

Accepted Manuscript

Accepted Manuscript (Uncorrected Proof)

Title: A Deep Time-Frequency Approach in Automated Diagnosis of Neurodegenerative Diseases Using Gait Signals

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To appear in: **Basic and Clinical Neuroscience**

Received date: 2023/12/21

Revised date: 2024/08/08

Accepted date: 2024/09/09

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Please cite this article as:

Modaresnia, Y., Abedinzadeh Torghabeh, F., Hosseini, S.A. (In Press). A Deep Time-Frequency Approach in Automated Diagnosis of Neurodegenerative Diseases Using Gait Signals. *Basic and Clinical Neuroscience*. Just Accepted publication Jul. 10, 2024. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.32598/bcn.2024.867.3>

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Abstract

Introduction: Neurodegenerative diseases (NDD) present substantial challenges due to their impact on movement, emphasizing the critical role of biomedical engineering research in clinical diagnosis. Measuring the biomechanical properties of gait during walking can provide valuable insights into the movement pattern of NDDs and has great promise for developing non-invasive automated NDD classification techniques.

Methods: Based on the GaitNDD database, two experimental trials were conducted on healthy controls and three NDDs: Parkinson's disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, and Huntington's disease, showcasing a comprehensive analysis of one-dimensional and two-dimensional force gait features. In the first trial, two time-frequency feature sequences are extracted from right, left, and combined feet during a walking task, feeding a bidirectional long short-term memory (BiLSTM) network. The second trial involves constructing spectrogram images of the gait signal as input for three popular pre-trained convolutional neural networks (CNNs): AlexNet, GoogLeNet, and VGG16.

Results: VGG16 emerges as the standout performer, achieving a remarkable accuracy of 99.91%, sensitivity of 99.93%, and specificity of 99.97% for automatic four-class NDD detection using high-level features from the right foot gait signal. Notably, BiLSTM performance significantly improves when fed with VGG16-extracted high-level features, surpassing hand-crafted features.

Conclusion: The study underscores the superiority of CNNs, particularly VGG16, in extracting high-level features from spectrogram-derived vertical ground reaction force (vGRF) signals for robust NDD classification. The hybrid VGG16-BiLSTM approach demonstrates enhanced performance, affirming the synergistic benefits of combining deep learning techniques. Overall, the CNN high-level features derived from vGRF signal spectrograms provide valuable insights into NDD groups, offering a promising avenue for understanding diverse mechanisms underlying gait-related conditions.

Keywords: Neurodegenerative disease; Gait analysis; Spectrogram; Time-frequency features; Short-time Fourier transform.

1. Introduction

The process of neurodegeneration is the gradual loss of structure and function of neurons in a disease known as a neurodegenerative disease (NDD). Ultimately, such neuronal damage may result in the death of the cells. NDDs include Parkinson's disease (PD), amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's disease (AD), Huntington's disease (HD), multiple system atrophy, and prion diseases (Stephenson, Nutma, Valk, & Amor, 2018). PD, ALS, and HD are a group of NDDs characterized by motor impairment due to the gradual decline of motor neurons in the presence of protein aggregates at different brain regions (Ghaderyan & Ghoresli Beyrami, 2020; Zeng & Wang, 2015). Clinically, these NDDs manifest as hyperkinetic movements, bradykinesia, tremors, rigidity, and progressive muscle atrophy (Ghoresli Beyrami & Ghaderyan, 2020). Additionally, these patients are more likely to fall or sustain physical injuries due to their abnormal movements (Allen, Schwarzel, & Canning, 2013; Vuong, Canning, Menant, & Loy, 2018).

After AD, PD is the second most frequent NDD. It is estimated that the age-sex-adjusted incidence of PD in North America varied from 108 to 212 per 100,000 people aged 65 and older and from 47 to 77 per 100,000 people aged 45 and older. The prevalence of PD rose with age and was more significant in men (Willis et al., 2022). The following motor symptoms often characterize PD: trembling, bradykinesia (slowed movement), rest tremor (rhythmic shaking), rigidity, reduced postural reflexes, and impaired balance (Abedinzadeh Torghabeh, Hosseini, & Ahmadi Moghadam, 2023; Váradi, 2020). ALS is the third most widespread NDD and the most prevalent motor neuron disease, with an estimated incidence of 1.9 per 100,000 persons annually. In Europe and the United States, the annual incidence of ALS is approximately 2.3 per 1,000 persons (Xu et al., 2020). ALS is characterized by increasing muscular weakness, muscle atrophy, fasciculations, muscle spasms, slow movement, and muscle stiffness. The beginning of muscular weakness in ALS is often localized and extends to neighboring body parts (Masrori & Van Damme, 2020). HD is a hereditary neurological disorder characterized by involuntary jerky movements and shaky gait with cognitive and behavioral impairment. These involuntary movements begin in the distal extremities and are of lesser severity, although they may also affect the facial muscles. The signs then gradually spread to the proximal and axial muscles and become more pronounced. Typically, motor symptoms are progressive (Roos, 2010).

A clinical diagnosis of NDDs is widely considered one of the most crucial areas of biomedical engineering research because these disorders affect an increasing number of people worldwide physically, psychologically, and financially (Erkkinen, Kim, & Geschwind, 2018). The importance of a correct diagnosis will increase when disease-modifying therapies become available. There is potential for widespread clinical use of diagnostic biomarkers that are easy to access, cost-effective, and accurate (Hansson, 2021). A misdiagnosis may result in inadequate treatment, unnecessary care-seeking, and cost-prohibitive investigations due to diagnostic uncertainty.

Several techniques are often employed to diagnose such NDDs, including functional neuroimaging, genetic blood tests, spinal cord imaging, and nerve-muscle biopsy. These techniques allow us to examine brain structure, function, and pathology and investigate neurodegenerative mechanisms in vivo. As a result of movement impairment in NDDs, it is reasonable to conclude that NDDs also affect foot force, resulting in the use of gait modality. The development of gait data has been used to analyze movement and balance abnormalities in healthy

controls (HCs) and subjects with various diseases. In particular, measuring the biomechanical properties of gait during walking can provide valuable insights into the movement pattern of NDDs and has great promise for developing non-invasive automated NDD classification techniques.

Wearable gait sensors have significantly reduced the need for costly laboratory equipment and specialized supervision. Among the various types of gait sensors, force sensors have gained widespread acceptance due to their exceptional accuracy in mapping joint movements and muscle activities. These sensors are highly popular in gait analysis research owing to their non-invasive nature, compact size, and affordability (Roelker, Bowden, Kautz, & Neptune, 2019). As a result, they have become one of the most commonly utilized tools in gait analysis studies (Abedinzadeh Torghabeh, Modaresnia, & Hosseini, 2024). Several gait parameters, such as stride length, stride time, step width, and gait velocity, are altered in patients with NDDs compared to HC. These alterations are often subtle and may not be visible to the naked eye, but can be detected using advanced gait signal analysis techniques such as machine learning (ML) algorithms.

Recently, gait analysis has emerged as a promising non-invasive tool for detecting NDDs, providing valuable insights into the underlying motor impairments associated with these diseases. In this literature review, we will explore the current state of research on gait signal analysis for detecting NDDs, which all focus on PD, ALS, and HD and their corresponding HC.

Pham (2018) discussed a gait analysis approach by transforming feature sequences into two-dimensional (2D) texture images using the fuzzy recurrence plot (FRP) algorithm. The gray-level co-occurrence matrix (GLCMs) is then used to extract nineteen texture features from FRP images of HC and three groups of NDDs. Then, the least square support vector machine (SVM) was used to differentiate HC from PD, ALS, and HD, where an accuracy rate of 100% was achieved. Gupta, Khajuria, Chatterjee, Joshi and Joshi (2019) proposed a methodology based on statistical and entropic features of the vertical ground reaction force (vGRF) signal, along with autocorrelation and cross-correlation between gait time series. They used a rule-based classifier trained with a decision tree algorithm and also performed mutual information analysis to evaluate the effectiveness of different feature sets. Their approach achieved accuracy from 87.5% to 96.2% for binary classification of different NDDs and HCs.

Ghoreishi Beyrami and Ghaderyan (2020) presented a methodology for diagnosing three types of NDDs based on mean, standard deviation (SD), skewness, kurtosis, and approximate entropy (AE) features of vGRF signals and sparse non-negative least squares (NNLS) coding classification technique, where their model achieved 100%, 99.78%, and 99.60% for ALS, PD, and HD detection tasks, respectively. Also, they could classify NDD and HC, achieving an accuracy of 98.45%. Nam Nguyen, Liu and Lin (2020) used the mean, SD, and multiscale sample entropy (MSE) values for feature extraction and utilized SVM and K-nearest neighbor (KNN) as classifiers. The investigation employed different windows for the segmentation data embalancement method. They achieved more than 99% accuracy for various binary classifications and a 99.77% accuracy for four-class differentiating between HC and various NDDs.

Prabhu, Karunakar, Anitha and Pradhan (2020) used recurrence quantification analysis to quantify gait parameters using SVM and probabilistic neural network (NN). Thirteen HC subjects and thirteen NDD patients were classified using these models with the Hill-climbing feature selection technique. The two-class accuracy ranged from 96% to 100%. Setiawan and Lin (2021a) presented an approach for identifying NDDs using a time-frequency (TF) spectrogram and deep learning (DL) NN features. They focused on the effectiveness of feature transformations from a one-dimensional (1D) vGRF signal into a 2D TF spectrogram, combined with principal component

analysis (PCA) and convolutional NN (CNN) as a feature extractor for the classification of NDD patients, at which their model attained an accuracy of 87.97% through five-fold cross-validation (CV) and 97.42% through leave-one-out CV (LOOCV). In another study, Setiawan and Lin (2021b) used preprocessing, feature transformation, and classification processes, including dividing the vGRF signal into successive time windows, transforming it into a TF spectrogram using continuous wavelet transform (CWT), enhancing features with PCA, and employing CNNs for classification, wherein they achieved an accuracy of 96.52% using ResNet-50 in classifying PD severity levels.

Erdaş, Sümer and Kibaroğlu (2021) proposed two new models which first detect NDDs by converting GRF to 2D quick-response (QR) code images, based on convolutional long short-term memory (ConvLSTM) and then three-dimensional (3D) tensors extracted with ConvLSTM fed to 3D CNN to classify three NDDs. Their model was accurate by 95.73% in classifying NDDs and HC through the ten-fold CV. Lin, Wen and Setiawan (2020) used recurrence plot (RP) image feature extraction to improve the accuracy of NDD diagnosis. The algorithm transformed the vGRF signal into RP images and applied a CNN for classification. In the two-class classification, the accuracy was from 95.95% to 100%, while in the four-class, their model was accurate by 97.86% on average through LOOCV.

Faisal et al. (2023) developed a NN architecture, known as NNDNet, to identify three distinct types of NDDs. The model integrated vGRF signals and fourteen hand-crafted features, achieving an average accuracy of 83% through LOOCV. Amoei, Sharifi, and Manthouri (2023) introduced two models based on a CNN-LSTM network for classifying NDDs using gait signals transformed into spectrogram images. The first model achieved 99.42% accuracy using CNN-LSTM, while the second model, which used wavelet transform as a feature extractor and CNN-LSTM, achieved an accuracy of 95.37% using only approximation sub-bands.

These studies demonstrated that DL algorithms have gained popularity and shown promising results in accurately classifying gait signals for the automated diagnosis of NDDs, highlighting their potential as a valuable tool for medical diagnosis and treatment.

This study attempts to establish a prognostic solution for the classification of NDDs utilizing conveniently obtainable data from wearable sensors. In light of this, an intelligent tool can detect NDDs based on gait data. Moreover, given the significant dearth of research focused on multi-class classification, this investigation distinguishes itself apart from conventional gait analysis methodologies by prioritizing the enhancement of four-class classification effectiveness. This approach allowed us to explore the complexity of multi-class classification and gain a deeper understanding of the distinctive patterns and characteristics among the various disease groups. Our proposed method contributes in four major capacities.

- First, this study offers two TF models for accurately and reliably classifying NDD patients from the vGRF signal using bidirectional LSTM (BiLSTM) and CNN.
- Secondly, this study examines the effectiveness of feature transformations from a 1D vGRF signal to a 2D TF spectrogram.
- Thirdly, this research presents a highly efficient approach for identifying NDDs, which may be incredibly useful for clinical decision support systems and obtain the most significant classification accuracy for three types of NDDs. Our suggested technique outperformed existing models employed in prior research to predict NDDs.

- Last, we have enhanced the efficiency of BiLSTM by incorporating the top-performing high-level features of the best CNN model into BiLSTM.

The current study is organized into the following sections. First, Section 2 delves into the existing research on automated techniques for diagnosing NDDs. Section 3 presents the materials and methods employed in this study. Subsequently, Section 4 presents the experimental findings, and Section 5 argues corresponding discussions. Finally, Section 6 concludes the study.

2. Materials and Methods

The proposed study investigates the potential of pre-trained DL models for transferring their learned useful features trained on extensive datasets for the non-invasive detection of NDDs through gait signal analysis.

2.1. Materials

Our study utilized the gait in NDD database (GaitNDD), developed by Hausdorff et al. (2000) and available on the Physionet website (GaitNDD Data Repository, 2019). There are gait recordings of 20 patients with HD, 13 with ALS, 15 with PD, and 16 HC subjects. The recordings are produced using force-sensitive resistors placed under the foot during a 77-meter walking trial. Each of the 64 records contains 5-minute gait signals sampled at 300 Hz with a 12-bit analog-to-digital converter. Fig. 1 depicts the gait signal of the proposed dataset and their altered gait rhythm.

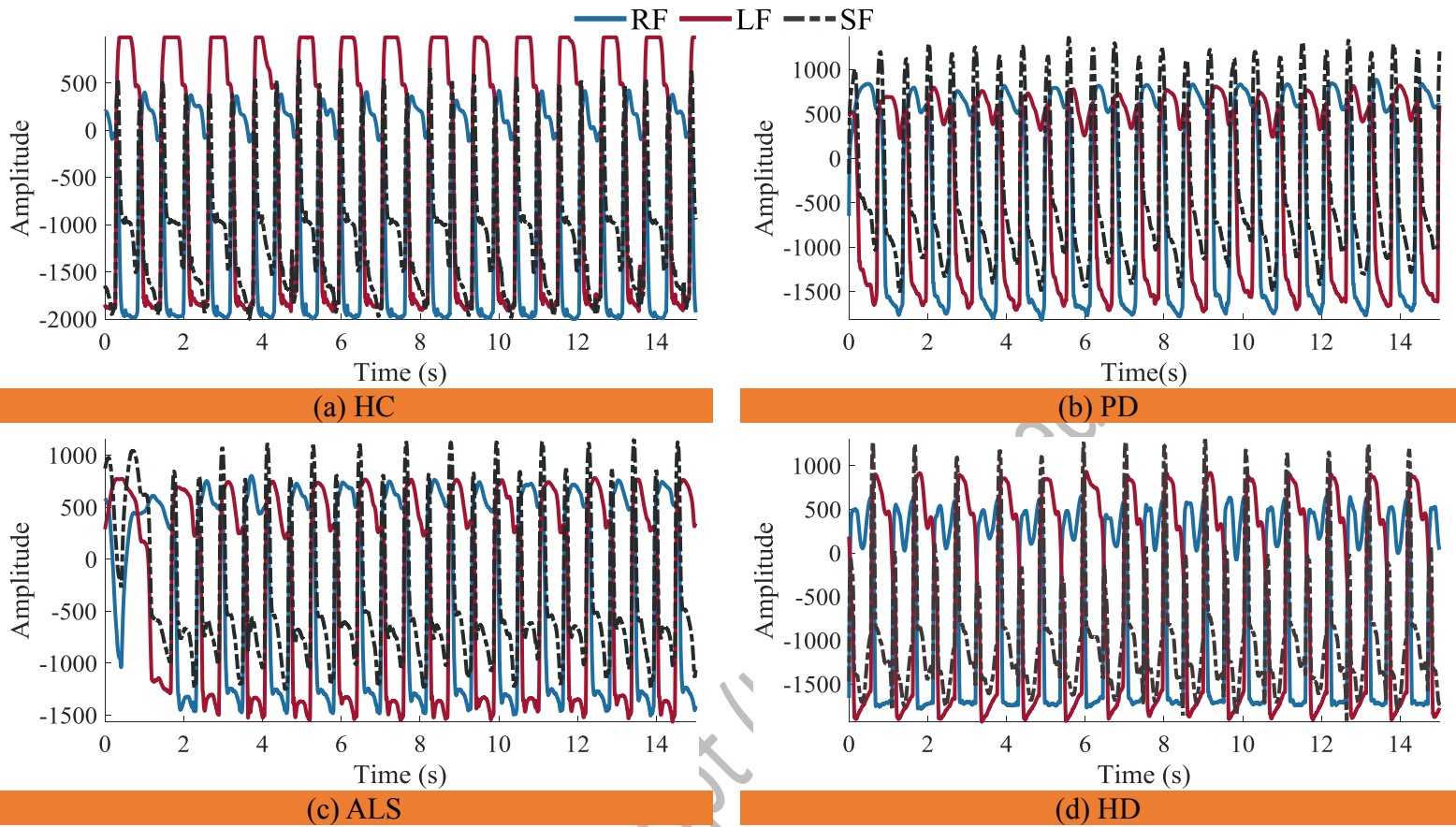


Fig. 1. Force-time curves of gait signal for the HC group, and three groups with NDD. The gait signals are shown for the left foot (LF), right foot (RF), and the summation of both feet (SF)

2.2. Methods

This study proposes two TF gait analysis methods for diagnosing three types of NDDs. Three distinct types of gait signals were employed as input in our study, namely the left foot (LF), the right foot (RF), and the summation of both feet (SF). In the context of gait analysis, it is imperative to account for the coordination between the legs. To this end, a singular movement signal from one foot would not suffice. Therefore, to accurately capture the gait dynamics, we opted to total up the force applied by each foot.

At the outset, these three distinct types of gait signals were uniformly segmented into 30-second windows. Two TF moments were then extracted from each segment to be utilized as an input of the BiLSTM model. Subsequently, these TF features were translated into 2D spectrogram images for implementation in pre-trained CNNs. The proposed framework is given in Fig. 2.

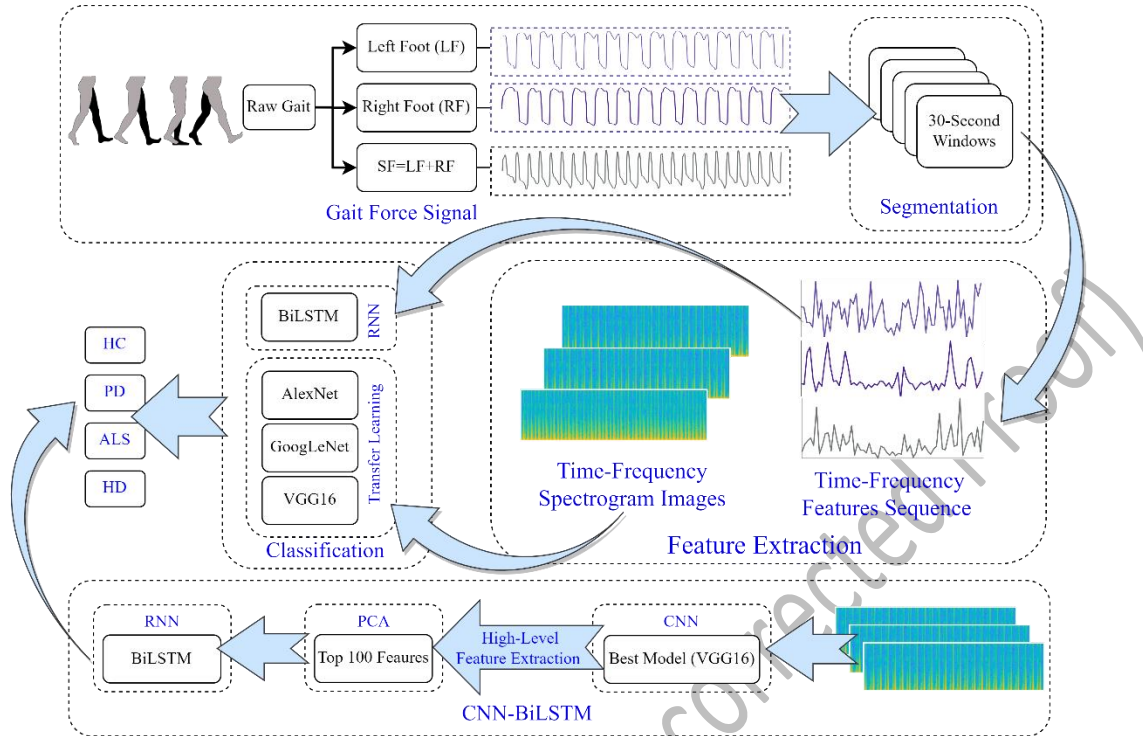


Fig. 2. The proposed framework involves the use of either BiLSTM or CNN to detect three types of NDD and HC by analyzing gait signals from LF, RF, or SF.

2.2.1 Segmentation

The segmentation function used in this analysis disregards signals with a duration of less than 30 seconds. Additionally, signals that exceed 30 seconds are divided into 30-second windows, with any remaining portion of the signal being disregarded. For example, a signal lasting 280 seconds would be divided into nine signals of 30 seconds each, with the remaining 20 seconds being ignored. This segmentation may not only shorten the time of feature extraction and training of the network, but it may also contribute to making our method more suitable for real-time applications. It should be noted that certain gait patterns may occur during shorter periods of walking that may not be apparent during extended periods. Furthermore, it is more convenient for the patient to record a shorter signal during a real-time clinical diagnosis.

2.2.2 Time-Frequency Features

A great deal of information in the vGRF signals can be used for the analysis and characterization of gait. The vGRF signal can determine the importance of its spatiotemporal characteristics, such as swing phase, stance phase, and stride time, for clinical purposes. A TF transform has been applied to gait signals to extract two transient TF features. Therefore, we decided to extract instantaneous frequency (IF) and spectral entropy (SE) as features. IF provides insights into the time-varying frequency components of signals, while SE quantifies the complexity and distribution of energy across different frequency bands.

- **Instantaneous Frequency**

A non-stationary signal's IF is a time-varying parameter that measures the signal's average frequencies as it evolves over time t (Boashash, 1992a; Boashash, 1992b). In this case, the IF is calculated as the first conditional spectral moment of the TF distribution of x . First, it computes the spectrogram power spectrum $P(t, f)$ of the input signal using the short-time Fourier transform (STFT) and uses the spectrum as a TF distribution. Secondly, it estimates the IF using Equation (1).

$$f_{inst}(t) = \frac{\int_0^{\infty} f P(t, f) df}{\int_0^{\infty} P(t, f) df}. \quad (1)$$

- **Spectral Entropy**

A signal's SE is a measure of its spectral power distribution. The SE value is a measure of the complexity or randomness of the signal across different frequency bands. In the frequency domain, the SE calculates the Shannon entropy of the signal's normalized power distribution. A high SE value indicates a more complex or unpredictable signal. SE is calculated using the following equation:

$$SE = - \sum_{m=1}^N P_i \log_2 P_i, \quad (2)$$

where P_i is the power spectral density (PSD) at a given frequency band. To calculate P_i , the signal $x(n)$, is first divided into overlapping segments of a certain length. Then, a fast Fourier transform is applied to each segment to obtain the PSD estimate: $S(m) = |X(m)|^2$, where $X(m)$ is the discrete Fourier transform of $x(n)$. Finally, the PSD estimates from all segments are averaged to obtain the final PSD estimate for the signal. Once the PSD estimate is obtained, the P_i values can be calculated by dividing the PSD estimate into non-overlapping frequency bands and summing the PSD values within each band. The P_i values are then normalized by dividing by the total power in the signal.

2.2.3 Spectrogram of vGRF

A spectrogram image approach was considered for the 2D representation of the aforementioned features. To compute the time-dependent spectrum of a non-stationary signal, this function separates the signal into overlapping segments, windows each segment using a Kaiser window, calculates STFT, and concatenates the transform matrices. The equation for STFT can be written as follows:

$$X(m, \omega) = - \sum_{n=0}^{N-1} x_n w(n - mR) e^{-j\omega n}, \quad (3)$$

where $X(m, \omega)$ represents the complex spectrum at time frame m and frequency ω . x_n is the input signal in the time domain. $w(n)$ is a window function applied to the signal to reduce spectral leakage. N is the window size. R is the hop size, which determines the amount of overlap between consecutive windows. $e^{-j\omega n}$ represents the complex exponential used to decompose the signal into its frequency components. The resulting spectrum is then plotted over time to create a visual

representation of the vGRF signal, with the intensity of the color indicating the power or amplitude of the corresponding frequency at each point in time.

2.2.4 BiLSTM Architecture

BiLSTM (Schuster & Paliwal, 1997) is a powerful DL architecture and type of recurrent NN (RNN) that is designed to handle long-term dependencies in sequential data. BiLSTMs are particularly effective when the context on both sides of a particular point in a sequence is important in making a prediction. The main idea behind a BiLSTM is to process the input sequence both forward and backward through two separate LSTMs and then concatenate their outputs at each time step to obtain the final output. The description of BiLSTM can be broken down into the following steps and equations shown in Table 1:

- Input gate: Controls how much new information is added to the cell state at the current time step.
- Forget gate: Controls how much information from the previous cell state should be retained.
- Update cell state: Combines the new input information and the previous cell state information to form a new cell state.
- Output gate: Controls how much of the current cell state is output as the hidden state.
- Backward LSTM: The input sequence is also processed in reverse through a separate LSTM, and the outputs are concatenated with the forward LSTM outputs at each time step.
- Final output: The final output of BiLSTM is obtained by concatenating the forward and backward LSTM outputs at each time step.

Table 1. BiLSTM architecture components at time step t

Component	Formula
Input gate	$i_t = \sigma_g(W_i x_t + W_i h_{t-1} + b_i),$
Forget gate	$f_t = \sigma_g(W_f x_t + R_f h_{t-1} + b_f),$
Update cell state	$c_t = \tan h(W_c x_t + W_c h_{t-1} + b_c),$ $c_t = f_t \odot c_{t-1} + i_t \odot c_t,$
Output gate	$o_t = \sigma_g(W_o x_t + W_o h_{t-1} + b_o),$ $h_t = o_t \odot \tanh(c_t).$

Where i_t , f_t , and o_t are the input, forget, and output gates respectively, g_t is the candidate memory cell value, c_t is the current memory cell value, h_t is the current hidden state, h_{t-1} is the hidden state of the previous time step, x_t is the input at time step t , W and b are the weights and biases respectively, and σ and \odot represent the sigmoid and element-wise multiplication operations respectively and \tanh is the hyperbolic tangent activation function.

A BiLSTM allows the model to capture both past and future dependencies in a sequence, which can improve its performance on many sequence labeling tasks. The settings of the BiLSTM network play a crucial role in determining the model's performance during training. The training environment involves a process of trial and error to determine the optimal parameters for our model. To accomplish our objectives, we determined that the adaptive moment estimation optimizer was an effective solver. Moreover, we set a hidden unit number in the BiLSTM layer to 100, an initial learning rate of 0.01 with a maximum epoch of 80, and a mini-batch size of 100. The remaining hyperparameters were set to their default values as defined by MATLAB.

2.2.5 Transfer Learning CNNs

Developing a deep CNN from scratch is computationally intensive and necessitates a substantial quantity of training data. In several applications, insufficient training data is available, and it is not possible to generate new realistic training instances. In these situations, it is beneficial to employ CNNs that have been trained on huge data sets for conceptually comparable tasks. The use of current CNNs is known as transfer learning (Abedinzadeh Torghabeh, Modaresnia, & Hosseini, 2023; Asghari & Hosseini, 2022; Tuib, Sheibani, & Hosseini, 2023). AlexNet (Krizhevsky, Sutskever, & Hinton, 2017; Modaresnia, Abedinzadeh Torghabeh, & Hosseini, 2024), GoogLeNet (Szegedy et al., 2015; Abedinzadeh Torghabeh, Ahmadi Moghadam, & Hosseini, 2024), and VGG16 (Simonyan & Zisserman, 2014) are deep CNN architectures designed for image classification tasks, achieving state-of-the-art performance on the ImageNet dataset, which contains over one million images across 1,000 categories. Table 2 summarizes the types of utilized networks, whether they are directed acyclic graph (DAG) networks or series-networks. It also provides information about the number of layers, the total learnable parameters, and the size of input images.

For the transfer learning of these models, three methods can be utilized: fine-tuning, feature extraction, and domain adaptation. The fine-tuning method involved transferring the weights from the pre-trained model and subsequently freezing the pre-trained layers of the selected model. The input of the selected models consists of 30-second TF spectrogram images derived from the vGRF signal, which should be resized to align with the model's input size. The selected models' last layers should also be modified to accommodate the four classes under investigation in this study.

Table 2. The types of utilized transfer learning networks, along with pertinent specifications, including layer count, total learnable parameters, and input image dimensions

Model	Type	No. Layers	Total Learnables	Image Input Size
AlexNet	SeriesNetwork	25 layers	60.9 million	227*227*3
GoogLeNet	DAGNetwork	144 layers	6.9 million	224*224*3
VGG16	SeriesNetwork	41 layers	138.3 million	224*224*3

All of these models were trained using stochastic gradient descent with momentum as the solver and weight decay with a momentum value of 0.9. The mini-batch size determines the number of samples used in each iteration to update the weights, which was set to 32, and the maximum number of epochs was set to 10 to prevent overfitting, and the data were shuffled in every epoch to avoid any bias in the training process. The learning rate determines the step size taken during optimization, which is initialized to $3e-4$. These settings have been carefully selected to optimize the model's performance for the given task. The default values for the remaining hyperparameters were used as specified by MATLAB.

3. Results

The present study aims to examine the gait signals of individuals with NDD and accurately classify each group solely based on their non-invasive force walking information, using a deep intelligent lightweight model.

Tables 3 and 4 present the outcomes of the BiLSTM and CNN models in classifying three distinct vGRFs, respectively. This information is presented as mean percentages and SD during a five-fold

CV. CNN showed better results, which are over 99.21% accuracy for all types of RF, LF, and SF signals, compared to BiLSTM, which achieved from 70.43% up to 75.11% accuracy.

3.1. BiLSTM

Table 3 presents the performance results of the BiLSTM model. The accuracies achieved were 75.11% for RF, 70.43% for LF, and 74.27% for SF. The model exhibited a notable average specificity of 91.597% in effectively discriminating the RF signals associated with distinct groups. In the classification of SF, the model achieved the same specificity percentage, further highlighting its ability to effectively distinguish each group within the dataset.

Table 3. The average results of the BiLSTM network in percentages

Signal	Accuracy	Sensitivity	Specificity	Precision	F ₁ score
RF	75.116±2.459	75.188±0.019	91.597±0.007	75.949±0.017	75.032±0.027
LF	70.434±2.407	70.022±0.0214	89.915±0.007	70.926±0.024	70.208±0.022
SF	74.277±2.169	74.601±0.018	91.409±0.006	75.027±0.022	73.432±0.018

The best performance of BiLSTM is written in **bold**.

3.2. CNN

The TF spectrogram representation of each vGRF signal for the HC group and different NDDs is shown in Fig. 3. Table 4 shows that among the three models—VGG16, AlexNet, and GoogLeNet—VGG16 achieved the highest accuracy for all three TF images of the RF, LF, and SF, with accuracies of 99.91%, 99.82%, and 99.65%, respectively. While the accuracy percentages suggest that VGG16 outperforms the other models, it is important to note that these conclusions are based on reported metrics alone. The AlexNet and GoogLeNet models also performed well, with accuracies ranging from 99.21% to 99.73% for all three signals. The specificity, sensitivity, precision, and F1 scores for all models were consistently high, exceeding 99%, indicating strong overall performance in classifying vGRFs from spectrogram images. However, to avoid overstating the results, we acknowledge the need for statistical validation in future work.

Given that both CNNs and BiLSTM utilize features derived from the same TF transform method, these results suggest that CNNs generally demonstrate superior performance over BiLSTM for analyzing vGRF signals when employing 2D feature representations versus 1D feature representations. It is important to note that this study did not include hyperparameter optimization, which may have impacted its performance.

In this study, we aim to further explore the patterns of gait signals, specifically the RF, LF, and SF, to discern which signal provides more informative insights into the classification of various NDDs. RF signal had better accuracy in GoogLeNet, VGG16, and BiLSTM. Only in AlexNet, LF showed a better result with 99.82%, which is only 0.35% more accurate than RF signal.

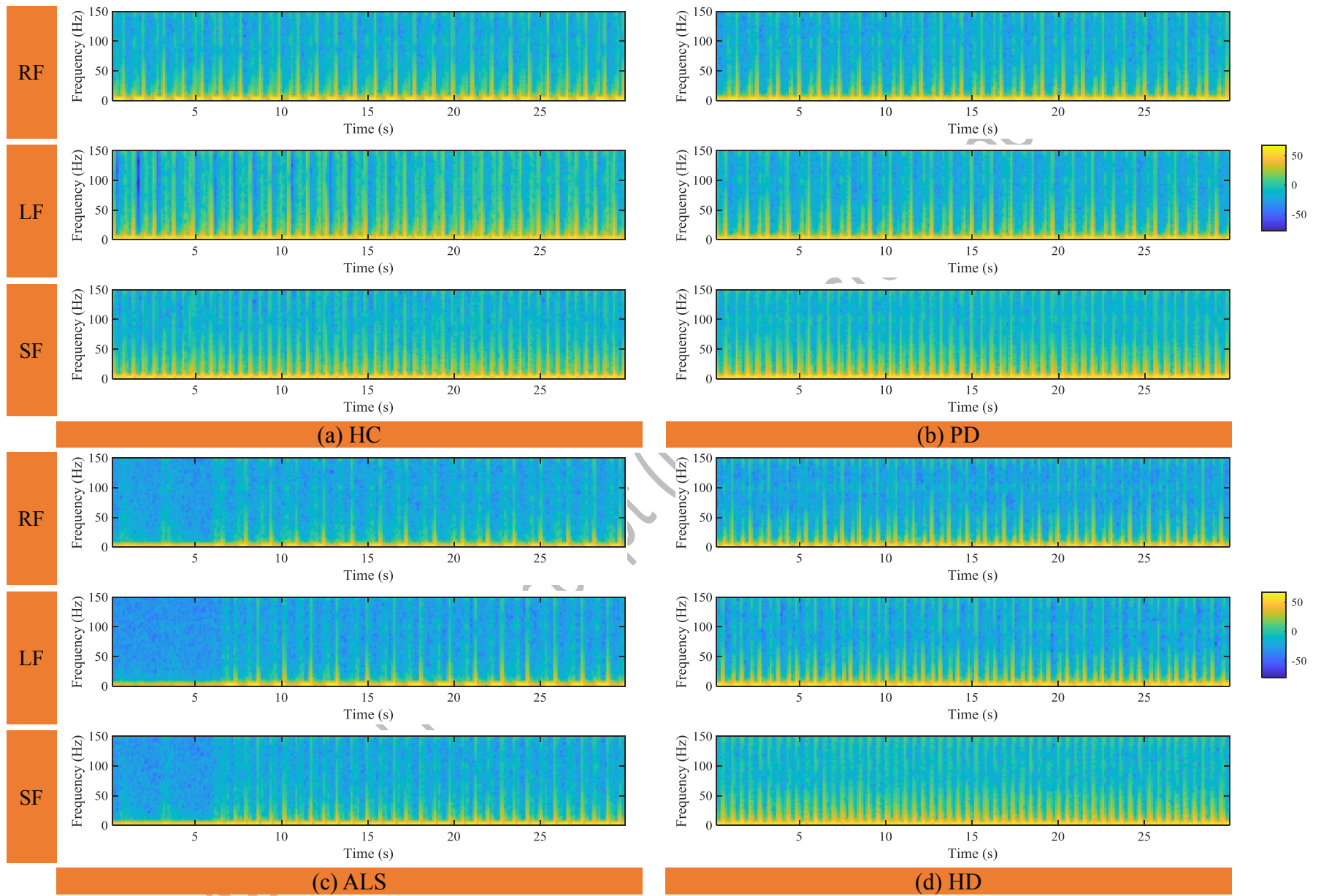


Fig. 3. The 30-second spectrogram of the (a) HC, (b) PD, (c) ALS, and (d) HD groups generated by utilizing the vGRF of RF, LF, and SF

Table 4. The average results of AlexNet, GoogLeNet, and VGG16 networks in percentages

		Accuracy	Sensitivity	Specificity	Precision	F ₁ score
AlexNet	RF	99.479±0.004	99.466±0.004	99.822±0.001	99.518±0.004	99.486±0.004
	LF	99.826±0.002	99.801±0.002	99.940±0.000	99.840±0.002	99.819±0.002
	SF	99.739±0.002	99.678±0.002	99.914±0.000	99.733±0.002	99.703±0.002
GoogLeNet	RF	99.739±0.003	99.773±0.003	99.914±0.001	99.733±0.003	99.750±0.003
	LF	99.479±0.005	99.543±0.005	99.822±0.001	99.505±0.005	99.522±0.005
	SF	99.218±0.007	99.312±0.006	99.736±0.002	99.260±0.007	99.271±0.007
VGG16	RF	99.913±0.001	99.930±0.001	99.971±0.000	99.915±0.001	99.922±0.001
	LF	99.826±0.002	99.861±0.001	99.944±0.000	99.804±0.002	99.831±0.002
	SF	99.652±0.001	99.609±0.002	99.887±0.000	99.629±0.002	99.615±0.002

The best performance of each model is written in **bold**.

3.3. VGG16-BiLSTM

In the RNN approach, utilizing BiLSTM alone did not yield satisfactory outcomes. To address this limitation, we employed a feature enhancement methodology in which we used pre-trained CNN with the best performance as a feature extractor and subsequently fed the extracted features to BiLSTM. In the previous experiment utilizing a CNN approach, the VGG16 network was provided with images of the LF, RF, and SF, and it demonstrated superior performance in extracting high-level features compared to the other two CNNs. The resulting CNN-BiLSTM network achieves a remarkable improvement in accurately distinguishing between four classes of NDDs and HC group.

The rationale behind the approach adopted in this study is based on the fact that CNNs such as VGG16 consist of multiple layers, with each layer learning increasingly abstract representations of the input data. Consequently, deeper layers in the network tend to contain higher-level features constructed using the lower-level features of earlier layers. To leverage this characteristic and extract the most important features, 4096 features were initially extracted from the 36th layer of the VGG16, which is a fully connected layer.

To further enhance the comprehensibility of the data and reduce the dimensionality of the feature space while retaining as much information as possible, PCA was applied to reduce the initial feature dimension from 4096 down to 100 features. The first 100 principal component coefficients were retained, as they were deemed to capture the most relevant information. Finally, the reduced set of features was obtained by projecting the original feature matrix onto the reduced feature space defined by the selected principal component coefficients. This final step resulted in a feature matrix with the same number of rows as the original feature matrix, but with only 100 columns, effectively reducing the dimensionality of the feature space and retaining the most important features. Then, the obtained features were normalized by subtracting the mean of each sample from it and then dividing it by SD.

The network was configured with 100 hidden units, and the training process was set to run for a maximum of 80 epochs. A mini-batch size of 100 was utilized during the training process, while the initial learning rate was set to the value of 0.01. Additionally, a gradient threshold of 1 was

imposed during the training process to prevent exploding gradients. These network settings were selected based on prior research and were deemed appropriate for the current study’s objectives. When Tables 3 and 5 are compared; it is found that the VGG16-BiLSTM architecture demonstrated efficacy in accurately classifying NDDs and HC individuals with a notable 24% improvement in performance over the basic BiLSTM model. Specifically, as illustrated in Table 5, the model achieved an average accuracy of 99.21% in classifying SF gait signals. Furthermore, the specificity, sensitivity, precision, and F₁ were increased by more than 20%. This noteworthy enhancement serves as compelling evidence for the effectiveness of this approach in enhancing the classification results. The method’s ability to significantly elevate these performance metrics highlights its potential for optimizing the accuracy and reliability of the classification process, making it a valuable contribution to the field.

Table 5. The average results of the CNN-BiLSTM network in percentages

	Accuracy	Sensitivity	Specificity	Precision	F₁ score
RF	98.349±1.319	98.365±1.384	99.454±0.443	98.351±1.199	98.331±1.329
LF	98.872±0.725	98.801±0.768	99.622±0.243	98.868±0.726	98.827±0.745
SF	99.218±0.475	99.202±0.470	99.735±0.161	99.233±0.483	99.211±0.473

The best performance is written in **bold**.

The high level of accuracy observed in the SF gait pattern suggests that this particular gait pattern may hold potential benefits for computer-aided diagnosis in gait-related contexts, and may provide informative insights beyond those gleaned from analysis of individual LF or RF patterns alone. Fig. 4 depicts the accuracy and loss curve of the VGG16-BiLSTM network architecture, which underwent a five-fold CV process, and illustrates how the model’s performance gradually converges through 80 epochs. Each color in these graphs represents a separate fold used during the validation process.

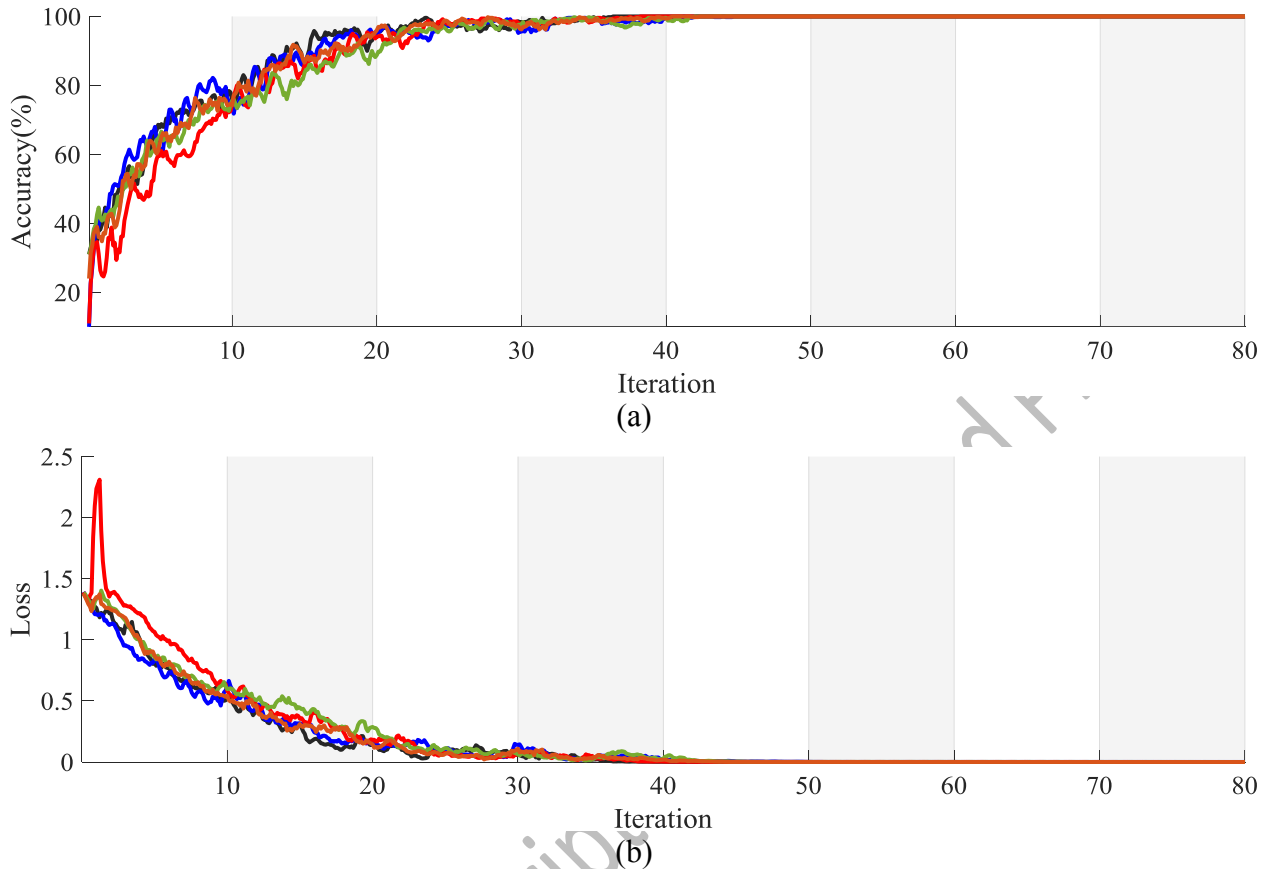


Fig. 4. (a) Accuracy and (b) Loss of five-fold CV of CNN-BiLSTM network

4. Discussion

NDDs are a group of disorders characterized by the progressive loss of neurons in the brain or spinal cord, leading to functional impairment and disability. The early detection and diagnosis of these diseases are crucial for their effective management and treatment. The analysis of gait signals can provide valuable insights into the motor function of individuals with NDD and aid in the early diagnosis and treatment of related conditions. The use of a deep lightweight method can facilitate the accurate and time-saving classification of different NDD groups, which can contribute to improving the overall well-being of affected individuals.

The primary aim of this investigation is to propose a methodology that is strong, economical, and non-intrusive, which has the potential to strike a better balance between cost and computational complexity while achieving high detection accuracy. Given that previous studies (Ghoreishi Beyrami & Ghaderyan, 2020), (Pham, 2018), and (Setiawan & Lin, 2021a) achieved perfect average accuracy in binary classification, we decided to exclude the binary classification task between the disease groups and HC subjects. Instead, our focus shifted solely to multi-class classification.

The proposed deep TF study provides valuable insights into the health status of the cohort, as it allows for the identification of potential abnormalities or anomalies in the vGRF. Through the utilization and comparison of feature sequences, namely IF and SE, as inputs for BiLSTM, and their corresponding spectrogram images for CNNs, this methodology presents a comprehensive

and impartial evaluation of the TF features present in gait signals. Earlier investigations have underscored the significance of frequency (Joshi, Khajuria, & Joshi, 2017) and high-level spectrogram features (Setiawan & Lin, 2021a), (Setiawan & Lin, 2021b) in NDD classification. Building upon these findings, we employed a comprehensive approach that encompassed both frequency-based and high-level spectrogram features. The objective was to discern the most effective feature representation, whether in 1D or 2D form. Our proposed study revealed the prevalence of auto-extracted features, indicating their superiority over other data-driven features in NDD classification. This comparative analysis allowed us to uncover valuable insights into the optimal choice of features for improved accuracy and performance to facilitate the diagnosis and classification of NDD.

The findings of this investigation demonstrate that employing spectrogram images to feed the CNNs, which convert time-domain signals into frequency-domain representations, provides a more comprehensive view of the vGRF signal than traditional 1D time-domain representations. By analyzing these spectrogram images using DL techniques, it is possible to extract both the temporal and spectral high-level features that capture the important characteristics to better understand the underlying signals. High-level features extracted from CNNs provide valuable information regarding the levels of abstraction present in an image. The earlier layers of the network detect lower-level features, such as edges and corners, while the later layers detect higher-level features, such as shapes and objects. Moreover, the visualization of in-depth features facilitates understanding how the model makes its predictions.

The combination of CNNs and spectrogram images has proven to be a powerful tool for feature extraction in vGRF signal processing tasks. The ability of CNNs to automatically learn high-level features from raw data, combined with the rich information provided by spectrograms, has led to significant improvements in accuracy and robustness compared to traditional hand-crafted feature extraction methods. Moreover, The high level of accuracy observed in the SF vGRF suggests that this particular gait pattern may hold potential benefits for computer-aided diagnosis in gait-related contexts, and may provide informative insights beyond those gleaned from analysis of individual LF or RF patterns alone.

Table 6 presents a comparative analysis with the latest research studies in the field employing diverse ML techniques, as well as DL networks, including CNN or RNN architectures. It is noteworthy that the table highlights a superior performance of the proposed method in comparison to prior multi-class NDD detection methods utilizing the identical dataset. The VGG16-BiLSTM approach with 99.21% accuracy also outperforms other studies using the DL approach for the four-class classification of NDDs.

The CNN and CNN-BiLSTM models employed in the present investigation have been determined to be reliable diagnostic tools for NDD, exhibiting minimal SD throughout the five-fold CV.

Table 6. Comparison with the state-of-art methods using the same gait signal dataset for the four-class classification of NDDs and HC group

Ref	Network	Classifier	Features	Validation	Dimensions	Accuracy (%)
(Ghoreshi Beyrami & Ghaderyan, 2020)	ML	SVM/MLFN/NNLS	Statistical and AE features	Five-fold CV	1D	98.45
(Nam Nguyen et al., 2020)	ML	SVM/KNN	Statistical and MSE features	Ten-fold CV	1D	99.77
(Setiawan & Lin, 2021a)	CNN	AlexNet	High-level features from the spectrogram generated by CWT, STFT, and WSST	Five-fold CV	2D	87.97
(Lin et al., 2020)	CNN	AlexNet	High-level features from RP	LOOCV	2D	97.86
(Faisal et al., 2023)	CNN	NDDNet	Gait and gait-cycle features	LOOCV	1D	83
Proposed method	CNN+RNN	VGG16-BiLSTM	high-level features from the spectrogram generated by STFT	Five-fold CV	2D	99.91

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates the effectiveness of BiLSTM and CNNs in accurately detecting NDD from vGRF signals obtained through wearable force sensors. Two experimental trials were conducted, wherein two informative TF features were extracted from the vGRF of the right, left, and combined feet of patients during a walking task, which were then used to feed a BiLSTM network. In the second trial, equivalent spectrogram images of the vGRF signal were constructed as input for CNNs. The findings demonstrate that utilizing transfer learning with VGG16 yielded superior outcomes in the automatic identification of NDDs, with accuracy, sensitivity, and specificity rates of 99.91%, 99.93%, and 99.97%, respectively. The significant promotion in the BiLSTM network performance was also achieved by feeding high-level features extracted from VGG16 instead of hand-crafted features. Overall, the CNN high-level features extracted from the spectrogram derived from the vGRF signal can provide valuable insights into the underlying NDD group and help researchers better understand the mechanisms of vGRF in different NDDs.

Acknowledgment

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to J. M. Hausdorff for providing the gait in the neurodegenerative disease database, which was made publicly available. The availability of this valuable dataset has greatly facilitated our research and contributed to the findings presented in this study.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

During the preparation of this study, the authors used ChatGPT and Grammarly to improve readability and language. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the publication's content.

Credit authorship contribution statement

Yeganeh Modaresnia: Reviewing, Editing, and Visualization. Farhad Abedinzadeh Torghabeh: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Data curation, Writing- Original draft preparation, and Visualization. Seyyed Abed Hosseini: Supervision, Investigation, Writing- Reviewing and Editing, and Validation.

Data availability

The datasets analyzed during the current study are available in the gait in neurodegenerative disease database repository, <https://physionet.org/content/gaitnidd/1.0.0/>.

Code availability

Code is available upon request from the corresponding author.

Funding

The authors declare that no funds, grants, or other forms of support were received during the preparation of this manuscript.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this manuscript.

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