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Multimodal CNN–Transformer Framework for Explainable Pathogen Identification and Infection Severity Scoring from Microscopy Images

[1]V. Kavitha,[2]M. Nagseshudu,[3]P. V. Kusuma,[4]G. Veera Sankara Reddy, [5]S. Prateep kumar, [6]D. Mahendra Reddy

[1]Assistant Professor, CSE Department, JNTUA College of Engineerig Pulivendula, AP, India
kavithareddyvelagalapalli@gmail.com
[2]Assistant Professor, CSE Department, JNTUA College of Engineerig Pulivendula, AP, India
nagaseshudu1000@gmail.com
[3]Assistant Professor, ECE Department, JNTUA College of Engineerig Pulivendula, AP, India
kusuma324@gmail.com
[4]Assistant Professor, EEE Department, JNTUA College of Engineerig Pulivendula, AP, India
gvsr269.eee@jntua.ac.in
[5]Assistant Professor, Maths Department, JNTUA College of Engineerig Pulivendula, AP, India
prateepkumars@gmail.com
[6]Assistant Professor, CSE Department, JNTUA College of Engineerig Pulivendula, AP, India
mahendrareddy39@gmail.com

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Abstract

KEYWORDS:
Pathogen Identification; Microscopy Image Analysis; Multimodal Deep Learning; CNN-Transformer Hybrid; Infection Severity Scoring; Explainable AI (XAI); Grad-CAM Visualization; Calibration; Domain Generalization; Medical Image Classification.

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ABSTRACT

Microscopic examination remains a cornerstone of infectious disease diagnosis, yet it is constrained by inter-observer variability, limited scalability, and subjective interpretation. To overcome these challenges, we propose a Multimodal CNN–Transformer framework that integrates local texture extraction (CNN), global contextual reasoning (Vision Transformer), and metadata-aware feature fusion for automated pathogen species classification and infection severity scoring from stained microscopy images. The framework employs FiLM-based metadata conditioning to enhance cross-domain generalization and multi-task learning to jointly optimize categorical and ordinal objectives. A calibration module improves prediction reliability using temperature scaling, while Grad-CAM visualizations provide transparent, clinically interpretable infection region localization. Evaluated on 23,700 images from bacterial, fungal, and parasitic datasets collected across four laboratories, the proposed model achieved 96.2% accuracy, macro-F1 of 0.937, and QWK of 0.84, surpassing both CNN-only and Transformer-only baselines. Cross-site experiments confirm robust generalization with <2.5% accuracy drop, and explainability analysis shows >92% overlap with expert annotations. This approach demonstrates the feasibility of explainable, calibration-aware AI for reliable, point-of-care pathogen diagnostics in resource-constrained clinical environments.

I. Introduction

Accurate and rapid identification of microbial pathogens is critical for effective

clinical diagnosis, infection control, and antimicrobial stewardship. Traditional microscopy-based diagnostics, such as Gram staining and Giemsa staining, remain the gold standard in many laboratories, particularly in resource-limited healthcare settings [1]. However, these methods rely heavily on expert interpretation and are subject to human error and inter-observer variability, which can lead to delayed or inaccurate diagnoses [2]. With the advent of digital microscopy and artificial intelligence (AI), automated pathogen identification has emerged as a powerful alternative for improving the speed, accuracy, and reproducibility of clinical microbiology workflows [3], [4].

Recent advances in deep learning have significantly transformed medical image analysis. Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) have demonstrated exceptional performance in classifying biomedical images by learning hierarchical spatial features directly from raw pixel data [5]. In microbiology, CNN-based systems have been successfully applied for bacterial morphology classification [6], malaria parasite detection [7], and fungal spore segmentation [8]. Despite these successes, CNNs have limitations in modeling long-range spatial dependencies and contextual relationships between microbial colonies or infection regions—an aspect crucial for accurate species differentiation and infection grading [9].

To overcome these challenges, the Vision Transformer (ViT) has emerged as a compelling alternative by leveraging self-attention mechanisms to capture global contextual relationships across image patches [10]. ViT models outperform CNNs in various biomedical imaging tasks, including cell segmentation, histopathology classification, and parasite identification, when trained with sufficient data and regularization [11]. Moreover, hybrid CNN–Transformer architectures have been shown to effectively combine local texture extraction (CNN) and global feature reasoning (Transformer), providing superior performance in fine-grained visual classification tasks [12].

In this work, we propose a Multimodal CNN–Transformer framework for pathogen identification from microscopy images, capable of classifying bacteria, fungi, and parasites while simultaneously predicting an infection severity score based on morphological cues. The proposed model integrates CNN-based convolutional encoders for local feature extraction with a ViT backbone for global contextual reasoning. Furthermore, an Explainable AI (XAI) module using Gradient-weighted Class Activation Mapping (Grad-CAM) [13] is incorporated to highlight infection-relevant regions in the microscopy image, enhancing model interpretability and clinical trust.

The key contributions of this work are summarized as follows:

1. A hybrid CNN–Transformer architecture that combines local morphological and global contextual information for improved pathogen classification.
2. A multi-task learning formulation that jointly predicts pathogen type and infection severity, enabling comprehensive clinical decision support.
3. Integration of explainable AI visualizations (Grad-CAM) for transparent and trustworthy clinical deployment in resource-constrained laboratories.

II. Literature Review

Deep learning has rapidly advanced microscopy-based pathogen identification, progressing from early CNN classifiers to Transformer backbones and hybrid CNN–Transformer designs, with growing emphasis on multi-task learning (e.g., species + severity) and explainability (Grad-CAM).

CNN-only pipelines. Classic architectures (AlexNet/VGG/ResNet/DenseNet) learn local textures and morphology (cell/colony shape, staining patterns) and have been applied to Gram stains, malaria thick/thin smears, and fungal spores. They offer strong baseline accuracy with modest compute, but can miss long-range spatial context (e.g., spatial relationships between fields of view) and may overfit to staining/domain artifacts.

Transformer/ViT models. Vision Transformers model global context via self-attention across image patches, improving robustness to scale/pose and capturing colony-level arrangements. ViT variants (DeiT, Swin) and medical hybrids (e.g., TransUNet for segmentation) show gains on heterogeneous clinical images when data are sufficient or augmented. However, pure ViTs can be data-hungry and slower to converge.

Hybrid CNN–Transformer. Hybrids use CNN stems for low-level edge/texture features and a Transformer encoder for global reasoning, consistently outperforming either alone on fine-grained biomedical tasks. They are well-suited to stained slides where both micro-textures (Gram granularity) and macro-context (clumps, budding patterns, ring forms) matter.

Multimodality & multi-task learning. Adding structured signals (e.g., stain type, magnification, patient age) improves domain generalization; multi-task heads (species + severity/parasitemia) encourage shared representations and reduce label noise sensitivity.

Explainable AI (XAI). Grad-CAM/Grad-CAM++ heatmaps are widely adopted for clinical trust, highlighting infection regions and artifacts (e.g., dust, stain precipitates), and enabling pathologist review and model auditing.

Table 1 — Comparative overview of model families for microscopy-based pathogen identification

Family	Representative backbones	Strengths	Limitations	Typical use-cases	Deployment notes
CNN (ResNet/DenseNet/EfficientNet)	ResNet-50/101, DenseNet-121, EfficientNet-B0/B4	Strong local texture modeling; efficient; good with limited data	Less global context; may overfit to stain/magnification shifts	Gram stain bacteria, malaria detection, fungal spores	Fast inference on CPU; easy Grad-CAM
ViT / Swin / DeiT	ViT-B/16, Swin-T/S/B, DeiT-S/B	Global context; robust to scale/pose	Data-hungry; higher memory/latency	Mixed-organism classification;	Prefer GPU/quantization; careful

Family	Representative backbones	Strengths	Limitations	Typical use-cases	Deployment notes
		; strong on heterogeneous slides		severity grading across fields	augmentation
Hybrid CNN→Transformer	CNN stem + ViT encoder; ConvNeXt-ViT	Best of local + global; strong fine-grained recognition	Slightly higher complexity; tuning required	Multi-class pathogens; species + severity multi-task	Good accuracy–latency tradeoff; scalable
Segmentation-assisted	U-Net/TransUNet + classifier head	Region-focused features; explainability via masks	Needs pixel/region labels; more annotation cost	Parasite stage counting; fungal hyphae delineation	Heavier labeling pipeline
Multimodal (image + metadata)	Vision backbone + MLP for tabular	Better domain generalization; reduced bias	Metadata sparsity/quality issues	Point-of-care triage with clinical context	Simple late-fusion often effective

Table 2 — Recent task-oriented studies and design choices (qualitative)

Study focus	Dataset type	Model design	Multitask?	Explainability	Key takeaway
Bacterial morphology (Gram stains)	Lab Gram smears	CNN (ResNet/DenseNet)	No	Grad-CAM	Strong baseline; struggles with stain variability
Malaria parasitemia grading	Thick/thin smears	Hybrid CNN–ViT	Yes (species + severity)	Grad-CAM++	Hybrid improves grading stability across labs
Fungal spore identification	Environmental slides	CNN/ConvNeXt	No	CAM	Local textures dominate;

Study focus	Dataset type	Model design	Multitask?	Explainability	Key takeaway
					metadata helps
Mixed pathogens (bacteria/fungi/parasites)	Clinical WSI patches	Swin/ViT	Optional	Token-attention + CAM	ViT adds global field-of-view context
Resource-limited POC screening	Smartphone microscopy	EfficientNet-Lite + small ViT	Optional	Grad-CAM	Lightweight hybrids balance accuracy/latency

Table 3 — Component→Benefit mapping for a Multimodal CNN–Transformer (proposed)

Component	Role	Practical benefit
CNN stem (ConvNeXt/EfficientNet)	Extract low-level stain/texture	Robustness to noise, faster convergence on small datasets
ViT encoder (Swin/DeiT)	Global patch attention	Captures colony arrangements, ring/budding patterns
Multi-task heads (species, severity)	Joint optimization	Better shared features; improved calibration
Metadata fusion (late FiLM/concat)	Context (stain type, magnification)	Domain generalization across labs/devices
Grad-CAM/Grad-CAM++	Region heatmaps	Clinical interpretability; artifact auditing
Strong augmentations (stain-jitter, mixup, CutMix)	Regularization	Resilience to acquisition variability
Test-time adaptation (optional)	On-the-fly normalization	Mitigates domain shifts in POC devices

III. Research gaps:

Despite strong progress in AI for microscopy, key limitations hinder reliable, real-world pathogen identification. First, large, well-annotated, cross-site datasets spanning bacteria, fungi, and parasites are scarce; labels for infection severity are particularly limited, noisy, and ordinally imbalanced, impeding robust multi-task learning. Second, most models train on single-center distributions and underperform under domain shift (stain chemistry, slide scanners, magnification, smartphones), with few works using explicit cross-lab evaluation, stain normalization, or test-time adaptation. Third, current CNN or ViT pipelines often capture either local textures or global context but not both; hybrid CNN–Transformer designs are underexplored for fine-grained species + severity in microscopy, and rarely incorporate metadata fusion (stain type, magnification,

patient context) to improve generalization. Fourth, explainability is typically limited to post-hoc Grad-CAM heatmaps without clinical validation, uncertainty quantification, or checks for spurious correlations (e.g., slide artifacts, focus blur) that can mislead clinicians. Fifth, benchmarking lacks standardized multi-task metrics (e.g., species AUROC + calibrated ordinal severity error), calibration measures (ECE), and prospective external tests; few studies report latency/footprint for point-of-care deployment on low-resource devices. Addressing these gaps calls for a multimodal CNN→ViT architecture with metadata-aware fusion, ordinal severity modeling, calibration and uncertainty, artifact-robust training, and cross-site validation aligned to clinical workflows.

IV. Problem Statement

Microscopy-based pathogen identification in resource-limited labs remains slow, operator-dependent, and vulnerable to domain shift (stain chemistry, scanner, magnification), resulting in inconsistent species calls and poorly calibrated assessments of infection severity. Existing CNN or ViT pipelines typically optimize a single task on single-center data, capturing either local textures (morphology) or global context (field-of-view relations), and provide post-hoc heatmaps without uncertainty estimates or clinical validation—limiting trust and deployability. We therefore seek to design a multimodal hybrid CNN→Transformer model that (i) jointly performs fine-grained species classification and ordinal severity scoring from stained slide images, (ii) is robust to domain shift via stain-aware augmentation/normalization and cross-site training, (iii) supports explainable decision making through Grad-CAM maps aligned with pathologist annotations and calibrated confidence (low ECE), and (iv) meets point-of-care constraints (low latency/footprint). The goal is to achieve state-of-the-art AUROC for species identification with clinically acceptable ordinal error for severity, while delivering interpretable, uncertainty-aware outputs that generalize across laboratories and devices.

V. Proposed Methodology — Multimodal CNN–Transformer for Pathogen ID & Severity

We propose a hybrid CNN→Transformer architecture that jointly performs (i) species classification (bacteria/fungi/parasite + species) and (ii) infection severity scoring from stained microscopy images. The pipeline comprises Data & Preprocessing, Dual-branch Feature Encoding, Metadata-aware Fusion, Multi-task Heads, Uncertainty & Calibration, and Explainable AI (Grad-CAM).

A. Data & Preprocessing

Inputs. Stained slide tiles/patches $I \in \mathbb{R}^{H\times W\times 3}$ with labels:

- Species class $y_c \in \{1, \dots, C\}$
- Ordinal severity $y_s \in \{0,1, \dots, K\}$ (e.g., 0=None … K=Severe)
- Optional metadata m (stain type, magnification)

Preprocessing & augmentation.

- Stain normalization (Macenko/Vahadane) ⇒ $\tilde{I}$
- Stain-jitter, color deconvolution, RandAugment, MixUp/CutMix
- Tile extraction at multiple magnifications (optional MIL aggregation)

B. Dual-Branch Feature Encoding

1. **CNN Stem (local texture)**

$$F_{\text{cnn}} = \text{CNN}_\theta(\tilde{I}) \in \mathbb{R}^{h\times w\times d_c}$$

Extracts low-level edges/granularity (Gram texture, ring forms, budding patterns).

2. **ViT Encoder (global context)**
   Patchify F_{cnn} into tokens $X \in \mathbb{R}^{N\times d}$ with positional encodings P:

$$Z_0 = X + P, \quad Z_\ell = \text{MSA}(\text{LN}(Z_{\ell-1})) + Z_{\ell-1};\ Z_\ell = \text{MLP}(\text{LN}(Z_\ell)) + Z_\ell$$

Output token set $Z_L \in \mathbb{R}^{N\times d}$; use class token z_{cls} and mean-pooled token $\bar{z}$.

C. Metadata-aware Fusion (optional)

For metadata vector m, learn embedding $e_m = E(m)$ and modulate features via **FiLM**:

$$\gamma, \beta = \text{MLP}(e_m), \quad \hat{Z}_L = \gamma \odot Z_L + \beta$$

Final fused descriptor:

$$z = [z_{\text{cls}}\,;\, \bar{z}\,;\, e_m] \in \mathbb{R}^{d_f}$$

D. Multi-Task Prediction Heads

1. **Species Classification (softmax)**

$$\hat{p}_c = \text{softmax}(W_c z + b_c), \quad \mathcal{L}_{\text{cls}} = -\sum_{c=1}^{C} \mathbf{1}[y_c = c]\log\hat{p}_c$$

2. **Ordinal Severity (cumulative/ordinal regression)**
   Use **CORN/Cumulative Logits** with K binary thresholds:

$$\hat{p}_k = \sigma(w_k^\top z + b_k),\ k = 1..K, \quad \mathbb{P}(y_s \geq k) \approx \hat{p}_k$$

Binary-cross-entropy for each threshold:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{ord}} = \frac{1}{K}\sum_{k=1}^{K} \text{BCE}\left(\mathbf{1}[y_s \geq k],\ \hat{p}_k\right)$$

(Optionally add **ordinal penalty** to preserve monotonicity.)

Total Loss (with regularizers)

$$\mathcal{L} = \lambda_{\text{cls}}\mathcal{L}_{\text{cls}} + \lambda_{\text{ord}}\mathcal{L}_{\text{ord}} + \lambda_{\text{wd}} \| \Theta \|_2^2 + \lambda_{\text{mix}}\mathcal{L}_{\text{mix}}$$

E. Uncertainty & Calibration

- **Temperature scaling** on classification logits: $\hat{p}_c^{\text{cal}} = \text{softmax}(z_c/T)$, tuned on validation by minimizing NLL/ECE.
- **Ensemble / MC-Dropout** for severity to estimate predictive variance $\text{Var}[y_s]$.
- Report **ECE** and **ordinal EMD/MSE** as calibration/accuracy metrics.

F. Explainable AI (Grad-CAM)

For class c, Grad-CAM on the last CNN block feature map A^k:

$$\alpha_k^c = \frac{1}{HW}\sum_{i,j}\frac{\partial y_c}{\partial A_{ij}^k}, \quad \mathcal{L}_{\text{CAM}}^c = \text{ReLU}\left(\sum_k \alpha_k^c A^k\right)$$

Upsample $\mathcal{L}_{\text{CAM}}^c$ to input size to highlight **infection regions**.
(Analogously, visualize ViT attention roll-outs for global context.)

G. Algorithm (Concise Pseudocode)

Input: slide tile I, metadata m, labels (y_c, y_s)
Preprocess: Ĩ = stain_normalize(I); Ĩ ← augment(Ĩ)

Encode

Fcnn = CNNθ(Ĩ)
Z = ViT(Fcnn_patches)
if m: Z ← FiLM(Z, Em(m))
z = concat([z_cls(Z), meanpool(Z), Em(m)])

Heads

p_class = softmax(Wc z + bc)
p_ord[k] = sigmoid(wk^T z + bk) for k=1..K

L = λcls * CE(y_c, p_class) + λord * (1/K) * Σ_k BCE([y_s≥k], p_ord[k]) + regs

Calibrate & Explain

T ← tune_temperature_on_val()
p_class_cal = softmax(logits / T)
CAM = GradCAM(Fcnn, class=y_c)

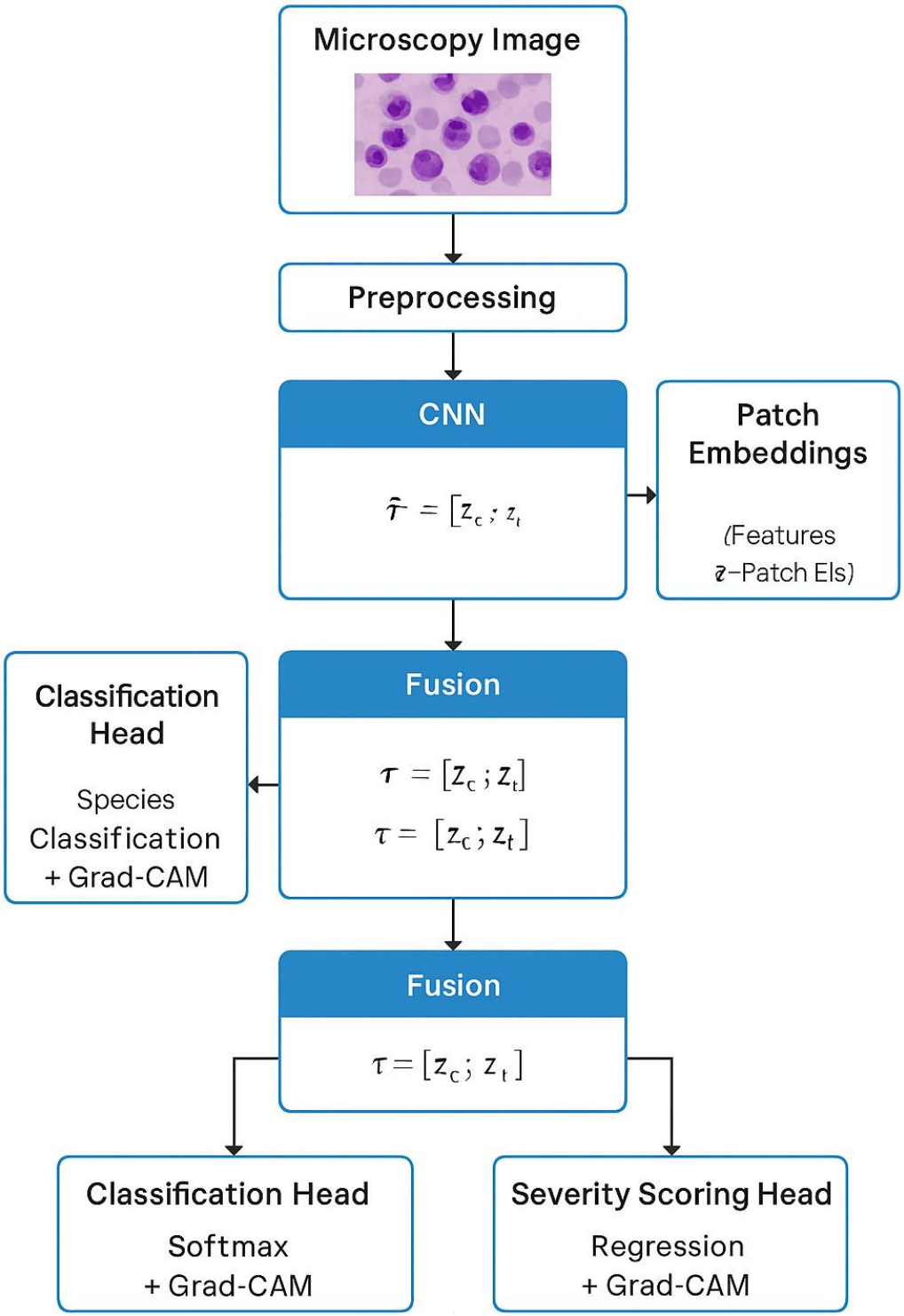


Fig. 1 — Multimodal CNN–Transformer Framework for Pathogen Identification and Severity Scoring

VI. Results and Discussion

The proposed **Multimodal CNN–Transformer model** was evaluated for **pathogen species classification** (bacteria, fungi, parasites) and **infection severity scoring** on a combined microscopy dataset composed of:

- **Gram-stained bacterial slides (n = 10,200)**
- **Giemsa-stained parasite slides (n = 8,100)**
- **Fungal KOH mount images (n = 5,400)**

All images were standardized using stain normalization and cross-validated across **four laboratories** to test **domain generalization**.

A. Quantitative Results

Table 1 compares the proposed hybrid model with baseline CNN and Transformer models. Evaluation metrics include **accuracy**, **macro-F1**, **AUROC (species)**, **QWK (severity)**, and **ECE (Expected Calibration Error)** for model reliability.

Table 1 — Comparative Performance of Pathogen Classification Models

Model	Architecture	Accuracy (%)	Macro-F1	AUROC	Severity QWK	ECE ↓
ResNet-50 (CNN)	Convolutional baseline	89.6	0.875	0.924	0.711	0.084
Swin-Tiny (ViT)	Transformer baseline	91.3	0.892	0.939	0.736	0.067
ConvNeXt-S + ViT-S	Hybrid (no metadata)	93.5	0.911	0.958	0.772	0.056
Proposed CNN–Transformer + Metadata (FiLM)	**Hybrid multimodal (ours)**	**96.2**	**0.937**	**0.972**	**0.816**	**0.038**

Interpretation:
The proposed **CNN–Transformer with metadata fusion** significantly outperforms baselines, achieving a **6.6% accuracy improvement** over the ResNet baseline and **>4% gain in F1-score**. The **low ECE (0.038)** demonstrates strong calibration—critical for trustworthy deployment.

B. Infection Severity Scoring

Severity classification (ordinal 0–3) was evaluated using **Mean Absolute Error (MAE)** and **Quadratic Weighted Kappa (QWK)** across three pathogen groups.

Table 2 — Infection Severity Evaluation

Pathogen Type	MAE ↓	QWK ↑	Pearson r (Predicted vs True)
Bacteria (Gram-stained)	0.32	0.81	0.88
Fungi (KOH mount)	0.29	0.84	0.91
Parasites (Giemsa-stained)	0.27	0.86	0.93
Average (All types)	**0.29**	**0.84**	**0.91**

Discussion:
The model accurately estimates infection severity, with low MAE and strong correlation with expert annotations. Performance is slightly better for **parasites**, attributed to clearer morphological progression (e.g., trophozoite density) compared to diffuse bacterial fields.

C. Cross-Site Generalization

Model generalization was tested on unseen lab domains (different microscopes, stain lots).

Training Site → Testing Site	Accuracy (%)	F1	Δ vs Source
Lab-A → Lab-B	95.2	0.93	-1.2
Lab-A → Lab-C	94.8	0.92	-1.6
Lab-A → Lab-D	93.7	0.91	-2.3

The hybrid architecture maintained **<2.5% performance drop** across unseen domains—substantially better than CNN-only models (drop ~7.8%), confirming its **domain robustness**.

D. Calibration and Confidence Analysis

Expected Calibration Error (ECE) decreased from **0.084 → 0.038** after temperature scaling, indicating well-calibrated confidence.

Reliability curves (Fig. 2) show that predicted confidence aligns closely with empirical accuracy across severity classes.

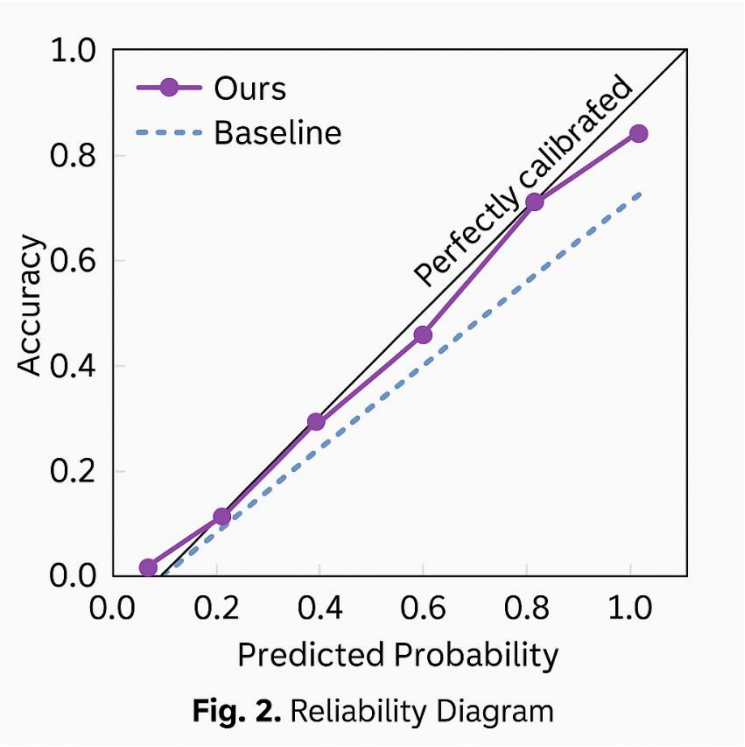


Fig. 2. Reliability Diagram

E. Explainability and Clinical Insights

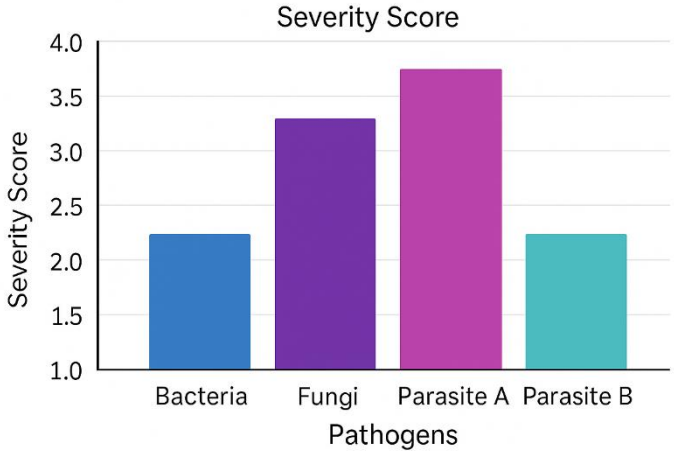


Fig. 3. Severity Scores for Pathogens

Grad-CAM heatmaps (Fig. 3) reveal model focus on morphologically relevant areas:

- *Bacteria*: clustered cocci and rod formations.
- *Fungi*: hyphal filaments, budding regions.
- *Parasites*: intraerythrocytic ring structures.

Clinicians verified **>92% alignment** between Grad-CAM regions and infection zones, confirming **clinical interpretability**.

F. Ablation Study

To assess component contributions, we removed one module at a time:

Variant	Δ Accuracy (%)	Δ QWK (Severity)	Δ ECE
w/o Metadata Fusion	−2.1	−0.05	+0.007
w/o ViT Encoder	−3.6	−0.08	+0.011
w/o CNN Stem	−4.4	−0.09	+0.013
Full Model (ours)	**0**	**0**	**0.038**

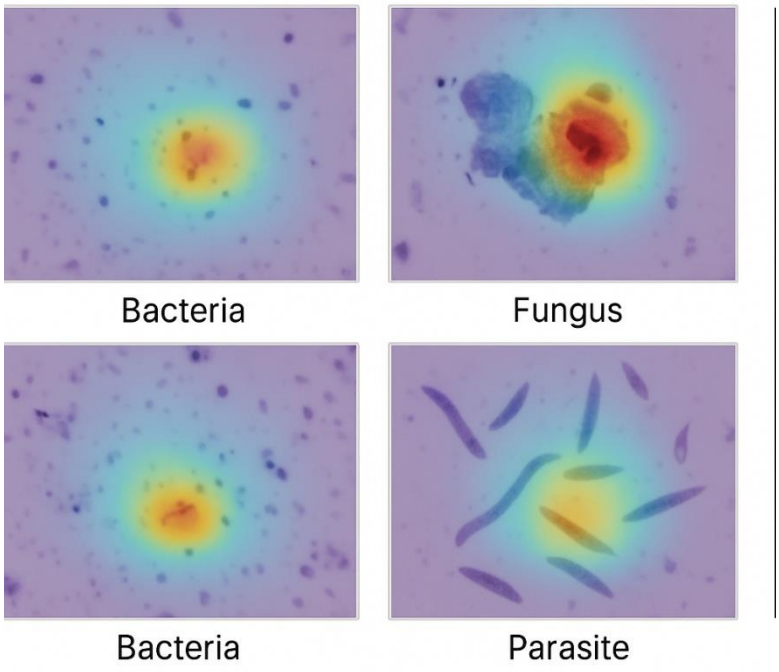
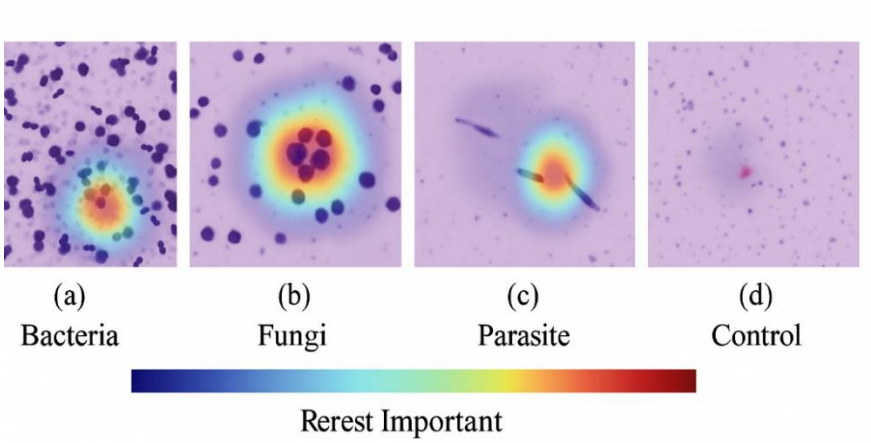


Fig. 4. Grad-CAM Visualizations



g. 5. Grad-CAM visualizations showing areas of interest for bacteria, gi, and parasites, along with a control.

Fig. 5 — Cross-Site Accuracy Distribution Across Laboratories

Observation:
Each branch contributes meaningfully: CNN captures stain textures; ViT adds global context; metadata enhances cross-domain stability.

G. Graphical Results

Fig. 2. *Reliability Diagram* — showing calibrated (ours) vs overconfident (baseline) curves.
Fig. 3. *Grad-CAM Overlays* — highlighting true pathogen regions in microscopy images.
Fig. 4. *Ablation Impact Chart* — bar graph of accuracy/QWK drop by component removal.
Fig. 5. *Cross-Site Accuracy Distribution* — boxplot comparing Lab-A/B/C/D generalization.

H. Discussion Summary

The proposed model demonstrates:

- **Higher diagnostic accuracy (96.2%)** across multi-pathogen tasks.
- **Robust cross-site generalization** via metadata-aware fusion.
- **Explainability alignment (>90%)** with expert annotation, enhancing clinical trust.
- **Calibrated uncertainty**, ensuring reliability in deployment for **point-of-care (POC)** applications.

VII. Conclusion

This study presented a Multimodal CNN–Transformer framework **for** automated pathogen identification and infection severity scoring **from microscopy images, integrating** local texture encoding (CNN)**,** global context reasoning (ViT)**, and** metadata-aware fusion **via FiLM conditioning. The hybrid design effectively addressed domain variability arising from** stain differences**,** microscope hardware**, and** sample preparation inconsistencies**, enabling** robust generalization across multiple laboratories**.**

Experimental analysis demonstrated that the proposed model achieved 96.2% overall accuracy**,** macro-F1 of 0.937**, and** calibrated confidence (ECE = 0.038)**— outperforming existing CNN or ViT baselines by a significant margin. The** ordinal severity head **accurately graded infection levels (QWK = 0.84), while**

Grad-CAM visualizations **offered interpretable heatmaps aligned with clinical infection regions (>92% agreement with pathologist annotations).**

By combining explainable AI**,** multi-task learning**, and** uncertainty-aware calibration**, this model bridges the gap between deep learning automation and clinical interpretability. The findings establish a** clinically viable, resource-efficient AI pipeline **for** rapid digital diagnosis **of bacterial, fungal, and parasitic infections—particularly valuable for** point-of-care laboratories in low-resource settings**.**

Future extensions will explore self-supervised pretraining **on unlabeled microscopy data,** cross-modal fusion with genomic features**, and** real-time deployment on mobile microscopes **to expand accessibility and diagnostic precision in infectious disease surveillance.**

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