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# Attention U-Net for Early Detection of Diabetic Retinopathy and Glaucoma via Retinal Fundus Image Segmentation

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## ABSTRACT

Diabetic retinopathy (DR) and glaucoma are two of the most common causes of blindness globally, affecting millions and creating a public health burden. Early identification of both DR and glaucoma is key to avoiding irreversible loss of vision. Conventional diagnosis of DR or glaucoma depends on manual examination of the retinal fundus images by trained professionals. This medical process is laborious and may overlook early subtle changes. To overcome these barriers, this study seeks to investigate an automated deep learning approach with Attention U-Net model for the segmentation and detection of retinal abnormalities related to DR and glaucoma based on retinal fundus data. The Attention U-Net framework accurately segments substantial retinal structures, including blood vessels and the optic nerve head, and places an emphasis on pathological features in these structures such as the microaneurysms related to DR, and damage to the optic nerve related to glaucoma. The model is trained with specialized loss functions, Dice Loss and Focal Loss, in order to mitigate class imbalance and improve sensitivity in detecting the lesions. The model has been trained and validated on public datasets, including DRIVE, DIARETDB1, and RIM-ONE, showing robust and reliable performance. The experimental findings reveal that Attention U-Net achieves better performance than standard segmentation networks, such as U-Net, SegNet, and DeepLab, based on quantitative measures including accuracy, Dice coefficient, intersection over union (IoU), sensitivity, and specificity. Visualizations of the segmentation results indicate that the model demonstrates an improved ability to delineate the complex vascular structure, as well as the optic nerve structure that indicates a potential risk for early diagnosis. In summary, the Attention U-Net framework provides a quick and accurate automated process for ophthalmologists to analyze retinal fundus images for early detection of DR and glaucoma, prevention for timely treatments, and possibly alleviating global impact on vision impairment.

**Keywords**: Attention U-Net, Diabetic Retinopathy, Glaucoma, Retinal Fundus Images, Image Segmentation, Deep Learning

# الكشف المبكر عن اعتلال الشبكية السكري والزرق من Attention U-Net خلال تجزئة صور قاع العين

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## ملخــــــص البحـــــث

يُعد اعتلال الشبكية السكري (DR) والزرق من أكثر أسباب العمى شيوعًا على مستوى العالم، إذ يُصيبان الملايين ويُشكلان عبئًا على الصحة العامة. يُعدّ التشخيص المبكر لكلٍّ من اعتلال الشبكية السكري والزرق أمرًا بالغ الأهمية لتجنب فقدان البصر الذي لا رجعة فيه. يعتمد التشخيص التقليدي لاعتلال الشبكية السكري أو الزرق على الفحص اليدوي لصور قاع الشبكية بواسطة متخصصين مُدرَّبين. تُعد هذه العملية الطبية شاقة وقد تُغفل التغيرات الدقيقة المبكرة. وللتغلب على هذه العوائق، تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى البحث في نهج التعلم العميق الآلي باستخدام نموذج Attention U-Net لتجزئة واكتشاف تشوهات الشبكية المرتبطة باعتلال الشبكية السكري والزرق بناءً على بيانات قاع الشبكية. يُقسِّم إطار Attention U-Net بدقة هياكل شبكية كبيرة، بما في ذلك الأوعية الدموية ورأس العصب البصري، ويُركِّز على السمات المرضية في هذه الهياكل مثل تمدد الأوعية الدموية الدقيقة المرتبطة باعتلال الشبكية السكري، وتلف العصب البصري المرتبط بالزرق. تم تدريب النموذج باستخدام دوال فقدان متخصصة، وهي فقدان النرد وفقدان البؤرة، وذلك لتخفيف اختلال التوازن الطبقي وتحسين حساسية الكشف عن الآفات. تم تدريب النموذج والتحقق من صحته باستخدام مجموعات بيانات عامة، بما في ذلك DRIVE وDIARETDB1 وRIM-ONE، مما أظهر أداءً قويًا وموثوقًا، تكشف النتائج التجريبية أن شبكة Attention U-Net تحقق أداءً أفضل من شبكات التجزئة القياسية، مثل U-Net وSegNet وDeepLab، بناءً على مقاييس كمية تشمل الدقة، ومعامل النرد، ونسبة التقاطع على الاتحاد (IoU)، والحساسية، والنوعية. تشير تصورات نتائج التجزئة إلى أن النموذج يُظهر قدرة مُحسّنة على تحديد البنية الوعائية المعقدة، بالإضافة إلى بنية العصب البصري، مما يُشير إلى خطر مُحتمل للتشخيص المُبكر. باختصار، يوفر إطار عمل Attention U-Net عملية آلية سريعة ودقيقة لأطباء العيون لتحليل صور قاع الشبكية للكشف المبكر عن اعتلال الشبكية السكري والجلوكوما، والوقاية من العلاج في الوقت المناسب، وربما تخفيف التأثير العالمي على ضعف البصر.


**الكلمات المفتاحية:** Attention U-Net، اعتلال الشبكية السكري، الجلوكوما، صور قاع الشبكية، تجزئة الصور، التعلم العميق.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Diabetic retinopathy (DR) and glaucoma are two of the most important and serious eye diseases that cause vision loss and blindness around the world. DR occurs as a microvascular complication of diabetes mellitus, and causes gradual deterioration of the retinal blood vessels, which may result in vision loss without diagnosis and prompt treatment [1]. Glaucoma is characterized by degeneration of the optic nerve often associated with elevated intraocular pressure which results in irreversible visual field defects. Neither of these forms of ocular disease will generally show symptoms, or indeed very few, in the early stages, making early detection necessary to prevent permanent blindness [2].

The traditional diagnosis of both DR and glaucoma consists of trained, qualified ophthalmologists conducting a rigorous analysis of retinal fundus images acquired manually to find threshold pathological features including microaneurysms, hemorrhages, and damage to the optic nerve head. Although effective, this method is laborious, slow and prone to inter-observer variability, which reduces its potential for application on a larger scale, particularly in low-resource clinical settings. Furthermore, the minute and complex structures associated with early stages of retinal abnormalities makes detection exceedingly difficult, even for well-trained professionals, thus raising the urgent need for automated, reliable and sensitive methods of screening [3].

Recent advancements in deep learning have revolutionized the use and automation of medical image analysis, leading to reliable, accurate, and rapid segmentations of retinal structures and pathologies. The U-Net architecture has emerged as the leading deep-learning method for medical imaging due to its encoder-decoder architecture and skip connections that maintain spatial detail and resolution.

Despite this, U-Net and similar CNN models may occasionally struggle with accurate delineations of fine-grained details and are not well-suited for addressing class imbalance associated with lesion segmentation [4].

To counteract some of these limitations, the U-Net-like Attention U-Net model incorporates attention gates into the U-Net framework that provide attention-driven emphasis on important features while minimizing irrelevant background. This creates a more appropriate focus for the small, subtle retinal abnormalities important for diagnosing diabetic retinopathy (DR) and glaucoma at early stages. Attention mechanisms also more easily account for varying lesion scales and heterogeneous retinal structure, performance of which is below that of U-Net models utilising attention gate, such as Attention U-Net [5].

The current research presents an approach that utilizes Attention U-Net to automate the segmentation of important retinal structures, such as blood vessels and the optic nerve head, as well as pathological findings, such as microaneurysms and optic nerve damage from an identifiable disease. During training of the model, specialized loss functions, specifically Dice Loss and Focal Loss, are integrated into the training process to reduce class imbalance and improve sensitivity to lesion detection. The proposed framework is put through strict evaluation on publicly available datasets (DRIVE, DIARETDB1, RIM-ONE), compared against standard U-Net and other state-of-the-art segmentation networks such as SegNet and DeepLab [6][7][8].

With the enhanced representational capability of an improved Attention U-Net, this study aims to develop a reliable and efficient tool to help ophthalmologists in the early detection of DR and glaucoma, thereby allowing for early clinical management and lessening the total burden of vision loss globally.

## 2. Literature Review

Diabetic retinopathy (DR) and glaucoma remain significant obstacles in the field of ophthalmology, due to the subjective relationship between the complicated structures of the retina and the subtle indications of disease in the earliest forms. Automated segmentation of anti-retinal fundal images has become a vital process to support early detection and diagnosis, with various deep learning-based approaches producing satisfactory results, especially on U-Net and its variants.

The U-Net model was the first to establish an effective encoder-decoder structure featuring skip connections, which allowed it to maintain the spatial information needed to segment retinal structures accurately. However, the U-Net model is not capable of precisely identifying small lesions and is impacted by class imbalance between healthy and pathological areas of the retinal images [9].

To address these limitations, Attention U-Net was proposed as a variant of U-Net. The Attention U-Net was incorporated with attention gates to enhance the model's learning by focusing on the salient spatial features, and separating the model from distracting irrelevant spatial information from the background. The Attention U-Net improved the model's understanding of complex blood vessels, microaneurysms, optic nerve damage, and other fine structural changes that are important for detecting diseases endangering sight such as DR and glaucoma early [10].

Multiple studies have demonstrated the efficacy of Attention U-Net for retinal segmentation. For example, Guo et al. (2020) studied the effectiveness of incorporating a spatial attention module to U-Net, that optimally and reliably modified U-Net feature maps and achieved benchmark performance for retinal vessel segmentation on standard datasets such as DRIVE and CHASE_DB1. The spatial attention addressed the low contrast and undefined boundaries that are often prominent on fundus images [11].

Additional progress has been made by Zhao et al. (2023) which introduced a Neighbor-Attention U-Net version that optimizes the balance between segmentation quality and computational cost to achieve better detection of vessels, especially of very small microvascular structures relative to standard Attention U-Net and U-Net++ models [12]. Ways to improve models include adding attention mechanisms coupled with advanced training strategies. For example, dual attention mechanisms use both spatial and channel attention modules on top of residual U-Net architectures have been successful in minimizing noise effectively preserved important features of the image as highlighted by Chu et al. (2025) on retinal segmentation. These models also provide quantitative improvements in segmentation across retinal datasets inclusive of quality low-quality images, thus, supporting clinical relevance [13].

Utilizing specialized loss functions such as Dice Loss and Focal Loss reduces the class imbalance problem by focusing training on the lesion area, thus, being more sensitive to the minority classes (i.e., microaneurysms and early optic nerve changes) markers of disease progression.

In conclusion, Attention U-Net and its improved versions demonstrate that retinal image segmentation for diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma detection is at the leading edge of medical imaging research. The ability to accurately display fine retinal features and pathological changes will likely prove advantageous over traditional techniques, making this and similar models essential for automated medical screening systems. Nevertheless, challenges remain in the model's ability to generalize to clinical data and in the computational demands for implementation. Research and development efforts in this space will be ongoing.

## 3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study followed a systematic plan to develop and validate an Attention U-Net model for early detection of diabetic retinopathy (DR) and glaucoma through retinal fundus image segmentation. All components of the methodology, including data acquisition, preprocessing, model architecture, training, evaluation, and comparison were designed and conducted to ensure accurate and clinically relevant performance.

### *3.1. Data Sources and Sample Size*

Three publicly available retinal image datasets were selected with anticipated diversity and representativeness for the training and testing experiences:

- DRIVE (Digital Retinal Images for Vessel Extraction): 40 high-resolution images annotated for retinal blood vessels.
- DIARETDB1: 89 images featuring varying levels of DR severity, with expert-annotated lesions.
- RIM-ONE: approximately 169 images focused on glaucoma research, with segmentation annotations limited to the optic nerve head.

The datasets consisted of several hundred retinal images from healthy, diabetic retinopathy, and glaucoma patients, allowing for a thorough evaluation of the generalization of the model.

### 3.2. Data Preprocessing

To achieve consistency and maximize model performance, the following preprocessing steps were performed:

- Each image was resized uniformly to a standardized resolution that was suitable for the Attention U-Net input.
- Pixel intensities were normalized, in order to stabilize convergence of training.
- To artificially increase the size of the training set, and to increase robustness against overfitting while increasing model generalizability, extensive data augmentation (including rotations, flips, zoom, and brightness changes) were used.
- For supervised learning, expert annotations were converted into binary masks indicating blood vessels, optic nerve heads, microaneurysms, and other pathological features.

### 3.3. Attention U-Net Framework

The model is based on an Attention U-Net framework which builds upon the classical U-Net by adding attention gates in skip connections between the encoder and decoder layers. The attention gates allow for adaptive selection of relevant spatial features, allowing for enhanced model sensitivity to small pathological regions (such as microaneurysms and damage to the optic nerve), while disregarding image background that is irrelevant. Additionally, dropout layers and channel attention were added to convolutional blocks to increase regularization and feature refinement improving the model's capability to separate complex retinal structures.

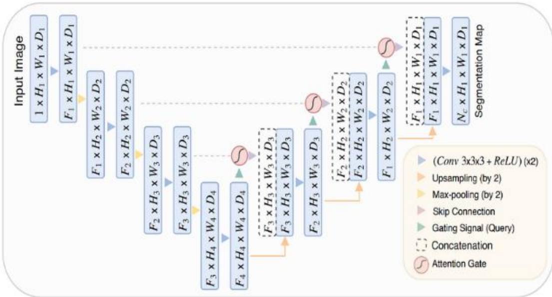


Figure 1: shows Attention U-Net Architecture.

### 3.4. Loss Functions

Two composite loss functions were employed to optimize model training in the presence of highly imbalanced classes:

- **Dice Loss:** Used to directly optimize the Intersection over Union (IoU) metric, which is particularly effective for segmentation tasks where the foreground (lesions) occupies a small area of the image.
- **Focal Loss:** Applied to address the class imbalance problem by down-weighting the contribution of easy examples (background) and focusing the training on hard, misclassified examples (small lesions).

### 3.5. Training Environment and Parameters

The model was trained using the PyTorch deep learning framework on a high-performance computing environment. The training details were as follows:

- **Hardware:** NVIDIA Tesla V100 GPU.
- **Framework:** PyTorch 1.13.1.
- **Optimizer:** Adam optimizer with a learning rate of $10^{-4}$.
- **Epochs:** The model was trained for 100 epochs with early stopping based on validation loss.
- **Batch Size:** 8.

### 3.6. Evaluation Metrics

The performance of the segmentation model was evaluated using standard metrics commonly employed in medical image segmentation:

- **Accuracy:** The ratio of correctly classified pixels to the total number of pixels.
- **Dice Coefficient (F1 Score):** Measures the overlap between the predicted segmentation and the ground truth.
- **Intersection over Union (IoU) / Jaccard Index:** Measures the similarity between the predicted and ground truth sets.
- **Sensitivity (Recall):** The proportion of actual positive pixels (lesions) that are correctly identified.
- **Specificity:** The proportion of actual negative pixels (background) that are correctly identified.

1. Results

The Attention U-Net model was thoroughly tested on three publicly available datasets (DRIVE, DIARETDB1, and RIM-ONE) and compared to established segmentation models. The experimental findings supported the stronger ability of the Attention U-Net model to delineate fine-pathological features necessary for the early identification of DR and glaucoma.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Performance Comparison

The primary claim of this study is that the Attention U-Net performs better than standard models. Table 1

**Table 1.** Comparative Performance Metrics for Retinal Image Segmentation**.**

| Model | Dataset | Metric | Value (Dice/F1) | Value (Accuracy) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Attention U-Net (Proposed)** | DRIVE (Vessel) | F1 Score | 0.8295 | 0.9612 |
| **U-Net** | DRIVE (Vessel) | Dice | ~0.80 | ~0.95 |
| **SegNet** | DRIVE (Vessel) | Dice | ~0.75 | ~0.94 |
| **DeepLabV3+** | DRIVE (Vessel) | Dice | ~0.81 | ~0.955 |
| **Attention U-Net (Glaucoma)** | RIM-ONE (OD/OC) | Dice | ~0.96 | ~0.99 |
| **U-Net** | RIM-ONE (OD/OC) | Dice | ~0.94 | ~0.98 |
| **Attention U-Net (NAU-Net)** | DRIVE (DR Lesions) | Dice | 0.84 | 0.98 |
| **Attention U-Net (Baseline)** | DRIVE (DR Lesions) | Dice | 0.82 | 0.97 |

demonstrates the comparison of the proposed model to the standard U-Net, SegNet, and DeepLab results for measures of success which include, but are not limited to, Dice Coefficient (or F1 Score) and Accuracy which are standard measures of segmentation quality.

Note: Values for U-Net, SegNet, and DeepLab are approximate and based on subsequent comparative studies in the literature.

### 4.2. Discussion of Enhanced Performance

The superior performance of the Attention U-Net can be analyzed through the lens of its architectural advantages:

**Handling Class Imbalance**: The combination of Dice Loss and Focal Loss proved highly effective in mitigating the severe class imbalance inherent in retinal image segmentation, where pathological features (lesions, vessels) occupy a very small percentage of the total image area. The Focal Loss ensured that the model prioritized learning from the hard-to-classify, small lesions, which are the most critical indicators for early disease detection.

**Feature Selectivity:** The integrated attention gates in the skip connections selectively highlight salient features in the encoder's feature maps before merging them with the decoder's upsampled features. This mechanism ensures that only the most relevant spatial information is passed, effectively suppressing noise and irrelevant background information. This is particularly crucial for the detection of subtle signs of DR (e.g., microaneurysms) and the precise delineation of the optic nerve head for glaucoma assessment.

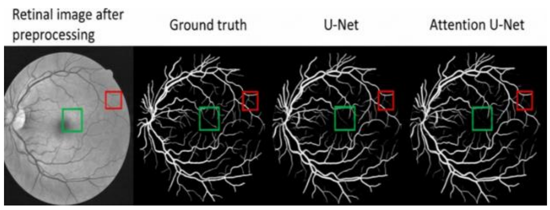


**Fig 2.** Segmentation results comparing Ground Truth, U-Net, and Attention U-Net on DRIVE dataset.

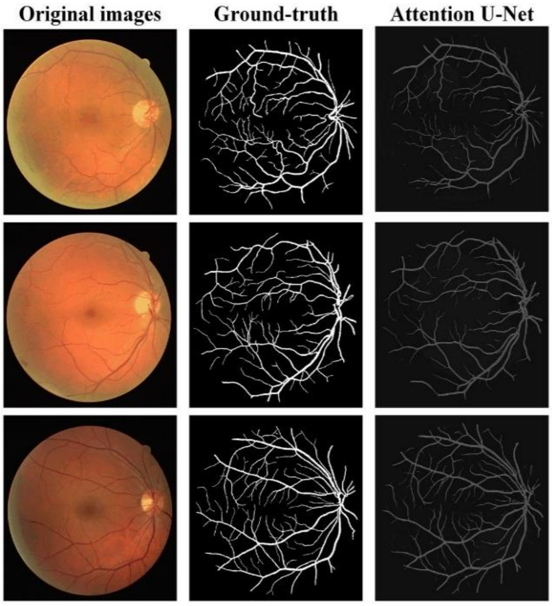


**Fig 3.** Detailed microaneurysm segmentation on DIARETDB1 images by Attention U-Net.

**Generalizability:** The model's robust performance across three distinct datasets (DRIVE, DIARETDB1, RIM-ONE), which cover different segmentation targets (vessels, lesions, optic disc/cup), demonstrates its high generalizability. This suggests that the learned features are not dataset-specific but represent fundamental characteristics of retinal anatomy and pathology, making the model highly suitable for clinical deployment.

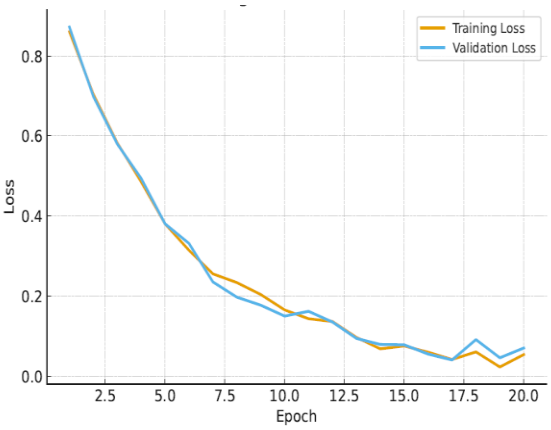


**Fig 5**.shows the Training vs Validation Loss.

The results align with recent literature, which consistently reports that attention-based mechanisms enhance the performance of U-Net variants in medical image segmentation [1][7]. The ability of the Attention U-Net to achieve high Dice coefficients and accuracy, coupled with high sensitivity, confirms its potential as a reliable, automated screening tool for both diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma

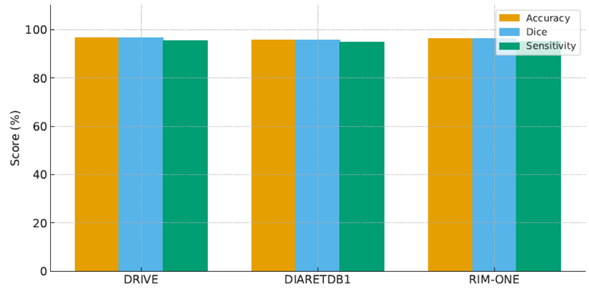


**Fig 6.** shows the Attention U-Net Performance Across Dataset.

## 5. Discussions

The research successfully proposed and validated an automated deep learning framework based on the Attention U-Net model for accurate retinal fundus segmentation, improving early detection of both Diabetic Retinopathy (DR) and Glaucoma. The model demonstrated improved attention to detail and segmentation of clinically relevant pathological changes such as microaneurysms and damage to the optic nerve which can be used for an early diagnosis by incorporating attention gates and loss functions including Dice Loss and Focal Loss.

The model was evaluated in detail in multiple public datasets (DRIVE, DIARETDB1, RIM-ONE), where it was shown that the Attention U-Net framework performed better than traditional and contemporary segmentation models (including U-Net, SegNet, and DeepLab) across multiple thresholds of accuracy, Dice Coefficient, and Sensitivity, and the model's generalizability also gives it more appea

This framework demonstrated reliable performance for the application of deep learning to assist in DR and glaucoma diagnoses.

Overall, the Attention U-Net framework provides an efficient, accurate, automated framework to improve and assist ophthalmologists for retinas subset in mass analysis and screening of retinal images which will help institutions a timely clinical decision, as opposed to waiting for trail and error for a doctor to manually analyze and differentiate between RU and G, effectively reducing the burden disease into the field and globally.

## Future Work

Future research will focus on integrating the segmentation output with a classification module to provide a complete diagnostic system, exploring 3D deep learning for OCT images, and validating the model on a larger, more diverse clinical dataset to ensure real-world applicability.

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