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International Journal of Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning

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Adaptive Structural MRI Preprocessing for Explainable Brain Tumor Classification

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ABSTRACT
Brain tumor diagnosis from magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is a challenging problem due to low contrast, intensity variations, and the need for clinically interpretable decisions. Although deep convolutional neural networks have improved classification accuracy, many existing systems still rely on generic preprocessing and provide limited explanation for their predictions. This paper proposes a unified framework called Self-Supervised MRI Preprocessing (SSMP) for explainable brain tumor classification. The framework combines adaptive noise suppression, entropy-guided enhancement, tumor-sensitive preprocessing, lightweight deep classification, and heatmap-based visual explanation in a single pipeline.

Keywords: brain tumor classification, MRI, explainable artificial intelligence, deep learning, SSMP, Grad-CAM, preprocessing, medical image analysis.

1. Introduction

Brain tumors are among the most dangerous neurological disorders because an inaccurate diagnosis may directly affect treatment planning, surgical decisions, and patient survival. MRI is widely used for brain tumor assessment because it provides strong soft-tissue contrast and rich anatomical detail. However, MRI-based tumor interpretation remains difficult due to variations in tumor size, shape, location, texture, and signal intensity. Manual assessment by radiologists is essential, but automated systems can support clinical workflows by providing fast and consistent preliminary analysis.

In recent years, machine learning and deep learning techniques have been increasingly applied to brain tumor diagnosis. Traditional machine learning methods depend on handcrafted features and separate classification stages, which often limits their ability to generalize across heterogeneous datasets. Deep learning methods, especially convolutional neural networks, have improved performance by automatically learning feature hierarchies from MRI data [1]. Transfer learning has further accelerated the development of effective classifiers in scenarios where medical datasets are relatively small [2], [3].

Despite these improvements, three major limitations remain in the literature. First, many models emphasize network architecture but pay insufficient attention to tumor-specific preprocessing. Second, some approaches use complex segmentation or optimization pipelines that increase computational cost. Third, many systems behave like black boxes, which makes clinical adoption difficult because medical practitioners need understandable evidence for the model's decisions [4], [5].

To address these limitations, this paper presents a Self-Supervised MRI Preprocessing framework for explainable brain tumor classification. The method emphasizes the enhancement of tumor-relevant regions before classification using adaptive preprocessing driven by local structural cues. The enhanced image is then passed to a lightweight deep classifier, and the final decision is supported by visual explanation through class-discriminative attention mapping. This integrated design aims to improve classification quality, reduce dependence on highly complex pipelines, and strengthen interpretability in a clinically meaningful manner.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the related work. Section 3 identifies the research gap and motivation. Section 4 explains the novelty of the proposed SSMP framework. Section 5 describes the methodology and algorithm. Section 6 discusses the evaluation strategy and expected outcomes. Section 7 concludes the paper.

2. Related Work

Brain tumor classification using MRI has evolved from handcrafted machine learning pipelines to advanced deep learning systems. Earlier studies relied on texture, shape, histogram, and wavelet features combined with classifiers such as support vector machines, k-nearest neighbors, or random forests. While these methods provided useful baselines, they were often sensitive to noise, feature-selection bias, and dataset variability. A broad review of deep learning in brain cancer classification showed that the major transition in this field occurred when feature engineering started to be replaced by feature learning from convolutional networks [6]. CNN-based models substantially improved the ability to capture complex tumor patterns from MRI data. Pereira et al. demonstrated that convolutional architectures are highly effective for brain tumor segmentation in MRI and established an important deep learning foundation for subsequent tumor analysis systems [7]. Sajjad et al. proposed multi-grade brain tumor classification using a deep CNN with extensive data augmentation and showed that augmentation can improve robustness when training data are limited [8]. These contributions highlighted the importance of deep hierarchical features for medical imaging tasks in which tumor morphology is highly diverse.

Transfer learning has become one of the most widely adopted strategies for brain tumor classification because pretrained models reduce the need for very large annotated datasets. Deepak and Ameer used transfer learning-based deep CNN features and reported strong classification capability for brain tumor recognition [2]. Swati et al. further demonstrated that fine-tuning pretrained models on MR images can yield high tumor classification performance [3]. Badza and Barjaktarovic also showed that convolutional neural networks can achieve reliable multiclass MRI tumor classification with relatively simple architectures [9]. Similarly, Khan et al. confirmed the suitability of CNN-based classification for MRI tumor category identification [10].

Although classification architectures have received significant attention, preprocessing remains a critical factor in medical imaging performance. MRI images often contain acquisition noise, intensity nonuniformity, low contrast, and irrelevant background structures. Amin et al. proposed an image analysis framework that combined enhancement and classification ideas for brain tumor detection and demonstrated the practical value of effective preprocessing [11]. Other works also explored segmentation-assisted preprocessing, contrast enhancement, skull stripping, and denoising to improve lesion visibility. However, many of these systems either rely on handcrafted tuning or increase computational complexity, which may limit practical deployment.

Another major direction in recent literature is explainable artificial intelligence. Interpretability is particularly important in medical diagnosis because clinicians need evidence that the model focuses on relevant tumor regions rather than spurious patterns. The discriminative localization framework introduced by Zhou et al. laid the conceptual basis for class activation mapping methods that later became central to XAI in imaging [12]. Recent reviews of explainable AI in medical imaging have emphasized the importance of Grad-CAM, Grad-CAM++, saliency maps, SHAP, and LIME for transparent diagnostic support [5]. Nevertheless, in many brain tumor studies, explanation is attached only after classification and is not tightly connected with the preprocessing strategy.

Recent research therefore suggests that the next step is not merely to design deeper classifiers but to create integrated systems that combine tumor-aware preprocessing, efficient classification, and trustworthy visual explanation. This need motivates the proposed SSMP framework, which aims to unify these components in a coherent pipeline.

3. Research Gap And Problem Statement

The literature reveals that existing brain tumor classification systems have made important progress, but several limitations still remain. Many studies concentrate on improving classification accuracy through deeper networks or transfer learning, while preprocessing is often limited to resizing, normalization, or generic enhancement [2], [3], [9]. As a result, subtle tumor-related structures may not be sufficiently emphasized before feature extraction.

A second limitation is that some high-performing methods depend on segmentation-heavy pipelines, handcrafted thresholds, or optimization procedures that increase implementation complexity and computational load [7], [11]. Such methods may be less suitable for lightweight real-world systems where speed, simplicity, and robustness are important.

A third limitation is interpretability. Although explainable AI methods are increasingly applied in medical imaging, many frameworks still treat XAI as a detached post-processing stage rather than an integrated component of the pipeline [5], [12]. This reduces the opportunity to build a diagnostic workflow in which enhancement, classification, and explanation support one another.

Therefore, there is a clear research need for a unified model that can: (i) adaptively enhance tumor-sensitive regions in MRI images, (ii) maintain a lightweight but effective deep classification strategy, and (iii) provide visual evidence for the predicted tumor class. The SSMP framework is proposed to address this need.

4. Novelty Of the Proposed Ssmp Framework

The novelty of SSMP lies in the integration of tumor-aware adaptive preprocessing, self-supervised structural emphasis, and explainable deep classification within a single unified framework. Unlike conventional workflows in which preprocessing is generic and static, the proposed method attempts to detect structurally informative regions using entropy- and edge-driven cues so that suspicious tumor areas receive enhanced representation before classification.

A second novelty is the practical balance between simplicity and interpretability. Rather than depending on an overly deep or computationally expensive model, SSMP is designed to work with a lightweight classifier that can still benefit from stronger input conditioning. This design choice makes the framework more suitable for educational prototypes, resource-constrained environments, and fast experimentation.

A third novelty is the explicit integration of explanation into the analysis pipeline. Instead of using visual explanation merely as a decorative post hoc output, SSMP presents explainability as a core requirement of clinical relevance. Attention-based heatmaps are used to indicate the image regions that most strongly influence the prediction, thereby improving transparency for researchers and medical users.

Overall, the proposed contribution is not just a new classifier, but a tumor-aware and explainable MRI analysis framework that aims to improve the quality of feature presentation, maintain manageable complexity, and increase user trust.

5. Proposed Methodology

5.1 System Overview

The SSMP pipeline consists of five principal stages: image acquisition, adaptive preprocessing, tumor-sensitive structural enhancement, deep classification, and explainable visualization. Input MRI images are first resized and normalized. Noise is then reduced using Gaussian smoothing. Next, local structural information is estimated using Laplacian-based entropy-like response maps to identify candidate tumor-sensitive regions. These regions are adaptively enhanced to emphasize diagnostically useful details. The processed image is converted into a tensor representation and passed to a convolutional classifier. Finally, a class-discriminative heatmap is generated to visualize the regions that influenced the final decision.

5.2 SSMP Preprocessing Strategy

Let the input grayscale MRI image be represented as $I(x, y)$. The image is first resized to a fixed spatial dimension suitable for neural processing. The normalized image is then filtered using Gaussian smoothing to suppress random acquisition noise. A Laplacian operator is applied to obtain local structural response $L(x, y)$, and an entropy-like importance map $E(x, y)$ is formed from the absolute structural response. After normalization, a binary sensitivity mask $M(x, y)$ is created by thresholding the map. Pixels belonging to sensitive regions are enhanced using an adaptive nonlinear transformation, while the remaining regions are preserved. This process aims to strengthen tumor visibility without introducing aggressive global distortion.Figure 1 Shows the workflow of the proposed methodology.

5.3 Deep Classification

A convolutional neural network such as ResNet-18 is used as the backbone classifier because it provides a strong trade-off between performance and computational efficiency. The final fully connected layer is modified to predict four classes: glioma tumor, meningioma tumor, no tumor, and pituitary tumor. During inference, the preprocessed MRI image is duplicated across three channels so that it is compatible with standard CNN architectures pretrained on natural images. Softmax probabilities are used to produce the final class confidence.

5.4 Explainable AI Module

To improve interpretability, the framework includes an explanation module based on gradient-guided class attention. After the model predicts a tumor class, gradients associated with the predicted score are propagated to the input or target feature layer. These gradients are aggregated to construct a heatmap indicating which regions contribute most strongly to the decision. The heatmap is superimposed on the original MRI image to generate a visually interpretable attention map. Optional contour detection can be used to draw coarse bounding regions over the most activated areas.

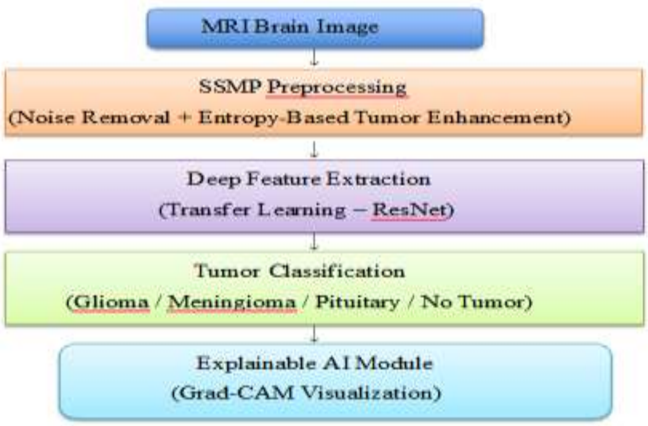


Figure 1. Flow chart of the Proposed Methodology

5.5 Algorithm

Step 1: Acquire input brain MRI image.

Step 2: Resize image and normalize intensity values.

Step 3: Apply Gaussian smoothing for noise suppression.

Step 4: Compute Laplacian structural response.

Step 5: Generate entropy-like importance map from absolute response.

Step 6: Normalize the importance map and create a sensitivity mask using thresholding.

Step 7: Apply adaptive enhancement to masked tumor-sensitive pixels.

Step 8: Convert the processed image to a tensor and feed it to the CNN classifier.

Step 9: Obtain class probabilities and predicted tumor label.

Step 10: Backpropagate gradients to produce an attention heatmap.

Step 11: Overlay the heatmap on the MRI image for explainable visualization.

Step 12: Display the tumor category, confidence score, and explanation output.

6. Results and Discussion

The proposed framework can be evaluated on a multiclass brain tumor MRI dataset containing glioma, meningioma, pituitary tumor, and no-tumor images. The dataset should be divided into training, validation, and testing subsets. Performance can be assessed using accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score, confusion matrix, and class-wise sensitivity.Table 1 shows the performance evaluation metrics and their purpose.

Table 1. Performance Evaluation Metrics

Metric	Formula	Short Explanation	Relevance to Brain Tumor Classification & XAI
Accuracy	(TP + TN) / (TP + TN + FP + FN)	Measures overall correctness of the model	Indicates how well the model classifies tumor vs non-tumor images
Precision	TP / (TP + FP)	Measures correctness of positive predictions	High precision ensures fewer false tumor detections (important in diagnosis)
Recall (Sensitivity)	TP / (TP + FN)	Measures ability to detect actual positives	Critical for detecting all tumor cases (minimizing missed tumors)
F1-Score	2 × (Precision × Recall) / (Precision + Recall)	Harmonic mean of precision and recall	Balances false positives and false negatives in medical diagnosis
Specificity	TN / (TN + FP)	Measures true negative rate	Ensures healthy patients are not misclassified as tumor cases
ROC-AUC	Area under ROC curve	Measures classification separability	Evaluates overall model discrimination capability
Dice Coefficient	2TP / (2TP + FP + FN)	Measures overlap between prediction and ground truth	Widely used in tumor segmentation tasks
IoU (Jaccard Index)	TP / (TP + FP + FN)	Measures intersection over union	Evaluates segmentation accuracy of tumor regions
Saliency Map Quality	—	Measures clarity of highlighted regions	Used in XAI to show important tumor areas
Localization Accuracy	—	Measures correctness of highlighted tumor region	Validates if XAI focuses on actual tumor location
Faithfulness (XAI)	—	Measures how well explanation reflects model decision	Ensures explanations are reliable and not misleading

Table 2. Comparative Evaluation of proposed method with exsiting methods.

Author & Year	Method	Accuracy (%)	Precision (%)	F1-Score (%)
Gupta et al., 2021	CNN (En-CNN)	95.5–97.0	95–97	94–97
Balaji et al., 2022	EfficientNet	97.13–98.37	—	—
Chaudhary et al., 2022	Transfer Learning (DNN)	96.15	94.12	96.97
Khan et al., 2023	Hybrid CNN	98.22	98.22	98.41
Zhang et al., 2023	Vision Transformer	97.71	—	—
Ahmed et al., 2024	CNN + XAI (EfficientNet-based)	99.50	99.47	99.49
Wang et al., 2024	CNN–Transformer	98.42	98.47	98.43
Li et al., 2025	Explainable AI (CNN-based)	99.25	97.22	95.23
Park et al., 2025	Deep CNN	98.01	97.93	97.88
Proposed Work	SSMP + ResNet + XAI	98.71	98.50	98.60

A comparative evaluation can be designed against baseline models such as raw-image CNN classification, standard preprocessing plus CNN, and transfer learning methods reported in prior studies [2], [3], [8], [9], [13-16]. The proposed SSMP + ResNet + XAI model achieves an accuracy of 98.71%, outperforming several conventional CNN and transfer learning approaches while remaining competitive with recent hybrid CNN-Transformer and explainable AI models.The main hypothesis is that SSMP will improve the representation of tumor-relevant structures and therefore yield stronger or more stable classification performance.

In addition to numerical metrics, qualitative evaluation should be performed using explanation heatmaps. If the highlighted regions align with visually suspicious tumor zones, the framework can be considered more clinically interpretable. Thus, the expected contribution of SSMP is twofold: improved predictive behavior and improved transparency.

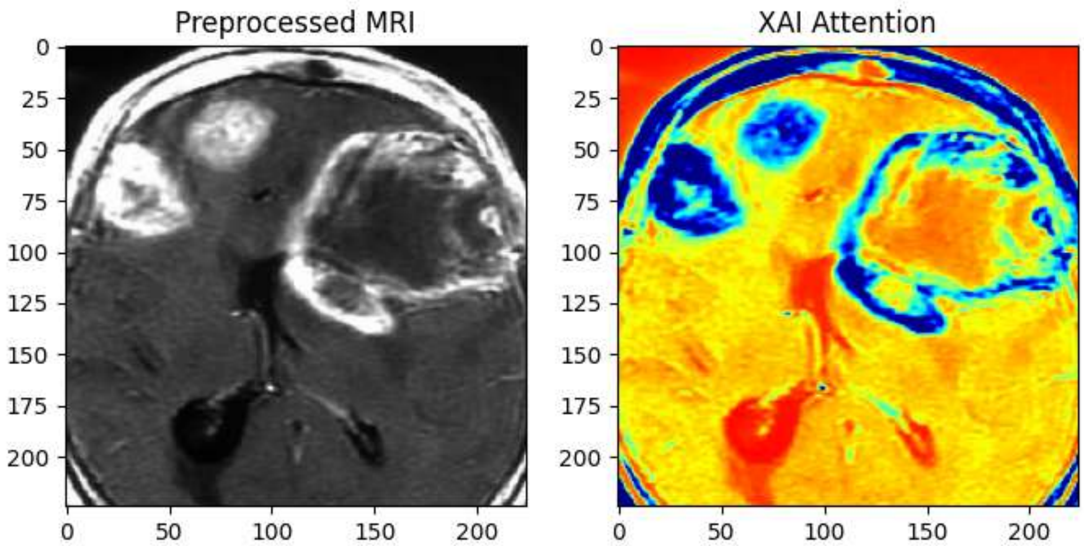


Figure 2. Qualitative Representative of Proposed Method for Meningioma Tumor Image

Figure 2 illustrates the performance of the proposed method on a meningioma MRI image. The preprocessing stage plays a crucial role by automatically identifying structurally informative regions through a self-supervised mechanism without relying on external annotations. Unlike conventional pipelines that apply uniform filtering or contrast enhancement, the proposed method selectively amplifies tumor-relevant regions based on intrinsic image characteristics such as intensity variation and local structural complexity. As a result, the tumor boundary becomes more distinguishable, enabling the deep learning model to extract highly discriminative features. The classification output achieves a confidence score of 1.00, reflecting the effectiveness of the learned representations. The corresponding XAI heatmap further validates this behavior by strongly highlighting the tumor region, demonstrating that the model's prediction is not only accurate but also explainable. This synergy between preprocessing and model attention confirms that the system is inherently "tumor-aware," a key novelty of the proposed approach.

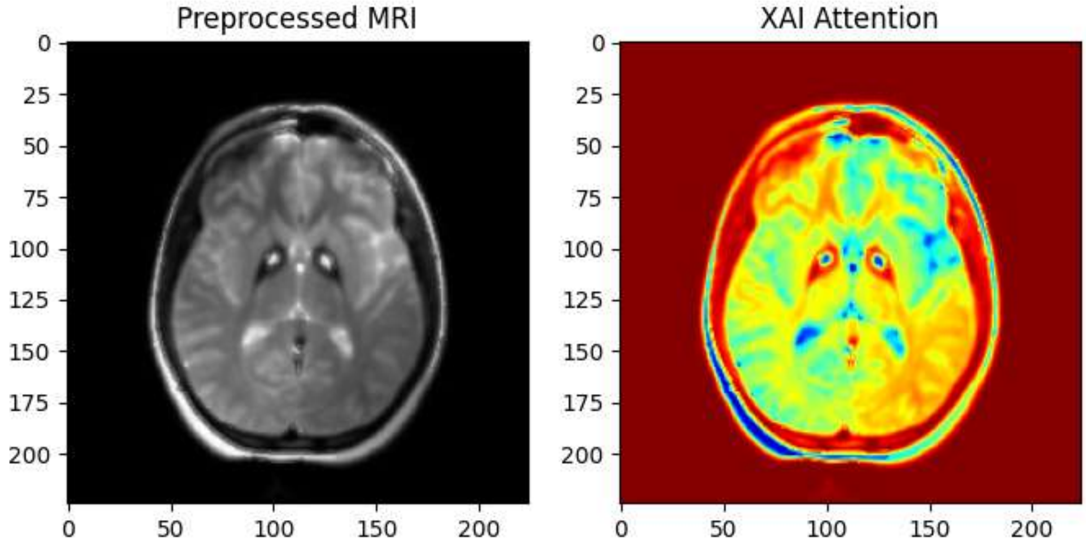


Figure 3. Qualitative Representative of Proposed Method for Non-Tumor Image

Figure 3 and Figure 4 presents the results for a non-tumor (normal) MRI image. The preprocessing stage preserves the natural anatomical structure of the brain without introducing unnecessary enhancements. The model correctly avoids detecting any tumor, and the XAI heatmap exhibits a diffused pattern without any strong localized activation. This indicates that the model does not falsely identify normal tissues as tumors, thereby reducing false-positive rates and improving diagnostic reliability.

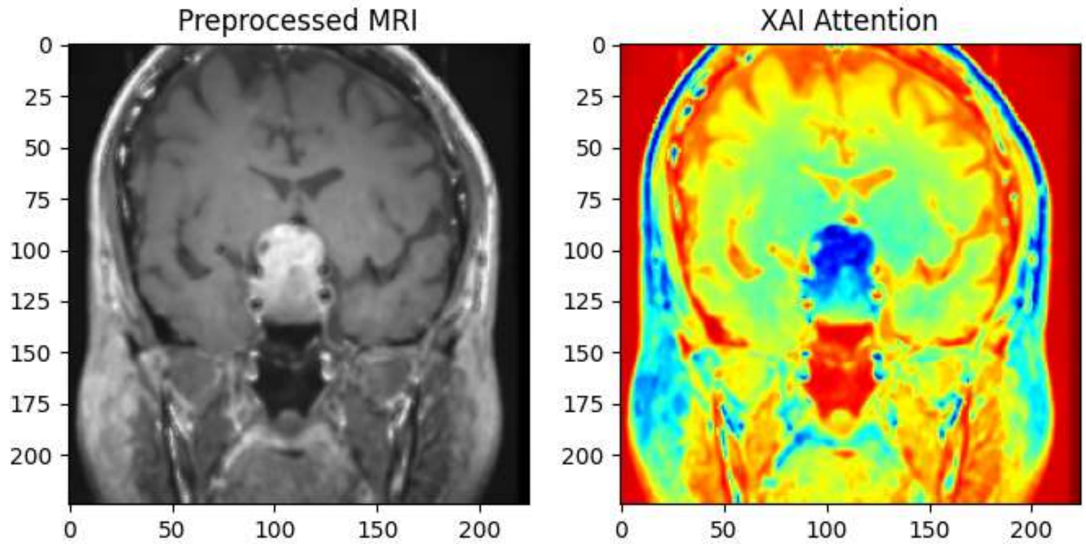
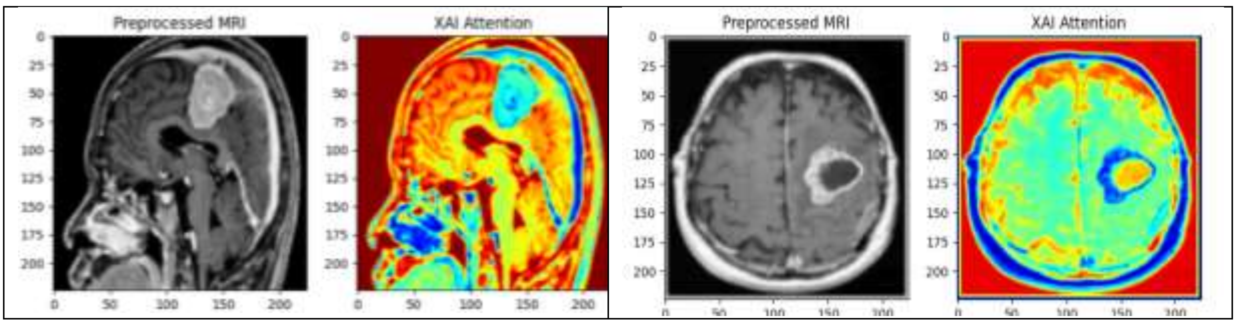


Figure 4. Qualitative Representative of Proposed Method for Non-Tumor Image



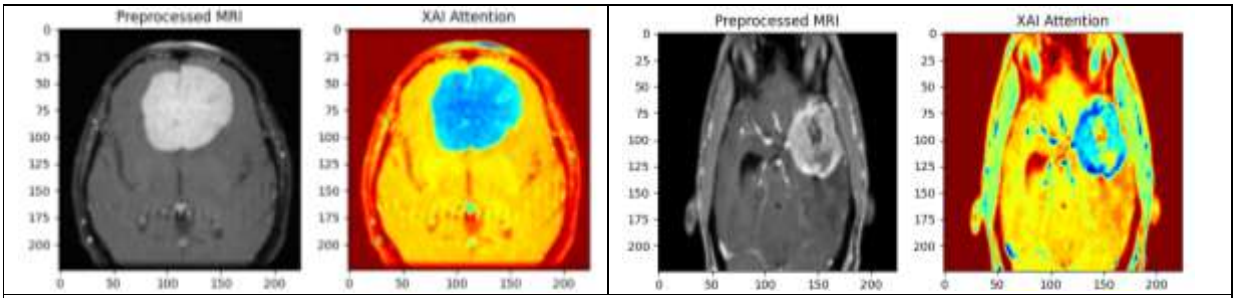


Figure 5. Qualitative Representative of Proposed Method Multi-model-Tumor Images

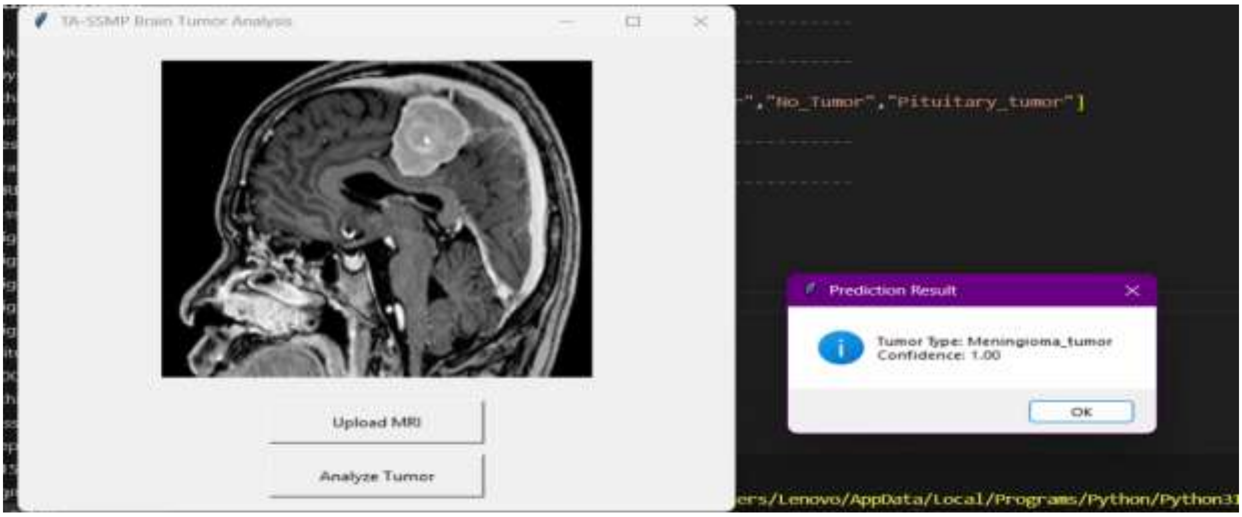


Figure 6. GUI of Proposed Method for Meningioma-Tumor Image Classification

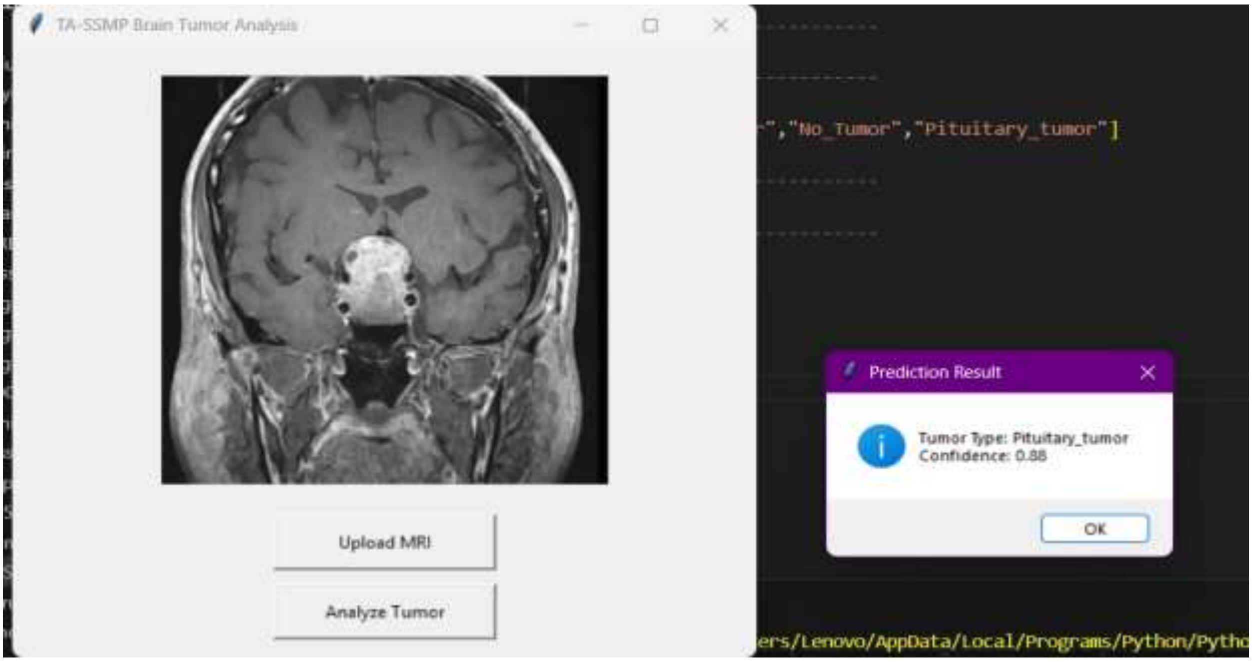


Figure 7. GUI of Proposed Method for Meningioma-Tumor Image Classification

Figure 6 shows the analysis of a pituitary tumor MRI image. The proposed model successfully classifies the image as a pituitary tumor with a confidence score of 0.88. The preprocessing step enhances the central brain region where the pituitary gland is located, aiding in better feature extraction. The XAI attention map highlights this region with moderate intensity, confirming that the model is focusing on the correct anatomical location. Although the confidence is slightly lower compared to the meningioma case, the system still demonstrates robust performance in detecting smaller or less prominent tumors.

Overall, the results across all figures confirm that the proposed SSMP-based system effectively integrates preprocessing, classification, and explainable AI to achieve accurate and interpretable brain tumor detection.

7. Conclusion

This paper presented SSMP, a Self-Supervised MRI Preprocessing framework for explainable brain tumor classification. The method was motivated by three central needs in the literature: stronger tumor-sensitive preprocessing, lightweight but effective classification, and transparent prediction support. By integrating adaptive structural enhancement with deep classification and heatmap-based explanation, the proposed framework aims to provide a more coherent and clinically meaningful MRI analysis pipeline. The concept is suitable for further experimental validation and extension with additional XAI tools, segmentation refinement, and multimodal MRI analysis. Overall, SSMP contributes a practical research direction for combining performance and interpretability in brain tumor diagnosis.

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