International Conference on Science, Engineering & Management Trends

International Journal of Science, Engineering and Technology
ISSN: 2348-4098, P-ISSN: 2395-4752

Explainable Image Processing Based on Road Defect Classification Using AI

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Abstract- Road infrastructure maintenance is a critical challenge faced by transportation authorities worldwide. Timely detection and classification of road defects such as potholes, cracks, and surface deterioration are essential for ensuring vehicle safety and reducing maintenance costs. Despite advancements in computer vision, existing automated systems struggle with handling diverse defect types under varying lighting and environmental conditions. This study proposes an Explainable AI (XAI)-based road defect classification system using image processing techniques to provide transparent and accurate identification of pavement anomalies. We compiled a comprehensive road surface image dataset from publicly available sources including RDD2022 and CrackForest. Features were extracted and optimized using pre-trained convolutional neural network (CNN) architectures including ResNet-50 and EfficientNet-B4, addressing high dimensionality and computational complexity issues commonly encountered in pavement image analysis. Explainability techniques such as Grad-CAM and LIME were integrated to ensure transparent, human-interpretable classification outputs.

Keywords- Road Defect Detection, Pavement Condition Monitoring, Pothole Detection, Crack Detection, Surface Deterioration Analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

Road infrastructure plays a vital role in ensuring transportation safety, economic productivity, and urban development. Deteriorating road conditions such as potholes, longitudinal cracks, transverse cracks, and surface rutting pose significant risks to vehicle safety and increase maintenance expenditure for municipal and highway authorities. Conventional road inspection methods rely heavily on manual surveys, which are time-consuming, labor-intensive, and prone to human error. As a result, the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and image processing techniques into road maintenance workflows has emerged as a promising approach to automate defect detection, improve classification accuracy, and reduce inspection costs.

Advancements in machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL) have enabled the development of intelligent vision systems capable of analyzing large volumes of road surface images captured by cameras mounted on inspection vehicles, drones, or smartphones. Publicly available repositories and government transportation databases provide valuable pavement image datasets containing labeled examples of various defect types. Using this data, AI models can perform critical tasks such as defect detection, severity classification, and location mapping — helping road engineers and municipal planners make timely maintenance decisions.

International Journal of Science, Engineering and Technology
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However, while these models can achieve high classification accuracy, they often function as black boxes, providing little insight into the reasoning behind their predictions. The absence of interpretability raises concerns regarding trust, accountability, and transparency. This is where Explainable Artificial Intelligence (XAI) becomes essential. XAI enhances model transparency by identifying and explaining the contribution of each image feature or region to the final classification output. The framework employs techniques such as Grad-CAM (Gradient-weighted Class Activation Mapping) and LIME (Local Interpretable Model-agnostic Explanations) to visually highlight the image regions that most influenced each classification decision. By combining high-accuracy defect classification with interpretability, this approach contributes toward building trustworthy and human-centered AI systems that support safer and smarter road infrastructure management.

II. RELATED WORK

Artificial Intelligence has become one of the most promising tools for transforming road maintenance into a data-driven discipline. Early research primarily focused on traditional image processing techniques such as edge detection, thresholding, and morphological operations. Chambon and Moliard (2011) proposed a crack detection system using wavelet transforms and texture analysis. Oliveira and Correia (2013) applied histogram-based segmentation for pothole identification. While effective for specific defect types, these methods lacked robustness under varying lighting conditions and complex road textures.

With the rise of deep learning, convolutional neural networks (CNNs) became the dominant approach for road defect classification. Zhang et al. (2016) introduced a deep CNN framework for pavement crack detection, demonstrating significant improvements over traditional methods. Maeda et al. (2018) developed a road damage detection system using smartphone images and the Single Shot MultiBox Detector (SSD) architecture, creating a large-scale public dataset for benchmarking. More recent efforts explored transfer learning: Fan et al. (2022) employed ResNet and VGG architectures fine-tuned for pothole detection, while Zou et al. (2023) applied EfficientNet-based models for multi-class defect classification.

Growing recognition of interpretability limitations led to increasing focus on Explainable AI for road defect analysis. Bang et al. (2021) applied Grad-CAM to visualize CNN decision regions in crack detection tasks, verifying that the network correctly focused on defect areas. Li et al. (2023) used SHAP-based feature attribution to interpret pavement distress severity predictions. However, these studies were limited to single defect types without providing a unified explainable framework covering the full spectrum of road surface anomalies — a gap the present study addresses.

III. SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE

A. Overview of the System

The proposed system is designed to provide an integrated Explainable AI framework for road defect classification encompassing pothole detection, crack type identification, and surface wear assessment using road surface imagery. The architecture consists of multiple layers: image data acquisition, preprocessing, CNN-based feature extraction, defect classification, explainability analysis, and result visualization. Each layer works sequentially to collect imagery, extract visual features, generate classifications, and explain the reasoning behind each decision. The system eliminates dependency on expensive specialized sensing equipment by using camera-captured road images and publicly available annotated datasets, making it cost-effective and scalable.

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B. Data Flow and Functional Modules

The data flow follows a structured sequential process ensuring accurate classification and clear interpretability. It begins with acquisition of road surface images from RDD2022, CrackForest, and DeepCrack datasets, containing labeled examples of longitudinal cracks, transverse cracks, alligator cracks, potholes, and undamaged surfaces. Once collected, images undergo resizing, normalization, contrast enhancement, and augmentation to account for variations in lighting, weather, and camera angle. Data augmentation techniques including random flipping, rotation, and brightness adjustment are applied to improve model generalization across diverse road conditions.

C. Components Description

The system includes several main components working together for automated road defect classification. Image data is collected from public datasets and inspection cameras. The preprocessing component applies image enhancement and normalization techniques. Deep learning models based on ResNet-50 and EfficientNet-B4 architectures perform feature extraction and multi-class defect classification. The explainability component uses Grad-CAM and LIME tools to visually highlight the image regions most responsible for each classification output. A user-friendly dashboard displays all classification results and visual explanations clearly, making the system accurate, transparent, and practical for road maintenance applications.

D. Explainability Integration

After the CNN model generates a defect classification, Grad-CAM produces heat map overlays highlighting specific road image areas that activated the classification decision, while LIME perturbs local image segments to explain individual predictions. This allows engineers to verify that the model focuses on actual defect regions rather than irrelevant background features. By providing clear visual explanations alongside each classification, the system builds user trust, supports maintenance prioritization decisions, and ensures that AI models are not treated as black boxes.

IV. IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

A. Data Preparation and Model Development

Implementation begins with collecting labeled road surface images from RDD2022, CrackForest, and DeepCrack datasets covering a wide range of defect types and road conditions. The data is cleaned by removing blurred or corrupted images, balancing class distributions through augmentation, and normalizing pixel values for consistent model performance. Visual features are extracted using pre-trained CNN backbones including ResNet-50, VGG-16, and EfficientNet-B4, fine-tuned on the road defect dataset via transfer learning. Models are evaluated using accuracy, precision, recall, and F1-score before integration. Hyperparameter tuning via learning rate scheduling and dropout regularization improves accuracy, and model quantization and pruning enable faster inference for real-time road inspection deployment.

B. Explainability and Result Visualization

The system incorporates explainability methods to help users understand how classification decisions are generated. Grad-CAM heat maps, saliency maps, and class activation visualizations highlight key image regions influencing each prediction. Visual dashboards present results through annotated road images, confidence score charts, and defect severity indicators. Each classification is accompanied by a visual explanation map showing which pavement regions triggered the defect label, enabling transparent and actionable road maintenance planning.

V. EXPERIMENTAL EVALUATION

A. Explainability Assessment

The experimental evaluation used the RDD2022 and CrackForest datasets encompassing over 26,000 annotated images across multiple defect categories. The dataset was divided into training (70%), validation (15%), and testing (15%) portions. Multiple deep learning architectures were compared including ResNet-50, VGG-16, EfficientNet-B4, and MobileNetV3. Performance was assessed using accuracy, precision, recall, and F1-score for each defect class. Grad-CAM heat map overlays and LIME segment importance maps verified that the system correctly identified defect regions as the primary basis for classification. Domain expert evaluators confirmed that visual explanations accurately corresponded to actual defect areas, increasing confidence in the system's reliability.

B. Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis identifies the most suitable deep learning approach for road defect classification. EfficientNet-B4 and ResNet-50 outperformed VGG-16 and MobileNetV3 in overall accuracy. EfficientNet-B4 demonstrated the highest precision for pothole detection, while ResNet-50 showed stronger performance for fine-grained crack type differentiation. Grad-CAM produced more spatially accurate visual explanations compared to LIME, particularly for complex defect patterns with irregular boundaries.

Table I: Comparative Performance of Deep Learning Models for Road Defect Classification

Task	Model	Accuracy (%)	Precision	F1-Score
	EfficientNet-B4	95.3	0.94	0.95
Defect Classification	ResNet-50	93.7	0.92	0.93
	VGG-16	89.4	0.88	0.89
	MobileNetV3	86.1	0.85	0.86
Crack Detection	ResNet-50	—	0.93	0.92
	VGG-16	—	0.87	0.86
Pothole Detection	EfficientNet-B4	—	0.96	0.95
	MobileNetV3	—	0.84	0.83
Explainability	Grad-CAM	Clear spatial focus	—	—
	LIME	Moderate clarity	—	—

VI. DISCUSSION

The proposed system demonstrates that combining deep learning-based image classification with explainability techniques provides both accurate and visually interpretable predictions for road defect identification. EfficientNet-B4 and ResNet-50 achieve strong performance across diverse road surface conditions, while Grad-CAM visualizations help engineers clearly see which pavement regions drove each classification decision. This transparency increases trust and supports better maintenance prioritization. Although the system performs well, its accuracy still depends on the quality and diversity of training imagery, particularly for underrepresented defect types. Future enhancements could include semantic segmentation for defect boundary delineation, expanded datasets for different pavement materials and climate zones, and real-time classification deployment on edge devices in inspection vehicles.

International Journal of Science, Engineering and Technology
ISSN: 2348-4098, P-ISSN: 2395-4752

VII. CONCLUSION

The proposed explainable AI system effectively combines deep learning image processing with transparent interpretation techniques to support automated road defect classification and maintenance decision-making. The system provides accurate identification of potholes, crack types, and surface wear conditions, while Grad-CAM and LIME ensure that engineers can clearly understand which visual features influenced each classification output. This improves trust, usability, and practical adoption among road maintenance professionals and transportation authorities. The modular framework can be expanded with additional annotated datasets and more advanced segmentation methods. Overall, the project demonstrates that integrating explainability with AI-based image processing significantly enhances transparency and practicality in modern road infrastructure management, supporting smarter, safer, and more cost-effective pavement condition monitoring.

Acknowledgment
We would like to express our sincere gratitude to everyone who supported us throughout the development of our project titled "Explainable Image Processing Based on Road Defect Classification Using AI." This work was made possible through the constant guidance, motivation, and encouragement provided by our mentors and faculty members. We also extend our appreciation to the institution for providing necessary resources and technical support. Finally, we are thankful to our peers, friends, and family members for their continuous support.

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