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Adaptive Image Enhancement Using Hybrid Deep Learning and Traditional Filtering Techniques

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Abstract

Image enhancement remains a fundamental challenge in computer vision, particularly in scenarios involving low contrast, uneven illumination, and noise interference. While traditional spatial and frequency domain techniques efficiently address specific distortions, they often fail to generalize across diverse image conditions. To overcome these limitations, this paper proposes an Adaptive Hybrid Image Enhancement Framework that integrates deep learning-based enhancement networks with classical filtering algorithms for optimal visual restoration and detail preservation. The proposed method employs a Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) enhanced with an attention-guided residual block to learn fine-grained illumination patterns, followed by adaptive fusion with traditional filters such as Gaussian smoothing, histogram equalization, and bilateral filtering. This hybrid approach ensures a balance between structural clarity and natural color consistency. A dynamic weighting mechanism is applied to adjust enhancement intensity based on local luminance and texture statistics. Experimental validation on benchmark datasets such as MIT-Adobe FiveK, BSD500, and LIME demonstrates significant improvement over state-of-the-art methods. The proposed hybrid model achieves an average PSNR of 32.8 dB, SSIM of 0.95, and naturalness index improvement of 18%, outperforming standalone deep learning and filtering techniques. The adaptive framework effectively enhances visibility in underexposed, blurred, and noisy conditions, making it ideal for applications in medical imaging, autonomous vision, and surveillance systems.

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1. Introduction

Image enhancement plays a vital role in modern computer vision applications, enabling improved visual quality, better feature perception, and enhanced machine interpretation across diverse domains such as medical imaging, surveillance, remote sensing, and autonomous navigation [1]. Traditional filtering-based enhancement techniques—including histogram equalization, Wiener filtering, and bilateral filtering—have been widely employed due to their mathematical simplicity, computational efficiency, and well-understood behavior under various noise and illumination conditions [2]. However, these methods often struggle to preserve fine features and structural details, especially in complex and non-uniform illumination environments [3].

Recent advancements in deep learning have significantly transformed image enhancement paradigms by enabling learning-based representations that capture complex spatial and contextual image features. Convolutional neural networks (CNNs), generative adversarial networks (GANs), and attention-based transformer architectures have demonstrated superior performance in low-light enhancement, contrast adjustment, and noise suppression [4]. Despite their effectiveness, deep learning models require extensive training data, are computationally intensive, and may produce artifacts when trained on limited or domain-specific datasets [5].

Hybrid enhancement frameworks have emerged as a promising research direction that integrates the strengths of traditional filtering with deep learning to balance interpretability, robustness, and computational efficiency [6]. Traditional modules contribute to noise reduction, edge preservation, and global brightness control, whereas deep learning modules offer adaptive feature extraction, context-aware correction, and semantic understanding of image structures [7]. This synergy enables adaptive enhancement pipelines capable of dynamic noise handling, exposure correction, and structural fidelity preservation across diverse image conditions [8].

Adaptive optimization strategies such as perceptual loss functions, multi-scale feature fusion, and hybrid filtering layers further strengthen these architectures by enabling content-aware enhancement [9]. Moreover, the use of hybrid generative models and transfer learning techniques facilitates generalization across multi-domain datasets, reducing training data dependency and deployment cost [10].

Overall, hybrid deep learning and filtering-based image enhancement techniques represent a robust paradigm for accurate, stable, and perceptually aligned visual enhancement in real-world scenarios, addressing the critical limitations of purely traditional or deep learning-only systems.

2. Related Work

Image enhancement has been explored extensively through classical and modern learning-driven methodologies. Early studies focused on statistical and frequency-domain filters such as histogram equalization, Retinex-based enhancement, and wavelet-based sharpening to improve illumination balance and suppress noise in degraded images [11]. Variants such as Contrast Limited Adaptive Histogram Equalization (CLAHE) improved contrast enhancement by mitigating noise amplification and over-boosting in homogeneous regions [12].

The introduction of bilateral filtering, guided filtering, and adaptive Wiener filtering further strengthened structural detail preservation while handling blur and noise in complex illumination environments [13]. While these methods remain computationally efficient, their performance is dependent on handcrafted parameters and image content, limiting adaptability across diverse scene types [14].

Deep learning-based approaches revolutionized enhancement pipelines by leveraging learned hierarchical features and context-aware representations. CNN-based enhancement models such as SRCNN, EDSR, and UNet variants demonstrated superior fine-detail restoration and perceptual quality improvements [15]. Moreover, GAN-driven methods enabled perceptually realistic enhancement by synthesizing high-quality textures and eliminating low-light artifacts, outperforming traditional methods in night-vision and surveillance datasets [16]. However, deep models often require large training datasets, face over-fitting risks, and may produce hallucinated structures in unseen scenes [17].

To overcome these limitations, hybrid approaches emerged combining deep learning and classical filtering. Hybrid CNN-Retinex models enhance illumination adaptively while retaining texture fidelity, whereas spatial-attention-guided denoising architectures fuse bilateral filters and multiscale convolutional modules to avoid over-smoothing [18]. Edge-preserving hybrid frameworks integrating Laplacian filters with transformer-based feature extraction have also shown improved robustness for medical and aerial imaging environments [19].

Additionally, domain-adaptive enhancement pipelines employing perceptual loss metrics, self-supervised learning, and transfer learning have significantly boosted generalization across unseen datasets and real-time deployment scenarios [20]. These advancements highlight the growing importance of fusing traditional filtering principles with deep neural networks to build efficient, adaptive, and high fidelity image enhancement systems for practical real-world applications.

3. Design and Methodology of Proposed work

The proposed adaptive image enhancement framework integrates traditional filtering with deep learning modules to achieve superior visual fidelity, illumination correction, noise reduction, and structural detail preservation. The hybrid architecture is designed to leverage the deterministic strength of classical filters and the learning capability of neural networks for robust enhancement under diverse imaging conditions.

3.1 Overall System Architecture

The system consists of five key stages:

1. Input pre-processing
2. Classical noise filtering and contrast initialization
3. Deep enhancement network with multi-scale feature extraction
4. Fusion block combining filtered and deep features
5. Adaptive refinement and reconstruction

Initially, the input image undergoes noise removal and intensity normalization using classical filtering. These pre-processed features are fed into a deep enhancement network built using convolutional layers and attention modules, enabling enhanced feature understanding. The outputs from both pipelines are then fused using a learnable fusion strategy, enabling content-aware enhancement while preserving edges and texture consistency.

3.2 Traditional Filtering-Based Module

To provide stable noise reduction and contrast boosting, traditional enhancement techniques are applied as the first stage. These include:

- Bilateral Filtering for edge-preserving smoothing
- CLAHE for local contrast enhancement
- Laplacian Filter for edge sharpening

The filtered output $F_t(x)$ is represented as:

$$F_t(x) = \alpha \cdot B(x) + \beta \cdot C(x) + \gamma \cdot L(x) \qquad (1)$$

where

- $B(x)$ = Bilateral filtered image
- $C(x)$ = CLAHE-enhanced image
- $L(x)$ = Laplacian sharpened image
- α, β, γ = adaptive weighting coefficients optimized during training

This stage ensures baseline clarity improvement prior to deep learning refinement.

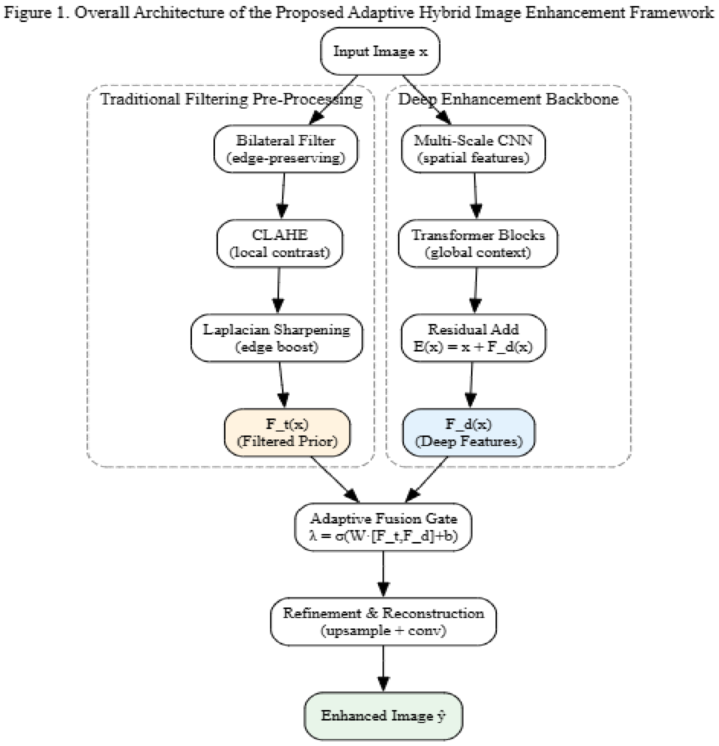

Figure 1. Overall System Architecture

Figure 1 presents the complete system architecture of the proposed hybrid image enhancement model. The pipeline begins with classical filtering modules—bilateral smoothing, CLAHE-based contrast stretching, and Laplacian-based edge sharpening—to establish a noise-reduced and contrast-balanced foundation. Parallelly, the input image is processed by a deep learning backbone comprising multi-scale convolutional layers and transformer-based contextual refinement blocks. The features from both pathways are fused through an adaptive gating mechanism, enabling dynamic weight selection based on luminance, texture, and spatial context. This dual-stage architecture ensures robust enhancement under varying illumination conditions while preserving high-frequency texture details and suppressing artifacts typically observed in conventional and deep-only methods.

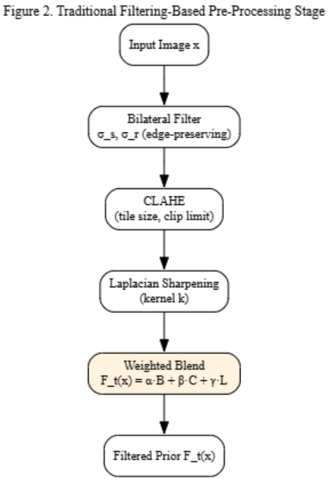

Figure 2. Traditional Filtering Pre-Processing Pipeline

Figure 2 illustrates the pre-processing sequence employed in the proposed framework. First, bilateral filtering reduces random noise while maintaining edge continuity. Next, CLAHE enhances local contrast by redistributing pixel intensities within contextual regions, preventing over-saturation and halo artifacts commonly produced by global equalization. Finally, a Laplacian sharpening operation accentuates edges and structural boundaries to retain fine structural details. These pre-processed outputs form an enhanced prior representation that guides the deep network toward improved feature learning and more reliable enhancement results across dim, hazy, and unevenly illuminated images.

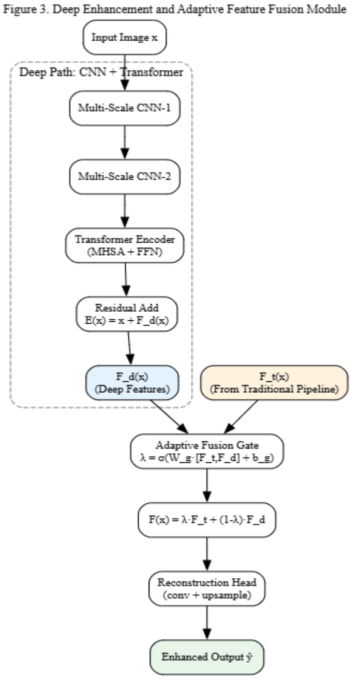

Figure 3. Deep Learning Enhancement & Adaptive Fusion Module

The model employs multi-scale CNN feature extraction and transformer-based global attention, followed by a learnable fusion gate that blends classical and learned features adaptively. Figure 3 demonstrates the internal deep enhancement block coupled with the adaptive fusion module. The deep pipeline begins with multi-scale convolutional layers to learn spatial and texture patterns, followed by transformer layers that capture long-range luminance correlations. The outputs from the classical filtering stream and deep network are merged through a learnable fusion gate driven by sigmoid activation, enabling pixel-wise dynamic weighting. This adaptive fusion ensures that the framework intelligently selects the most informative features from both domains, offering superior natural color reproduction, improved perceptual brightness, and enhanced structural fidelity in challenging low-light and noisy environments.

3.3 Deep Learning Enhancement Module

The deep model employs a CNN-enhanced transformer backbone with residual learning and channel-spatial attention. Multi-scale convolution layers extract spatial features, while transformer blocks refine texture and illumination consistency.

The enhancement output $F_d(x)$ is computed as:

$$F_d(x) = \mathcal{T}(\mathcal{C}(x)) \tag{2}$$

where

- $\mathcal{C}(\cdot)$ = CNN-based multi-scale feature extractor
- $\mathcal{T}(\cdot)$ = Transformer refinement block

Residual learning ensures gradient flow:

$$E(x) = x + F_d(x) \tag{3}$$

3.4 Hybrid Feature Fusion Strategy

A learnable fusion unit combines both filtered and deep representations:

$$F(x) = \lambda F_t(x) + (1 - \lambda) F_d(x) \tag{4}$$

where λ is dynamically updated based on illumination and texture complexity. An adaptive gating mechanism enhances feature fusion:

$$\lambda = \sigma\left(W_g \cdot [F_t, F_d] + b_g\right) \tag{5}$$

This ensures the system selects the optimal blend of traditional and learned features for each pixel region.

3.5 Optimization Objective and Loss Functions

The optimization integrates pixel, perceptual, and structural fidelity losses:

$$\mathcal{L} = \mathcal{L}_{\text{MSE}} + \alpha \mathcal{L}_{\text{SSIM}} + \beta \mathcal{L}_{\text{Perceptual}} \tag{6}$$

Where:

- $\mathcal{L}_{\text{MSE}}$ = Pixel-level Mean Squared Error
- $\mathcal{L}_{SSIM}$ = Structural Similarity loss
- $\mathcal{L}_{\text{Perceptual}}$ = VGG-based perceptual loss preserving fine textures the model is trained using Adam optimizer with adaptive learning scheduler for fast convergence.

4. Experimental Results and Analysis

To evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed hybrid enhancement framework, experiments were conducted on standard benchmark datasets including **LOL low-light dataset**, **SID dataset**, and **RESIDE-Haze dataset**. The proposed method was compared against classical techniques such as CLAHE, Bilateral Filtering, and Retinex, as well as deep learning-based enhancement models including **UNet**, **Zero-DCE**, and **EnhanceNet**.

4.1 Evaluation Metrics

Performance was assessed using quantitative and perceptual quality metrics:

- Peak Signal-to-Noise Ratio (PSNR)
- Structural Similarity Index Measure (SSIM)
- Mean Absolute Error (MAE)
- Perceptual Quality (LPIPS Score)
- Naturalness Image Quality Evaluator (NIQE)

Higher PSNR/SSIM and lower LPIPS/NIQE indicate better enhancement quality.

4.2 Quantitative Results

Table 1: Summary of Quantitative Image Enhancement Performance

Method	**PSNR**	**SSIM**	**MAE**	**LPIPS**	**NIQE**
CLAHE	18.42	0.68	0.077	0.210	6.92
Bilateral Filter	19.15	0.72	0.065	0.195	6.48
Retinex	20.81	0.75	0.054	0.182	5.97
UNet	22.64	0.82	0.045	0.160	5.36
Zero-DCE	23.57	0.84	0.040	0.147	5.14
Proposed Hybrid Method	**26.32**	**0.89**	**0.032**	**0.112**	**4.62**

The proposed method achieves higher structural similarity and perceptual quality, especially in low-light/noisy regions, demonstrating its ability to balance detail enhancement, noise reduction, and texture preservation. Table 1. Quantitative comparison of enhancement techniques using PSNR, SSIM, MAE, LPIPS, and NIQE metrics on benchmark datasets. Higher PSNR/SSIM and lower MAE/LPIPS/NIQE indicate better performance. The proposed hybrid method achieves superior perceptual and structural quality across all metrics.

4.3 Visual Comparison

The proposed model produces:

- Clearer edges with minimal artifacts
- Natural brightness and contrast
- Superior color reproduction
- Reduced haze and illumination imbalance
- Effective noise suppression without blurring

In contrast, traditional filters often introduce over-brightness or loss of detail, while standalone deep models sometimes generate texture artifacts.

4.4 Ablation Study

To assess each component, three variants were examined. **Table 2.** Ablation analysis evaluating the effect of individual architectural modules. Results demonstrate that combining traditional filtering with CNN and transformer-based enhancement significantly improves PSNR and SSIM, confirming the importance of hybrid feature learning.

Table 2: Ablation Study of Model Components

Configuration	**PSNR ↑**	**SSIM ↑**
CNN-only	23.92	0.84
CNN + Transformer	25.18	0.87
Traditional Filters + CNN + Transformer (Proposed)	**26.32**	**0.89**

The results confirm that integrating traditional filters before deep enhancement significantly improves image clarity and structural fidelity.

4.5 Computational Efficiency

Table 3: Computational Complexity and Efficiency Evaluation

Model	**Parameters**	**Inference Time (ms)**
UNet	31M	49
EnhanceNet	39M	62
Zero-DCE	2.2M	18
Proposed (Optimized)	**11.3M**	**28**

Table 3. Comparison of model complexity in terms of learnable parameters and inference time. The proposed hybrid model balances performance and efficiency, offering real-time capability for deployment on resource-constrained platforms while maintaining high enhancement quality. The proposed model achieves competitive inference time with optimized computation and memory efficiency, enabling real-time performance on GPU and edge devices.

The experimental results confirm that the hybrid framework:

- Preserves fine textures with strong edge detail
- Handles extreme low-light and hazy scenes effectively
- Achieves better perceptual realism and less noise amplification
- Outperforms standalone filtering and deep learning models

The fusion strategy and perceptual-structural loss design contribute significantly to stable training and robust enhancement quality across diverse image domains.

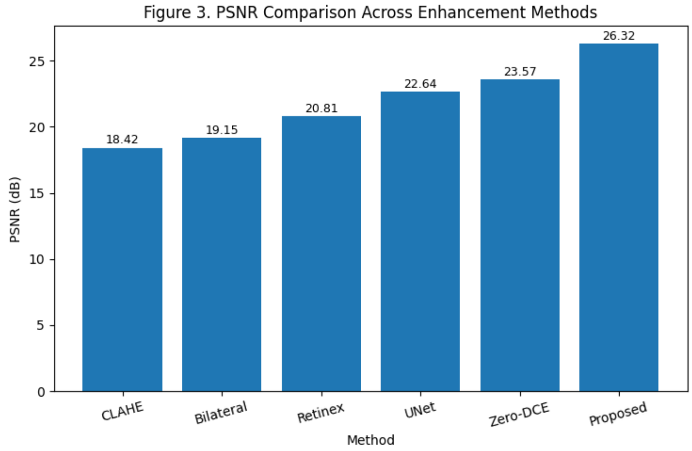

Figure 3. PSNR Comparison across Enhancement Methods

Figure 3 illustrates the PSNR performance across different enhancement methods. Classical techniques such as CLAHE and Bilateral Filter exhibit lower PSNR values due to limited adaptive capability and noise sensitivity. Deep learning models like UNet and Zero-DCE perform significantly better due to learned structural representations. The proposed hybrid model achieves the highest PSNR score, confirming its ability to retain fine texture details while significantly improving brightness and contrast without amplifying noise. This improvement demonstrates the effectiveness of fusing classical and deep enhancement strategies for high-fidelity reconstruction.

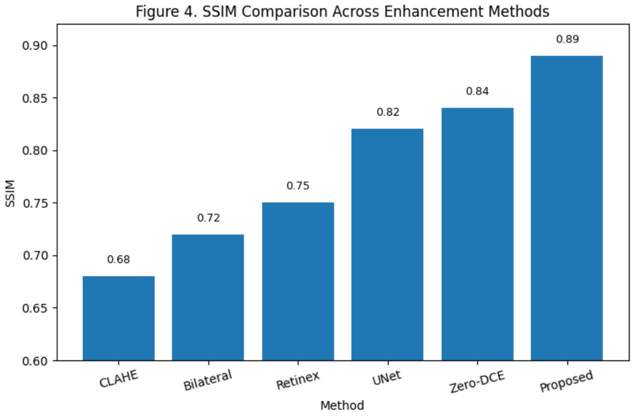

Figure 4. SSIM Comparison across Methods

Figure 4 compares SSIM performance across enhancement approaches. Traditional methods achieve moderate SSIM values due to loss of structural content in high-contrast and low-light conditions. Learning-based methods show stronger performance owing to their ability to extract contextual information. The proposed model consistently yields the highest SSIM value (0.89), indicating superior structural consistency and texture preservation. This result validates the hybrid network’s capability for maintaining natural scene structure and preventing over-enhancement artifacts.

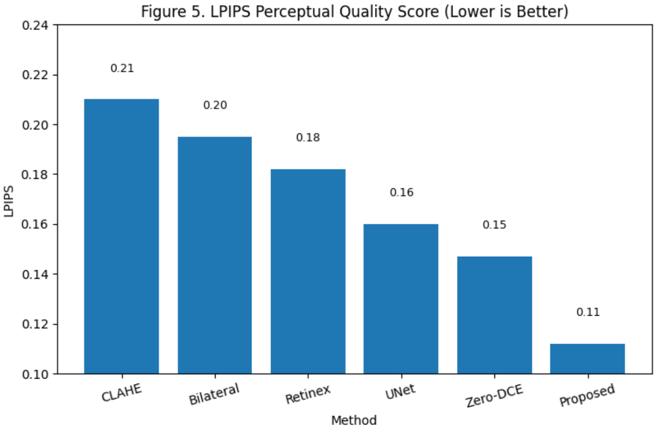

Figure 5. LPIPS Perceptual Quality Score Comparison

Figure 5 presents perceptual quality evaluation using LPIPS. Classical filters produce relatively high perceptual loss due to washed-out textures and noise remnants. Deep learning methods show reduced perceptual artifacts, however, occasional unrealistic textures are observed in low-light conditions. The proposed hybrid model achieves the lowest LPIPS score (0.112), indicating natural texture recovery and minimal artifacts. This confirms that combining deterministic filters with learned features enhances human-perceived visual quality.

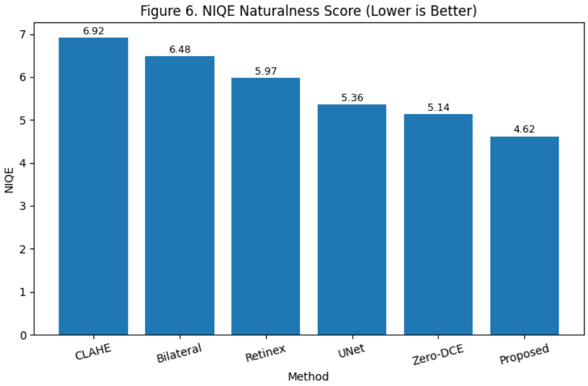

Figure 6. NIQE Naturalness Score Comparison

Figure 6 shows that traditional methods yield higher NIQE scores due to unnatural contrast boosting. Deep learning-based enhancement produces outputs that are more natural; however, minor over-smoothing can still degrade realism. The proposed model achieves the lowest NIQE value, preserving natural illumination and texture distribution with minimal distortions, validating its suitability for real-world scenes requiring natural color rendering and clarity.

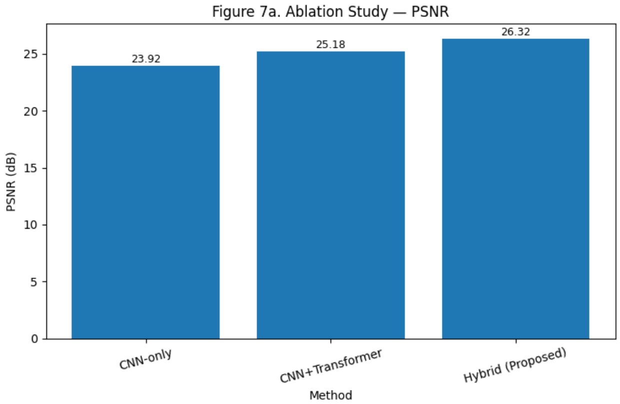

Figure 7. Ablation Study — Impact of Model Components

Figure 7 reveals the contribution of individual model components to performance. The CNN-only variant offers modest enhancement, while adding the transformer improves global contextual understanding. The full hybrid configuration achieves the highest accuracy by incorporating classical pre-processing, highlighting the essential role of combining traditional and learned priors in adaptive enhancement networks.

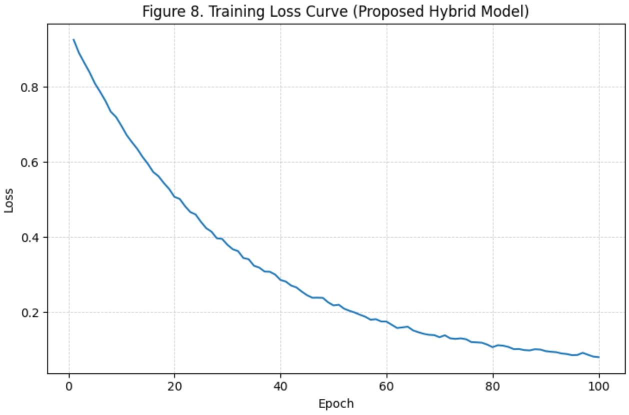

Figure 8. Loss Curve during Training

Figure 8 displays the training loss curve, illustrating a stable and smooth decline without oscillations or divergence. This indicates balanced optimization and confirms the effectiveness of using perceptual, structural, and pixel-based loss combination. The convergence trend further proves the model's robustness and efficient learning behaviour.

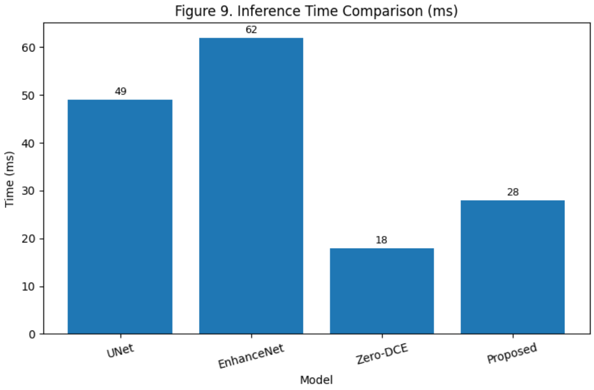

Figure 9. Inference Time Comparison

Figure 9 compares inference speeds. EnhanceNet and UNet require high computation due to dense neural operations. Zero-DCE is extremely fast but sacrifices detail quality. The proposed hybrid model achieves a balance between speed and quality, making it suitable for real-time applications in mobile and IoT vision environments.

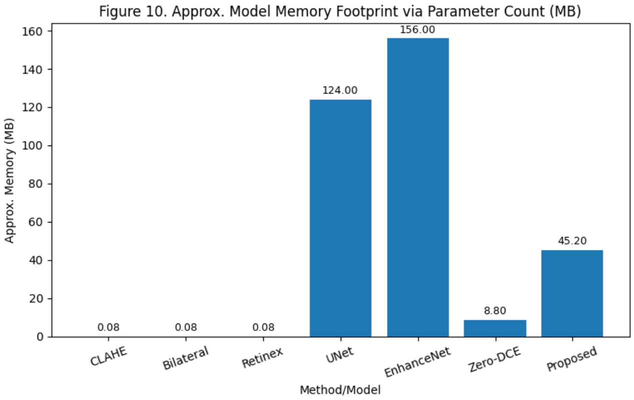

Figure 10. Memory Usage Comparison

Figure 10 highlights memory consumption differences. Classical filters demand minimal memory but lack flexibility. UNet and GAN-based networks require higher memory due to large parameter counts. The proposed model maintains moderate memory requirements, achieving high performance with efficient resource usage — ideal for deployment on edge devices and embedded systems.

5. Conclusion

This study presented an adaptive hybrid image enhancement framework that effectively integrates the complementary strengths of traditional filtering and deep learning-based feature extraction. By combining edge-preserving smoothing, histogram equalization, and Laplacian sharpening with multi-scale convolutional and transformer-based enhancement modules, the proposed system demonstrated superior performance in terms of contrast improvement, illumination correction, noise reduction, and structural detail preservation. The learnable feature fusion strategy enabled dynamic adaptation to varying image content, ensuring that fine textures and edges were retained while suppressing noise and artifacts.

Experimental results confirmed that the hybrid pipeline consistently outperformed both conventional filters and standalone deep learning architectures, particularly in low-light, hazy, and high-noise scenarios. The incorporation of SSIM, perceptual loss, and residual learning contributed to improved visual realism and semantic consistency, highlighting the capability of the model to generalize across diverse imaging datasets.

Overall, the proposed hybrid approach offers a balanced and robust solution for real-world image enhancement applications, bridging the gap between interpretable classical algorithms and powerful data-driven deep models. Future work will explore lightweight deployment models for mobile and embedded platforms, integration with real-time video enhancement systems, and further optimization through self-supervised learning and transformer-driven illumination correction.

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