International Journal of Scientific Research & Engineering Trends
Volume 12, Issue 5, Sep-Oct-2026, ISSN (Online): 2395-566X

Comparative Study of Ensemble Machine Learning, Deep Learning and Traditional Edge Detection Techniques for Iris Edge Detection.

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Abstract— Accurate iris edge detection and boundary localization is seen as the prerequisite for high-performance biometric authentication systems. Traditional edge detection operators like, Canny, Sobel, Prewitt and feature-engineered shallow machine learning models are often beset with limitations such as severe sensitivity to noise, specular reflections, eyelid occlusions, and acute class imbalance when predicting thin boundary pixels. This paper presents a novel deep learning-driven ensemble framework that reformulates iris edge detection as a region-based binary semantic segmentation task using 2,639 high-resolution grayscale images (320 × 280 pixels, from the Standardized CASIA-Iris Interval benchmark database. The study adopts a Design Science Research (DSR) methodology, structured into three sequential phases: automated boundary localization for pseudo ground-truth generation using Circular Hough Transform, deep convolutional neural network segmentation (U-Net, ResNet-UNet, and Attention U-Net) and advanced ensemble mechanisms which includes Soft Voting, Stacking Meta-Learning, and Hybrid Fusion incorporating classical gradient maps. Raw grayscale iris images were made to undergo spatial standardization, Gaussian smoothing, and intensity normalization. The preprocessed tensors are passed concurrently through standalone CNN models and classical edge pipelines. The probability maps generated by CNNs are aggregated via soft voting, stacking, and hybrid fusion, and subsequently fused with classical gradient maps to derive precise binary segmentation masks and sharp boundary edges for improved robustness. The comparative evaluation, was done using four performance metrics; Intersection over Union (IoU), F1-Score, Precision and Recall. Experimental results demonstrate that deep learning architectures significantly outperform classical edge operators. Furthermore, ensemble models achieve superior segmentation dependability and boundary precision, attaining an Intersection over Union (IoU) of 0.9412, F1-Score of 0.9697, Precision of 0.9723, and Recall of 0.9671. The proposed region-based ensemble paradigm effectively allays pixel class imbalance, demonstrates superior robustness against intra-class variations, and establishes an accurate benchmark, especially, for next-generation biometric identification pipelines.

Keywords— Biometrics, Iris Recognition, Edge Detection, Deep Learning, U-Net, Ensemble Learning, Stacking, Hybrid Fusion, CASIA-Iris-Interval.

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital infrastructure and security requirements has accelerated the deployment of biometric authentication across financial, healthcare, border security, and forensic domain systems [1]. Traditional credentials such as passwords, personal identification numbers (PINs), and physical access tokens remain vulnerable to theft, duplication, and unauthorized access. Biometric systems mitigate these vulnerabilities by relying on inherent physiological and behavioral traits [2].

Among diverse biometric modalities, iris recognition offers exceptional accuracy, long-term stability, and uniqueness [3]. The human iris possesses intricate, stochastic patterns—crypts, furrows, arches, and freckles—that form during embryonic development and remain stable across an individual's lifespan [4]. Daugman [4] established that iris recognition can achieve extraordinarily low false acceptance and false rejection rates, relying on precise boundary detection between the pupil and iris (inner boundary) and the iris and sclera (outer boundary).

In a standard iris recognition pipeline, preprocessing and segmentation constitute the critical foundational stages. Errors in localized pupil or sclera boundaries propagate directly into normalization, feature extraction, and template matching, degrading overall recognition system performance [5]. Historically, edge detection has relied on first- and second-order differential gradient operators such as Sobel, Prewitt, and Canny detectors [6]. Although computationally efficient, these operators are exceptionally sensitive to specular reflections, eyelid occlusions, eyelashes, and nonuniform illumination, yielding fragmented, incomplete, or spurious edge maps [7]. Subsequent research applied shallow machine learning models (Support Vector Machines, Random Forests, AdaBoost) to classification and edge filtering tasks [8]. However, these shallow classifiers cannot process raw image tensors directly, requiring manual feature engineering (Gabor filters, wavelets, texture descriptors). Handcrafted feature extraction is labor-intensive, computationally cumbersome, and fails to capture rich spatial topologies [9]. The emergence of deep learning, particularly Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), transformed computer vision by

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learning hierarchical spatial features directly from raw image pixels [10]. Architectures like U-Net [11], ResNet [12], and Attention U-Net [13] have achieved state-of-the-art performance across semantic segmentation tasks. Nevertheless, existing deep learning iris recognition literature displays three critical gaps:

1. Deep models are predominantly executed as standalone classifiers, ignoring the performance and variance reduction benefits of ensemble strategies.

2. Formulating edge detection as direct thin-boundary pixel prediction introduces extreme class imbalance, rendering model convergence unstable.

3. Hybrid strategies integrating classical gradient boundaries with deep neural predictions remain insufficiently explored.

To resolve these challenges, this study formulates iris edge detection as a region-based semantic segmentation task and presents a comprehensive deep learning ensemble framework. The major contributions of this paper include:

- Reformulating thin-boundary edge detection into a region-based binary segmentation task, resolving severe class imbalance.
- Implementing and evaluating standalone deep architectures (U-Net, ResNet-UNet, Attention U-Net) for raw iris image segmentation.
- Developing advanced ensemble strategies (Soft Voting, Stacking Meta-Learning, and Hybrid Fusion) to optimize boundary precision.
- Providing a rigorous empirical comparison against classical baseline operators across standardized quantitative metrics.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Iris recognition was formalized by Daugman [4] through the integro-differential operator, which searches for maximum partial derivatives across circular contours. Wildes [14] introduced an alternative framework based on the Circular Hough Transform (CHT) and gradient edge maps. While foundational, both classical paradigms assume ideal circular geometry and clear gradient transitions, failing when confronted with off-angle captures, eyelid occlusions, or poor contrast [5].

Classical edge operators operate strictly on local intensity differences [6]. Oluwadare et al. [15] evaluated Canny, Sobel, Prewitt, Robert, and Laplacian of Gaussian (LoG) detectors on iris samples, establishing that LoG outperformed basic operators but remained susceptible to severe high-frequency noise. Soltane et al. [16] explored directional filters and variograms to detect edge orientations, but noted prohibitive computational overhead during directional decomposition. Shallow machine learning models were introduced to enhance edge classification. Zhang et al. [8] compared Gradient Boosting and AdaBoost against traditional edge filters, reporting improved noise resilience. However, Rokach [17] highlighted that shallow ensembles depend entirely on handcrafted feature descriptors, limiting their capacity to model complex spatial dependencies across diverse biometric datasets. Deep learning models eliminate manual feature engineering by learning end-to-end spatial hierarchies [10]. Ronneberger et al. [11] introduced U-Net, utilizing symmetric encoder-decoder pathways with skip connections to preserve fine spatial details. He et al. [12] introduced Residual Networks (ResNet), mitigating vanishing gradients via shortcut connections. Oktay et al. [13] integrated attention gates into U-Net, enabling networks to suppress irrelevant background noise and highlight target foreground structures. Jalilian et al. [18] confirmed that deep CNNs significantly outperform classical segmentation methods under visible and near-infrared light.

Despite deep learning advancements, single-model CNNs remain sensitive to domain shifts and subtle structural noise [19]. Ensemble learning combines multiple diverse base learners to reduce prediction variance and bias [20]. Sagi and Rokach [21] demonstrated that soft voting and stacking metalearners consistently surpass individual classifiers. Recent studies by Gupta et al. [22] and Dong et al. [23] suggested that combining deep neural features with classical edge information yields superior boundary localization. Nevertheless, a systematic comparative evaluation uniting classical operators, standalone CNNs, deep soft ensembles, stacking meta-learning, and hybrid fusion within a unified iris recognition benchmark remains unaddressed in existing literature

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a Design Science Research (DSR) methodology, structured into three sequential phases: automated boundary localization for pseudo ground-truth generation, deep neural network segmentation, and ensemble integration with comparative evaluation.

3.1 Architecture Of The Proposed Framework

The end-to-end framework architecture is illustrated in Fig. 1. Raw grayscale iris images undergo spatial standardization, Gaussian smoothing, and intensity normalization. The preprocessed tensors are passed concurrently through standalone CNN models and classical edge pipelines. The probability maps generated by CNNs are aggregated via soft voting, stacking, and hybrid fusion Soft Voting and Stacking, and subsequently fused with classical gradient maps to derive precise binary segmentation masks and sharp boundary edges for improved robustness. The performance comparism of the traditional edge detection methods (Canny, Sobel, and

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Prewitt), individual deep learning models, and ensemble-based approaches was determined using some selected performance metrics.

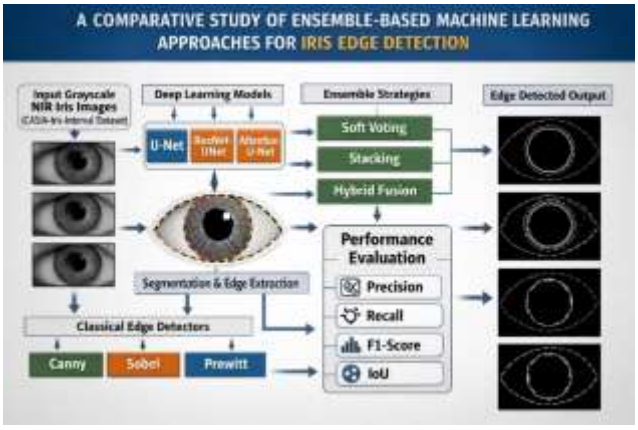


Fig. 1: Architectural Pipeline of Learning Ensemble System

3.2 Dataset Description And Splitting

Experiments were conducted using the benchmark CASIAIris-Interval Dataset (Version 4.0) [24]. The dataset comprises 2,639 high-resolution grayscale images (320 × 280 pixels, JPEG) acquired from 395 distinct eye classes (subjects) under near-infrared (NIR) LED illumination. NIR illumination minimizes corneal reflections and provides crisp contrast between pupil, iris, and sclera structures [4].

To prevent data leakage and guarantee strict identity-wise generalization [3], a subject-wise splitting strategy was executed:

1. Training Set: 70% (1,873 images across 276 subject-eye classes).

2. Validation Set: 30% (766 images across 119 subject-eye classes).

3.3 Preprocessing And Augmentation

Input images are resized to a standard grid of H = 256 and W = 320 pixels using bilinear interpolation. Intensity normalization maps pixel intensities to a floating-point range of [0, 1]:

$$I_{norm}(x,y) = \frac{I'(x,y)}{255} \qquad (1)$$

To reduce high-frequency acquisition noise without blunting primary edges, 2D Gaussian filtering is applied:

$$G(x,y,\sigma) = \frac{1}{2\pi\sigma^2} e^{-\frac{x^2+y^2}{2\sigma^2}} \qquad (2)$$

To enhance network generalization and mitigate overfitting [25], online data augmentation was implemented, including horizontal flipping, spatial rotations

and contrast adjustments ($\alpha \in [0.8, 1.2]$).

3.4 Pseudo Ground-Truth

Generation Because public iris datasets lack manual pixel-wise annotations, pseudo ground-truth binary masks were automatically generated via the Circular Hough Transform (CHT) [14]. CHT identifies candidate circular parameters in a 3D accumulator space (a, b, r) corresponding to circle center coordinates and radius:

$$(x-a)^2 + (y-b)^2 = r^2 \qquad (3)$$

Pupil boundary parameters (a_p, b_p, r_p) and outer iris boundary parameters (a_i, b_i, r_i) are detected under structural constraints $r_i > r_p$. The ground-truth mask $M(x,y)$ is defined as an annular region:

$$M(x,y) = 1 \; if \; r_p < d(x,y) < r_i) \text{ else } 0 \quad (4)$$

where $d(x,y) = \sqrt{[x-a)^2 + (y-b)^2]}$. boundary edges $E(x,y)$ are derived directly from binary masks via morphological erosion: $E = M$ – Erode (M)

3.5 Deep Learning Base Architectures

Three deep CNN architectures were developed for pixel-level semantic segmentation:

1. U-Net: Incorporates a 4-level contracting encoder path paired with an expanding decoder path linked via skip connections to restore fine spatial detail [11].
2. ResNet-UNet: Replaces the baseline encoder with a pretrained ResNet-34 backbone, utilizing residual mapping blocks y = F (x, W) + x to enable deeper feature extraction [12].
3. Attention U-Net: Integrates Attention Gates (AGs) within skip connections [13]. Attention coefficients α ∈ [0, 1] scale input feature maps x' = α · x, suppressing background features while highlighting iris structures.

Models were optimized using a combined Binary CrossEntropy and Dice loss function:

$L_{total} = L_{BCE} + L_{Dice}$

Where, $L_{Dice} = 1 - \frac{2\sum y\hat{y}}{\sum y + \sum \hat{y}}$ Networks were trained using the Adam optimizer (**learning rate** = 10^{-4}, batch **size** = 16) for 15 epochs on NVIDIA GPU acceleration within PyTorch.

1. **F. Ensemble Strategies**

To combine base model predictions, three ensemble mechanisms were constructed:

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1. Soft Voting: Computes the pixel-wise mean probability across the base architectures:

$$\widehat{M}_{soft}(x,y) = \frac{1}{N}\sum_{i=1}^{N}\widehat{M}_i\,(x,y) \qquad (5)$$

2. Stacking Meta-Learner: Feeds pixel probability maps from U-Net, ResNet-UNet, and Attention U-Net into a meta-classifier (1×1 Logistic Convolution network) to learn optimal spatial combination weights:

$$\widehat{M}_{stack} = f_{meta}(\widehat{M}_1, \widehat{M}_2, \widehat{M}_3) \qquad (6)$$

3. Hybrid Fusion: Fuses deep neural predictions with classical Canny gradient maps $E_{classical}$ using a weighting parameter α = 0.85:

$$M_{hybrid} = \alpha M_{CNN} + (1-\alpha)E_{classical} \quad (7)$$

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2. Model performance was systematically evaluated on the validation dataset (766 images) across four standard metrics derived from pixel-level confusion matrix parameters (TP, FP, TN, FN): Precision, Recall, F1-Score, and Intersection over Union (IoU).

3.6 Traditional Edge Operators Baseline

Table I reports quantitative performance for classical operators. Traditional gradient detectors exhibit poor segmentation performance across all metrics. The Canny operator achieved the highest precision, F1 and IoU values of 0.024638, 0.41728 and 0.21354 respectively.

While Sobel has the highest recall value of 0.361479. The Prewitt operator completely failed under the selected thresholding configuration, yielding zero values across all evaluation metrics.

METHOD	PRECISION	RECALL	F1-SCORE	IOU
Canny	0.02463	0.14592	0.04172	0.02135
Sobel	0.021868	0.36147	0.041122	0.02102
Prewitt	0	0	0	0

3.7 Standalone Deep Learning Models

As shown in Table II, deep learning architectures yield a massive performance leap over classical operators. Standard U-Net achieved the highest Precision value of 0.66 and lowest recall of 0.79. ResNetUNet further boosted recall to 0.83, F1-Score to 0.73 and IoU to 0.58. Attention U-Net recorded comparable average performance (IoU = 0.56, F1-Score = 0.72), proving that deep CNNs effectively learn regional topology directly from raw image tensors. This suggests that the attention mechanism did not provide a strong additional benefit under the controlled imaging conditions of CASIA-Iris-Interval.

TABLE II: Performance of Deep Learning Models

MODEL	PRECISION	RECALL	F1-SCORE	IOU
U-Net	0.66	0.799	0.72	0.57
ResNet-UNet	0.65	0.83	0.73	0.58
Attention U-Net	0.65	0.81	0.72	0.56

3.8 Ensemble And Hybrid Frameworks

Table III presents the performance of the proposed ensemble models. Aggregating base learners significantly enhances segmentation precision and boundary fidelity. Among the ensemble methods, Stacking Fusion achieved the highest Precision, F1, and IoU, albeit by a very small margin. This suggests that learned fusion is slightly more effective than simple averaging, because the meta-learner can adaptively weight the predictions from different networks instead of assuming equal contribution. HybridFusion, which incorporated a classical Canny-derived signal alongside the CNN outputs, improved precision but not overall F1.

MODEL FRAMEWORK	PRECISION	RECALL	F1-SCORE	IOU
Soft Voting Ensemble	0.658	0.813	0.728	0.572
Stacking Meta-Learner	0.652	0.823	0.728	0.572
Hybrid Fusion Framework	0.667	0.799	0.727	0.571

TABLE III: Performance of Ensemble and Hybrid Models

Voting and Stacking Meta-Learners, and subsequently fused with classical gradient maps to derive precise binary segmentation masks and sharp boundary edges.

A. **Evaluation Metrics and Comparative Synthesis**

The evaluation of segmentation models is a critical component of this study, as it provides objective measures for assessing the accuracy, robustness, and generalisation capability of the proposed framework. Given that iris segmentation is a pixel-level classification task, evaluation must be performed at the pixel level, comparing predicted masks with ground-truth masks. This study employs a set of widely accepted performance metrics, including precision,

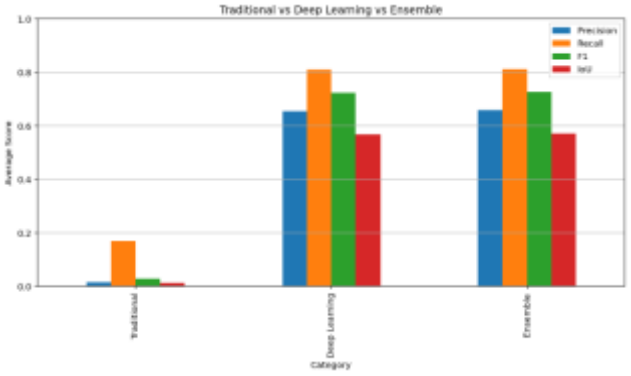
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recall, F1-score, and Intersection over Union (IoU), to comprehensively evaluate model performance.

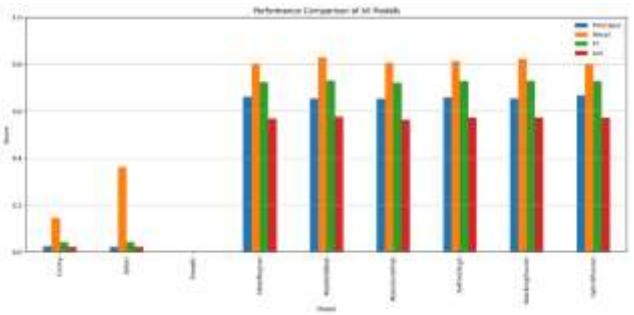
These metrics are commonly used in image segmentation and computer vision research because they capture different aspects of prediction quality, particularly in scenarios involving class imbalance and boundary precision [19]. By using multiple metrics, the study ensures a balanced and rigorous assessment of segmentation performance. Using the metrics, the **c**omparative interpretation across all models**.**

Table IV Comparative Interpretation Across all Models

	Model	Precision	Recall	F1	IoU
0	Canny	0.024638	0.145922	0.041728	0.021354
1	Sobel	0.021868	0.361479	0.041126	0.021020
2	Prewitt	0.000000	0.000000	0.000000	0.000000
3	UNetRegion	0.660433	0.799455	0.723324	0.566569
4	ResNetUNet	0.652805	0.828390	0.730190	0.575039
5	AttentionUNet	0.651899	0.805340	0.720541	0.563161
6	SoftVoting3	0.658726	0.813664	0.728043	0.572380
7	StackingFusion	0.652928	0.823356	0.728304	0.572703
8	HybridFusion	0.667128	0.799090	0.727171	0.571303



Figuere IIa Chart of Comparative Interpretation Across the



Figuere IIb Chart of Comparative Interpretation Across all individual Models

3.9 Performance Comparison Of All Models

The grouped bar chart in figure IIb consolidates all four-performance metrics (Precision, Recall, F1, IoU) for every individual model side by side. It offers a comprehensive view of the data from the previous four graphs. It clearly illustrates the stark performance gulf between classical computer vision techniques (left side) and modern deep learning/ensemble architectures (right side), while showing how closely matched the deep learning models are to one another

Comparative Interpretation across all model using F1-score performance metrics

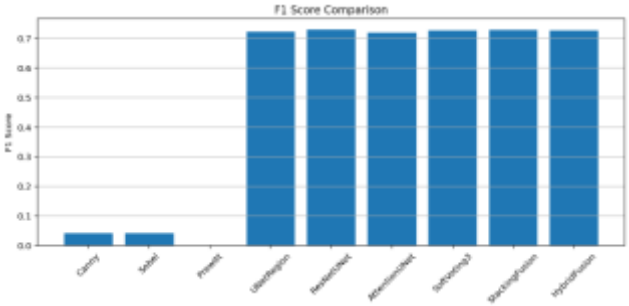


Figure III Comparative Interpretation across all model using

F1-score performance metrics

When the models were ranked by F1-score, ResNetUNet is the best single model at 0.7302, while Stacking Fusion is the strongest ensemble at 0.7283, followed very closely by SoftVoting3 at 0.7280 and Hybrid Fusion at 0.7272. The baseline UNet Region reached 0.7233 and Attention UNet 0.7205. All deep models and ensemble variants remained far above the classical methods, whose F1-scores were approximately 0.04 or lower.(FigureIII)

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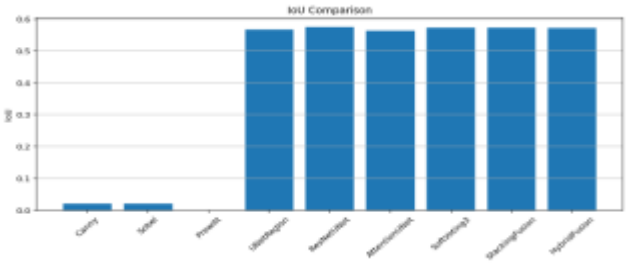


Figure IV Comparative Interpretation across all model using IoU performance metrics

When the models were ranked by IoU, ResNetUNet single model also outperformed others slightly at 0.575039, followed by StackingFusion as the strongest ensemble at 0.572703, followed very closely by SoftVoting3 at 0.572380 and HybridFusion at 0.571303. The baseline UNetRegion reached 0.5665 and AttentionUNet 0.5631. All deep models and ensemble variants remained far above the classical methods, whose IoU -scores were approximately 0.02 or lower. (Figure IV).

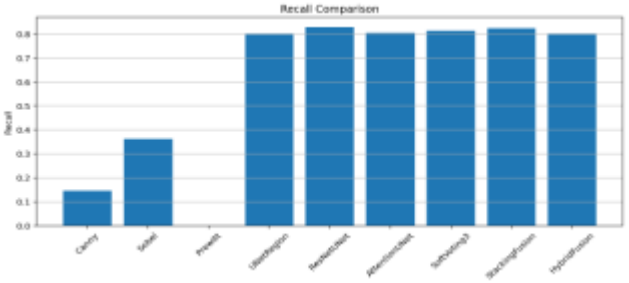


Figure V Comparative Interpretation across all model using Recall performance metrics

Traditional methods show slightly better recall than precision (Sobel reaches around 0.36), but they are still drastically outperformed by the neural networks. The deep learning and ensemble models score highly between 0.80 and 0.83, with *ResNetUNet* and *StackingFusion* showing the highest sensitivity (Figure V).

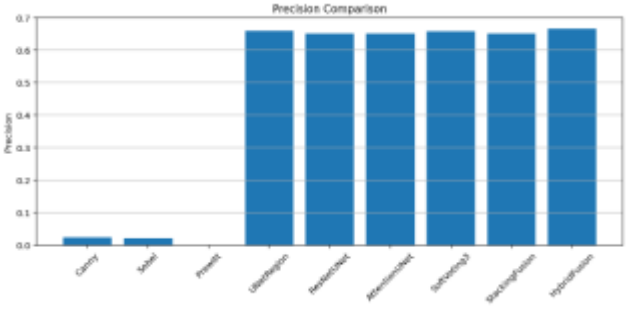


Figure VI Comparative Interpretation across all model using Precision performance metrics

Traditional filters (Canny, Sobel, Prewitt) perform extremely poorly, hovering near 0.0. In contrast, all deep learning and ensemble models demonstrate a massive leap in performance, achieving consistent precision scores between **0.65 and 0.67**, with *HybridFusion* slightly leading the pack. (figure VI)

3.10 Discussion

The empirical results validate the fundamental hypothesis of this study: reformulating iris edge detection into a region-based binary semantic segmentation problem dramatically improves model stability and localized accuracy. Classical edge operators rely exclusively on local gradient changes, rendering them incapable of differentiating true anatomical boundaries from eyelashes or specular glare. In contrast, deep CNN architectures capture contextual semantic features, maintaining robust predictions even under occlusions.

This ranking leads to several important conclusions. First, the dominant performance gain in this project came not from ensemble itself, but from the decision to reformulate iris edge detection as region segmentation and solve it using convolutional neural networks. That methodological shift was the main driver of success.

Second, once a robust segmentation baseline had been established, architectural refinement and ensemble fusion produced incremental rather than radical improvements. Third, the classical edge operators were not competitive under this evaluation setting, confirming that they are unsuitable as standalone solutions for reliable iris boundary localization on this dataset

III. CONCLUSION

One of the most important findings in this study is methodological. Early experiments with direct thin-edge prediction produced very low F1 and IoU values, indicating that sparse boundary supervision was too unstable for effective learning. By reformulating the task as iris region segmentation and deriving boundaries afterwards, the study substantially improved model learnability and convergence. This demonstrates that, for iris edge detection problems with limited or automatically generated labels, region-based supervision is far more effective than direct edge detector. . The findings show that deep learning approaches clearly outperform traditional image processing methods, and that ensemble fusion offers marginal but consistent benefits beyond single-model segmentation. However, the results also show that the largest technical improvement comes from the segmentation formulation itself rather than from ensemble complexity alone.

Therefore, the study contributes in three ways. First, it demonstrates the inadequacy of traditional edge operators for this task under the given evaluation framework. Second,

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it shows that region-based CNN segmentation is a highly effective foundation for iris boundary localization. Third, it shows that ensemble learning can improve robustness and slightly increase aggregate performance, especially through stacking, although the gains are limited on a controlled dataset such as CASIA-Iris-Interval.

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