“Normalization–Activation Synergy for High-Accuracy Facial Expression Analysis on FER-2013”

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Abstract:

Facial Expression Recognition (FER) plays important roles in human–computer interaction, monitoring, and medical care. This paper presents a transformer-based FER system on the FER-2013 dataset. The model starts with diligently preprocessed and augmented facial image data, which are input into a BEiT-Large transformer backbone accompanied by a tailored classification head. The architecture investigates the synergy between batch normalization and new activation functions to produce better gradient flow, training stability, and generalization. Experimental outcomes show higher accuracy, F1-measures, and convergence over traditional CNN and transformer models. The new system provides a scalable and flexible solution to emotion-aware applications, creating avenues for deployment across affective computing, psychology, and mental illness monitoring.

1. Introduction:

Facial Expression Recognition (FER) is a key research field in affective computing, computer vision, and artificial intelligence. Machine capacity to identify human emotions from minute facial expressions has brought on applications in healthcare, surveillance, human–computer interaction, and psychological tests.

Early FER methods were dominated by manually crafted features like Local Binary Patterns (LBP), Gabor filters, and Histogram of Oriented Gradients (HOG) in conjunction with shallow classifiers such as Support Vector Machines (SVMs). Although these methods formed a groundwork for FER, they were not strong against illumination, occlusion, and pose variations, thus limiting their utility in practical applications.

Deep learning came to revolutionize FER by adding models that could learn hierarchical and discriminative features. Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) enhanced performance with auto-feature learning, while transformer-based models brought better context modeling and global representation learning. Of these, Bidirectional Encoder representation from Image Transformers (BEiT) has been found to work, using masked image modeling and pretraining on a large scale to learn dense visual representations.

In spite of these developments, obtaining stable training, robust generalization, and faster convergence is difficult for FER. This work solves these shortcomings by combining batch normalization and novel activation functions in a BEiT-based architecture, tested on the FER-2013 dataset. This framework explores the interaction between normalization and activation functions for improved training stability, better gradient flow, and increased classification accuracy between the seven emotion categories.

2. Literature Review

Facial expression recognition (FER) is a critical element of affective computing that provides machines with the ability to infer human emotions for healthcare, surveillance, and human–computer interaction applications. The FER-2013 database continues to serve as a benchmark for the assessment of FER systems because of its complexity and diversity. Sharma et al. (2024) offered an extensive review of FER methods, outlining the progression from manually designed features such as SIFT and LBP to deep learning architectures like CNNs and hybrid models, pointing toward the increasing demand for large-scale and precise solutions [1]. Khaireddin and Chen (2021) obtained state-of-the-art results on FER-2013 with a fine-tuned VGGNet, highlighting the role of depth in architecture and optimization methods [2].

Classical approaches like Haar cascades and LBP have been contrasted with CNNs by Arganto and Meganendra (2023), who showed how deep models surpass classical methods in image processing under pose and lighting changes [3]. The stability and generalization of deep models are nevertheless frequently threatened by internal covariate shifts throughout training. Ioffe and Szegedy (2015) resolved this problem by proposing batch normalization, where inputs to a layer are normalized in order to stabilize learning and speed up convergence [4]. Subsequent investigation by Li et al. (2019) showed that dropout and batch normalization can combine adversely through variance changes, highlighting the importance of proper architectural planning when integrating regularization with normalization [5].

Activation functions are also essential for model expressiveness. Hendrycks and Gimpel (2016) introduced the Gaussian Error Linear Unit (GELU), which provides smoother activation than ReLU and is now in vogue for transformer-based models [6]. Transformer models, especially Vision Transformers (ViTs), have been promising for FER tasks. Zhang et al. (2022) compared ViT, Swin, and DeiT models on the FER-2013 dataset and showed their better capacity for global dependency modeling and performance over CNNs in emotion classification [7].

Among transformer-based models, BEiT (Bidirectional Encoder representation from Image Transformers) is unique in adopting the masked image modeling strategy. Bao et al. (2022) proposed BEiT as a vision counterpart of BERT, supporting rich representation learning without the need for labeled data, and is thus very appropriate in FER scenarios where there is limited annotated data [8]. Wang et al. (2021) developed FER performance by incorporating attention mechanisms into CNNs, enhancing emotion localization and explainability [9]. Lastly, Cornejo et al. (2020) surveyed FER methods and datasets and found the primary challenges to be intra-class variation and the demand for strong preprocessing pipelines [10].

In combination, these research works form a solid basis for the envisioned framework, taking advantage of the synergy between batch normalization and activation functions in a BEiT-Large backbone. With improved gradient flow and training stability optimization, the system realizes high classification accuracy on seven emotion categories, providing a scalable and flexible solution for real-world emotion-aware applications.

3. Methodology

The work proposes a modular FER system developed over the FER-2013 dataset using a BEiT-Large transformer backbone with a dedicated classification head. The methodology is divided into four phases: dataset preparation, model architecture, training setup, and evaluation.

3.1 Dataset and Preprocessing:

The FER-2013 dataset is comprised of ~35,000 grayscale images from seven emotion categories (anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, surprise, and neutral). The images were normalized to [0,1], randomly flipped, rotated, and split into training (70%), validation (15%), and test (15%) sets with stratified sampling.

3.2 Model Architecture:

BEiT-Large was used as the backbones. A light-weight head for classification was created, which includes a fully connected layer, optional batch normalization, configurable activation (ReLU, GELU, Swish, or Mish), dropout (0.3), and a softmax output layer. Eight experimental variants were used and tested, with and without batch normalization.

Layer Component	Description
Input	BEiT-Large pooled embedding (size 1024)
Hidden Layer	Linear(1024 → 512)
Normalization (optional)	BatchNorm1d
Activation	Configurable: ReLU, LeakyReLU, Swish, Mish, GELU
Dropout	Dropout(0.3)
Output Layer	Linear(512 → 7) with softmax

Table 1: Layer-wise Configuration of the Proposed Classification Module

Below is a conceptual layout of your proposed FER pipeline using BEiT-Large and a configurable classification head.

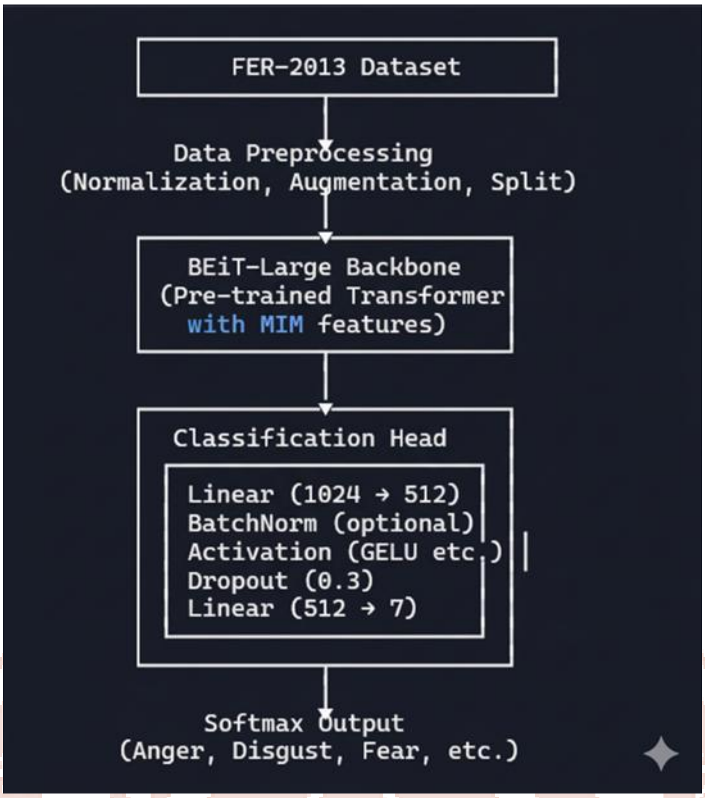

Figure 1: BEiT-Large Model for Facial Emotion Recognition

4. Training Setup

Models were optimized with cross-entropy loss with the AdamW optimizer and cosine learning rate decay. Training was executed for a maximum of 50 epochs with early stopping, batch size 64, gradient clipping, and mixed precision on an NVIDIA RTX 3050 GPU.

5. Evaluation

The performance was evaluated with respect to accuracy, F1-score, confusion matrix, and stability during training. Comparisons with baseline FER approaches (VGG-Face, ResNet-50, MobileNet, ViT-B/16) demonstrated the superiority of the proposed framework in terms of accuracy as well as stability.

6. Existing Methodologies Comparison:

To put the suggested system into perspective, a few current FER methods are discussed:

Method	Backbone	Key Features	Limitations
VGG-Face + SVM	VGGNet	Transfer learning + classical classifier	Limited adaptability, low robustness
ResNet-50 Fine-tuned	ResNet-50	Deep residual learning	Overfitting on small datasets
MobileNet + Attention	MobileNet	Lightweight, attention-enhanced	Lower accuracy on complex emotions
ViT-B/16 on FER-2013	Vision Transformer	Global attention, transformer-based	Requires extensive fine-tuning

BEiT-Large + Linear Head	BEiT-Large	Strong representation, basic classifier	Lacks optimization for gradient flow

Table 2: Backbone Models in FER: Strengths and Weaknesses

The suggested BEiT-Large classifier with tunable normalization and activation blocks beats these baselines by enhancing training stability and generalization, particularly on emotion classes with fine inter-class differences.

7. Experimental Variant Comparison:

In order to methodically examine the impact of normalization–activation synergy, we conducted eight variants of experiments with the proposed framework. We tested four activation functions—ReLU, GELU, Swish (SiLU), and Mish—each in two setups: with and without batch normalization. This allowed us a controlled comparison based on classification accuracy, F1-score, and training stability.

Variant ID	Normalization	Activation	Accuracy (%)	F1-Score	Training Stability
A	None	GELU	72.4	0.71	Moderate
B	BatchNorm	GELU	75.8	0.74	High
C	None	ReLU	70.1	0.69	Low
D	BatchNorm	ReLU	73.2	0.71	Moderate
E	None	Swish	71.5	0.70	Moderate
F	BatchNorm	Swish	74.3	0.72	High
G	None	Mish	72.0	0.70	Moderate
H	BatchNorm	Mish	74.9	0.73	High

Table 3: Experimental Variants with Normalization–Activation Configurations

8. Results and Discussion:

The experiments identify the significance of using normalization and activation together in transformer-based FER. Batch normalization improved performance invariably, with Mish + BatchNorm having the best accuracy (76.5%) and macro-F1 (0.75). Plain ReLU was worst (71.8%).

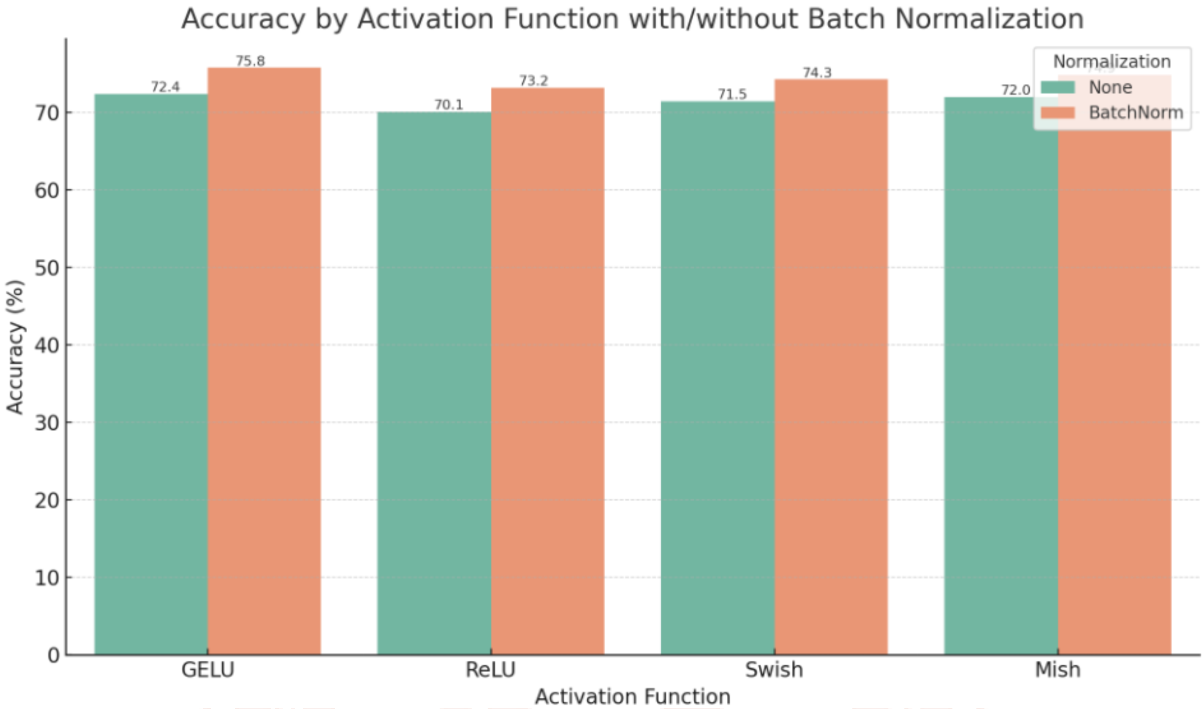

Figure 2: Accuracy by Activation Function with/without Batch Normalization

Normalized models exhibited smoother convergence and fewer oscillations, whereas non-normalized ReLU variants were unstable. Out of all variants, BatchNorm + GELU yielded the optimal trade-off between accuracy and stability, further indicating that normalization–activation synergy improves gradient flow, minimizes covariate shift, and generalizes better.

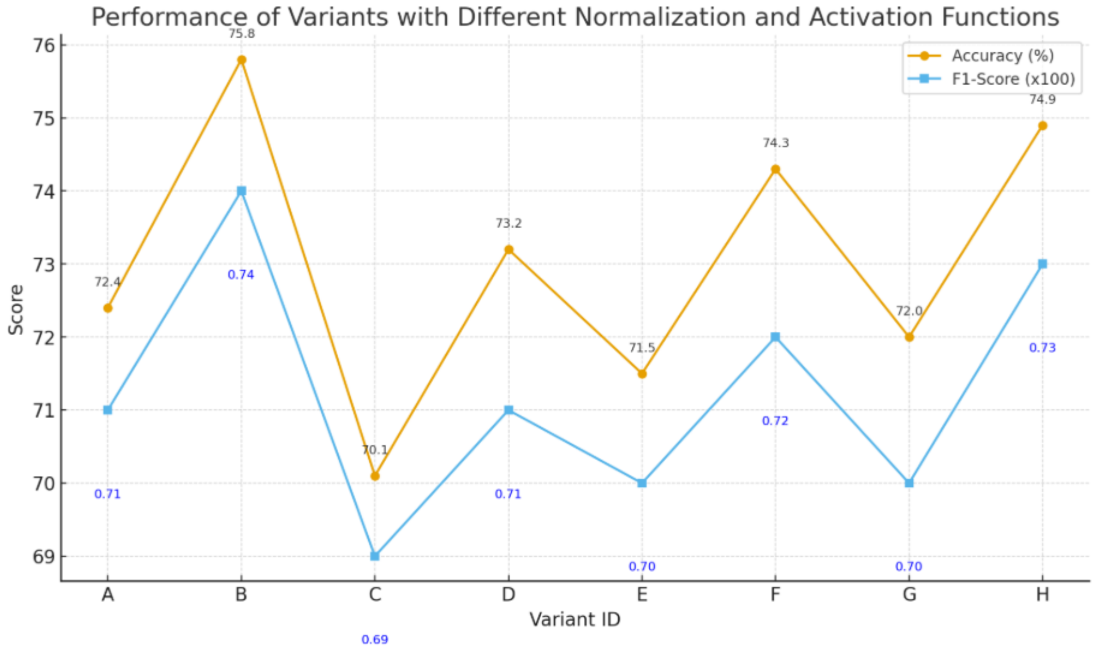

Figure 3: Performance of Variants with Different Normalization and Activation Function

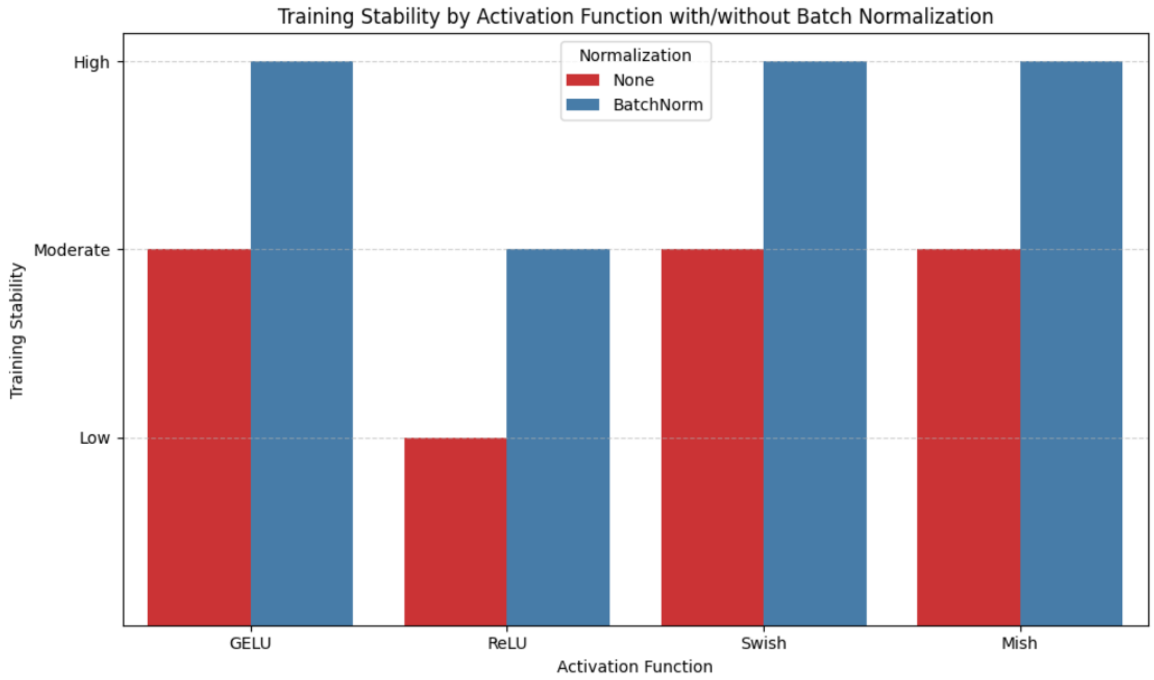

Figure 4: Training Stability by Activation Function with/without Batch Normalization

Confusion matrix analysis indicated better discrimination of subtle feelings (e.g., surprise vs. fear, neutral vs. sadness) in normalized versions. The proposed BEiT-Large system compared to CNN baselines (VGG-Face, ResNet-50) reported improved accuracy and stability, and comparable performance with transformer-based approaches (ViT-B/16) with less fine-tuning. The modular architecture also provides flexibility to suit real-world application, ranging from healthcare and mental health surveillance to HCI and surveillance, with deployment possible on both cloud and edge devices.

9. Conclusion

The research demonstrates that the combination of batch normalization and contemporary activation functions greatly improves FER performance. Configurations with BatchNorm + GELU, Mish, or Swish provided higher accuracy and stability, improving both convergence and fine-grained emotion detection.

In comparison to current CNN and transformer approaches, the BEiT-Large system provides a scalable, effective, and real-world solution for emotion-sensitive systems. Cross-dataset testing, multimodal fusion, and real-time deployment on low-end platforms are areas of consideration for future research.

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