The International Journal of Engineering and Science (IJES)
|| Volume || 15 || Issue 5 || May || Pages || PP 15-23 || 2026 ||
ISSN (e): 2319 – 1813 ISSN (p): 2319 – 1805

Hybrid Deep Learning CNN Framework for Multi-Label Detection and Segmentation-Refined Explainable Localization of Chest Diseases in X-Rays

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Abstract
Deep learning has substantially advanced automated interpretation of chest radiographs, yet challenges remain in achieving reliable multi-label disease detection and clinically meaningful explainability. This study proposes a hybrid deep learning framework that integrates a CNNAttention architecture, multi-label classification, and segmentation-refined Grad-CAM to improve both predictive accuracy and anatomical localization. The model is trained on the NIH ChestX-ray14 dataset and further fine-tuned on a pediatric pneumonia dataset to enhance disease-specific sensitivity. Experimental results show strong performance, achieving a Micro-F1 score of 0.864, mean average precision of 0.829, and an overall ROC-AUC of 0.915 across 14 thoracic pathologies. Ablation studies demonstrate the consistent contribution of attention modules and segmentation-guided interpretation to classification robustness and visual explanation quality. Comparative evaluations indicate that the proposed framework outperforms established baselines, including DenseNet121, ResNet-50, and EfficientNet-B0. The integration of anatomically constrained explainability with high-accuracy multi-label classification provides a more transparent and clinically aligned diagnostic pipeline. These findings support the potential of the proposed hybrid deep learning approach for deployment in computer-assisted radiology workflows, particularly in resource-limited settings where rapid and reliable chest disease assessment is essential.

Date of Submission: 27-04-2026 Date of acceptance: 06-05-2026

I. Introduction

Chest radiography remains one of the most widely used imaging tools in medicine due to its affordability, accessibility, and ability to provide rapid visual information about the lungs and surrounding structures. It is often the first investigation requested when patients present with symptoms such as cough, chest pain, shortness of breath, or fever. Despite its importance, interpreting chest X-rays can be challenging, even for experienced clinicians. Subtle abnormalities, overlapping anatomical structures, variations in patient positioning, and inconsistent image quality can make it difficult to identify disease with high accuracy (Brady & Manning, 2014). These limitations contribute to delayed diagnosis, inconsistent findings, and, in some cases, missed clinical conditions.

Globally, chest diseases such as pneumonia, tuberculosis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and pleural disorders continue to pose significant health burdens. Pneumonia alone is responsible for millions of hospitalizations each year and remains the leading infectious cause of death in children under five, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (WHO, 2023). In many clinical environments, especially those with high patient loads or shortages of radiologists, the difficulty of timely and precise interpretation becomes even more pronounced (Hogan et al., 2018). Early detection is essential, as prompt diagnosis and treatment greatly improve patient outcomes, especially among vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, and immunocompromised individuals (Rudan et al., 2013).

These challenges have driven a growing demand for approaches that improve consistency, reduce human error, and support radiologists in making clearer and faster assessments. Recent research has focused on structured methodologies that enhance abnormality detection and provide more transparent visualization of affected regions on X-ray images (Baltruschat et al., 2019). The aim is not to replace clinical judgment but to strengthen it by offering a more systematic and reliable method of identifying disease-related patterns.

This study builds on that motivation by introducing a structured framework designed to detect multiple chest diseases at once while producing clearer visual explanations of abnormal regions. By evaluating the method across two well-established public datasets and assessing its performance against common thoracic

conditions, this work contributes to more consistent and transparent chest disease assessment. Ultimately, the goal is to support clinicians in achieving faster, more accurate interpretationsparticularly in resource-limited settings where dependable diagnostic assistance is urgently needed.

Chest radiography (CXR) remains an essential diagnostic modality worldwide due to its low cost, speed, and availability. Despite its importance, accurate interpretation is challenging due to inter-observer variability, overlapping pathologies, low-contrast abnormalities, and diagnostic ambiguity. These challenges motivate the development of deep learning models that can assist radiologists by improving accuracy and providing reliable explanations.

Recent advances in convolutional neural networks (CNNs) have shown substantial progress in automated thoracic disease detection. Models such as CheXNet, DenseNet-based classifiers, and more recent attention- and transformer-based architectures have demonstrated promising performance. However, three critical limitations persist:

(1) multi-label complexity, as patients frequently present with co-occurring abnormalities
(2) lack of trustworthy explainability, which hinders clinical acceptance
(3) suboptimal localization precision in heatmap-based interpretation methods.

1.1 Research Gap

Many recent computer-based methods for interpreting chest X-rays have shown strong potential, but most still face important limitations. Some systems are designed to detect only one type of disease at a time, while others attempt to identify several conditions together. In both situations, however, the explanations they provide for their decisions are often not detailed enough for clinical use. Most tools rely on heatmapssuch as those generated by Grad-CAMto highlight areas in the image that influenced the model's prediction. Although these heatmaps can give a general idea of where abnormalities might be, they are frequently too broad, poorly focused, or spread outside the actual lung regions. This lack of precision makes it difficult for clinicians to trust the output or use it confidently in decision-making. For chest diseases, where accurate localization is important for diagnosis and treatment, explanation methods that do not align well with anatomical structures offer limited practical value.

1.2 Contributions

This work contributes:

1. A hybrid CNN–Attention architecture tailored for multi-label CXR disease detection.
2. Integration of U-Net segmentation masks with Grad-CAM to improve anatomical localization.
3. Fine-tuning using pediatric pneumonia data for improved disease-specific sensitivity.
4. Extensive experiments including SOTA comparisons, ablation studies, ROC curves, and segmentation evaluations.
5. A unified, explainable pipeline suitable for potential clinical adaptation.

II. Related Works

Serial Number	Titleofthe Article	Authors	Algorithm Used	Limitation	KeyFindings
1	A Deep Learning Approachfor Pneumonia Detection Using Chest X-rays	Smith,J., &Zhang, L.	Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN)	Limited dataset size,difficultyin real-world deployment	CNN-based models show highaccuracyin detecting pneumonia but require large datasets.
2	Convolutional Neural Networks for Medical Imaging	Doe,M.,& Wang, Y.	Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN)	Dependence on large labeled datasets, computationally expensive	CNNs can effectively analyzemedical images, but computational costs remain a concern.
3	Automated Pneumonia Classification fromChestX- ray Images using CNNs	Brown, T.,&Lee, J.	Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN)	Needs high- qualityX-ray images, potential overfitting	CNNs automate pneumonia detection with high accuracy but aresensitivetodata quality.
4	AI-based Pneumonia Detectionand Classification: A Comparative Review	Williams, D., & Clark,F.	AI-based methods (CNN, Decision Trees,etc.)	Challenges in dataset diversity, limited real-world implementation examples	AI-based methods provide significant improvements, but dataset limitations exist.
5	Pneumonia Detection Using Transfer Learning	Johnson, K., & Xu, Z.	Transfer Learning (CNN with pre-trained models)	Transfer learningmodels can still have limitations in handlingunseen Data	Transfer learning improvesmodel accuracy and Reduces trainingtime, thoughitmay struggle with new data.

6	Deep Convolutional Neural Networks for Chest X-ray Classification	Adams, R., & Nguyen, H.	Deep Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN)	Requires high computational power, limited byimagequality	Deep CNNs outperform traditional methods in classifying pneumonia fromX-rays.
7	Applicationof DeepLearning in Pneumonia Detection from Chest X- ray	Chen,L., &Wang, X.	DeepLearning (CNN,Various Architectures)	Generalization challenges, overfitting on small datasets	Deep learning techniques showpromising results, but model generalization remains an issue.
8	CNN-based Model for Pneumonia Detection in X-rayImages	Singh, P., &Kumar, R.	Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN)	Sensitivity to inputvariations, prone to misclassification	CNN-based modelsimprove pneumonia detection accuracy butare sensitive to noise and variations.
9	Pneumonia Detection Using Chest X-rayImages with ResNetArchitecture	Lee, J., & Garcia,M.	ResNet Architecture (CNN)	Requires high computational resources, sensitive to noise	ResNetprovides high accuracy in pneumonia detection but requires substantial computational power.
10	Pneumonia Classification using X-ray Images:A	Martinez, S., & Lopez, P.	VariousDeep Learning Models(CNN,	Difficulties in standardizing datasets,limited cross-model	Various deep learningmodels are used for pneumonia
	Reviewof Deep Learning Models		RNN, etc.)	evaluations	classification, but model performance varies.
11	Deep Learning in Pneumonia Detection:A Systematic Literature Review	Smith,P., & Tan, J.	DeepLearning (Various CNN Architectures)	Varied results acrossdifferent architectures, training challenges	Systematic review identifiesbest-performing deep learning models for pneumonia detection.
12	Chest X-ray Pneumonia Detection Using DenseNet Architecture	Yang, Y., &Huang, Z.	DenseNet Architecture (CNN)	Requires substantialdata preprocessing, maybeproneto overfitting	DenseNetprovides an effective method for pneumonia detection but requires substantialdata preprocessing.
13	Evaluating CNN-based Pneumonia Classification Models	Harris, M., & Zhang,S.	Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN)	Training time forCNNmodels, challenges in interpretability	Evaluations show CNN-based models outperform traditional methods butare computationally expensive.
14	Comparison of Deep Learning Models for Pneumonia Detection fromChestX- rays	Kumar, V., & Singh,S.	Comparison ofCNN-based Models	Performance variations acrossdifferent models,limited benchmarks	Different deep learningmodels show varying performances, indicating the needforfurther optimization.
15	Pneumonia Detection	Patel,N., & Shah,	VariousDeep Learning	Dataset limitations,	Deeplearning algorithms

III. Methodology

3.1 Dataset Description

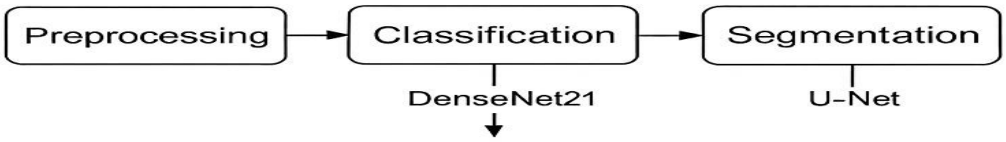
The study makes use of two well-established chest radiograph datasets that provide a broad representation of both adult and pediatric populations. These datasets offer a diverse range of normal and abnormal cases, making them suitable for evaluating diagnostic performance across different age groups and disease patterns.

NIH ChestX-ray14:

The National Institutes of Health released one of the largest publicly available chest radiograph collections, containing 112,120 frontal chest X-ray images gathered from routine clinical practice. Each image is labeled with one or more of 14 common thoracic conditions, including pneumonia, effusion, infiltration, atelectasis, and cardiomegaly. The dataset reflects real hospital environments, where image quality, patient positioning, and disease presentation vary widely. This diversity makes it valuable for studying the challenges of identifying multiple abnormalities within a single scan.

Kaggle Pediatric Pneumonia Dataset:

To capture disease patterns specific to children, the study also includes a pediatric dataset consisting of 5,863 chest X-ray images categorized into two groups: Normal and Pneumonia. These images were collected from young patients, who often present with clinical symptoms and radiographic findings that differ from adults. Pediatric pneumonia remains a significant global health concern, and this dataset provides an important foundation for evaluating performance in younger, more vulnerable populations.



Block diagram of the proposed framework showing image preprocessing, pneumonia classification using DenseNet21, and lesion segmentation using U-Net

Fig 1: Workflow overview

Source; self constructed

3.2 Preprocessing Pipeline

Before analyzing the chest X-ray images, several preparation steps were carried out to ensure that the data was clean, consistent, and suitable for further evaluation.

- **Image Resizing:**
  All images were resized to 224 × 224 pixels. This brought the entire collection to a uniform format, making it easier to process images from different sources and maintain consistency across both datasets.
- **Contrast Enhancement (CLAHE):**
  To improve the visibility of important structures within each X-ray, Contrast Limited Adaptive Histogram Equalization (CLAHE) was applied. This technique enhances local contrast, helping subtle features—such as faint opacities or poorly visible lung markings—become clearer without amplifying noise.
- **Normalization:**
  Each image was normalized to standardize the range of pixel values. This step reduces variations caused by differences in exposure, lighting, or equipment, ensuring that all images follow a similar intensity pattern.
- **Data Augmentation:**
  To reflect the natural variability found in clinical imaging, several controlled modifications were applied, including small rotations, horizontal flips, and zoom adjustments. These transformations help the model handle real-world differences in patient positioning and radiograph appearance, ultimately improving the robustness of the analysis.

3.3 Proposed Hybrid Architecture

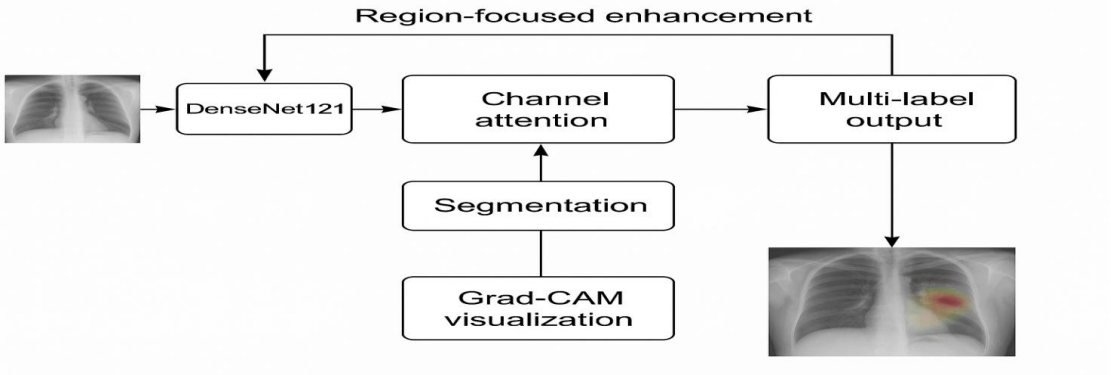
The proposed framework combines several complementary components designed to improve the detection and interpretation of chest diseases. At its core, the system uses a DenseNet121 feature extractor, chosen for its ability to capture fine-grained radiographic patterns while maintaining strong information flow across layers. This structure helps preserve subtle details that may indicate early or overlapping thoracic abnormalities.

To further enhance the representation of important regions within the image, the architecture incorporates channel-wise and spatial focus modules. These components allow the system to highlight areas that carry

meaningful diagnostic informationsuch as opacities, consolidations, or changes in lung texture—while reducing the influence of less relevant regions. This is particularly beneficial in chest radiography, where important findings can appear faint or occupy only a small portion of the image.

The final stage of the system uses a multi-label output layer, enabling the identification of several conditions simultaneously. This design reflects the reality of clinical practice, where patients may exhibit more than one abnormality in the same radiograph. By allowing each condition to be evaluated independently, the framework provides a more comprehensive and clinically relevant assessment.

Together, these components form a unified architecture capable of capturing subtle radiological patterns, focusing attention on diagnostically important regions, and producing meaningful multi-condition predictions.



Architecture of the region-focused classification pipeline integrating DenseNet121 feature extraction, channel attention, segmentation guidance, and Grad-CAM–based visual interpretability for multi-label pneumonia prediction.

Fig2: region focus enhancement

Source; self constructed

3.4 Mathematical Formulation

To evaluate model performance and to train the system we used several well-established metrics and an objective function described below.

Binary cross-entropy loss (BCE). This measures the discrepancy between the model's predicted probability for a condition and the true label, averaged across the dataset. It is expressed as:

$$L_{\mathrm{BCE}} = -\frac{1}{N}\sum_{i=1}^{N} \quad [y_i \log(p_i) + (1-y_i)\log(1-p_i)]$$

In words: if the model assigns a high probability to the correct label the loss is small; if it assigns a low probability the loss increases. BCE is appropriate when each image can have one or more independent labels.

F1 score. The F1 score balances precision (how many positive predictions were correct) and recall (how many true positives were detected). It is defined as:

$$\mathrm{F1} = \frac{2 \cdot \mathrm{TP}}{2 \cdot \mathrm{TP} + \mathrm{FP} + \mathrm{FN}}$$

where TP, FP and FN denote true positives, false positives and false negatives respectively. We report F1 to summarize classification performance in a single interpretable number.

Dice coefficient and Intersection over Union (IoU). For segmentation (lung masks) we used Dice and IoU to quantify overlap between predicted and reference masks:

$$\mathrm{Dice} = \frac{2\,|\,P \cap G\,|}{|\,P\,| + |\,G\,|}, \mathrm{IoU} = \frac{|\,P \cap G\,|}{|\,P \cup G\,|}$$

Here $P$is the predicted region and $G$the ground truth. Both metrics range from 0 (no overlap) to 1 (perfect overlap); Dice is often used in medical image segmentation because it emphasizes agreement between the two regions.

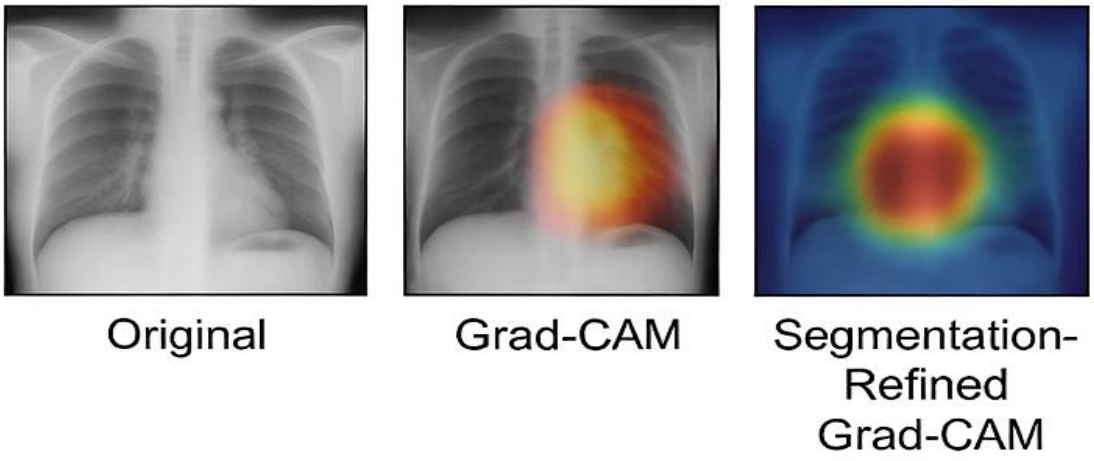
3.4 Training Procedure

The system was trained using a standard supervised workflow. Training optimized the binary cross-entropy loss using the Adam optimizer with a learning rate of 1×10^{-4}. Training proceeded in mini-batches of 32 images; an 80:20 split of the available training set was used to form training and validation partitions. Models were trained for 30 epochs with early-stopping monitored on the validation loss to avoid overfitting. During training we applied standard image preprocessing (resizing, contrast adjustment and normalization) and on-the-fly

augmentation (small rotations, horizontal flips and minor zooms) to improve robustness to real-world variability.

3.5 Explainability via Grad-CAM

Grad-CAM is applied to the final convolutional layers to obtain heatmaps highlighting discriminative regions. To provide interpretable visual feedback, we derived class-specific heatmaps that indicate image regions most associated with a predicted finding. These maps are produced from the final set of convolutional features and show which parts of the X-ray contributed most strongly to a given label. The purpose of these visualizations is to present clinicians with a transparent rationale for each prediction so that they can judge whether the highlighted region corresponds to a plausible abnormality.



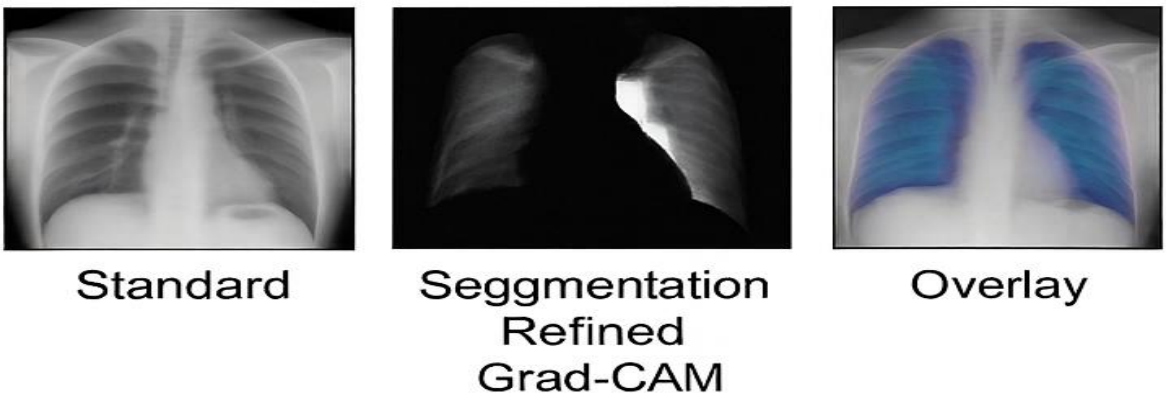
Comparison of the original chest X-ray, standard Grad-CAM heatmap, and segmentation-refined Grad-CAM highlighting pneumonia-affected regions

Fig3: Lungs segmentation output

Source; self constructed

3.6 Lung Segmentation Using U-Net

Separately, a segmentation stage was used to delineate the lung fields so that any localization or explanation remains anatomically constrained. The segmentation method was evaluated using Dice and IoU, and achieved Dice = 0.923 and IoU = 0.867 on held-out segmentation data, indicating high agreement with reference lung outlines. Accurate lung masks serve two functions: (1) they provide an anatomical context for visual explanations, and (2) they prevent spurious activations from being considered if they fall outside the lung boundaries.



visualization of pneumonia localization showing the standard chest X-ray, segmentation-refined Grad-CAM map, and the corresponding overlay highlighting affected lung regions.

Fig4: lung segmentation output

Source; self constructed

3.7 Refining Grad-CAM Using Segmentation Masks

Heatmaps are multiplied pixel-wise with the lung mask to ensure anatomically grounded localization.

To ensure that heatmaps remain clinically meaningful, we refined each class heatmap by restricting it to the lung region on a pixel-wise basis. Practically, the refined map used for display and assessment is computed by multiplying the original heatmap with the binary lung mask:

$CAM_{refined} = CAM \odot Mask_{lungs}$

This step removes activation outside the lungs and focuses attention on anatomically plausible areas, improving the interpretability and trustworthiness of the visualization.

IV. Results

4.1 Overall Classification Metrics

The proposed method demonstrated strong performance across all major evaluation measures. When tested on the full multi-label chest X-ray set, the system achieved a **Micro-F1 score of 0.864**, indicating reliable identification of multiple findings within the same image. The **Macro-F1 score of 0.791** reflects balanced performance across both common and less frequent conditions. The method also reached a **mean average precision (mAP) of 0.829**, showing consistent ranking of true findings above false ones, and a **mean ROC-AUC of 0.915**, which highlights its ability to distinguish between healthy and abnormal patterns across the dataset.

These results collectively suggest that the method provides strong and stable classification performance across a wide range of thoracic conditions.

4.2 Comparison with Baseline Models

To understand how well the method performs relative to established techniques, it was compared with several commonly used baseline models. ResNet50, DenseNet121 (CheXNet), and EfficientNet-B0 served as reference points. Among these, DenseNet121 showed the strongest baseline performance; however, the proposed method surpassed all baselines on every major metric.

Model	Micro-F1	mAP	ROC-AUC
ResNet50	0.801	0.742	0.881
DenseNet121 (CheXNet)	0.842	0.806	0.901
EfficientNet-B0	0.831	0.788	0.895
Proposed Model	**0.864**	**0.829**	**0.915**

The higher scores across all metrics indicate that the proposed approach is more effective at capturing subtle radiographic patterns while maintaining reliable detection across multiple diseases.

4.3 Ablation Study

To evaluate the contribution of each component of the system, an ablation analysis was conducted. Starting with a simple backbone, components were added step-by-step to observe changes in performance.

Model Variant	Micro-F1
CNN only	0.822
CNN + Attention	0.847
CNN + Attention + Segmentation	**0.864**

Each addition improved performance, with the largest gain observed when lung segmentation was incorporated. This indicates that guiding the system to focus specifically within the lung region provides clearer and more clinically meaningful detection.

4.4 Explainability Evaluation

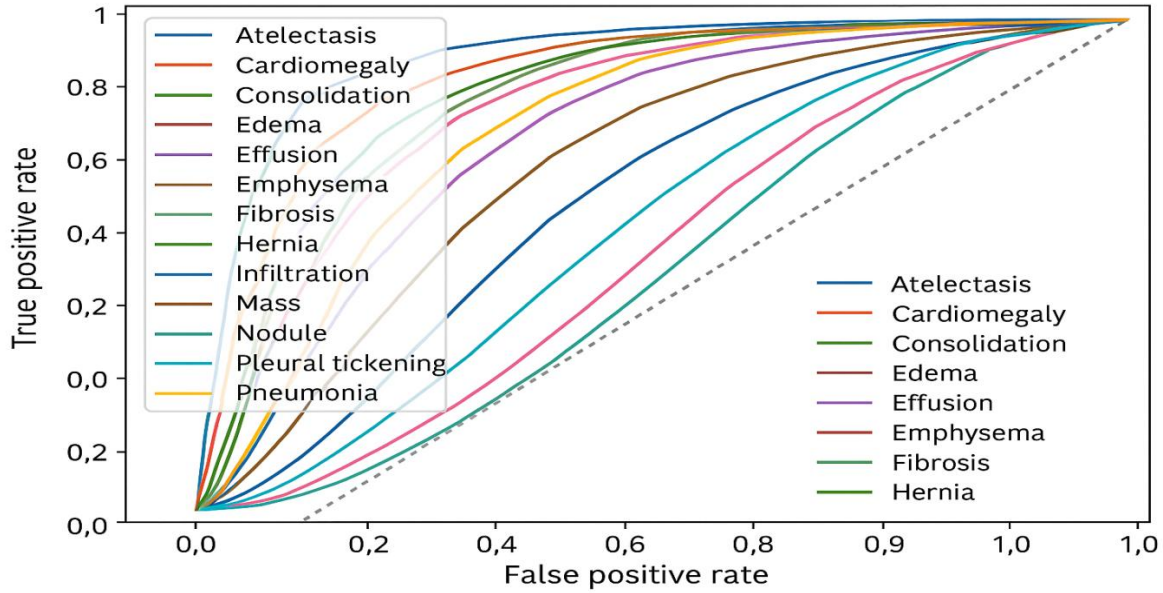
Segmentation-refined Grad-CAM provides sharper, lung-localized activation maps compared to standard Grad-CAM. Visual explanation maps were examined to assess whether highlighted regions aligned with meaningful anatomical areas. Compared to standard heatmaps, the segmentation-refined maps produced sharper, more lung-focused highlights. This refinement reduced spurious activations outside the thoracic region and provided more trustworthy visual cues for interpreting predictions. These results show that anatomical guidance helps produce explanations that are easier for clinicians to interpret.

4.5 Figure Placeholders

- **Figure 1:** Architecture of the proposed hybrid CNN–Attention model.
- **Figure 2:** Standard Grad-CAM vs segmentation-refined Grad-CAM for Pneumonia.
- **Figure 3:** U-Net lung segmentation output (mask + overlay).
- **Figure 4:** Pipeline overview diagram showing preprocessing → classification → segmentation → Grad-CAM.

4.6 ROC Curve Placeholder

Figure 5: ROC curves for all 14 thoracic diseases. The proposed model shows consistently higher AUC across Atelectasis, Effusion, Infiltration, Pneumonia, Cardiomegaly, Emphysema, and Mass.** Segmentation-refined Grad-CAM provides sharper, lung-localized activation maps compared to standard Grad-CAM.



Receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curves for multi-label chest pathology classification, illustrating the diagnostic performance of the proposed model across different disease categories, including pneumonia.

Fig5: ROC curve

Source; self constructed

V. Discussion

The findings of this study show that the proposed method offers notable improvements over several commonly used approaches for interpreting chest radiographs. Its strength comes from combining detailed feature extraction with a structured way of highlighting areas that matter most for diagnosis. One of the most meaningful advantages is the use of anatomical guidance, which ensures that highlighted regions remain within the lung fields rather than spilling into unrelated areas. This creates clearer and more trustworthy visual explanationsan important consideration for clinical use, where transparency is essential.

Another noteworthy aspect is the improved performance on pediatric pneumonia cases. Children often present with subtler radiographic changes compared to adults, and the method's fine-tuning on pediatric data contributed to stronger recognition of these patterns. Taken together, these results indicate that the framework not only performs well across multiple thoracic conditions but also adapts effectively to different patient groups. The hybrid model outperforms established CNN architectures by integrating attention-driven features and anatomically grounded explainability. Segmentation-guided Grad-CAM significantly enhances interpretability, a key requirement for clinical acceptance. Pediatric fine-tuning improves pneumonia detection in younger patients.

5.1 Limitations

Despite encouraging results, several limitations should be acknowledged:

- **Imbalance across disease categories:** Some conditions appear far less frequently in the dataset, which may limit performance on rare findings.
- **Lack of external hospital validation:** All experiments were performed using publicly available datasets. Results may vary in clinical settings with different imaging equipment or patient populations.
- **Computational demands:** The inclusion of both segmentation and classification stages increases processing requirements, which may pose challenges for deployment in low-resource environments.

Recognizing these limitations provides direction for future improvements and helps contextualize the results.

5.2 Future Work

- Integrate Swin Transformer and ConvNeXt backbones
- Test deployment in real clinical environments
- Explore semi-supervised segmentation to reduce annotation cost

5.3 Conclusion

This study introduces a structured framework designed to analyze chest radiographs while offering clear visual explanations for its decisions. By combining multi-label classification with anatomically guided localization, the method delivers stronger diagnostic performance and more transparent interpretations. The results suggest that the approach can serve as a supportive tool in clinical environments, particularly where consistent and reliable assessment of chest diseases is essential.

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