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AI-Driven Multi-Omics Fusion Framework for Early HCC Prediction and Precision Prognosis

[1]Dr.K.Dharmarajan, Professor, School of Computing Sciences, VISTAS, Chennai, India
dharmak07@gmail.com

[2]Dr.K.Abirami, Assistant Professor, School of Computing Sciences, VISTAS, Chennai, India
kabirami.scs@vistas.ac.in

[3]T.Haripriya, Research scholar, School of Computing Sciences, VISTAS, Chennai, India
hariswt9@gmail.com

Abstract

Hepatocellular Carcinoma (HCC) remains one of the primary leading causes of cancer-related mortality globally, chiefly driven by late-stage clinical detection and a highly heterogeneous tumor microenvironment. Early-stage diagnosis provides the highest window for curative interventions such as surgical resection or liver transplantation. However, conventional single-modality screening techniques—including serum alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) measurements and ultrasonography—frequently demonstrate suboptimal sensitivity and specificity. In this paper, we propose a novel, end-to-end AI-Driven Multi-Omics Fusion Framework (Moff-HCC) that integrates transcriptomic (RNA-Seq), epigenomic (DNA methylation), and proteomic profiles gathered from peripheral blood mononuclear cells and liquid biopsies. Our framework utilizes an adaptive Graph Convolutional Network (GCN) integrated with a Multi-Head Cross-Attention mechanism to discover inter-omic regulatory structures while preserving modality-specific biological signals. To resolve high-dimensional feature spaces and low sample sizes, we introduce a Contrastive Regularized Autoencoder (CRAE) for robust unsupervised representation learning before downstream classification. Experimental evaluation on a multi-institutional dataset comprising 1,240 patients demonstrates that Moff-HCC achieves an Area Under the Receiver Operating Characteristic curve (AUROC) of 0.942 for early HCC detection (BCLC Stage 0/A), significantly outperforming state-of-the-art single-modality models and traditional late-fusion algorithms. Furthermore, by incorporating a Cox Proportional Hazards attention block, the model generates a continuous Risk Prognostic Score (RPS) capable of stratifying patients into low-risk and high-risk survival cohorts ($p < 0.001$). Explainable AI (XAI) analysis via integrated gradients identified key multi-omics driver signatures, including aberrant methylation of the CDKN2A promoter coupled with upregulated GPC3 transcript expressions, providing clinically actionable therapeutic targets. This holistic computational architecture offers a robust pathway toward non-invasive, early-stage hepatocellular surveillance and precision patient management.

Keywords: Hepatocellular Carcinoma, Multi-Omics Fusion, Graph Convolutional Networks, Cross-Attention, Deep Learning, Early Detection, Precision Prognosis.

I. INTRODUCTION

HEPATOCELLULAR carcinoma (HCC) accounts for approximately 75% to 85% of primary liver cancer cases globally, making it a critical public health challenge characterized by poor long-term prognosis and aggressive progression. The primary clinical etiology of HCC is highly correlated with chronic hepatitis B virus (HBV) or hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection, liver cirrhosis, metabolic dysfunction-associated steatohepatitis (MASH), and prolonged alcohol abuse. Despite substantial therapeutic advances in multi-kinase inhibitors, immune checkpoint blockades, and localized therapeutic modalities, the five-year overall survival rate for patients diagnosed with advanced HCC remains below 15%. Conversely, when HCC is recognized at an early clinical stage (Barcelona Clinic Liver Cancer stage 0 or A), curative curative techniques such as anatomical surgical resection, radiofrequency ablation, or orthotopic liver transplantation dramatically elevate the five-year survival rate to over 70%. Consequently, the development of robust, highly sensitive, and non-invasive methods for early HCC screening and accurate prognosis is paramount to altering the clinical trajectory of this lethal disease.

Currently, the standard clinical regimen for hepatocellular surveillance involves a bi-annual combination of transabdominal ultrasonography and serum alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) quantification. However, real-world clinical implementation reveals severe limitations in this approach. Ultrasonography is highly operator-dependent, exhibiting drastically reduced sensitivity (often below 45%) in patients presenting with dense abdominal fat or underlying multi-nodular liver cirrhosis. Serum AFP, while widely adopted, suffers from prominent false-negative rates in early-stage tumors (up to 40% of early HCC cases are AFP-negative) and false-positive elevation during acute inflammatory flares or non-malignant cirrhotic exacerbations. Liquid biopsy analytes, such as circulating tumor DNA (ctDNA) mutations, cell-free DNA (cfDNA) methylation patterns, and circulating microRNAs, have emerged as promising non-invasive biomarkers. Nonetheless, parsing single-modality biomarker profiles often misses the complex, multi-layered biological architecture that drives oncogenesis.

The development of high-throughput sequencing technologies enables multi-omics profiling, tracking biological information flow across genomic, epigenomic, transcriptomic, and proteomic layers. Hepatocarcinogenesis involves complex alterations, including structural genomic variants, extensive promoter hypermethylation leading to tumor suppressor silencing, and widespread metabolic reprogramming reflected in altered proteomic expressions. Relying on a single omics layer offers only a partial window into these changes, failing to capture the full spectrum of tumorigenesis. By integrating multi-omics datasets, computational models can cross-reference complementary biological patterns, neutralizing noise inherent to individual platforms and delivering a comprehensive overview of tumor biology.

Integrating diverse high-throughput data modalities presents major computational and mathematical challenges. First, multi-omics data is highly dimensional and suffers from low sample size (the 'curse of dimensionality'), leading to severe overfitting in standard machine learning models. Second, biological data across layers exhibits strong non-linear relationships, rendering classical linear fusion methods—such as Principal Component Analysis (PCA) or canonical correlation analysis—incapable of identifying deep trans-omic interactions. Third, standard late-fusion architectures, which train independent classifiers for each omics modality and aggregate predictions, overlook the vital cross-talk and regulatory networks that span across layers, such as methylation-driven transcriptional suppression.

To overcome these challenges, we introduce the AI-Driven Multi-Omics Fusion Framework (Moff-HCC), a deep learning architecture for early HCC prediction and long-term survival prognosis. Moff-HCC applies an unsupervised Contrastive Regularized Autoencoder (CRAE) to extract compact, noise-resilient latent representations from transcriptomic, epigenomic, and proteomic data. These features are then passed to an adaptive Graph Convolutional Network (GCN) that treats biological features as nodes, capturing complex intra-modality correlations. To model non-linear cross-talk between layers, we implement a Multi-Head Cross-Attention (MHCA) mechanism, allowing the framework to prioritize overlapping features essential for early oncogenesis. Finally, the model optimizes joint objective functions for early detection and hazard-based survival forecasting. We validate Moff-HCC on a multi-institutional cohort of 1,240 patients, showing clear improvements over existing approaches.

II. RELATED WORK

Recent computational research focused on early HCC prediction has shifted from classical statistical approaches to sophisticated machine learning architectures. Traditional methods heavily leveraged support vector machines (SVMs), random forests (RF), and gradient boosted trees applied to serum biomarkers or restricted microRNA panels. For instance, the GALAD score—a linear logistic regression model utilizing gender, age, AFP-L3, AFP, and des-gamma-carboxy prothrombin (DCP)—has achieved notable success in clinical validation trials. However, the parametric nature of GALAD limits its capacity to map complex, non-linear biological synergies across high-throughput sequencing panels, leaving room for advanced machine learning enhancements.

Deep learning methods excel at managing high-throughput multi-omics data. Early Multi-Omics Integration techniques typically used concatenation-based early fusion or ensemble-based late fusion. Early fusion combines raw feature matrices from diverse modalities into a single high-dimensional matrix, which often causes models to overlook subtle proteomic or epigenetic signals due to the dominance of transcriptomic features. Late fusion builds separate predictive pipelines for each modality and aggregates scores via voting or averaging, missing the structural cross-talk and inter-layer regulatory networks that drive tumor development.

Intermediate fusion frameworks address these limitations by merging disparate data modalities within hidden neural layers. Deep Autoencoders and Multimodal Variational Autoencoders (MVAEs) have been deployed to project multi-omics data into shared latent subspaces, effectively capturing common variance. However, these methods often struggle to separate shared multi-omics features from distinct, modality-specific biological signals, sometimes discarding low-abundance markers critical for early-stage diagnosis. Recently, Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) have shown strong performance in biological contexts by structuring multi-omics data as graphs, preserving known protein-protein interactions and metabolic pathways. While GNNs model intra-modality relationships effectively, standard setups lack a dynamic mechanism to capture cross-layer dependencies. Our Moff-HCC framework addresses this gap by combining adaptive Graph Convolutional Networks with a Multi-Head Cross-Attention layer, preserving distinct modality structures while tracking essential trans-omic regulatory links.

III. METHODOLOGY

The structural architecture of the proposed Moff-HCC framework consists of four primary stages: (A) High-dimensional data preprocessing and cohort normalization, (B) Unsupervised feature extraction via Contrastive Regularized Autoencoders (CRAE), (C) Graph Convolutional network formulation coupled with Multi-Head Cross-Attention for intermediate fusion, and (D) Multi-task joint learning optimization for early HCC classification and survival risk profiling.

A. Data Preprocessing and Feature Selection

The framework accepts three distinct molecular inputs: transcriptomic RNA-Seq count matrices, epigenomic DNA methylation beta-value matrices, and mass-spectrometry-based quantitative proteomic vectors. Let X_rna, X_meth, and X_prot denote the raw feature matrices for a given cohort. To handle raw RNA-Seq data, we apply upper-quartile normalization followed by a log2 transformation to reduce skewness:

$$\hat{X}\_rna = \log_2 ((Count / Q_3) \times 10^6 + 1)$$

where Q3 represents the 75th percentile of non-zero counts across the sample profile. For DNA methylation data, missing beta-values are imputed using the K-Nearest Neighbors (KNN) algorithm (k=5), and background correction is executed via standard min-max scaling to bound the inputs strictly between 0 and 1. Proteomic abundances undergo median centering and variance scaling. To address extreme feature dimensionality, we employ a preliminary filter utilizing Moderated t-statistics via the Limma package to select the top 2,000 highly variable and statistically significant features for each modality, establishing a baseline input feature dimension of d_m (where m ∈ {rna, meth, prot}).

B. Contrastive Regularized Autoencoder (CRAE)

To mitigate overfitting and map the inputs into a low-dimensional space without losing essential biological characteristics, we develop a Contrastive Regularized Autoencoder. Rather than minimizing reconstruction error alone, which often captures non-pathological biological noise, our CRAE introduces a contrastive learning loss term in the bottleneck layer. For each modality m, an encoder function E_m maps the preprocessed vector x_m into a continuous latent vector z_m ∈ ℝ^h, where h = 256. The decoder function D_m attempts to reconstruct the original input vector x̂_m. The combined loss function consists of a Mean Squared Error (MSE) reconstruction loss and an InfoNCE contrastive loss that aligns representations from the same patient across modalities while separating them from different patients:

$$\mathscr{L}\_CRAE = \sum\_\{m\} \| x\_m - D\_m(E\_m(x\_m)) \|^2 + \lambda \mathscr{L}\_contrastive$$

Here, λ is a tuning hyperparameter set to 0.15. This contrastive constraint ensures that the latent embedding space maintains cross-modality biological consistency across different omics measurements for the same patient.

C. Adaptive GCN and Multi-Head Cross-Attention Fusion

The latent representations z_rna, z_meth, and z_prot are passed to separate, adaptive Graph Convolutional Networks to capture intra-modality feature relationships. Traditional GCNs rely on static, pre-defined biological interaction graphs (like STRING or Reactome databases), which can introduce bias and miss unknown novel disease interactions. To overcome this, we initialize an empirical correlation graph for each modality, refining the adjacency matrix A_m dynamically during training. The graph layer update formula is expressed as:

$$H\_m^{(l+1)} = \sigma(\tilde{D}\_m^{(-1/2)} \tilde{A}\_m \tilde{D}\_m^{(-1/2)} H\_m^{(l)} W\_m^{(l)})$$

where $\tilde{A}_m = A_m + I_n$ denotes the adjusted adjacency matrix with self-loops, $\tilde{D}_m$ is its diagonal degree matrix, $W_m^{(l)}$ is the trainable weight parameter matrix for layer l, and σ represents the LeakyReLU activation function. This generates refined feature representations that preserve intra-modality structures.

To integrate these distinct omics representations while capturing vital cross-layer interactions (e.g., methylation-driven transcript silencing), we feed the GCN outputs into a Multi-Head Cross-Attention (MHCA) mechanism. Instead of self-attention within a single layer, our cross-attention module projects one modality as the Query (Q) matrix, and an alternating modality as the Key (K) and Value (V) matrices. The cross-attention weights between modality i and modality j are computed via:

$$\mathbf{Attention}(Q_i, K_j, V_j) = \mathbf{softmax}\left((Q_i K_j^T) / \sqrt{d_k} \right) V_j$$

where d_k is the scaling dimension. By calculating these attention fields for all pairs—RNA-to-Methylation, RNA-to-Proteomics, and Methylation-to-Proteomics—the framework dynamically maps non-linear trans-omic regulatory dependencies. The resulting cross-attended representations are concatenated into a unified multimodal matrix, $Z_{fusion} \in \mathbb{R}^{768}$, which serves as the core input for downstream clinical prediction tasks.

D. Joint Multi-Task Optimization Pipeline

The consolidated representation Z_{fusion} is simultaneously routed to two distinct predictive neural heads: a binary classification network for early HCC detection and a Cox Proportional Hazards network for survival forecasting. The early classification network outputs a continuous malignancy score $P(y=1|Z_{fusion})$ using a standard sigmoid activation function, optimized through weighted binary cross-entropy loss ($\mathscr{L}_{cls}$) to handle class imbalances between normal controls and early-stage HCC patients. Concurrently, the prognostic head outputs a risk score $R(Z_{fusion}) = \exp(\beta^T Z_{fusion})$ to model patient survival trajectories. This survival network is optimized using negative log-partial likelihood from the Cox proportional hazards framework:

$$\mathscr{L}_{cox} = -\sum_{i:\, \delta_i=1} \left[R(Z_{fusion}^{(i)}) - \log\left(\sum_{j \in R_i} \exp(R(Z_{fusion}^{(j)})) \right) \right]$$

where δ_i represents the event indicator (1 for observed mortality, 0 for right-censored patients), and R_i signifies the set of patients at risk at time t_i. The final unified training objective function is a joint optimization problem governed by a balance hyperparameter γ:

$$\mathscr{L}_{total} = \mathscr{L}_{cls} + \gamma \mathscr{L}_{cox} + \eta \|\Theta\|_2^2$$

where η represents the weight decay coefficient penalizing model parameters Θ to prevent overfitting. During empirical validation, γ was set to 0.4 and η was maintained at 1e-4. The entire multi-task system is optimized end-to-end via the AdamW optimizer with an adaptive learning rate strategy.

IV. EXPERIMENTAL EVALUATION

To rigorously evaluate the predictive performance, generalization capabilities, and clinical utility of the Moff-HCC framework, we performed comprehensive benchmarking experiments against state-of-the-art predictive baselines using a large multi-institutional dataset.

A. Dataset Composition and Validation Protocol

The training and evaluation datasets used in this study were aggregated from three primary repositories: The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA-LIHC), the International Cancer Genome Consortium (ICGC-LIRI-JP), and an independent, multi-institutional clinical validation biobank containing liquid biopsy profiles from 420 patients. The combined cohort consists

of 1,240 total individual participants, categorized as follows: 340 healthy control subjects, 410 patients diagnosed with underlying chronic liver diseases (cirrhosis, advanced fibrosis, or chronic HBV/HCV), and 490 pathologically confirmed cases of early-stage Hepatocellular Carcinoma (defined strictly as Barcelona Clinic Liver Cancer Stage 0 or Stage A). Samples were randomly partitioned into a 70% training cohort (n=868), a 15% validation cohort (n=186) for hyperparameter tuning, and a 15% completely independent testing cohort (n=186). We applied a 5-fold stratified cross-validation strategy during the training phase to evaluate model stability and prevent data leakage.

B. Baseline Comparative Models

We benchmarked our proposed Moff-HCC model against five distinct computational baselines commonly deployed in digital oncology and multi-omics analysis:

1) Standard GALAD Score: A classical clinical logistic regression model utilizing age, gender, AFP-L3, AFP, and DCP values.

2) Single-Omics Random Forest (SO-RF): Individual Random Forest models trained separately on transcriptomic, epigenetic, or proteomic features, with the highest-performing single modality selected for comparison.

3) Early-Fusion Multi-Layer Perceptron (EF-MLP): A deep feedforward neural network trained on a concatenated raw feature matrix containing all three omics modalities.

4) Late-Fusion Support Vector Machine (LF-SVM): Independent SVM classifiers trained on each individual modality, using an ensemble averaging layer to output final classification probabilities.

5) Multimodal Variational Autoencoder (MVAE): A state-of-the-art intermediate fusion architecture that projects multi-omics data into a shared gaussian latent distribution for downstream prediction.

C. Quantitative Results: Early HCC Detection

The primary classification objective focuses on distinguishing early-stage HCC (BCLC Stage 0/A) from healthy controls and high-risk cirrhotic patients. Table I summarizes the performance metrics achieved on the independent validation testing cohort.

Model Architecture	**Sensitivity (%)**	**Specificity (%)**	**Accuracy (%)**	**AUROC Score**
Standard GALAD Score	71.4%	83.2%	76.8%	0.812
Single-Omics RF (RNA)	78.9%	85.6%	81.3%	0.854
Early-Fusion MLP	82.1%	88.4%	84.5%	0.889
Late-Fusion SVM	84.3%	89.1%	86.2%	0.901
Multimodal VAE (MVAE)	87.5%	91.2%	89.0%	0.918
Moff-HCC (Proposed)	**92.6%**	**95.8%**	**94.1%**	**0.942**

TABLE I: Quantitative Performance Comparison for Early HCC Detection

As demonstrated in Table I, the proposed Moff-HCC model outperforms all comparative baselines across every evaluation metric. Specifically, Moff-HCC achieves an AUROC score of 0.942, representing a substantial improvement over the clinical standard GALAD score (AUROC = 0.812). This performance gap stems from GALAD's reliance on serum protein values that can fluctuate during non-malignant liver inflammation, whereas Moff-HCC leverages multi-layered omics markers that track early oncogenic signaling. Furthermore, our framework outpaces the intermediate fusion MVAE model by 2.4% in absolute AUROC, showing that our combination of adaptive GCNs and Multi-Head Cross-Attention captures essential trans-omic regulatory structures more effectively than standard joint latent projections.

D. Ablation Analysis

To verify the individual contributions of each architectural component within Moff-HCC, we conducted a systematic ablation study by isolating or removing core features: (1) Removing the Contrastive Loss regularization from the autoencoder (CRAE); (2) Replacing the Adaptive GCN layers with standard static, fully connected layers; (3) Replacing the Multi-Head Cross-Attention fusion block with a standard concatenation early-fusion step. Table II outlines the resulting changes in model performance.

Model Configuration Variant	Accuracy (%)	AUROC Score	Delta AUROC
Moff-HCC Full Architecture	**94.1%**	**0.942**	**Baseline**
w/o Contrastive Learning Loss	90.8%	0.911	-0.031
w/o Adaptive GCN (Static Layers)	89.2%	0.898	-0.044
w/o Multi-Head Cross-Attention	87.4%	0.881	-0.061

TABLE II: Ablation Study Results on Key Framework Modules

The ablation results highlight that removing the Multi-Head Cross-Attention mechanism causes the largest drop in performance, reducing the AUROC from 0.942 to 0.881 (-0.061). This significant decrease confirms that simple feature concatenation fails to capture the vital cross-layer correlations required to accurately identify early stage malignancies. Additionally, omitting the adaptive graph learning layer reduces the AUROC by 0.044, showing the clear value of dynamically modeling intra-modality feature relationships over using static layer structures.

V. PRECISION PROGNOSIS & CLINICAL UTILITY

Beyond early detection, the clinical utility of Moff-HCC depends on its ability to accurately forecast long-term survival trajectories and guide precision treatment adjustments based on patient risk profiles.

A. Patient Survival Stratification

The Risk Prognostic Score (RPS) generated by the model's survival neural head was used to divide patients in the independent testing cohort into low-risk and high-risk groups based on the median training cohort score. Kaplan-Meier survival analysis revealed clear differences between these groups. The high-risk group exhibited a median overall survival

of only 18.4 months, compared to 58.2 months for the low-risk group. A log-rank test confirmed that this separation was highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), demonstrating the framework's capacity to guide personalized post-operative monitoring and adjuvant therapy planning.

B. Model Interpretability via Explainable AI

To ensure clinical accountability and prevent our deep learning model from operating as an uninterpretable 'black box,' we applied the Integrated Gradients explainable AI technique to compute feature importance scores across all three omics layers. This analysis highlighted key driver signatures underpinning the model's predictions: first, extensive hypermethylation within the promoter region of the CDKN2A tumor suppressor gene; second, significant transcriptional upregulation of Glypican-3 (GPC3) and Alpha-Fetoprotein (AFP) mRNA; and third, elevated proteomic expression of Heat Shock Protein 90 (HSP90) and vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF). This specific multi-omics profile aligns with established molecular models of hepatocarcinogenesis, confirming that Moff-HCC identifies valid biological pathways rather than relying on confounding computational noise.

VI. CONCLUSION & FUTURE WORK

In this study, we introduced Moff-HCC, a comprehensive, AI-driven multi-omics fusion framework designed for early-stage Hepatocellular Carcinoma prediction and precision prognosis. By integrating transcriptomic, epigenomic, and proteomic data using an architecture that combines Contrastive Regularized Autoencoders, adaptive Graph Convolutional Networks, and Multi-Head Cross-Attention, our framework successfully maps complex cross-modality regulatory networks while preserving distinct biological signals. Validated on a multi-institutional cohort of 1,240 patients, Moff-HCC achieved an AUROC of 0.942 for early HCC detection, outperforming existing clinical indices and traditional late-fusion models. Additionally, the framework's prognostic head effectively stratifies patients into distinct risk cohorts, demonstrating strong potential for clinical translation. Future work will focus on integrating multi-modal radiomics imaging features into the fusion layer and evaluating model performance across diverse, heterogeneous patient populations in active prospective trials.

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