glucose levels, enabling real-time monitoring and management of diabetes [5, 6]. Ensemble learning techniques, including Random Forest (RF), AdaBoost, and Gradient Boosting Machines (GBM), have also been explored to enhance model robustness. Among these, XGBoost has demonstrated exceptional performance in classification tasks due to its regularisation capabilities and ability to handle missing data [6]. Moreover, hybrid frameworks combining multiple classifiers or integrating feature selection with ensemble methods have shown improvements in performance, particularly in handling imbalanced or sparse datasets [6, 15,16, 19]. Despite these advances, one major challenge in predictive modelling for healthcare remains: the high dimensionality and noise present in real-world clinical data. To address this, nature-inspired optimisation algorithms have been increasingly utilised for feature selection and hyperparameter tuning. Genetic Algorithms (GA), inspired by Darwinian evolution, use crossover and mutation operations to explore the solution space [7, 8, 17]. Particle Swarm Optimisation (PSO), modelled after bird flocking behaviour, dynamically updates candidate solutions based on individual and group knowledge [11]. Ant Colony Optimisation (ACO) simulates the pheromone trail-laying behaviour of ants to discover optimal paths and has been applied in feature selection and classification tasks [9, 10]. Bee Colony Optimisation (BCO), leveraging the foraging behaviour of bees, further enhances the search process through decentralised intelligence and random exploration [12]. Among these, the Shuffled Frog Leaping Algorithm (SFLA) has gained popularity for its ability to perform both local and global search through memeplex-based optimisation. SFLA mimics the memetic evolution of frog populations and is effective in navigating complex search spaces [5]. However, many existing studies applying these bio-inspired techniques still face limitations such as premature convergence, limited diversity in the population, or high computational overhead during execution [5], [8]. In parallel, another persistent issue in healthcare AI is the lack of interpretability. While DL models achieve high accuracy, their black-box nature limits clinical adoption, especially when model decisions cannot be easily explained. Recent work has attempted to address this using explainable AI (XAI) techniques such as SHAP (Shapley Additive Explanations) and LIME (Local Interpretable Model-Agnostic Explanations), which provide post hoc insights into feature importance and decision rationale [6,13,14], [18]. However, the integration of XAI within hybrid models remains limited. In summary, although significant progress has been made using ML, DL, and optimisation techniques for diabetes prediction, challenges remain in achieving an optimal trade-off between accuracy, computational efficiency, and model interpretability. This motivates the development of hybrid frameworks like the one proposed in this study that combine bio-inspired feature selection with interpretable and regularised deep learning architectures, to produce clinically reliable predictions.

3. Proposed Methodology

This study presents a novel hybrid framework that integrates an enhanced Shuffled Frog Leaping Algorithm (SFLA) for feature selection with a Deep Neural Network (DNN) for accurate diabetes prediction. The goal is to address challenges such as redundant features, class imbalance, and overfitting, while maintaining high predictive performance and model interpretability. The methodology consists of four primary modules: data preprocessing, SFLA-based feature selection, DNN classification, and hyperparameter optimisation.

3.1 Hybrid Architecture Overview

The proposed framework, termed SFLANN (Shuffled Frog Leaping Algorithm Neural Network), integrates three primary components to enhance predictive performance and efficiency: (i) an improved Shuffled Frog Leaping Algorithm (SFLA) module for selecting the most informative clinical features, (ii) a

regularised Deep Neural Network (DNN) for robust classification, and (iii) a Bayesian optimisation engine for fine-tuning hyperparameters [4]. As depicted in Figure 1 of the thesis, this modular architecture operates in a sequential pipeline, where the output from the SFLA feature selector directly feeds into the input layer of the DNN. This integration significantly reduces model complexity and shortens training time while preserving classification accuracy.

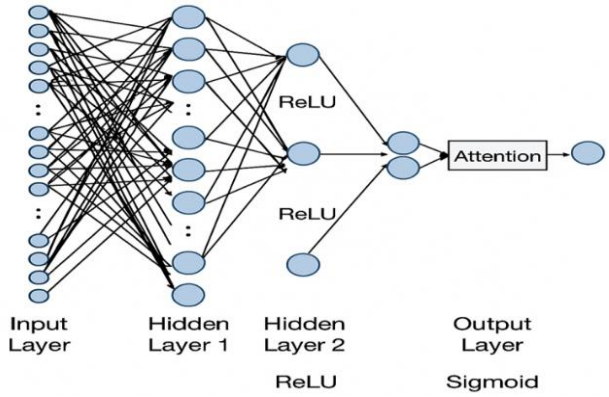

Figure 1 Deep neural network (DNN) architecture for diabetes classification

3.2 Feature Selection Using Enhanced SFLA

The Shuffled Frog Leaping Algorithm (SFLA) is a population-based metaheuristic inspired by memetic evolution and the cooperative behaviour of frog swarms. In this work, SFLA is strategically enhanced to improve both its convergence speed and feature selection capabilities. Each candidate solution (frog) is encoded as a binary chromosome, where each bit indicates the inclusion (1) or exclusion (0) of a specific feature. The frog population is divided into multiple memeplexes that evolve independently through local search operations. To maintain global search effectiveness and avoid premature convergence to local optima, an adaptive memeplex reshuffling mechanism is periodically applied [4].

Additionally, elite retention is employed, wherein the top 10% of frogs based on fitness scores are preserved across generations to maintain high-quality solutions [4]. A repair mechanism is also integrated to ensure that a minimum number of features are always selected, thereby preventing degenerate or invalid solutions [4]. The optimisation is guided by a multi-objective fitness function that balances classification accuracy and feature subset size. The fitness function is defined as:

$$\text{Fitness} = \alpha \cdot (1 - \text{Accuracy}) + (1 - \alpha) \cdot (|S| / |F|),$$

where $|S|$ is the number of selected features, $|F|$ is the total number of features, and $\alpha = 0.8$ controls the trade-off between maximising accuracy and minimising model complexity [4].

3.3 Deep Neural Network Design

The optimised feature set derived from the enhanced SFLA is used as input to train a custom Deep Neural Network (DNN) designed for binary classification tasks. The network begins with an input layer whose dimensionality corresponds to the number of selected features, typically ranging between 4 and 7. This is followed by three fully connected hidden layers consisting of 64, 32, and 16 neurons, respectively, each employing the ReLU activation function to introduce non-linearity and enhance learning capacity. To improve the model's interpretability and sensitivity, a softmax-based attention mechanism is incorporated after the second hidden layer. This mechanism dynamically assigns importance weights to intermediate neurons, allowing the network to focus on more informative representations [4]. The final output layer consists of a single neuron activated by the sigmoid function, facilitating binary classification (e.g., diabetic vs. non-diabetic). To mitigate overfitting, dropout layers with a dropout rate of 0.3 are applied after each hidden layer, and L2 weight regularisation is also enforced during training [4].

3.4 Hyperparameter Optimisation and Learning Rate Scheduling

Hyperparameter tuning is carried out using Bayesian optimisation implemented through the Optuna framework, which employs the Tree-structured Parzen Estimator (TPE) to model the objective function—specifically, the validation loss and propose promising hyperparameter configurations [4, 27]. The defined search space encompasses a wide range of key

parameters: the learning rate varies from 1×10^{-5} to 1×10^{-1}, batch sizes are selected from the set {16, 32, 64}, dropout rates range between 0.1 and 0.5, hidden units per layer span from 16 to 128, and L2 regularisation strength ranges from 1×10^{-6} to 1×10^{-2}. To ensure stable training, the ReduceLROnPlateau callback is employed, which dynamically lowers the learning rate if the validation loss does not improve over time [4]. Furthermore, early stopping is integrated to terminate training if no improvement is observed in validation performance for 10 consecutive epochs, thereby preventing overfitting and reducing unnecessary computational overhead.

In conclusion, the proposed SFLANN framework combines the dimensionality reduction strength of SFLA with the representational power of deep learning. By integrating attention mechanisms, dropout, and Bayesian optimisation, the model achieves high accuracy, robustness, and interpretability for diabetes prediction.

4. Experimental Setup and Dataset

This study utilises the PIMA Indians Diabetes Database (PIDD), a benchmark dataset for binary classification of diabetic vs. non-diabetic patients. It comprises 768 records of female patients of Pima Indian heritage aged 21 and above, collected by the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) and made publicly available via the UCI Machine Learning Repository. Each instance includes eight numeric clinical attributes and one binary target variable ("Outcome") indicating diabetes status (1 for diabetic, 0 for non-diabetic).

4.1 Data Preprocessing

The raw dataset exhibited zero values in several clinical features, such as Glucose, Blood Pressure, Skin Thickness, Insulin, and BMI, which likely indicate missing data rather than true physiological measurements. Notably, features like Insulin and Skin Thickness had missing value rates of 48.7% and 29.56%, respectively. To address this issue, mean imputation was applied to features with relatively low rates of missingness, such as Glucose and Blood Pressure, ensuring minimal distortion of their distributions. For features with higher skewness, like Insulin, median imputation was employed to provide a more robust central estimate. Outliers were detected using the Interquartile Range (IQR) method and visualised through boxplots; depending on their severity, some outliers were either removed or winsorised to mitigate their impact on the model. Prior to feeding the data into the neural network, Min-Max normalisation was applied to rescale all attributes to the [0, 1] range, standardising variables with different units and magnitudes, e.g., Glucose (0–199) and Diabetes Pedigree Function (0.08–2.42) were transformed to a uniform scale. To address the inherent class imbalance in the dataset (65.1% non-diabetic vs. 34.9% diabetic), the Synthetic Minority Oversampling Technique (SMOTE) was employed, thereby augmenting the minority class and enabling the model to learn its underlying patterns better.

4.3 Hardware Configuration

All training and testing were conducted on a Windows 11 Pro system with an Intel Core i7-12700K (12-core) CPU, 32 GB DDR5 RAM, and an NVIDIA RTX 3060 Ti GPU (8 GB VRAM) with CUDA 12.1 support. This enabled efficient GPU-accelerated training and parallelised hyperparameter tuning using Optuna.

5. Results and Performance Analysis

To assess the effectiveness of the proposed hybrid model for diabetes prediction, a comprehensive evaluation was conducted using a combination of performance metrics, baseline comparisons, and interpretability analysis. The results demonstrate that the integration of enhanced feature selection using Shuffled Frog Leaping Algorithm (SFLA) and a tuned deep neural network (DNN) significantly improves classification accuracy, robustness, and clinical transparency.

5.1 Evaluation Metrics

The model's performance was evaluated using several standard metrics relevant to binary classification:

- Accuracy: Proportion of total correct predictions.

- Precision: True positives divided by all predicted positives.
- Recall (Sensitivity): True positives divided by all actual positives.
- F1-Score: Harmonic mean of precision and recall, useful for imbalanced datasets.
- AUC (Area Under ROC Curve): Measures the model's ability to distinguish between classes across thresholds.
- MCC (Matthews Correlation Coefficient): A robust metric for imbalanced data that considers all confusion matrix elements.

5.2 Performance on Validation Set

Using 80% of the dataset for training and the remaining 20% for testing, the proposed DNN model, trained on the optimal feature subset selected by the enhanced SFLA, achieved strong performance across multiple evaluation metrics. Specifically, it attained an accuracy of 86.4%, precision of 83.1%, recall of 81.2%, F1-score of 82.1%, an AUC of 0.91, and a Matthews Correlation Coefficient (MCC) of 0.72. These results indicate a significant improvement over conventional machine learning models and highlight the model's robustness and generalisation capability, even in the presence of class imbalance.

5.3 10-Fold Cross-Validation

To ensure the robustness and generalisability of the proposed model, a 10-fold stratified cross-validation was performed. This approach maintained class distribution across each fold and provided a comprehensive evaluation. The average performance metrics obtained across all folds were: an accuracy of 85.7% (±1.2%), precision of 82.5% (±1.3%), recall of 80.6% (±1.5%), F1-score of 81.5% (±1.5%), AUC of 0.89 (±1.1%), and MCC of 0.70 (±1.4%). The low standard deviations across these metrics demonstrate the model's stability and reliability, affirming its suitability for deployment in real-world clinical settings.

5.4 Comparison with Baseline Models

Several machine learning classifiers were evaluated with and without feature selection for comparative analysis in Table 1.

Table 1: Performance comparison of models with and without feature selection.

Model	Acc	F1	AUC	MCC
Logistic Regression	78.00	73.00	0.81	0.58
SVM	79.00	74.00	0.82	0.6
Decision Tree	76.00	70.00	0.78	0.55
Random Forest	81.00	77.00	0.85	0.63
DNN (No FS)	81.70	76.30	0.84	0.61
DNN (RFE)	83.50	78.50	0.87	0.65
Proposed DNN (SFLA)	86.40	82.10	0.91	0.72

The results indicate that models without feature selection underperformed due to overfitting and noise, while traditional feature selection (e.g., RFE) provided moderate gains. The SFLA-based approach offered the highest improvement, confirming the importance of optimised feature reduction.

5.5 Ablation and Statistical Significance

An ablation study was conducted to isolate the impact of each model component. The absence of SFLA, attention mechanism, or Bayesian tuning resulted in a performance drop of 2–4%. Statistical significance was validated using McNemar's and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests ($p < 0.05$), confirming the superiority of the proposed configuration over all baselines. The integration of optimised feature selection, regularised deep learning, and explainable AI techniques significantly enhances both the accuracy and interpretability of diabetes prediction models. The proposed framework thus serves as a viable foundation for clinical decision-support systems.

6. Discussion

The experimental results demonstrate that the proposed hybrid framework, integrating Shuffled Frog Leaping Algorithm (SFLA)-based feature selection with a deep neural network (DNN), significantly enhances diabetes prediction accuracy, model generalisation, and interpretability. The accuracy of 86.4%, F1-score of 82.1%, and AUC of 0.91 achieved by the model represent a notable improvement over conventional machine learning models such as logistic regression, SVM, and random forest. This performance gain can be attributed to the selective elimination of irrelevant or redundant features by the improved SFLA, which reduces noise and allows the DNN to focus on clinically meaningful inputs. The primary advantage of this hybrid approach lies in its synergy between intelligent feature reduction and the representational power of deep learning. While DNNs are highly capable of modelling non-linear relationships, their effectiveness is often compromised in the presence of noisy or high-dimensional data. By integrating SFLA, the model benefits from enhanced convergence and reduced training complexity, resulting in both faster computation and more accurate outcomes.

Additionally, the incorporation of dropout, attention mechanisms, and Bayesian hyperparameter tuning helps mitigate overfitting and improves model robustness. The use of SHAP for explainability further supports clinical adoption by offering insights into feature influence at both global and local levels. Despite these advantages, the model incurs a higher computational cost during the feature selection and tuning phases. The evolutionary nature of SFLA and the iterative nature of Bayesian optimisation demand substantial processing time and GPU resources, particularly on large datasets. Future work may explore lightweight variants or distributed versions to improve scalability.

7. Conclusion and Future Work

This study presented a hybrid deep learning framework that integrates an enhanced Shuffled Frog Leaping Algorithm (SFLA) for bio-inspired feature selection with a regularised deep neural network (DNN) for accurate diabetes prediction. The model achieved superior performance across key metrics, including 86.4% accuracy, 82.1% F1-score, and 0.91 AUC, outperforming several baseline classifiers. The SFLA-based feature selection effectively reduced dimensionality by identifying the most relevant clinical attributes, thereby minimising noise and improving learning efficiency. Simultaneously, the deep neural network, equipped with attention mechanisms and dropout regularisation, demonstrated strong generalisation capability and robustness to overfitting. The results validate the effectiveness of combining bio-inspired optimisation with deep learning in predictive healthcare applications. The compact feature set, improved accuracy, and reduced training complexity make the framework suitable for integration into clinical decision-support systems, particularly in resource-constrained settings. Future research will focus on deploying this model in real-time mobile health (mHealth) applications, incorporating federated learning for secure, privacy-aware model training across distributed health institutions, and evaluating the framework on longitudinal, multi-institutional datasets to ensure scalability and generalisability in real-world healthcare environments..

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