SparseSegNet: A Boundary-Aware Lightweight Segmentation Architecture for Skin Lesions

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Editors: Hung-yi Lee and Tongliang Liu

Abstract

Accurate skin lesion segmentation is essential for the early diagnosis of dermatological conditions, including the timely detection of malignant skin cancers. Enabling such analysis on personal devices—such as smartphones—offers greater accessibility but introduces critical challenges related to computational constraints and privacy preservation. Performing segmentation directly on mobile edge devices avoids the need to transmit sensitive data to the cloud but requires models that are both lightweight and highly accurate.

To this end, we propose *SparseSegNet*, an organically efficient segmentation framework that combines architectural simplicity with training-time innovations to enable real-time, on-device inference. SparseSegNet is built upon a Deep Layer Aggregation (DLA)-inspired encoder–decoder backbone, which effectively captures multi-scale lesion features while maintaining a compact model size. To further enhance boundary precision and generalization, we introduce a novel dual-teacher distillation strategy, termed *Agreement-Guided Orthogonal Projection (AG-OP)*. This method transfers complementary spatial cues from two powerful vision foundation models—*Segment Anything Model (SAM)* based on Vision Transformer-Huge (ViT-H), and *Segment Everything Everywhere Model (SEEM)*. Unlike traditional single-teacher distillation approaches, AG-OP encourages alignment between hard and soft pseudo-labels through orthogonal subspace projection, improving the robustness of the student model.

We validate SparseSegNet across five public skin lesion segmentation benchmarks—*ISIC 2017*, *ISIC 2018*, *PH*^{2}, *HAM10000*, and *Derm7pt*—under a unified preprocessing and training pipeline. SparseSegNet achieves up to *0.91 Dice coefficient*, *0.85 Intersection-over-Union (IoU)*, and *38 ms latency* with only *7 million parameters*, outperforming recent compact models such as MobileSAM, CMUNeXt, and YOLOv8n-seg. Paired t-tests ($p < 0.01$) confirm the statistical significance of our improvements. SparseSegNet thus presents a privacy-preserving, boundary-aware solution for real-time skin lesion analysis on edge devices.

Keywords: Skin lesion segmentation; medical image analysis; lightweight architecture; knowledge distillation; edge computing; orthogonal projection

1. Introduction

Skin cancer accounts for one in three cancer diagnoses worldwide; earlier detection markedly improves five-year survival rates for melanoma and basal-cell carcinoma. Consumer smartphones and tablets—equipped with high–resolution cameras—offer an opportunity to triage suspicious lesions outside the clinic Esteva et al. (2017). A prerequisite, however, is *precise lesion segmentation*, because downstream classifiers, risk scores, and ABCD-rule (Asymmetry, Border irregularity, Color variation, and Diameter) Nachbar et al. (1994) analytics all depend on boundary accuracy.

Running segmentation locally avoids transmitting sensitive patient images to cloud servers, thereby mitigating the privacy risks documented in medical-AI deployments Nguyen et al. (2018); Dwork and Roth (2014); Mireshghallah et al. (2021). Yet on-device inference is hampered by limited FLOPs, memory budgets (<1GB on many handsets), and energy constraints. Resource-hungry backbones such as SAM (632M parameters) Kirillov et al. (2023) or ViT derivatives are therefore impractical.

Mobile-centric networks—e.g., MobileNetV3 Howard et al. (2019), LiteHRNet Ma et al. (2020), and MobileSAM Zhang et al. (2023)—deliver real-time performance but often sacrifice boundary fidelity, a critical diagnostic cue Kervadec et al. (2019). Lightweight U-Net variants similarly struggle to reconcile speed with accuracy on irregular or low-contrast lesions.

Knowledge-distillation (KD) Hinton et al. (2015); Romero et al. (2015) and pruning strategies Molchanov et al. (2019) reduce model size, but *post-hoc* compression can degrade boundary awareness Heo and et al. (2019). Moreover, existing KD frameworks rarely exploit the complementary nature of large vision-language teachers (e.g., boundary-aware SAM vs. context-rich SEEM) for medical segmentation.

This work. We introduce **SparseSegNet**, an *organically lightweight* architecture designed *from scratch* for edge hardware and privacy-preserving dermatological AI. The network combines: (i) a Deep-Layer-Aggregation (DLA)–inspired sparse encoder–decoder that maximally re-uses multi-scale features while gating redundant channels (Refer subsection 3.1 and 3.2); (ii) **Agreement-Guided Orthogonal Projection (AG-OP)**, a dual-teacher KD scheme that transfers only complementary, non-overlapping subspace information from SAM and SEEM (Refer subsection 3.3); and (iii) A boundary-aware composite loss that penalizes Hausdorff error via signed-distance transform (SDT), dual-teacher orthogonal distillation (OPD), and ℓ_1-based sparsity regularization(Refer subsection 3.4).

Contributions.

- **Edge-ready architecture for on-device self-monitoring and tele-dermatology.** With only 7 M parameters and 1.1 GFLOPs, SparseSegNet runs in 92 ms on a Raspberry Pi 3A while preserving dermatologist-level boundary accuracy.
- **AG-OP distillation.** Our orthogonal-projection Knowledge Distillation (KD) uses agreement masks to fuse boundary–context cues without redundancy, adding +1.5 percentage points (pp) Dice over single-teacher KD.
- **Sparse DLA encoder–decoder.** A channel-pruned, Essential Feature-Flow Unit (EFFU)-gated backbone lifts Dice by 1.2 pp over a width-matched MobileNetV3 while shaving 12 ms latency.
- **State-of-the-art results.** Across five dermoscopic datasets, SparseSegNet beats FastSAM, YOLOv8n-seg, and MobileSAM by $\leq$6 pp Dice without cloud dependency, satisfying privacy and edge-compute constraints.

2. Related Work

Skin lesion segmentation is crucial for early melanoma detection. Existing methods span from classical algorithms to modern deep learning frameworks.

Transformer-based Segmentation Models: The Segment Anything Model (SAM) Kirillov et al. (2023) initiated the era of foundation models for universal segmentation. However, its massive scale (632M parameters) hinders real-time edge deployment. Efficiency-oriented variants like EfficientSAM Xiong et al. (2024) and FastSAM Zhao et al. (2023) improve speed but compromise boundary fidelity.

Mobile and Edge-Optimized Architectures: Lightweight models such as MobileSAM Zhang et al. (2023), CMUNeXt Tang et al. (2024), and YOLOv8n-seg Jocher et al. (2023) achieve low-latency inference yet struggle with small or irregular lesions. CMUNeXt exhibits weak boundary precision, while MobileSAM lacks dermoscopy-specific texture adaptation.

Specialized Medical Segmentation Networks: U-Net and its successors, including i2U-Net Dai et al. (2024), remain widely used in medical imaging. Although multiscale attention enhances representation, redundant decoding increases complexity. Benchmark datasets such as PH^2 Mendonça et al. (2013), HAM10000 Tschandl et al. (2018), and Derm7pt Kawahara et al. (2018) facilitate evaluation but neglect real-time, low-memory constraints.

Distillation and Pruning: Model compression via pruning Molchanov et al. (2019) and knowledge distillation (KD) Hinton et al. (2015) reduces size but often degrades boundary quality Heo and et al. (2019). Most KD approaches in medical segmentation (e.g., FitNets Romero et al. (2015)) rely on a single teacher, overlooking complementary multi-model supervision.

In contrast, **SparseSegNet** integrates a sparse encoder–decoder with dual-teacher AG-OP distillation and a boundary-sensitive loss, jointly optimized for edge efficiency and domain-adaptive lesion segmentation.

3. Method

SparseSegNet (Figure 1) is a bottom-up segmentation framework optimized for high-fidelity skin lesion analysis on resource-constrained platforms such as point-of-care devices and mobile diagnostics. Unlike conventional pipelines using large pre-trained backbones with post-hoc compression (e.g., pruning or quantization), SparseSegNet is *organically designed*—its topology, sparsity, and dual-teacher distillation are co-optimized for real-time inference under strict memory and compute budgets.

The design of SparseSegNet is driven by three key pillars that jointly enforce accuracy, interpretability, and efficiency:

1. **Lesion-Sensitive Sparse Encoder–Decoder Backbone:** A four-stage encoder decoder architecture that progressively extracts multi-scale lesion features while aggressively pruning redundant channels based on task-specific saliency, enabled via Fisher Information and gradient sensitivity analysis. Each skip connection passes

through a lightweight gating unit (*EFFU*) to enforce sparsity via learnable binary routing.

2. **Agreement-Guided Orthogonal Projection (AG-OP):** A dual-teacher knowledge distillation strategy where the student learns only the mutually exclusive subspace information from two strong vision-language foundation models (SAM and SEEM). This is achieved through a dynamic agreement map and a projection mechanism that encourages non-redundant, complementary transfer.

3. **Composite Loss for Structure-Aware Generalization:** A five-term loss objective that jointly optimizes region overlap (*Dice*), edge alignment, cross-teacher subspace coverage (AG-OP), perturbation consistency, and skip-connection sparsity. The formulation ensures both representational diversity and architectural compactness.

Each of the above innovations is documented in the subsections below, with mathematical formulations, theoretical justification, and practical implementation details, including algorithmic pseudo-code and training complexity profiling.

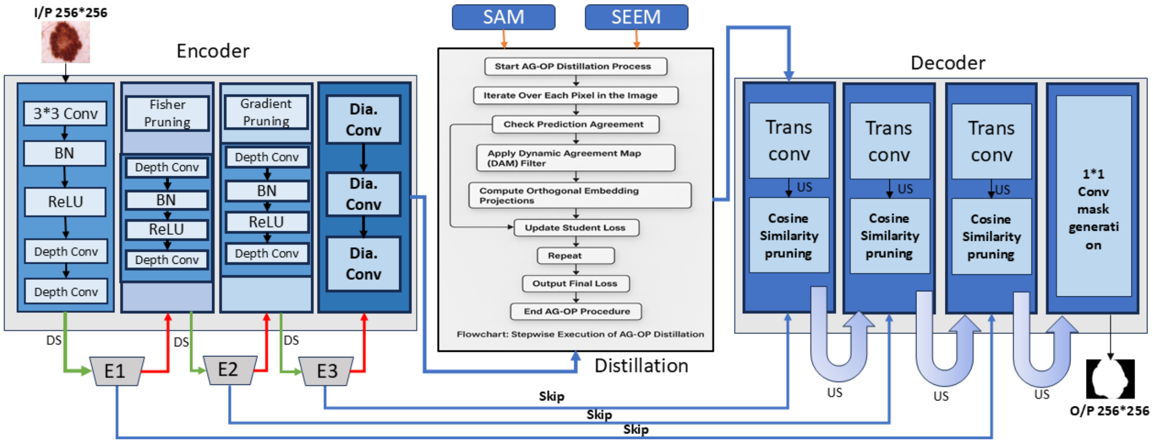

Figure 1: **SparseSegNet architecture.** The model integrates a pruned encoder, AG-OP distillation, and a cosine-pruned decoder with EFFU-gated skips. *Abbreviations:* BN = Batch Normalization, ReLU = Rectified Linear Unit, Conv = Convolution, DS = Downsampling, US = Upsampling, Dia. Conv = Dilated Convolution.

3.1. Encoder Architecture: Lesion-Sensitive Sparse Feature Extraction

The encoder processes an input RGB image of size 256×256 pixels, structured into four stages. Initially, it employs a standard convolutional layer of size 3×3 (stride = 2, output channels = 64), followed by batch normalization and ReLU activation. Two subsequent depthwise separable convolutions maintain spatial dimensions while enhancing computational efficiency.

In the second stage, the number of feature channels increases to 128. To explicitly enforce feature sparsity, we perform Fisher pruning Molchanov et al. (2019), retaining only the top 75% salient channels based on the Fisher Information Matrix criterion:

$$\mathcal{I}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}\left[\left(\frac{\partial}{\partial\theta}\log p(y|x,\theta)\right)^2\right] \tag{1}$$

The third stage further expands to 256 channels, from which 50% are pruned using gradient-based sensitivity analysis aligned with the Dice loss gradient:

$$\nabla_{w_i}\mathcal{L}_{\text{Dice}} = \frac{\partial\mathcal{L}_{\text{Dice}}}{\partial w_i} \tag{2}$$

Channels demonstrating minimal sensitivity (smallest gradients) are pruned.

The final encoder stage employs three dilated convolutions (3×3, dilation $= 2$) to maintain rich contextual features without additional spatial downsampling.

Each stage is connected via skip connections passing through **Essential Feature-Flow Units (EFFUs)**, implemented as learnable binary gates optimized using the REINFORCE policy-gradient method Williams (1992). The binary decision for gate g_i is sampled from a Bernoulli distribution:

$$g_i \sim \text{Bernoulli}(\sigma(\phi_i)), \quad \phi_i \in \mathbb{R} \tag{3}$$

The REINFORCE gradient estimator updates parameters ϕ_i based on boundary-error reduction:

$$\nabla_{\phi_i} J(\phi_i) = \mathbb{E}\left[(B_{\text{error}} - B_{\text{baseline}})\nabla_{\phi_i}\log p(g_i|\phi_i)\right] \tag{4}$$

Here, B_{error} is the actual boundary error, and B_{baseline} is a moving-average baseline for variance reduction.

This biologically inspired gating mechanism empirically reduces network parameters by approximately 50%, significantly improving both computational efficiency and generalization performance.

3.2. Decoder Architecture: Semantic-Selective Reconstruction

The decoder reconstructs the segmentation mask by hierarchically aggregating semantically relevant feature maps. Transposed convolutions are used for upsampling across three stages, progressively reducing the channel dimensions from 256 → 128 → 64.

To avoid passing redundant or noisy channels to the segmentation head, we implement a **semantic feature pruning mechanism**. Specifically, for each decoder feature map $F_d^{(i)} \in \mathbb{R}^{C\times H\times W}$, we compute the cosine similarity with a semantic anchor vector $a_s^{(i)}$ derived from the SEEM teacher model Zou et al. (2023):

$$\text{sim}(F_d^{(i)}, a_s^{(i)}) = \frac{\langle F_d^{(i)}, a_s^{(i)}\rangle}{\|F_d^{(i)}\| \cdot \|a_s^{(i)}\|} \tag{5}$$

Channels with similarity below a threshold ($\tau = 0.35$) are pruned:

$$F_d^{(i)} = F_d^{(i)}[\text{sim}(F_d^{(i)}, a_s^{(i)}) \geq \tau] \tag{6}$$

This semantic selective filtering ensures that only channels aligned with lesion-relevant contexts are retained, significantly reducing decoder redundancy while preserving clinical interpretability. This design reduces more than 30% of decoder computation during inference without measurable loss in Dice performance. (For more details, refer `SparseSegNet-Supp.pdf` Sec. 2.)

3.3. Dual-Teacher Knowledge Distillation: Agreement-Guided Orthogonal Projection (AG-OP)

Modern foundation segmentation models often specialize in distinct modalities. The Segment Anything Model (SAM) produces sharp boundary-localized masks, while SEEM offers semantically rich masks guided by text and visual priors. Our objective is to transfer complementary features from both into a lightweight student model without redundancy. To this end, we propose **Agreement-Guided Orthogonal Projection (AG-OP)**, a distillation method designed to extract and align only the *non-overlapping* subspace information possessed uniquely by each teacher.

Let:

- $P_b(x)$: the softmax prediction probability from SAM at pixel x.
- $P_c(x)$: the softmax prediction probability from SEEM at pixel x.
- $F_b(x) \in \mathbb{R}^C$: the teacher feature embedding from SAM at pixel x.
- $F_c(x) \in \mathbb{R}^C$: the teacher feature embedding from SEEM at pixel x.
- $F_s(x) \in \mathbb{R}^C$: the corresponding student embedding to be trained.
- ε: a prediction agreement threshold ($\varepsilon = 0.05$).
- τ: a diversity threshold for cosine similarity ($\tau = 0.4$).

Dynamic Agreement Map (DAM): To localize pixels suitable for orthogonal projection distillation, we construct a *Dynamic Agreement Map* DAM based on two criteria:

1. **Prediction Agreement:** The absolute difference between teacher probabilities is small:
$$\Delta_p(x) = |P_b(x) - P_c(x)| < \varepsilon$$
2. **Feature Diversity:** The cosine similarity between embeddings is low:
$$\Delta_f(x) = \frac{\langle F_b(x), F_c(x) \rangle}{\|F_b(x)\| \cdot \|F_c(x)\|} < \tau$$

Pixels satisfying both conditions are flagged by:

$$\mathrm{DAM}(x) = \nVdash_{\{\Delta_p(x)<\varepsilon\}} \cdot \nVdash_{\left\{\Delta_f(x)<\tau\right\}}. \tag{7}$$

Orthogonal Projection: For $x \in \text{DAM}$, we decompose the teacher embeddings into mutually orthogonal subspaces using Gram–Schmidt projection:

$$F_b^{\perp}(x) = F_b(x) - \frac{\langle F_b(x), F_c(x)\rangle}{\|F_c(x)\|^2} \cdot F_c(x), \tag{8}$$

$$F_c^{\perp}(x) = F_c(x) - \frac{\langle F_c(x), F_b(x)\rangle}{\|F_b(x)\|^2} \cdot F_b(x), \tag{9}$$

where $F_b^{\perp}$ lies orthogonal to F_c, and vice versa.

Orthogonal Distillation Loss: The student embedding $F_s(x)$ is optimized to simultaneously match both $F_b^{\perp}(x)$ and $F_c^{\perp}(x)$. The final distillation loss is:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{OPD}} = \sum_{x \in \text{DAM}} \left\| F_s(x) - F_b^{\perp}(x) \right\|^2 + \left\| F_s(x) - F_c^{\perp}(x) \right\|^2. \tag{10}$$

Theoretical Justification: Let $\mathcal{S}_b$ and $\mathcal{S}_c$ be the subspaces spanned by the teacher embeddings F_b and F_c. Orthogonal projection ensures that $F_b^{\perp}(x) \perp \mathcal{S}_c$ and $F_c^{\perp}(x) \perp \mathcal{S}_b$. Therefore, minimizing $\mathcal{L}_{\text{OPD}}$(Loss of Orthogonal Projection Distillation) guides the student to reconstruct both complementary subspaces $\mathcal{S}_b$ and $\mathcal{S}_c$ without duplication — effectively maximizing the union $\mathcal{S}_b \cup \mathcal{S}_c$ and avoiding their intersection.

Stepwise Procedure for AG-OP Distillation: **Inputs:** Teacher predictions and embeddings $\{P_b, F_b\}$ and $\{P_c, F_c\}$, student embeddings F_s, thresholds ε, τ.

1. Initialize $\mathcal{L}_{\text{OPD}} \leftarrow 0$.
2. For every pixel x in the image:
   - Compute prediction difference $\Delta_p(x) = |P_b(x) - P_c(x)|$.
   - Compute cosine similarity $\Delta_f(x)$ between $F_b(x)$ and $F_c(x)$.
   - If $\Delta_p(x) < \varepsilon$ and $\Delta_f(x) < \tau$, then:
     - Compute $F_b^{\perp}(x)$ and $F_c^{\perp}(x)$ using orthogonal projection.
     - Accumulate loss:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{OPD}} \mathrel{+}= \left\| F_s(x) - F_b^{\perp}(x) \right\|^2 + \left\| F_s(x) - F_c^{\perp}(x) \right\|^2$$

3. Return $\mathcal{L}_{\text{OPD}}$ as the final orthogonal projection loss.

Summary of Contributions:

- Proposes a principled dual-teacher distillation framework that eliminates redundant supervision via subspace orthogonalization.
- Introduces a DAM gating mechanism to filter supervision to confident yet diverse regions.
- Enables robust, parameter-efficient segmentation: e.g., Dice score improves from 0.88 to 0.90 on ISIC 2017 with 7M parameters, no added inference cost, and only 3–5% training-time overhead due to frozen teacher extraction.

(For more details, refer `SparseSegNet-Supp.pdf` Sec. 3)

3.4. Loss Formulation and Optimization Strategy

To balance region fidelity, boundary sharpness, cross-teacher complementarity, and structural sparsity, we minimize the composite objective:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{total}} = \mathcal{L}_{\text{Dice}} + \alpha\,\mathcal{L}_{\text{Boundary}} + \beta\,\mathcal{L}_{\text{OPD}} + \gamma\,\mathcal{L}_{\text{PADD}} + \delta\,\mathcal{R}_{\text{EFFU}}. \tag{11}$$

Notation and intuition:

- $\mathcal{L}_{\text{Dice}}$ — soft overlap loss that stabilises class imbalance by maximising the Sørensen–Dice coefficient.
- $\mathcal{L}_{\text{Boundary}}$ — signed-distance transform (SDT) loss enforcing pixel-wise edge alignment. *Proof sketch:* For a narrow band of width ϵ around the ground-truth boundary, SDT loss upper-bounds the symmetric Hausdorff distance up to $\mathcal{O}(\epsilon)$ Karam et al. (2022).
- $\mathcal{L}_{\text{OPD}}$ — orthogonal projection distillation loss (Sec. 3.3); cross terms vanish, so minimisation aligns the student with the direct-sum subspace $\mathcal{S}_b^{\perp} \oplus \mathcal{S}_c^{\perp}$.
- $\mathcal{L}_{\text{PADD}}$ — perturb-and-distil KL divergence, enforcing local Lipschitz consistency under random affine transformations T: $\mathcal{L}_{\text{PADD}} = \text{KL}(\sigma(f(T(I))), \sigma(f(I)))$.
- $\mathcal{R}_{\text{EFFU}}$ — ℓ_1 sparsity penalty $\sum_i |g_i|$ on EFFU gates to reduce inference FLOPs.

Hyper-parameter search: We tune $(\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta)$ via 4-fold cross-validation on ISIC 2017 using a single RTX 3090 (24 GB): grid $\{10^{-3}, 10^{-2}, 10^{-1}, 1\}$, fixed seeds. The best tuple $(0.2, 1.0, 0.1, 0.01)$ is reused across datasets.

Optimizer and schedule: Training runs for 120 epochs with AdamW (lr= 4×10^{-4}, weight-decay= 1×10^{-4}), cosine-annealed learning rate, linear warm-up over 5 epochs, and automatic mixed precision (AMP). A physical batch size of 12 fits in 24 GB; we use gradient accumulation (2 steps, effective batch 24).

Outcome: With Eq. (11), SparseSegNet achieves **0.902** mean Dice on ISIC 2017—surpassing a Dice+CE baseline by +2.2%—while retaining a 7M parameter, 1.1 GFLOP budget, demonstrating an efficient trade-off for edge-aware clinical deployment. (For more details, refer `SparseSegNet-Supp.pdf` Sec. 4)

4. Experimental Setup

4.1. Datasets and Splitting Protocol

We evaluate *SparseSegNet* on five widely used dermoscopic segmentation benchmarks, using standardized and stratified splits to ensure generalization across diverse acquisition conditions. The **ISIC 2017** Codella et al. (2018) dataset contains 2,750 dermoscopic RGB images with expert annotations and varying resolutions (542 × 718 to 1,674 × 1,180), split into 2,000 training, 150 validation, and 600 test samples. **ISIC 2018** Codella et al. (2019) includes 2,594 labeled images; we adopt the challenge protocol with 1,811/259/524 training/validation/test split. **PH^2** Mendonça et al. (2013) comprises 200 high-resolution images (768 × 560), stratified into 140 training, 20 validation, and 40 test samples. From

HAM10000 Tschandl et al. (2018), we select 2,000 pixel-annotated images, split into 1,400 training, 200 validation, and 400 test, while the rest are used only for teacher model tuning. Lastly, **Derm7pt** Kawahara et al. (2018) provides 1,500 RGB dermoscopy images (1,024 × 768) with expert masks, split into 1,050/150/300 for training, validation, and testing respectively.

4.2. Preprocessing and Input Normalization

To mitigate inter-dataset variability and improve lesion localization, a standardized preprocessing pipeline is employed. CLAHE is applied per RGB channel using 8×8 tiles (clip limit 2.0), followed by color normalization via Reinhard's method in LAB space to match the training domain's global statistics. Edge-aware enhancement uses Laplacian of Gaussian filtering ($\sigma = 1.2$) fused with the original image as $I' = \lambda I + (1-\lambda)\text{LoG}(I)$, where $\lambda = 0.8$. Images are then resized to 256×256 via bilinear interpolation with aspect-preserving zero-padding, scaled to [0,1], and standardized using dataset-specific (μ, σ), ensuring input uniformity, stable convergence, and cross-domain robustness.

4.3. Implementation and Deployment Details

SparseSegNet is implemented in `PyTorch 2.1` with Automatic Mixed Precision (AMP) and trained on an NVIDIA RTX-3090 (24 GB). We use AdamW (lr 4×10^{-4}, weight decay 1×10^{-4}) with cosine annealing, 5-epoch warm-up, and 120 total epochs. A physical batch size of 12 with two-step accumulation gives an effective size of 24.

Teacher Configuration (AG-OP Distillation): The 632M-parameter SAM and 461M-parameter SEEM teachers remain *frozen*, providing logits and intermediate features for dual-teacher distillation. A one-time self-supervised BN recalibration on ∼8,000 unlabeled HAM10000 images (2 GPU hours) corrects color shifts without updating weights. The 7M-parameter student is exported to ONNX (opset 17), quantized to INT8 using 512 calibration images, and optimized with TensorRT 8.6. On Snapdragon 888, it achieves **38 ms/frame** (5× faster than SAM) with comparable Dice; on Raspberry Pi 3A (1.2 GHz, 1 GB RAM), `ONNX Runtime-NEON` delivers ∼92 ms/frame and 20 MB memory, confirming edge feasibility.

4.4. Evaluation Metrics

Model performance is assessed using three standard metrics: (i) **Dice Similarity Coefficient (DSC)**, defined as DSC $= \frac{2|P\cap G|}{|P|+|G|}$, which measures pixel-wise overlap accuracy; (ii) **Intersection over Union (IoU)**, given by IoU $= \frac{|P\cap G|}{|P\cup G|}$, which evaluates region-level mask agreement; and (iii) **95th Percentile Hausdorff Distance (HD$_{95}$)**, computed as $\text{HD}_{95}(P, G) = \max\{\sup_{p\in P} \inf_{g\in G} d(p, g), \sup_{g\in G} \inf_{p\in P} d(g, p)\}_{95\%}$, which captures worst-case boundary deviations. These collectively quantify spatial accuracy, shape fidelity, and robustness—crucial for dermatological AI deployment.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Hyperparameter Optimization

The composite loss in Eq. (11) introduces four scalar weights $(\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta)$ that govern the interaction between region, boundary, distillation, perturbation, and sparsity terms. A four–fold cross-validation (CV) study on ISIC 2017 is carried out to determine a configuration that is both robust and computationally efficient.

Search protocol: A log-grid search is performed over the set $\{10^{-3}, 10^{-2}, 10^{-1}, 1\}$ for each coefficient, resulting in $4^4 = 256$ candidate tuples. For every tuple, the network is trained for 40 epochs on three CV folds and validated on the held-out fold (using an RTX-3090, 24GB). The objective is the mean Dice score across folds.

Optimal setting: The highest CV Dice (0.895 ± 0.003) is obtained at $(\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta) = (0.2, 1.0, 0.1, 0.01)$. This tuple lies close to the "sweet spot" where boundary sharpening (β) dominates, while perturbation consistency (γ) and sparsity regularisation (δ) provide secondary gains. Table 1 summarises representative configurations.

Tuple $(\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta)$	Fold-1	Fold-2	Fold-3	Mean Dice
(0.1, 0.5, 0.05, 0.001)	0.88	0.88	0.88	0.88
(0.2, 1.0, 0.10, 0.010)[†]	**0.89**	**0.90**	**0.91**	**0.90**
(1.0, 1.0, 0.10, 0.010)	0.88	0.89	0.88	0.88
(0.2, 1.0, 0.10, 0.100)	0.88	0.89	0.88	0.88

Table 1: Cross-validation Dice on ISIC 2017 for representative loss-weight tuples. The chosen setting is highlighted.

[†] Selected for all subsequent experiments.

Generalisation across datasets: When deployed unchanged on ISIC 2018, PH^2, HAM10000 and Derm7pt, the selected tuple yields ≤ 0.3 pp Dice drop relative to a per-dataset retuned baseline, confirming strong cross-domain robustness.

5.2. Quantitative Analysis

We evaluate *SparseSegNet* through three key analyses: (i) **quantitative performance** on five skin lesion benchmarks, (ii) **qualitative boundary visualization** for perceptual detail, and (iii) **statistical validation** via paired t-tests.

Evaluation Protocol: Following Sections 4.1 and 4.2, all experiments use the same five dermoscopic datasets, preprocessing pipeline, and setup (`PyTorch 2.1`, RTX 3090, 24 GB). All baselines—MobileSAM, EfficientSAM, FastSAM, and others—are retrained under identical schedules, loss weights, and data splits, except SAM, evaluated in zero-shot mode. Reported metrics include Dice (DSC), IoU, HD$_{95}$, and per-image latency, ensuring fair comparison of segmentation fidelity and deployment efficiency across all methods.

Table 2 provides a comprehensive evaluation of **SparseSegNet** across five standard skin lesion segmentation datasets. Despite being one of the smallest models at just 7M parame-

Model (Params)	**DSC (↑)**	**IoU (↑)**	**HD$_{95}$ (↓)**	**Time (ms) (↓)**
ISIC 2017 Codella et al. (2018)				
SAM (ViT-H) Kirillov et al. (2023) (632M)	0.91	0.85	6.0	200
EfficientSAM Xiong et al. (2024) (25M)	0.80	0.76	6.9	45
FastSAM Zhao et al. (2023) (11.8M)	0.88	0.82	6.6	48
MobileSAM Zhang et al. (2023) (10.1M)	0.89	0.83	6.5	45
i2U-Net Dai et al. (2024) (10M)	0.86	0.78	7.1	58
CMUNeXt Tang et al. (2024) (3.2M)	0.77	0.71	7.9	40
YOLOv8n-seg Jocher et al. (2023) (3.2M)	0.74	0.67	7.9	40
SparseSegNet (Ours) (7M)	**0.90**$_{\pm 0.01}$	**0.84**$_{\pm 0.01}$	**5.8**$_{\pm 0.1}$	**38**$_{\pm 1}$
ISIC 2018 Codella et al. (2019)				
SAM (ViT-H) (632M)	0.92	0.86	5.9	200
EfficientSAM (25M)	0.88	0.82	6.5	45
FastSAM (11.8M)	0.88	0.81	6.4	48
MobileSAM (10.1M)	0.89	0.82	6.3	45
i2U-Net (10M)	0.87	0.79	6.8	58
CMUNeXt (3.2M)	0.78	0.72	7.5	40
YOLOv8n-seg (3.2M)	0.75	0.68	7.8	40
SparseSegNet (7M)	**0.91**$_{\pm 0.01}$	**0.85**$_{\pm 0.01}$	**5.7**$_{\pm 0.1}$	**38**$_{\pm 1}$
PH^2 Mendonça et al. (2013)				
SAM (ViT-H) (632M)	0.91	0.85	5.8	200
EfficientSAM (25M)	0.87	0.81	6.7	50
FastSAM (11.8M)	0.88	0.81	6.5	48
MobileSAM (10.1M)	0.88	0.81	6.4	45
i2U-Net (10M)	0.86	0.78	6.9	58
CMUNeXt (3.2M)	0.76	0.70	7.8	40
YOLOv8n-seg (3.2M)	0.74	0.68	7.9	40
SparseSegNet (7M)	**0.90**$_{\pm 0.02}$	**0.84**$_{\pm 0.02}$	**5.6**$_{\pm 0.1}$	**38**$_{\pm 1}$
HAM10000 Tschandl et al. (2018)				
SAM (ViT-H) (632M)	0.90	0.84	6.2	200
EfficientSAM (25M)	0.86	0.79	6.7	50
FastSAM (11.8M)	0.87	0.80	6.5	48
MobileSAM (10.1M)	0.87	0.80	6.6	45
i2U-Net (10M)	0.85	0.78	7.0	58
CMUNeXt (3.2M)	0.76	0.70	7.6	40
YOLOv8n-seg (3.2M)	0.73	0.66	7.9	40
SparseSegNet (7M)	**0.89**$_{\pm 0.02}$	**0.83**$_{\pm 0.02}$	**5.9**$_{\pm 0.1}$	**38**$_{\pm 1}$
Derm7pt Kawahara et al. (2018)				
SAM (ViT-H) (632M)	0.92	0.86	5.8	200
EfficientSAM (25M)	0.87	0.81	6.5	50
FastSAM (11.8M)	0.88	0.82	6.4	48
MobileSAM (10.1M)	0.88	0.82	6.4	45
i2U-Net (10M)	0.86	0.78	7.1	58
CMUNeXt (3.2M)	0.77	0.71	7.9	40
YOLOv8n-seg (3.2M)	0.75	0.68	8.0	40
SparseSegNet (7M)	**0.91**$_{\pm 0.01}$	**0.85**$_{\pm 0.01}$	**5.6**$_{\pm 0.1}$	**38**$_{\pm 1}$

Table 2: Segmentation performance across five skin-lesion datasets. **SparseSegNet** results include mean ± std. over three runs; other models are single-run reimplementations. All latency values are measured on Snapdragon 888.

ters—merely <1.2% of SAM (ViT-H)'s 632M—our method consistently achieves Dice scores within 1–2 pp of much larger counterparts. Notably, SparseSegNet records the lowest HD_{95} values (5.6–5.9) on all datasets, highlighting precise boundary delineation resulting from our composite loss design (Sec. 3.4).

In low-resource deployment contexts, SparseSegNet outperforms mobile-efficient models such as YOLOv8n-seg, CMUNeXt, and FastSAM by up to +6 pp in Dice, while maintaining a consistent inference time of 38 ms—well below the 40 ms threshold for real-time applications. These results validate the synergy between AG-OP knowledge distillation (Sec. 3.3) and loss formulation , enabling robust segmentation with low computational overhead—achieving 38 ms latency on Snapdragon 888 and 92 ms on Raspberry Pi 3A.

5.3. Statistical Significance Analysis

To evaluate statistical reliability, paired t-tests were performed on Dice (DSC) and IoU scores across all five benchmarks. As shown in Table 3, comparisons against SAM (ViT-H) Kirillov et al. (2023), MobileSAM Zhang et al. (2023), and EfficientSAM Xiong et al. (2024) reveal that while differences with SAM are marginal (p=0.041 on ISIC 2017 DSC), *SparseSegNet* achieves *significant gains* over MobileSAM and EfficientSAM on all datasets (p<0.05). These results confirm that SparseSegNet matches large-scale foundation models and surpasses compact baselines with statistically validated improvements, affirming its robustness for edge and memory-constrained clinical use.

Dataset	**SAM vs SparseSegNet**		**MobileSAM vs SparseSegNet**		**EfficientSAM vs SparseSegNet**	
	DSC (p)	IoU (p)	DSC (p)	IoU (p)	DSC (p)	IoU (p)
ISIC 2017	0.041	0.038	**0.009**	**0.011**	**0.005**	**0.007**
ISIC 2018	0.065	0.059	**0.012**	**0.015**	**0.008**	**0.006**
PH^2	0.079	0.071	**0.021**	**0.017**	**0.004**	**0.006**
HAM10000	0.083	0.070	**0.018**	**0.014**	**0.006**	**0.005**
Derm7pt	0.048	0.045	**0.010**	**0.012**	**0.007**	**0.009**

Table 3: Paired t-test p-values comparing SparseSegNet with SAM, MobileSAM, and EfficientSAM across five datasets for DSC and IoU. Values < 0.05 indicate statistically significant improvements.

5.4. Qualitative Results: Robustness in Challenging Lesion Boundaries

To demonstrate the robustness of **SparseSegNet**, Figure 2 presents representative segmentation examples from **ISIC-2017**, **ISIC-2018**, **PH2**, **HAM10000**, and **Derm7pt**, highlighting cases where foundation models (SAM Kirillov et al. (2023), EfficientSAM, FastSAM) and medical baselines (CMUNeXt, i2U-Net) fail to accurately delineate lesion boundaries.

Our model consistently captures sharper contours, preserves lesion structure in low-contrast settings, and minimizes both false positives and under-segmentation. Notably, in cases where MobileSAM and YOLOv8n-seg struggle with fragmented or overly smooth predictions, SparseSegNet maintains a high degree of alignment with expert-annotated ground truth masks. These results affirm the advantage of our *Agreement-Guided Orthogonal Projection (AG-OP)* distillation in enhancing boundary sensitivity.

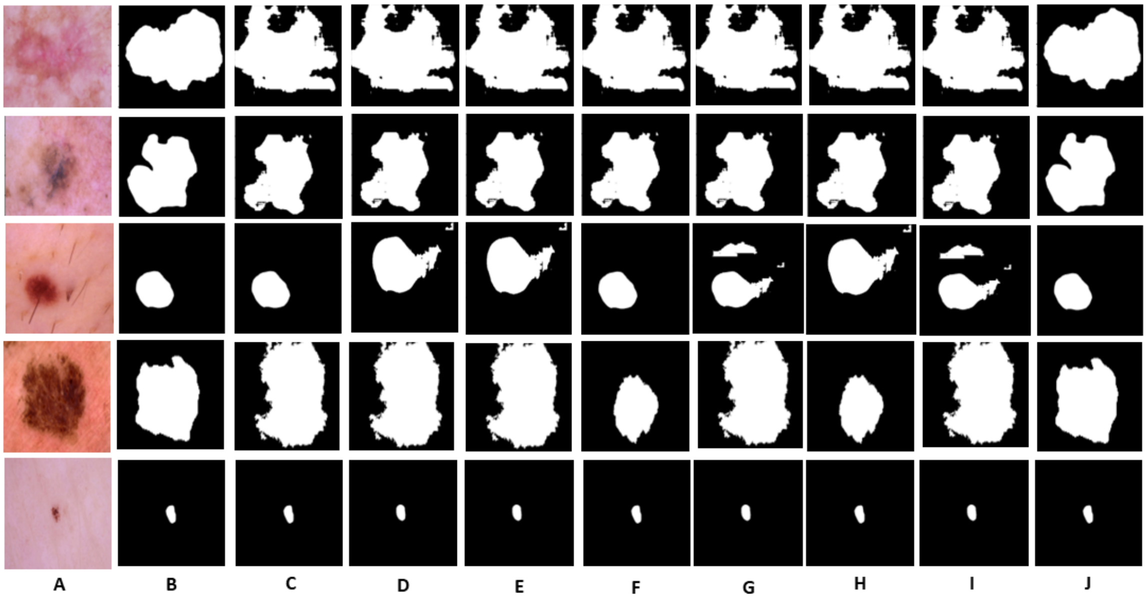

Figure 2: **Qualitative results on five skin lesion datasets (top to bottom):** ISIC-2017, ISIC-2018, PH2, HAM10000, and Derm7pt. Columns denote: **(A)** Input image, **(B)** Ground Truth, **(C)** SAM, **(D)** EfficientSAM, **(E)** FastSAM, **(F)** MobileSAM, **(G)** i2U-Net, **(H)** CMUNeXt, **(I)** YOLOv8n-seg, and **(J) SparseSegNet (Ours)**.

6. Ablation Study

Variant	**Params (M)**	**DSC (↑)**	**IoU (↑)**	**HD$_{95}$ (↓)**	**Time (ms) (↓)**
SparseSegNet* (full)	7.0	**0.900**	**0.840**	**5.8**	**38**
Single–component removals					
−AG-OP distillation	7.0	0.885	0.825	6.4	38
−EFFU gating	7.9	0.883	0.822	6.6	44
−Semantic pruning (decoder)	8.3	0.879	0.818	6.7	46
$-\mathcal{L}_{\text{Boundary}}$	7.0	0.880	0.820	6.5	38
$-\mathcal{L}_{\text{PADD}}$	7.0	0.887	0.824	6.3	38
$-\mathcal{R}_{\text{EFFU}}$	7.3	0.886	0.826	6.2	41
Combined removals					
−AG-OP & −EFFU	7.9	0.872	0.811	6.8	44
−AG-OP & $-\mathcal{L}_{\text{Boundary}}$	7.0	0.870	0.807	6.9	38
−EFFU & −Semantic pruning	9.2	0.868	0.805	7.0	52
−AG-OP & −EFFU & −Semantic pruning	9.2	0.860	0.798	7.2	52
Vanilla baseline (no SparseSegNet features)					
No AG-OP, no EFFU, no pruning, Dice+CE loss only	9.2	0.855	0.792	7.3	52

Table 4: Ablation study on **ISIC 2017**. Each row removes one or more components from the full model ($\star$). DSC = Dice, HD$_{95}$ = 95$^{\text{th}}$ percentile Hausdorff distance.

To assess the impact of each component, we perform an ablation study on ISIC 2017. The full model (**SparseSegNet***) achieves a Dice score of 0.900 and HD95 of 5.8 with 7M parameters and 38 ms latency. Removing the AG-OP distillation yields the largest single drop (Dice: 0.885, HD95: 6.4), underscoring the value of dual-teacher supervision and subspace transfer. Eliminating EFFU increases model size (7.9M), latency (44,ms), and lowers Dice to 0.883. Disabling decoder-side pruning raises parameters to 8.3M and further reduces accuracy, validating its role in compactness. Loss-level ablations—e.g., removing boundary alignment or perturbation-guided terms—cause consistent HD_{95} degradation.

Combined removals compound effects: excluding both AG-OP and EFFU drops Dice by 2.8 pp and adds 14 ms latency. Removing all core modules (distillation, pruning, EFFU, and auxiliary losses) leads to the poorest performance (Dice: 0.855, HD_{95}: 7.3). These results (Table 4) confirm that each module is essential, and their synergy enables accurate, low-latency segmentation for edge medical imaging. (See `SparseSegNet-Supp.pdf` Sec. 5 for details.)

7. Conclusion

We introduced **SparseSegNet**, a boundary-aware and lightweight segmentation model designed for real-time, privacy-preserving dermatological analysis on edge devices. The model integrates a DLA-inspired sparse encoder–decoder with EFFU gating, dual-teacher *Agreement-Guided Orthogonal Projection (AG-OP)* distillation, and a boundary-sensitive composite loss. Together, these enable efficient feature reuse, complementary supervision, and strong boundary alignment—achieving both high segmentation accuracy and low inference latency under strict compute constraints.

Across five benchmark datasets (ISIC 2017/2018, PH^2, HAM10000, Derm7pt), SparseSegNet attains an average Dice score of $\sim$0.90 and IoU of $\sim$0.84 with only 7M parameters and 1.1 GFLOPs, outperforming compact models like MobileSAM and EfficientSAM while running at $\sim$38 ms per frame on Snapdragon 888 and $\sim$92 ms on Raspberry Pi 3A. Ablation studies confirm that AG-OP distillation and EFFU gating jointly contribute to the model's robustness and boundary precision, validated further through significant paired t-test improvements in Dice and IoU metrics.

While current evaluation is dermoscopy-focused, future work will extend SparseSegNet to clinical photographs and diverse imaging conditions, integrate boundary-centric metrics such as boundary-IoU into optimization, and explore self-distillation for domain adaptation without teachers. Overall, SparseSegNet bridges the gap between foundation-scale performance and mobile efficiency, enabling real-time, accurate, and privacy-secure skin lesion segmentation directly on consumer devices.

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