PriSM: Prior-Guided Search Methods for Query Efficient Black-Box Attacks

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Abstract

Deep Neural Networks are vulnerable to adversarial examples in black-box settings, requiring query-efficient attack methods. We propose **PriSM** (**Pri**or-Guided **S**earch **M**ethods), which systematically exploits two types of transferable surrogate information: decision boundary geometry and loss landscape topography. We demonstrate their utility through complementary attacks: (1) **TGEA** leverages boundary geometry to initialize evolutionary optimization with surrogate evolved populations, maximizing attack success rates, and (2) **SGSA** leverages loss topography via multi-scale saliency guidance to direct Square Attack's Andriushchenko et al. (2020) perturbations, minimizing query costs. Across MNIST, CIFAR-10, and ImageNet, both methods achieve 30-60% query reductions compared to uninformed baselines, while also being competitive with state of the art hybrid attacks. Our evaluation reveals a strategic trade off: SGSA excels in query efficiency through local exploitation, whereas TGEA maximizes success rates via global exploration. Our comprehensive evaluation also demonstrates that different types of surrogate information require matched exploitation strategies, providing practical guidance for query-efficient black-box attacks.

1 Introduction

Deep Neural Networks (DNNs) have achieved remarkable success across critical domains, including autonomous vehicles, biometric authentication, and medical diagnostics Krizhevsky et al. (2012); He et al. (2016). However, their susceptibility to adversarial examples—subtly perturbed inputs that cause misclassification, poses significant security risks Szegedy et al. (2014); Goodfellow et al. (2015); Carlini & Wagner (2017).

In real-world deployments, attackers often operate under black-box constraints, where they lack access to model internals and can only query the model for predictions Papernot et al. (2017). This setting presents two key challenges: (1) achieving high attack success rates without gradient information, and (2) minimizing the number of queries to evade detection and reduce computational costs Chen et al. (2017); Ilyas et al. (2018). Existing approaches: transfer-based, query-based, and hybrid methods face a fundamental trade-off: transfer attacks require zero queries but suffer from low success rates, while query-based attacks achieve high success at the cost of thousands of queries per sample Papernot et al. (2017); Dong et al. (2018); Chen et al. (2017); Andriushchenko et al. (2020); Huang & Yu (2022). Opportunities remain to more fully leverage surrogate model information to enhance both query efficiency and attack success.

In this work, we introduce **PriSM** (Prior-Guided Search Methods), a novel framework that strategically incorporates surrogate-derived guidance in different ways in order to enhance black-box adversarial searches more effectively. Our key contributions are:

- **TGEA**: A transfer-guided evolutionary attack with advanced initialization strategies (TASI and SEGI) that warm-start CMA-ES optimization Hansen (2006), delivering the highest success rates on complex models.

- **SGSA**: A saliency-guided enhancement to the Square Attack Andriushchenko et al. (2020) that uses multi-scale gradient maps from surrogates to intelligently inform perturbation placement and sizing, achieving state-of-the-art query efficiency.
- **Intuitive Analysis**: Intuitive justifications showing that SGSA exploits local loss geometry transferability, while TGEA leverages global decision boundary correlations.

Our results demonstrate that PriSM offers a strategic choice between minimizing query costs and maximizing attack success. Both SGSA and TGEA reduce queries by up to 50% over random baselines while achieving equal or greater success rates. This work advances the understanding of prior-guided paradigms in adversarial machine learning, providing practical tools for robustness evaluation.

2 Related Work

Black-box adversarial attacks balance success rates and query costs through three paradigms: transfer-based, query-based, and hybrid approaches, with recent advancements incorporating saliency guidance and evolutionary optimization.

Transfer-based attacks exploit cross-model transferability by generating perturbations on surrogate models trained on similar data distributions Papernot et al. (2017); Liu et al. (2017). Efforts to boost transferability include momentum integration Dong et al. (2018), input diversity Xie et al. (2019), and ensemble methods Liu et al. (2017). Although these require no queries to the target, their effectiveness is often limited against robust defenses He et al. (2017).

Query-based attacks iteratively refine perturbations via direct model queries. Score-based methods like SimBA Guo et al. (2019) and Square Attack Andriushchenko et al. (2020) use confidence scores, with Square Attack leading benchmarks such as BlackboxBench Zheng et al. (2025). Decision-based approaches like Boundary Attack Brendel et al. (2018) rely solely on hard labels but incur higher query demands Chen & Gu (2020). Saliency-guided variants prioritize perturbations in salient regions Dai et al. (2023); Soor et al. (2025).

Hybrid attacks combine these paradigms, using surrogate priors to initialize or guide query-based searches. Examples include TAGA Huang & Yu (2022), which refines transfer seeds via genetic algorithms, and Hybrid Batch Attacks Suya et al. (2020), which leverage local surrogates for scalable generation. Recent work enhances transferability through meta-learning Fu et al. (2022), ensemble surrogates Cai et al. (2022), and saliency integration Wang et al. (2024); Huang & Kong (2022). Most recently, PBO Cheng et al. (2024) introduced Bayesian optimization with a learned function prior, achieving state-of-the-art query efficiency on standard models by exploiting loss surface smoothness.

Evolutionary algorithms navigate high dimensional spaces without gradients Su et al. (2019); Alzantot et al. (2019). CMA-ES Hansen (2006) adapts search distributions via covariance updates, showing promise in adversarial contexts, though random initializations can lead to slow convergence Qiu et al. (2021); Kuang et al. (2019).

Despite these advances, existing hybrids often underutilize surrogate priors for continuous guidance or sophisticated warm-starts. Our PriSM framework addresses this through SGSA, which embeds multi-scale saliency from surrogates into every Square Attack query decision, and TGEA, which enhances evolutionary hybrids with surrogate-evolved initializations (e.g., SEGI), achieving up to 8.24% higher success rates on robust models while maintaining low query costs.

3 Background

3.1 Adversarial Attacks

Let $f_\theta : \mathcal{X} \to \mathbb{R}^K$ denote a deep neural network classifier with parameters θ, mapping input $x \in \mathcal{X}$ to logits over K classes. For a clean input x with true label y, the model's prediction is $\hat{y} = \arg\max_k f_\theta(x)_k$.

An adversarial example $x' = x + \delta$ is a perturbed input that causes misclassification while remaining perceptually similar to x. The perturbation δ is typically constrained by $\|\delta\|_p \leq \epsilon$, where $p \in \{0, 2, \infty\}$ and ϵ controls the perturbation budget.

White-box attacks. With full access to model parameters and gradients, white-box attacks like PGD Madry et al. (2019) iteratively optimize:

$$x^{t+1} = \Pi_\epsilon(x^t + \alpha \cdot \text{sign}(\nabla_x \mathcal{L}(f_\theta(x^t), y))) \tag{1}$$

where Π_ϵ projects onto the ℓ_p ball of radius ϵ, and $\mathcal{L}$ is the attack loss (e.g., cross-entropy).

Black-box attacks. In black-box settings, attackers lack gradient access and can only query the model. These attacks are categorized by query type:

- **Score-based:** Access to confidence scores/logits
- **Decision-based:** Access only to predicted labels
- **Transfer-based:** Zero queries, relying on adversarial transferability

3.2 Square Attack

Square Attack Andriushchenko et al. (2020) is a score-based black-box attack that does not rely on local gradient information. It selects localized square-shaped updates at random positions such that the perturbation is situated approximately at the boundary of the feasible set. At iteration i, it *randomly* samples a square region depending on the current square size $h^{(i)}$. The algorithm minimizes the margin-based loss $L(f(\hat{x}), y) = f_y(\hat{x}) - \max_{k \neq y} f_k(\hat{x})$. The update rule for the perturbation δ is defined as:

$$\delta^{i+1} = \begin{cases} \text{Project}(\delta^i + \nu_i) & \text{if } L(f_\theta(x + \text{Project}(\delta^i + \nu_i)), y) < L(f_\theta(x + \delta^i), y) \\ \delta^i & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \tag{2}$$

where the update ν_i is sampled from a discrete distribution $\nu \in \{-2\epsilon, 2\epsilon\}^d$ within the square region, ensuring the perturbation stays at the corners of the ℓ_∞-ball.

3.3 CMA-ES for Black-Box Optimization

Covariance Matrix Adaptation Evolution Strategy (CMA-ES) Hansen (2006) is a gradient-free optimizer that adapts a multivariate normal search distribution. At generation g, it samples λ candidate solutions:

$$x_i^{(g)} \sim \mathcal{N}(m^{(g)}, (\sigma^{(g)})^2 C^{(g)}), \quad i = 1, \ldots, \lambda \tag{3}$$

where $m^{(g)}$ is the mean vector, $\sigma^{(g)}$ is the step size, and $C^{(g)}$ is the covariance matrix.

The mean is updated using the μ best individuals:

$$m^{(g+1)} = \sum_{i=1}^{\mu} w_i x_{i:\lambda}^{(g)} \tag{4}$$

where $x_{i:\lambda}$ denotes the i-th best solution and w_i are recombination weights.

The covariance matrix adapts to the local loss landscape through rank-one and rank-μ updates, enabling efficient search in high-dimensional spaces without gradient information. However, CMA-ES suffers from slow convergence when initialized randomly, particularly for adversarial attack objectives.

3.4 Surrogate Models and Transferability

A surrogate model f_s is a white-box model accessible to the attacker, typically trained on similar data as the target model f_t. Adversarial transferability refers to the phenomenon where adversarial examples crafted on

f_s often fool f_t:

$$\Pr[f_t(x + \delta_s) \neq y] > 0 \quad \text{where } \delta_s = \arg\max_{\|\delta\|_p \leq \epsilon} \mathcal{L}(f_s(x + \delta), y) \tag{5}$$

Transferability arises from models learning similar decision boundaries on similar data distributions Papernot et al. (2017). However, transfer success varies significantly with model architecture, training procedure, and robustness Huang et al. (2017).

Saliency maps. Gradient-based saliency maps indicate input region importance:

$$S(x) = \|\nabla_x \mathcal{L}(f_s(x), y)\|_2 \tag{6}$$

High saliency regions are more sensitive to perturbations. While saliency is model-specific, relative importance patterns often transfer across models Simonyan & Zisserman (2015), enabling surrogate-guided attacks.

4 Methodology

4.1 Motivation

In this work, we investigate how surrogate model information can be systematically exploited to improve query efficiency in black-box adversarial attacks. While transfer-based attacks require zero queries but suffer from low success rates, and query-based attacks achieve high success at the cost of thousands of queries, hybrid approaches that *strategically* leverage surrogate priors remain underexplored.

We focus on two transferable properties that provide complementary information about the attack surface:

Decision Boundary Geometry. Models trained on similar data distributions learn correlated decision boundaries. Adversarial examples lying near a surrogate's decision boundary are statistically enriched near the target's boundary (Section 4.2.4). This geometric correlation provides *spatial information* indicating which regions of input space are promising for adversarial search.

Loss Landscape Topography. Gradient-based saliency maps reveal input regions where the loss function is most sensitive to perturbations. Empirical evidence shows that these sensitivity patterns transfer across architecturally similar models, even when exact gradient vectors differ. This topological information provides *directional guidance*, indicating which perturbations are most likely to increase loss.

We focus on these properties because they represent fundamentally different aspects of transferability that is directly exploited in query-based attacks. Boundary geometry provides information about the global structure of the adversarial space where misclassification regions exist, which is critical for initializing search algorithms effectively. Loss topography provides information about the local sensitivity landscape, which input regions are most vulnerable to perturbation, which is essential for guiding iterative refinement. Together, they span the spectrum from global positioning to local gradient information, enabling complementary exploitation strategies for query-efficient attacks.

We incorporate these properties into SOTA query-based attacks through two distinct approaches: TGEA (Section 4.2.1) leverages boundary geometry to warm-start evolutionary optimization with surrogate-evolved populations, achieving up to 98% attack success rates while reducing queries by 30–60% compared to random initialization. SGSA (Section 4.3.3) leverages loss topography to guide Square Attack's random perturbations toward salient regions, achieving query reductions of 30–50% while maintaining competitive success rates.

Ultimately, these methods demonstrate that understanding *what* transfers enables principled design of *how* to exploit it. By systematically decomposing transferability into boundary geometry and loss topography, we reveal that different types of surrogate information require different exploitation strategies matched to the operational characteristics of search algorithms. This framework not only achieves substantial query reductions across diverse threat models, but also provides a foundation for future work to identify and exploit additional transferable properties in black-box adversarial settings.

4.2 Transfer-Guided Evolutionary Attack (TGEA)

4.2.1 Overview

Traditional evolutionary attacks on black-box models have been widely used in the literature Qiu et al. (2021); Ilyas et al. (2018); Alzantot et al. (2019). They rely on randomly initialized populations, which we empirically demonstrate can lead to relatively slower convergence and higher query costs. This is particularly problematic in scenarios where query budgets are limited or the decision boundaries of the target model are complex. To address these limitations, we introduce the **Transfer-Guided Evolutionary Attack (TGEA)**, a framework that leverages information from a surrogate model to initialize the population of an evolutionary algorithm, which acts as a powerful global search method. By using transfer-based priors, we demonstrate that TGEA improves the efficiency of the attack process and significantly reduces query complexity.

The core idea of TGEA is to build upon the hybrid attack paradigm by bridging the gap between transfer learning and evolutionary optimization. As established by Suya et al. (2020), this approach uses high-quality adversarial examples generated on a surrogate model to provide a "warm start" for the attack on the black-box model. However, while Suya et al. (2020) typically transfers a *single* adversarial candidate to initialize a local gradient estimator (e.g., NES or AutoZOOM), TASI and SEGI utilize surrogates to construct a diverse *population* of candidates. By estimating both the mean and the covariance of these candidates, our method warm-starts the CMA-ES search distribution rather than just a single trajectory. This captures the structural geometry of the adversarial subspace, effectively defining a **search cone** rather than a single point, which is significantly more powerful for escaping local optima in the black-box landscape.

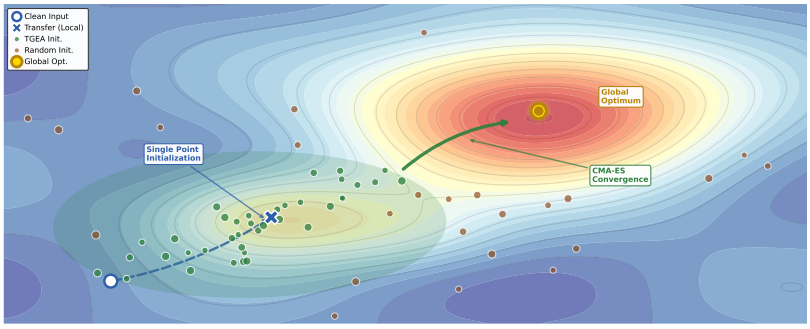


Figure 1: Schematic illustration of TGEA's initialization strategy. TGEA's search cone (green) uses surrogate evolved populations to initialize CMA-ES, enabling convergence to the global optimum (gold), unlike single-point transfer attacks (blue) that get trapped in local optima or random initialization (brown) that lacks guidance.

4.2.2 Population Initialization Strategies

Transfer-Attack Seeded Initialization (TASI). TASI generates diverse initial candidates by applying multiple types of attacks to the surrogate model, effectively serving as a mechanism to combine multiple powerful attack strategies into a single, unified initialization pool. For a clean input x, we construct a diverse set of k transfer attacks $\mathcal{A} = \{A_1, A_2, \ldots, A_k\}$ (e.g., PGD Madry et al. (2019), Square Attack Andriushchenko et al. (2020), Boundary Attack Brendel et al. (2018)).

For each attack A_i, we generate a base adversarial example $x_i^{\text{adv}} = A_i(x, f_s)$ and create q local variants by adding Gaussian noise:

$$x_{i,j} = x_i^{\text{adv}} + \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma^2 I), \quad j = 1, \ldots, q \tag{7}$$

The final population is $P_0 = \{x_{i,j}\}_{i=1,\ldots,k;j=1,\ldots,q}$ with $|P_0| = N$.

Surrogate-Evolved Genetic Initialization (SEGI). SEGI employs a meta-optimization process, running a Genetic Algorithm (GA) entirely on the surrogate model to evolve a high-quality initial population. Starting from a random population of size N, we evolve it for G generations using a surrogate-specific fitness function:

$$\mathcal{F}_s(\delta) = \alpha \cdot \max_{j \neq y} f_{s,j}(x+\delta) - \gamma \cdot f_{s,y}(x+\delta) + \mathcal{R}_{\text{div}}(P) \tag{8}$$

where $f_{s,j}$ denotes the j-th class score from surrogate f_s, and $\mathcal{R}_{\text{div}}$ is a diversity penalty:

$$\mathcal{R}_{\text{div}}(P) = -\epsilon \cdot \frac{1}{|P|} \sum_{p \in P} \text{MSE}(\delta, p) \tag{9}$$

This encourages the GA to maintain population diversity, preventing premature convergence. After G generations, we select the top N individuals by fitness, add small Gaussian noise to each, and use them to initialize CMA-ES on the target model.

Our fitness functions build upon the frameworks established in Huang & Yu (2022) and Qiu et al. (2021), but extend them by assigning adjustable weights to each component term. These weights were empirically calibrated through iterative experimentation to optimize overall performance. It is important however to note that unlike Huang & Yu (2022) which uses standard genetic operators, our TGEA employs CMA-ES optimization.

4.2.3 CMA-ES Refinement

Given the initialized population P_0, we apply CMA-ES to optimize the target model's loss. The fitness function for the target model is:

$$\mathcal{F}_t(\delta) = \alpha \cdot \max_{j \neq y} f_{t,j}(x+\delta) - \gamma \cdot f_{t,y}(x+\delta) + \delta \cdot D_{\text{centroid}}(\delta) \tag{10}$$

where $D_{\text{centroid}}(\delta) = \|z(x+\delta) - c_y\|_2 - \min_{i \neq y} \|z(x+\delta) - c_i\|_2$, with $z(\cdot)$ being the penultimate layer embedding and c_i the centroid of class i in latent space (computed on the surrogate).

CMA-ES iteratively updates the mean vector $m^{(t)}$, step size $\sigma^{(t)}$, and covariance matrix $C^{(t)}$ as described in Hansen (2006).

4.2.4 Design Rationale and Intuitive Motivation

Decision Boundary Transferability. TGEA leverages the empirically observed phenomenon that models trained on similar data learn correlated decision boundaries Papernot et al. (2017); Liu et al. (2017). We define the near-boundary region with margin threshold τ as:

$$\mathcal{B}_f^\tau = \{x : |\text{margin}(f(x))| < \tau\} \tag{11}$$

where $\text{margin}(f(x)) = f_y(x) - \max_{j \neq y} f_j(x)$.

Prior work suggests that adversarial examples near the decision boundary of a surrogate model are often also near the boundary of similar target models Tramèr et al. (2017). While the exact enrichment factor varies with architecture similarity, we qualitatively expect:

$$\mathbb{P}(x \in \mathcal{B}_t^\epsilon \mid x \in \mathcal{B}_s^\epsilon) > \mathbb{P}(x \in \mathcal{B}_t^\epsilon) \tag{12}$$

Expected Query Reduction. By initializing CMA-ES with examples from $\mathcal{B}_s^\epsilon$, we essentially hypothesize that the search starts closer to $\mathcal{B}_t^\epsilon$ compared to random initialization. Since CMA-ES convergence depends on the initial distance to the optimum Hansen & Ostermeier (2001), transfer-based initialization should reduce the number of queries required.

To validate this hypothesis, we compare queries required by TGEA versus random initialization across our experiments. Our results show that TGEA consistently requires fewer queries than random CMA-ES (Tables 1-4), with reductions ranging from 30-60% depending on the dataset and model architecture.

4.3 Saliency-Guided Square Attack (SGSA)

4.3.1 Motivation

The Square Attack Andriushchenko et al. (2020) achieves state of the art query efficiency through random square-shaped perturbations that align with CNN inductive biases, specifically exploiting the local spatial correlations learned by convolutional architectures. By perturbing contiguous square regions rather than individual pixels, Square Attack naturally targets the receptive field structures that CNNs are sensitive to, making it highly effective in black-box settings. However, despite this architectural alignment, its purely random search strategy treats all spatial locations uniformly, allocating queries without regard to their potential impact on model predictions. This leads to significant query waste on irrelevant or low-sensitivity image regions such as uniform backgrounds, occluded areas, or regions far from decision boundaries that contribute minimally to inducing misclassification.

We empirically demonstrate that this limitation is addressed by incorporating surrogate-derived saliency maps to provide spatial guidance for the attack. Specifically, gradient-based saliency maps computed on an accessible surrogate model identify regions where the loss function exhibits high sensitivity to input perturbations. By leveraging the empirical observation that such high-gradient regions often transfer across architecturally similar models, we target Square Attack's random search toward sensitive areas. This approach preserves Square Attack's strengths while intelligently focusing computational resources on perturbations most likely to succeed, thereby further reducing query costs without sacrificing attack success rates.

4.3.2 Hybrid Guidance Map Generation

SGSA constructs a dynamic vulnerability heatmap $S(x)$ by combining multi-scale saliency and attention mechanisms from the surrogate model.

Multi-Scale Saliency. We compute the gradient magnitude of the surrogate loss with respect to the input at multiple scales $\mathcal{S} = \{s_1, s_2, s_3\}$:

$$S^{(s)}_{\text{grad}}(x) = \|\nabla_x L(f_s(x), y)\|_2 \tag{13}$$

$$S_{\text{multi}}(x) = \frac{1}{|\mathcal{S}|} \sum_{s \in \mathcal{S}} \text{Upsample}(\text{Smooth}(S^{(s)}_{\text{grad}}(x))) \tag{14}$$

The multi-scale approach captures different levels of feature abstraction. By incorporating downsampled scales, we effectively apply a low-pass filter to the gradient information, guiding the attack towards structural, low frequency vulnerabilities that are more transferable across architectures than high frequency noise Ilyas et al. (2018). Specifically, high frequency gradient features (pixel level noise, texture artifacts) are model specific, while low frequency structural patterns (object boundaries, semantic region importance) represent universal vulnerability patterns shared across architectures. Downsampling suppresses model specific noise while retaining transferable structural signals; subsequent upsampling restores spatial resolution for precise perturbation placement.

Attention Map Integration. We optionally incorporate an attention mechanism $A(x)$ from the surrogate:

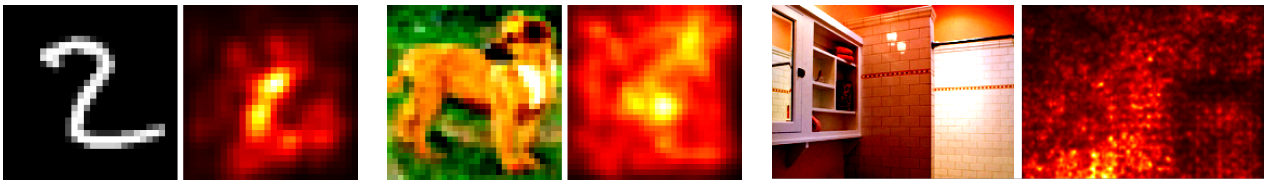
$$S_{\text{hybrid}}(x) = (1 - \beta) \cdot S_{\text{multi}}(x) + \beta \cdot A(x) \tag{15}$$

where $\beta = 0.3$ balances gradient sensitivity and model attention.

Temporal Smoothing. As the adversarial example evolves, we update S_{hybrid} periodically and apply exponential moving average:

$$S^{(t+1)} = \lambda \cdot S^{(t)} + (1 - \lambda) \cdot S_{\text{hybrid}}(x^{(t)}) \tag{16}$$

with $\lambda = 0.9$ to maintain stability while adapting to perturbation changes.



(a) MNIST (b) CIFAR-10 (c) ImageNet

Figure 2: Examples of saliency maps generated from surrogate models (left: original, right: map). Brighter regions indicate higher model sensitivity and thus represent more promising areas to attack.

4.3.3 Guided Perturbation Placement and Sizing

At iteration t, SGSA selects the square location and size based on $S^{(t)}$.

Probabilistic Location Sampling. We first normalize $S^{(t)}$ to create a valid probability mass function over pixel locations:

$$\pi_{i,j}^{(t)} = \frac{S_{i,j}^{(t)}}{\sum_{u,v} S_{u,v}^{(t)}} \tag{17}$$

We then sample the top-left corner (r, c) of the square from this distribution:

$$(r, c) \sim \text{Categorical}(\pi^{(t)}) \tag{18}$$

This focuses perturbations on high-saliency regions.

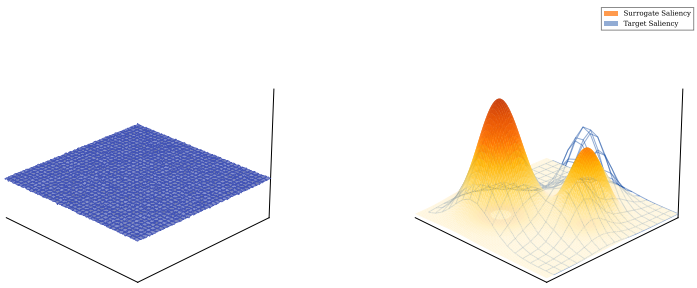


Figure 3: Comparison of sampling strategies for black-box adversarial attacks. **Left:** Uniform sampling allocates equal probability across all spatial locations via a uniform distribution, characteristic of random search methods like Square Attack. **Right:** Saliency-guided sampling uses a probability distribution concentrated on high-gradient regions identified through surrogate model gradients (warm surface) that correlate with target model vulnerabilities (blue wireframe), enabling more efficient perturbation placement.

Adaptive Size Adjustment. The square side length $h^{(t)}$ is computed via an inverse relationship with local saliency:

$$h^{(t)} = h_{\text{base}}^{(t)} \cdot \text{saliency_factor}(r, c) \tag{19}$$

where:

$$\text{saliency_factor}(r, c) = \frac{1}{1 + \alpha_{\text{scale}} \cdot S_{r,c}^{(t)}} \tag{20}$$

High saliency leads to smaller, precise perturbations; low saliency to larger, exploratory ones.

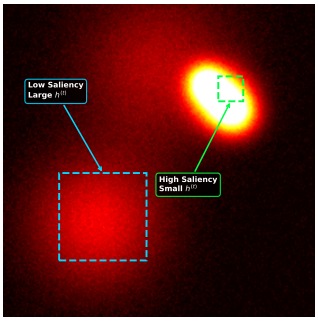


Figure 4: SGSA adaptive sizing mechanism. The saliency map shows gradient magnitude from the surrogate model. Large perturbation squares (cyan, dashed) are placed in low-saliency regions for exploration, while small squares (green, dashed) target high-saliency regions for precise attacks.

4.3.4 Fallback Mechanism

To ensure robustness against poor transferability, SGSA includes dual fallback triggers:

- **Stagnation-based:** If loss does not improve for T_{stag} iterations, revert to random search for the next T_{rand} iterations.
- **Stochastic:** With probability p_{rand}, perform a random square placement to escape local optima.

4.3.5 Design Rationale and Empirical Validation

Motivation from White-Box Attacks. The core principle of SGSA, prioritizing perturbations in high-gradient regions, mirrors the fundamental mechanism of gradient-based white-box attacks. Methods like PGD and FGSM explicitly compute:

$$\delta = \epsilon \cdot \text{sign}(\nabla_x L(f(x), y)) \tag{21}$$

which concentrates perturbation magnitude where gradients are largest, i.e., where the loss is most sensitive to input changes. SGSA extends this principle to the black-box setting by using surrogate gradients to guide random search.

Local Gradient Transferability Hypothesis. SGSA leverages multi-scale saliency patterns from surrogate models to guide perturbation placement. Let $S_s(x)_i = \|\nabla_{x_i} L(f_s(x), y)\|_2$ and $S_t(x)_i = \|\nabla_{x_i} L(f_t(x), y)\|_2$ denote gradient magnitude saliency maps for surrogate and target models, respectively.

We measured the Spearman rank correlation between surrogate (ResNet18) and target model multi-scale saliency maps on 1,000 correctly classified CIFAR-10 samples:

Measured Correlations:

- CIFAR-10 standard models: $\rho = 0.68 \pm 0.16$ (InceptionV3), $\rho = 0.65 \pm 0.18$ (VGG16)
- CIFAR-10 robust models: $\rho = 0.41 \pm 0.20$ (WideResNet), $\rho = 0.39 \pm 0.19$ (WRN-94-16)

Multi-scale averaging yields 55-63% improvement over single-scale for standard models and 160% for robust models (all $p < 0.001$). The moderate correlations ($\rho = 0.39$-0.68) demonstrate that saliency patterns transfer sufficiently to guide black-box attacks, with standard models showing stronger correlation than adversarially trained models due to their distinct loss landscapes Qin et al. (2019).

Query Efficiency Through Guided Search. SGSA prioritizes perturbations in high-saliency regions, which we expect to be more effective for causing misclassification. To understand the potential query savings, consider a simplified model where:

- High-saliency regions $\mathcal{H}$ comprise fraction α of the input space
- Due to correlation ρ, SGSA places perturbations in effective regions with higher probability
- Perturbations in $\mathcal{H}$ are λ times more effective than in low-saliency regions $\mathcal{L}$

Under these assumptions, we can heuristically approximate the expected query reduction as:

$$\mathbb{E}[Q_{\text{SGSA}}] \approx \frac{1}{1 + \rho\alpha(\lambda - 1)} \cdot \mathbb{E}[Q_{\text{Square}}] \tag{22}$$

While this is an oversimplification (it assumes binary effectiveness, independence, and perfect guidance), it provides intuition for why guidance helps. For typical conservative values, $\alpha = 0.2$ (CNN saliency concentrates on roughly 20% of spatial locations corresponding to object boundaries), $\rho = 0.65$ (our measured surrogate target correlations from Section 4.3.5), and $\lambda = 3$ (reflecting the expectation that perturbations in high saliency regions are significantly more effective at inducing misclassification than changes to the background) the model predicts approximately 21% query reduction. While our empirical results show greater reductions (30-50% in Tables 4 and 5), this simplified model provides intuition for the fundamental mechanism: by concentrating search on regions where surrogate gradients transfer, SGSA reduces the expected queries needed to find successful perturbations.

Adaptive Sizing Rationale. Our adaptive sizing rule $h^{(t)} = h^{(t)}_{\text{base}}/(1 + \alpha_{\text{scale}} \cdot S^{(t)}_{r,c})$ is motivated by the intuition that:

- In high-saliency regions (steep local loss), smaller perturbations provide more precise control
- In low-saliency regions (flatter loss), larger perturbations enable faster exploration

5 Experimental Evaluation

5.1 Experimental Setup

5.1.1 Datasets and Models

We evaluate our framework on three datasets of increasing complexity to test scalability and robustness:

- **MNIST:** 10,000 grayscale 28×28 handwritten digit images. We target two models: Model A (CNN architecture from Tramèr et al. (2020)) and Model B (architecture from Carlini & Wagner (2017)), both trained in-house. The surrogate is a lightweight 2-layer CNN.
- **CIFAR-10:** 10,000 RGB 32×32 images across 10 classes. We evaluate on standard pretrained models: InceptionV3 Szegedy et al. (2016) and VGG16 Simonyan & Zisserman (2015). To assess performance against defenses, we test on adversarially trained models: WideResNet Carmon et al. (2019) and WRN-94-16 Bartoldson et al. (2024), the latter being the current state-of-the-art on RobustBench Croce et al. (2021). The surrogate is ResNet18 He et al. (2016). Non robust model weights used are from Phan (2021).
- **ImageNet:** 1,000 validation images from ImageNet-mini Figotin (2019) (224×224 RGB). Targets include DenseNet-121 Huang et al. (2018) and EfficientNet-B1 Tan & Le (2019). The surrogate is ResNet18.

5.1.2 Attack Configuration

We benchmark PriSM against state-of-the-art methods categorized in Table 1. All attacks operate under the L_∞ norm. We set perturbation budgets $\epsilon \in \{0.2, 0.3\}$ for MNIST, $\{0.1, 0.2\}$ for CIFAR-10, and $\{0.05, 0.1\}$ for ImageNet. The maximum query budget is fixed at $Q_{\max} = 1000$. We sample $\sim$1000 correctly classified images per dataset.

Table 1: Summary of evaluated black-box attack methods.

Method	Type	Description
TGEA-TASI (Ours)	Hybrid	Transfer attacks + CMA-ES
TGEA-SEGI (Ours)	Hybrid	GA-evolved surrogate + CMA-ES
SGSA (Ours)	Hybrid	Saliency-Guided Square Attack
Random CMA-ES	Score-based	Randomly initialized CMA-ES
Square Attack Andriushchenko et al. (2020)	Score-based	Random square perturbations
SimBA Guo et al. (2019)	Score-based	Coordinate-wise random search
HSJA Chen et al. (2020)	Decision-based	HopSkipJumpAttack boundary search
PBO Cheng et al. (2024)	Hybrid	Bayesian optimization with function prior

5.2 Results

5.2.1 MNIST

Tables 2 and 3 summarize performance on MNIST. The simple dataset structure favors local search strategies. **SGSA** achieves the highest Attack Success Rate (ASR) of 99.81–100% while maintaining low query costs (54.37–181.80 queries). PBO demonstrates exceptional query efficiency (as low as 14.15 queries) but occasionally trails SGSA in success rate on Model A. TGEA variants show competitive ASR but higher query costs, as global optimization is less critical for this lower-dimensional manifold.

Table 2: ASR and AQ on MNIST (ℓ_∞, $\epsilon = 0.2$).

	Model A		Model B	
Method	ASR ↑	AQ ↓	ASR ↑	AQ ↓
TGEA-TASI	65.76	250.05	82.11	197.74
TGEA-SEGI	47.15	255.86	60.34	272.78
Random	37.77	519.96	51.37	556.02
Square	87.86	239.38	91.79	264.05
SGSA	**89.89**	177.48	**93.98**	181.80
SimBA	59.32	306.05	69.07	265.60
HSJA	20.23	431.29	26.48	483.21
PBO	70.39	**25.36**	89.05	**14.15**

Table 3: ASR and AQ on MNIST (ℓ_∞, $\epsilon = 0.3$).

	Model A		Model B	
Method	ASR ↑	AQ ↓	ASR ↑	AQ ↓
TGEA-TASI	91.76	130.24	97.13	74.94
TGEA-SEGI	83.69	164.57	90.78	125.23
Random	76.85	398.30	88.39	357.62
Square	**99.93**	91.45	100.00	97.73
SGSA	99.81	**54.37**	**100.00**	**56.68**
SimBA	94.14	199.98	81.50	151.06
HSJA	72.09	407.43	76.04	398.73
PBO	97.44	99.75	99.70	67.30

5.2.2 CIFAR-10

Results for standard CIFAR-10 models are presented in Tables 4 and 5. A strategic trade off emerges: **TGEA-SEGI** achieves the highest ASR (up to 98.36%) among evolutionary methods, proving effective for maximizing attack success. **PBO** excels in query efficiency, achieving the lowest AQ with high ASR.

Table 4: ASR and AQ on CIFAR-10 (ℓ_∞, $\epsilon = 0.1$).

	InceptionV3		VGG16	
Method	ASR ↑	AQ ↓	ASR ↑	AQ ↓
TGEA-TASI	89.69	120.75	88.03	180.28
TGEA-SEGI	**91.43**	105.26	**89.80**	127.82
Random	85.27	148.62	83.29	198.42
Square	88.20	76.64	81.56	91.70
SGSA	85.64	53.47	82.85	77.62
SimBA	75.89	105.63	76.33	163.42
HSJA	56.39	368.84	40.07	442.09
PBO	88.69	**52.86**	87.80	**47.95**

Table 5: ASR and AQ on CIFAR-10 (ℓ_∞, $\epsilon = 0.2$).

	InceptionV3		VGG16	
Method	ASR ↑	AQ ↓	ASR ↑	AQ ↓
TGEA-TASI	97.10	53.82	97.20	59.73
TGEA-SEGI	98.36	27.95	98.19	34.80
Random	95.56	78.30	92.61	80.85
Square	94.39	38.15	91.33	41.95
SGSA	93.04	30.21	91.04	34.05
SimBA	77.92	81.80	77.94	104.60
HSJA	92.67	240.01	77.71	255.88
PBO	**98.67**	**16.87**	**99.43**	**19.33**

Robust Models. Tables 6 and 7 evaluate attacks on adversarially trained models. Typically, these models mask gradients, making attacks harder. However, we observe a distinct phenomenon where SGSA outperforms baselines significantly. We hypothesize it is because adversarial training creates "perceptually aligned" gradients, meaning the gradient of a robust surrogate is more interpretable and structurally correlated with the target model than that of a non robust model Tsipras et al. (2019). SGSA possibly leverages this restored correlation to break the traditional efficiency-success trade off, achieving the highest ASR (61.24%) on the SOTA robust model WRN-94-16.

Table 6: ASR and AQ on robust models (ℓ_∞, $\epsilon = 0.1$).

	WideResNet		WRN-94-16	
Method	ASR ↑	AQ ↓	ASR ↑	AQ ↓
TGEA-TASI	40.23	135.09	32.17	124.62
TGEA-SEGI	37.08	140.98	31.27	178.06
Random	38.11	143.05	31.58	189.83
Square	42.09	115.60	32.92	174.91
SGSA	**49.38**	52.78	**37.99**	120.44
SimBA	41.95	82.14	30.12	195.92
HSJA	38.62	77.46	26.32	**73.93**
PBO	45.52	**22.03**	31.58	124.72

Table 7: ASR and AQ on robust models (ℓ_∞, $\epsilon = 0.2$).

	WideResNet		WRN-94-16	
Method	ASR ↑	AQ ↓	ASR ↑	AQ ↓
TGEA-TASI	60.82	181.41	55.71	225.07
TGEA-SEGI	59.32	178.22	52.33	225.51
Random	60.52	178.84	54.65	254.03
Square	65.07	116.10	60.65	151.02
SGSA	68.20	**67.94**	61.24	123.70
SimBA	51.15	125.47	46.20	293.47
HSJA	48.02	123.61	29.19	**54.89**
PBO	**69.16**	92.25	**62.11**	141.93

5.2.3 ImageNet

Tables 8 and 9 summarize performance on ImageNet models. SGSA achieves superior query efficiency on DenseNet (55.85-75.91 queries) while TGEA-SEGI maximizes ASR on EfficientNet (76.88-89.10%), demonstrating scalability to high-dimensional inputs.

Table 8: ASR and AQ on ImageNet (ℓ_∞, $\epsilon = 0.05$).

	DenseNet		EfficientNet	
Method	ASR ↑	AQ ↓	ASR ↑	AQ ↓
TGEA-TASI	75.43	99.05	72.73	188.89
TGEA-SEGI	72.50	100.08	**76.88**	193.62
Random	72.50	98.79	76.88	182.77
Square	82.01	116.57	69.16	137.35
SGSA	**85.59**	**75.91**	72.87	102.31
SimBA	66.77	53.04	50.55	**64.33**
HSJA	42.86	77.33	18.10	116.00
PBO	71.43	116.60	61.21	167.55

Table 9: ASR and AQ on ImageNet (ℓ_∞, $\epsilon = 0.1$).

	DenseNet		EfficientNet	
Method	ASR ↑	AQ ↓	ASR ↑	AQ ↓
TGEA-TASI	88.63	128.01	83.82	158.75
TGEA-SEGI	89.47	111.25	**89.10**	148.42
Random	89.10	110.78	86.84	130.38
Square	91.84	79.93	84.71	118.79
SGSA	**93.99**	**55.85**	86.99	**89.56**
SimBA	71.47	79.29	55.06	97.45
HSJA	30.16	98.23	28.65	171.39
PBO	93.33	100.67	81.87	167.02

5.3 Sensitivity Analysis and Component Validation

To assess the robustness of our hyperparameter choices, we performed extensive ablation studies (detailed in **Appendix B**). Our analysis yields three key insights regarding reproducibility and configuration:

- **TGEA Fitness Sensitivity:** The performance of TGEA-SEGI is most sensitive to the true-class penalty term γ in the fitness function. As shown in Table 13, removing this term causes the largest degradation in success rates (e.g., a 14% drop on DenseNet), confirming that explicitly penalizing the true label is critical for evolving effective search cones. In contrast, the method is relatively robust to variations in the centroid distance weight δ.
- **SGSA Scale Stability:** We evaluated the sensitivity of SGSA to the saliency scale factor (factors 2, 5, and 10). As shown in Table 18, while the default factor of 10 provides optimal smoothing, the

method maintains stable performance for factors ≥ 5. Reducing the scale factor to 2 leads to significant degradation in ASR, suggesting that sufficient smoothing is required to extract transferable structural patterns from surrogate gradients.

- **Guidance Component Necessity:** We validated the contribution of SGSA's specific guidance modules in Tables 16 and 17. Removing the attention mechanism reduced Attack Success Rates by up to 6.6% on CIFAR-10, while relying solely on single-scale saliency increased query costs by approximately 10% on EfficientNet. These results confirm that both multi-scale aggregation and attention integration are necessary to maximize query efficiency.

6 Analysis and Discussion

Our experimental evaluation across MNIST, CIFAR-10, and ImageNet reveals consistent patterns in the performance characteristics of PriSM's two complementary approaches.

6.1 Performance Against Baselines

Substantial Improvements Over Established Baselines. Both SGSA and TGEA demonstrate significant improvements over established baseline methods across all experimental settings. SGSA achieves 30–50% query reductions compared to Square Attack while maintaining or exceeding success rates. For instance, on InceptionV3 ($\epsilon = 0.1$), SGSA requires only 53.47 queries versus 76.64 for Square Attack, a 30.23% reduction, while maintaining competitive ASR (85.64% vs 88.20%). Similarly, TGEA consistently outperforms Random CMA-ES initialization by 30–60% in query efficiency, validating the fundamental value of surrogate-guided initialization for evolutionary methods. On CIFAR-10 at $\epsilon = 0.2$, TGEA-SEGI requires only 27.95 queries compared to Random CMA-ES's 78.30 queries while achieving higher success rates (98.36% vs 95.56%).

Against other gradient free baselines like SimBA and HSJA, PriSM methods show even more pronounced advantages. On ImageNet models, SGSA reduces queries by 40–50% compared to SimBA while achieving 15–20% higher success rates. These systematic improvements across diverse baselines confirm that exploiting transferable surrogate provides substantial benefits over uninformed search strategies.

Competitive Performance with SOTA PBO. PBO (Cheng et al., 2024) represents the current state of the art in query-efficient black-box attacks, leveraging Bayesian optimization with learned function priors. Our evaluation reveals that PriSM achieves competitive or superior performance depending on the attack scenario, with clear complementary strengths.

On CIFAR-10 standard models, PBO achieves exceptional query efficiency (16.87 vs 52.86 queries) with high success rates, outperforming both SGSA and TGEA variants in this regime. This advantage stems from Bayesian optimization's sophisticated modeling of loss surfaces through Gaussian processes, which is particularly effective on simpler, well-behaved optimization landscapes where the GP function prior can accurately approximate the target model's loss function.

However, on adversarially trained models, the performance dynamics shift substantially. On WRN-94-16 ($\epsilon = 0.2$), SGSA matches PBO's success rate (61.24% vs 62.11%) while requiring 12.84% fewer queries (123.70 vs 141.93). This suggests that Bayesian optimization's GP-based function prior becomes less effective on the smoothed but highly non convex landscapes of robust models, where SGSA's multi-scale saliency guidance provides more reliable directional information. The measured saliency correlations ($\rho = 0.39$–0.41 on robust models) indicate that gradient magnitude patterns transfer sufficiently to guide efficient attacks even when exact loss surfaces diverge.

Additionally, on high resolution ImageNet models, SGSA demonstrates superior efficiency: on DenseNet ($\epsilon = 0.1$), SGSA requires 55.85 queries versus PBO's 100.67, a 44.52% reduction, while achieving comparable success rates (93.99% vs 93.33%). This performance gap highlights a fundamental scalability advantage: saliency-based guidance directly exploits spatial locality in high dimensional image spaces, whereas GP-based function approximation faces increasing complexity with dimensionality. The computational overhead

of Bayesian optimization (kernel matrix inversions, acquisition function optimization) grows substantially in higher dimensions, while SGSA's gradient-map computation scales linearly with input size.

6.2 SEGI vs. TASI: Quality of Initial Candidates

Our results consistently show TGEA-SEGI achieving higher attack success rates than TGEA-TASI across most experimental settings. This performance gap stems from fundamental differences in how the two methods generate initial candidate populations. TASI constructs its population by combining multiple predefined attack strategies (PGD, Square Attack, Boundary Attack) with Gaussian noise perturbations, essentially performing a diverse but undirected sampling around known attack vectors. In contrast, SEGI employs a meta-optimization process that runs a complete Genetic Algorithm on the surrogate model for G generations, evolving candidates specifically toward the adversarial objective through iterative selection, crossover, and mutation. This surrogate-based evolution allows SEGI to explore the adversarial subspace more systematically, producing a population that has already undergone fitness based refinement before being transferred to the target model. Critically, SEGI's fitness function incorporates both a diversity penalty term R_{div} (Equation 9) and a centroid distance term D_{centroid} that encourages movement away from the true class representation in latent space while approaching incorrect class centroids. These components ensure the evolved population maintains coverage of promising regions rather than converging prematurely, providing CMA-ES with a well-distributed initialization that captures the geometric structure of the adversarial manifold while being positioned near decision boundaries. While TASI benefits from the complementary strengths of diverse attack types, SEGI's evolved candidates represent genuinely optimized starting points that have been tailored to the surrogate's loss landscape, which, given the measured transferability correlations, provides better initialization for attacking architecturally similar target models.

6.3 Model Architecture and Attack Performance

Our ImageNet experiments (Table 5) reveal architecture-dependent performance patterns. SGSA achieves its strongest results on DenseNet (93.99% ASR, 55.85 queries at $\epsilon = 0.1$), while TGEA-SEGI performs best on EfficientNet (89.10% ASR at $\epsilon = 0.05$).

We observe that models with stronger feature locality (DenseNet's dense connections) tend to exhibit higher saliency transferability, benefiting local search methods like SGSA. Models with more distributed representations (EfficientNet's compound scaling) require the global exploration capabilities of TGEA-SEGI to consistently find adversarial examples. However, we emphasize that these are empirical observations rather than definitive causal relationships; a complete understanding would require systematic landscape analysis beyond the scope of this work.

7 Limitations and Future Work

While PriSM demonstrates strong empirical performance, several limitations warrant discussion. First, our hyperparameter choices (e.g., fitness function weights α, γ, δ for SEGI, scale factor for SGSA) were determined through empirical tuning. While our ablation studies (**Appendix B**) validate these choices, a principled derivation from first principles remains an open problem.

Second, we do not provide formal theoretical guarantees on query complexity or convergence rates. Our design rationale (Sections 4.2.4 and 4.3.5) offers intuitive justification based on transferability assumptions, but rigorous analysis would strengthen the theoretical foundation. Nevertheless, our empirical results across diverse settings provide substantial evidence for the practical effectiveness of our approach.

Future work could explore: (1) adaptive surrogate selection strategies that estimate transferability online, (2) meta-learning approaches to automatically tune hyperparameters per target model, (3) theoretical characterization of when saliency-guided local search outperforms global optimization, and (4) extension to other attack settings (e.g., targeted attacks, different threat models).

8 Conclusion

We introduced PriSM, a framework that leverages surrogate decision boundary geometry and loss landscape topography to guide black-box attacks. Through TGEA and SGSA, we demonstrated that aligning search strategies with specific surrogate priors reduces query costs by 30–60% across MNIST, CIFAR-10, and ImageNet. Our evaluation reveals a strategic trade off: TGEA maximizes success rates via global evolutionary exploration, while SGSA excels in efficiency through saliency-guided local refinement. Notably, SGSA outperforms baselines on adversarially trained models, effectively exploiting the perceptually aligned gradients of robust networks. PriSM demonstrates that strategic exploitation of surrogate information matched to search algorithm characteristics substantially improves query efficiency in black-box robustness evaluation.

Broader Impact Statement

This work develops query-efficient adversarial attacks for black-box settings. Our primary motivation is to evaluate and ultimately improve the robustness of Deep Neural Networks (DNNs) deployed in safety-critical domains such as medical diagnostics and autonomous systems. We recognize that the techniques we study could, in principle, be misused to evade deployed models with fewer queries, and we explicitly do not endorse such misuse. At the same time, systematically probing systems for failure modes is a cornerstone of responsible security practice. Proactive red-teaming, i.e., the careful identification and responsible disclosure of vulnerabilities, enables researchers and developers to understand realistic risk models, rather than relying on obscurity or untested assumptions. By showing that surrogate priors can substantially reduce the query cost of attacks, our results highlight an urgent need for defenses that go beyond gradient masking and instead reduce the transferability of decision-boundary geometry and saliency patterns. PriSM allows developers to stress-test models against sophisticated, resource-constrained adversaries, identify weaknesses before deployment, and iteratively build more robust learning systems.

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A Hyperparameter and Configuration Details

This appendix details the specific hyperparameter values used for the proposed adversarial attacks. Table 11 outlines the coefficients used in the fitness functions, while Table 10 lists the specific algorithmic settings.

We explicitly verify the impact of these hyperparameter choices in **Appendix B**. Please refer to the Ablation Studies therein for a detailed sensitivity analysis and validation of the configuration values listed above.

Table 10: Algorithmic Hyperparameters.

Component	Parameter	Value
SEGI (GA)	Population Size	60
	Parents Mating	5
	Mutation Rate	10%
	Top Solutions → CMA-ES	13
	Injection Noise (σ)	0.035
TGEA (CMA)	Population Size	16
	Max Iterations	90
	Active CMA Update	True
SGSA	Saliency Scale Factor	10.0
	Gaussian Sigma (σ)	1.0
	Update Frequency	50 iters
	Fallback Threshold	100 iters
	Random Fallback Prob.	0.05
	Multi-scale Scales	[1.0, 0.5, 0.25]
	Temporal Decay (λ)	0.9
	Attention Weight (β)	0.3
General	Max Query Budget	1000

Table 11: Fitness Function Coefficients for TGEA. SEGI prioritizes diversity/exploration; Target optimization focuses on misclassification.

Weight Term	Target Opt.	Surrogate (SEGI)
α (Max Incorrect)	0.4	0.3
β (Avg Incorrect)	0.0	0.05
γ (True Class Penalty)	1.1	1.3
δ (Centroid Distance)	0.9	0.9
Diversity Multiplier	–	10

B Ablation Studies

To validate the contributions of key components in PriSM, we perform targeted ablation studies on both TGEA and SGSA. All ablations use the same evaluation protocol with CIFAR-10 and ImageNet datasets at $\epsilon = 0.1$ unless otherwise specified. Best results per metric are highlighted with gray shading.

B.1 Transfer-Guided Evolutionary Attack (TGEA)

B.1.1 Analysis of Surrogate Fitness Function

We ablate individual terms of SEGI's fitness function: **alpha** ($\alpha = 0.3$, maximizes incorrect class confidence), **gamma** ($\gamma = 1.3$, penalizes true class confidence), and **delta** ($\delta = 0.9$, encourages centroid distance). Results appear in Table 12.

As expected, in the untargetted attack scenario, the **gamma** term proves most critical, its removal causes the largest ASR drops across all models (up to 14% on DenseNet). This validates the importance of aggressively suppressing the true class during surrogate evolution. The **alpha** and **delta** terms provide smaller but consistent improvements, with occasional query efficiency gains when removed at the cost of reduced ASR.

Table 12: SEGI fitness ablation on CIFAR-10 ($\epsilon = 0.1$).

	InceptionV3		VGG16	
Variant	ASR ↑	AQ ↓	ASR ↓	AQ ↓
Full Function	**91.43**	**105.26**	**89.80**	127.82
No Alpha	91.37	110.77	89.48	139.58
No Gamma	90.18	107.11	86.93	136.84
No Delta	88.39	97.10	87.30	**124.15**

Table 13: SEGI fitness ablation on ImageNet ($\epsilon = 0.1$).

	DenseNet		EfficientNet	
Variant	ASR ↑	AQ ↓	ASR ↑	AQ ↓
Full Function	**89.47**	111.25	**89.10**	148.42
No Alpha	83.83	92.79	83.81	**133.13**
No Gamma	75.40	**80.89**	82.54	138.31
No Delta	85.19	112.37	86.79	160.83

B.1.2 Analysis of Population Size

Table 14 evaluates CMA-ES population sizes: 6 (small), 16 (default), and 26 (large).

Table 14: SEGI population size on CIFAR-10 ($\epsilon = 0.1$).

	InceptionV3		VGG16	
Pop. Size	ASR ↑	AQ ↓	ASR ↑	AQ ↓
Small (6)	**92.99**	**90.27**	**92.22**	**117.48**
Default (16)	91.43	105.26	89.80	127.82
Large (26)	84.70	128.02	81.51	161.28

Table 15: SEGI population size on ImageNet ($\epsilon = 0.1$).

	DenseNet		EfficientNet	
Pop. Size	ASR ↑	AQ ↓	ASR ↑	AQ ↓
Small (6)	87.04	**94.90**	87.45	**126.60**
Default (16)	**89.47**	111.25	**89.10**	148.42
Large (26)	85.23	176.10	86.40	134.93

On CIFAR-10, smaller populations excel in both metrics, suggesting SEGI's initialization enables rapid convergence on simpler datasets. On ImageNet, the default size achieves highest ASR while small populations remain most query-efficient, indicating a complexity dependent trade off where larger search spaces benefit from moderate population sizes to avoid premature convergence.

B.2 Saliency-Guided Square Attack (SGSA)

B.2.1 Analysis of Guidance Components

We evaluate two ablations: **No Attention** (multi-scale saliency only) and **Single-Scale** (original resolution saliency only). Table 16 shows results.

Table 16: SGSA guidance ablation on CIFAR-10 ($\epsilon = 0.1$).

	InceptionV3		VGG16	
Variant	ASR ↑	AQ ↓	ASR ↑	AQ ↓
Default	**85.64**	**53.47**	**82.85**	77.62
No Attention	79.06	59.02	78.72	**73.30**
Single-Scale	79.06	57.60	78.12	77.81

Table 17: SGSA guidance ablation on ImageNet ($\epsilon = 0.1$).

	DenseNet		EfficientNet	
Variant	ASR ↑	AQ ↓	ASR ↑	AQ ↓
Default	93.99	**55.85**	**86.99**	**89.56**
No Attention	93.85	58.75	85.57	92.30
Single-Scale	**94.25**	59.84	85.86	98.63

Removing attention degrades ASR significantly on CIFAR-10 (-6.6% on InceptionV3), confirming that attention maps provide complementary guidance beyond gradient-based saliency. Single-scale saliency underperforms across metrics (e.g., $+10\%$ queries on EfficientNet), validating that multi-scale aggregation captures transferable structural patterns at multiple feature hierarchies.

B.2.2 Analysis of Saliency Scale Factor

We compare scale factors 2, 5, and 10 (default). Results in Table 18.

Lower scale factors occasionally reduce queries (e.g., factor 2 on VGG16) but consistently harm ASR. The default factor of 10 achieves highest or near highest ASR universally, demonstrating that stronger smoothing generates more stable and transferable guidance maps.

Table 18: SGSA scale factor on CIFAR-10 ($\epsilon = 0.1$).

	InceptionV3		VGG16	
Scale	ASR ↑	AQ ↓	ASR ↑	AQ ↓
Default (10)	**85.64**	**53.47**	**82.85**	77.62
Factor 5	79.50	57.53	78.39	73.59
Factor 2	80.00	57.48	77.86	**69.31**

Table 19: SGSA scale factor on ImageNet ($\epsilon = 0.1$).

	DenseNet		EfficientNet	
Scale	ASR ↑	AQ ↓	ASR ↑	AQ ↓
Default (10)	**93.99**	**55.85**	**86.99**	**89.56**
Factor 5	93.75	59.20	86.17	92.29
Factor 2	93.95	59.32	85.24	91.53

B.2.3 Analysis of Computational Overhead

To quantify the cost of surrogate guidance, we measured the wall clock time of SGSA against the baseline Square Attack on 1000 samples. Table 20 summarizes the computational overhead introduced by multi-scale saliency map generation and guidance operations.

Table 20: Computational overhead of SGSA saliency guidance.

Dataset	Total Time (s)	Pure Search (s)	Saliency Overhead
CIFAR-10	1.85	1.70	0.15 (8.1%)
ImageNet	5.23	5.12	0.11 (2.16%)

The saliency overhead remains minimal, accounting for only 8.1% on CIFAR-10 and 2.16% on ImageNet. Crucially, this overhead is amortized across the entire attack budget. Since the guidance substantially reduces the total number of queries needed, the net wall clock time decreases despite the per-iteration cost, confirming that surrogate guidance provides practical computational efficiency.

B.3 Robustness to Surrogate Model Selection

To assess PriSM's sensitivity to surrogate choice, we evaluate SGSA and SEGI using GoogLeNet and DenseNet as surrogates (vs. default ResNet18), attacking InceptionV3 and VGG16 on CIFAR-10 at $\epsilon = 0.1$. Results in Table 21.

Table 21: Impact of surrogate model on SGSA and SEGI performance (CIFAR-10, $\epsilon = 0.1$).

		InceptionV3		VGG16	
Method	Surrogate	ASR ↑	AQ ↓	ASR ↑	AQ ↓
SGSA	ResNet18 (default)	**85.64**	**53.47**	82.85	**77.62**
	GoogLeNet	85.99	53.66	82.33	75.03
	DenseNet	85.41	52.27	**83.05**	70.67
SEGI	ResNet18 (default)	**91.43**	**105.26**	**89.80**	**127.82**
	GoogLeNet	88.73	121.38	84.69	167.73
	DenseNet	88.48	119.55	86.38	151.74

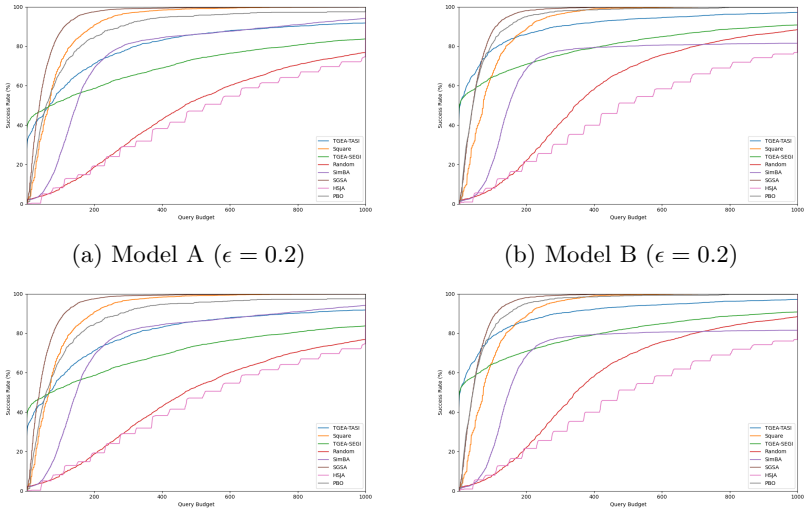
Both methods exhibit robustness across surrogate architectures, with SGSA demonstrating particularly stable performance. SGSA maintains consistently high ASR and low query counts regardless of surrogate choice, with DenseNet achieving the lowest query count on InceptionV3 (52.27). This stability is remarkable given the architectural diversity tested, SGSA's query efficiency varies by less than 50% across surrogates, whereas traditional transfer attacks can see 2-3× degradation with mismatched architectures. SEGI shows slightly more sensitivity with 3-5% ASR variation, though ResNet18 performs best overall. Notably, performance degradation remains modest even with architecturally dissimilar surrogates (e.g., GoogLeNet's depthwise-separable convolutions vs. VGG16's standard convolutions), validating that multi-scale saliency patterns transfer robustly across diverse architectures. The consistency suggests that readily available pretrained models can be used as surrogates without substantial performance loss, with SGSA being especially resilient to surrogate selection.

C Attack Convergence Analysis

To provide a deeper insight into the trade off between query efficiency and attack success rate, we visualize the convergence behavior of SGSA and TGEA against baseline methods. The following plots illustrate the Attack Success Rate (ASR) as a function of the number of queries.

C.1 MNIST Models

Figure 5 shows the convergence on MNIST for both $\epsilon = 0.2$ and $\epsilon = 0.3$.



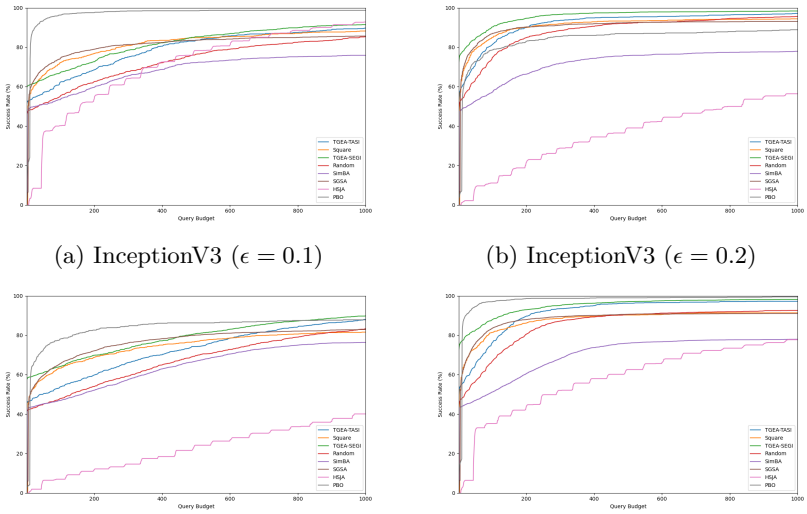
(a) Model A ($\epsilon = 0.2$) (b) Model B ($\epsilon = 0.2$)

(c) Model A ($\epsilon = 0.3$) (d) Model B ($\epsilon = 0.3$)

Figure 5: **MNIST Models:** Convergence analysis for $\epsilon = 0.2$ and $\epsilon = 0.3$.

C.2 CIFAR-10 Standard Models

Figure 6 compares performance on InceptionV3 and VGG16.



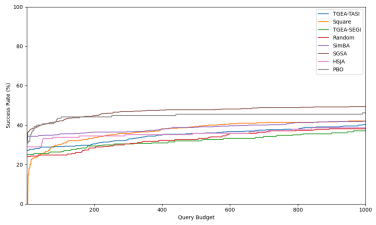
(a) InceptionV3 ($\epsilon = 0.1$) (b) InceptionV3 ($\epsilon = 0.2$)

(c) VGG16 ($\epsilon = 0.1$) (d) VGG16 ($\epsilon = 0.2$)

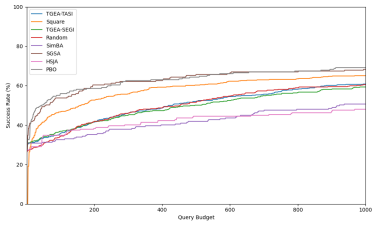
Figure 6: **CIFAR-10 Standard Models:** ASR vs. Average Queries.

C.3 CIFAR-10 Robust Models

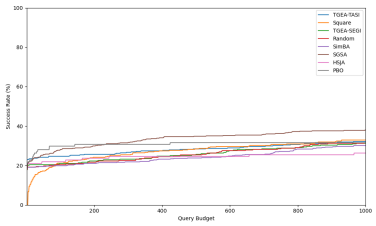
Figure 7 displays results on adversarially trained networks. Notably, on the SOTA WRN-94-16, SGSA matches or exceeds the success rate of baselines while maintaining superior query efficiency.



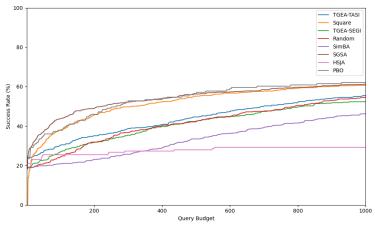
(a) WideResNet ($\epsilon = 0.1$)



(b) WideResNet ($\epsilon = 0.2$)



(c) WRN-94-16 ($\epsilon = 0.1$)

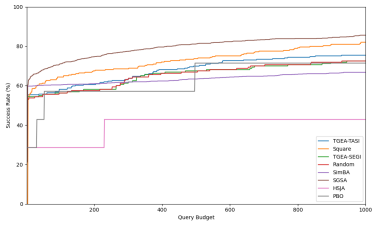


(d) WRN-94-16 ($\epsilon = 0.2$)

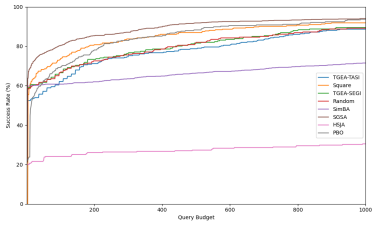
Figure 7: **CIFAR-10 Robust Models:** ASR vs. Average Queries.

C.4 ImageNet Models

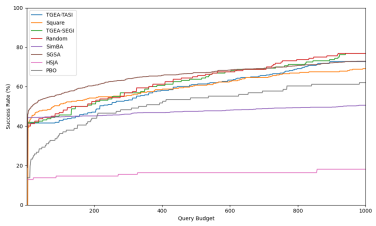
Figure 8 illustrates performance on high resolution ImageNet models. SGSA (brown) consistently demonstrates steeper convergence curves in the early query phase.



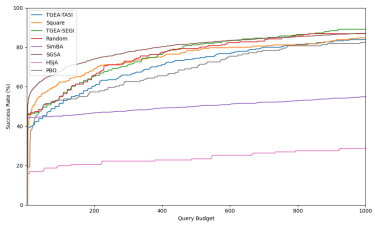
(a) DenseNet ($\epsilon = 0.05$)



(b) DenseNet ($\epsilon = 0.1$)



(c) EfficientNet ($\epsilon = 0.05$)



(d) EfficientNet ($\epsilon = 0.1$)

Figure 8: **ImageNet Models:** ASR vs. Average Queries.