

# Advanced Diagnostic Technique for Alzheimer's Disease using MRI Top-Ranked Volume and Surface-based Features

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Alzheimer's disease (AD) is the most dominant type of dementia that has not been treated completely yet. Few Alzheimer's patients are correctly diagnosed on time. Therefore, diagnostic tools are needed for better and more efficient diagnoses.

**Objective:** This study aimed to develop an efficient automated method to differentiate Alzheimer's patients from normal elderly and present the essential features with accurate Alzheimer's diagnosis.

**Material and Methods:** In this analytical study, 154 Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scans were obtained from the Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI) database, preprocessed, and normalized by the head size for extracting features (volume, cortical thickness, Sulci depth, and Gyrfication Index Features (GIF). Relief-F algorithm, t-test, and one way-ANOVA were used for feature ranking to obtain the most effective features representing the AD for the classification process. Finally, in the classification step, four classifiers were used with 10 folds cross-validation as follows: Gaussian Support Vector Machine (GSVM), Linear Support Vector Machine (LSVM), Weighted K-Nearest Neighbors (W-KNN), and Decision Tree algorithm.

**Results:** The LSVM classifier and W-KNN produce a testing accuracy of 100% with only seven features. Additionally, GSVM and decision tree produce a testing accuracy of 97.83% and 93.48%, respectively.

**Conclusion:** The proposed system represents an automatic and highly accurate AD detection with a few reliable and effective features and minimum time.

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## Keywords

Hippocampus; Amygdala; Cortical Thickness; Gyrfication Index; Sulcal Depth; Alzheimer Disease; Relief Algorithm

## Introduction

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a progressive neurodegenerative disease without any certain treatment until now and leads to death eventually. In addition, AD mainly affects older people over the age of 65 years with an exponentially increasing rate, nearly doubling every five years [1]. However, Alzheimer's has no definitive cure [2,3], and the detection of the disease in the early stage can enormously assist in slowing down the progress, leading to effective treatment.

Some tests are used to diagnose Alzheimer's, such as mini-mental exams [4], distinguishing the cognitive symptoms of the disease, and

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brain imaging techniques, such as Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) [5-8]. The neuropathological alteration due to AD can appear much earlier before the onset of clinical symptoms [9]. Therefore, the early detection of AD using neuroimaging techniques is considered a promising area of research, especially with the advances in machine-learning and image-segmentation techniques [10-16].

MRI scans have been investigated to obtain many Alzheimer's biomarkers and study the most atrophic regions using volume measurements [6,17], shape [18], texture [17,19,20], cortical measurements [21,22], and sulcal measurements [23]. These measurements were applied to many brain regions, such as the hippocampus [24], which is one of the earliest brain regions in the neurodegeneration [25], amygdala [26,27], whole brain [28], entorhinal cortex [29], brainstem [30], and ventricles [31]. Recent advances in machine-learning techniques, such as Support Vector Machine (SVM) [32,33], Naïve Bayes, Logistic Regression, and K-Nearest Neighbors (KNN) [34] have been implemented. The use of automated methods rather than relying solely on physician experiments has led to the reliance on ensemble models to improve disease detection and increase accuracy. However, a major challenge is in selecting the best biomarkers that characterize AD to differentiate between AD and Normal Controls (NC).

Several feature selection methods have been used in recent studies; for example, Particle Swarm Optimization (PSO) algorithm [35], genetic algorithm, t-test [36,37], and Principal Component Analysis (PCA) [38-41].

The current study aimed to demonstrate the least and most beneficial number of features

among a large pool of different AD biomarkers to classify AD cases and perform the best classifiers using these features.

## Material and Methods

### Database

In this analytical study, data were acquired from the Alzheimer's disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI) database (<http://adni.loni.usc.edu>), propelled as a public-private corporation by six nonprofit organizations in 2003 as follows: the National Institute on Aging (NIA), the National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering (NIBIB), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and private pharmaceutical companies. ADNI's main objective was to check whether some specific biomarkers, clinical and neuropsychological assessment, positron emission tomography (PET), and serial MRI can be combined to evaluate the Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) evolution and early Alzheimer's.

154 T1-weighted images were obtained from ADNI, 37 female cases and 41 male cases in the AD stage, and 40 females and 36 males in the normal control (NC) stage. The age ranged from 50 to 85 years. The magnetic field strength was 3T, slice thickness was 1.2 mm, acquisition matrix was 240×256 pixels with pixel spacing X=1.0 mm; pixel spacing Y=1.0 mm, the number of slices=176, and demographic characteristics of the individuals (shown in Table 1).

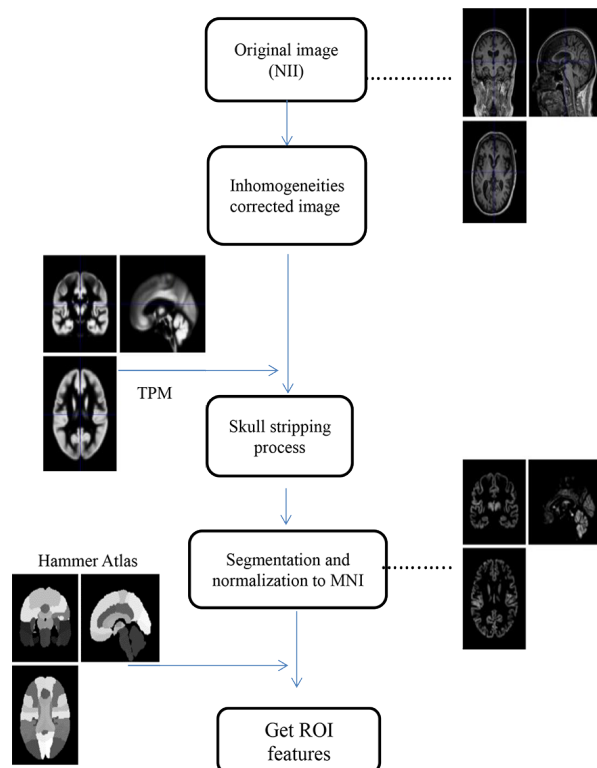
### Image Preprocessing

Before executing the analysis, the quality of the data must be improved due to missing values and inaccurate information, leading to

**Table 1:** Sample size for classes

Class	Female	Male	Sample size/each class
Alzheimer's Disease Patients (AD)	37	41	78
Normal Control (NC)	40	36	76

distorted results. The data was preprocessed using CAT12 after obtaining it from ADNI. The preprocessing workflow involved bias field inhomogeneities correction, affine registration, skull stripping, and normalization to Montreal Neurological Institute (MNI). Hammers atlas [42] is then used as a binary mask to select the brain Regions of Interest (ROIs), as shown in Figure 1. Finally, 71 raw volumetric measurements, 68 cortical thickness (CT), 68 gyrification indexes (GI), and 68 sulcal depth (SD) measurements are extracted. The four measurements, together with their differences among AD and NC, are shown in Figure 2. Volume measurements, involving the hippocampus, amygdala, temporal pole, fusiform, insula, putamen, thalamus, lateral temporal ventricle, and cuneus were normalized by the intracranial volume. Relative volumes provide more precise volumes to reduce the influence of factors, such as the head and brain size.



**Figure 1:** Workflow of medical image preprocessing

Entorhinal, temporal pole, fusiform, parahippocampus, and insula are examples of surface-based characteristics (CT, GI, and SD), resulting in the excellent features to indicate the existence of the disease.

### Feature Selection

Feature selection uses specific algorithms to select the most relevant features with the most contribution towards predicting variables for increasing the accuracy and reducing the prediction time. A high-dimensional feature vector, 71 volumetric, and  $68 \times 3$  surface-based features (cortical thickness, sulcal depth, and gyrification index) were in this study without any significant or appropriate information to diagnose AD. Therefore, the following algorithms are used to obtain the top-ranked features, including the Relief-F algorithm, t-test, and one-way ANOVA.

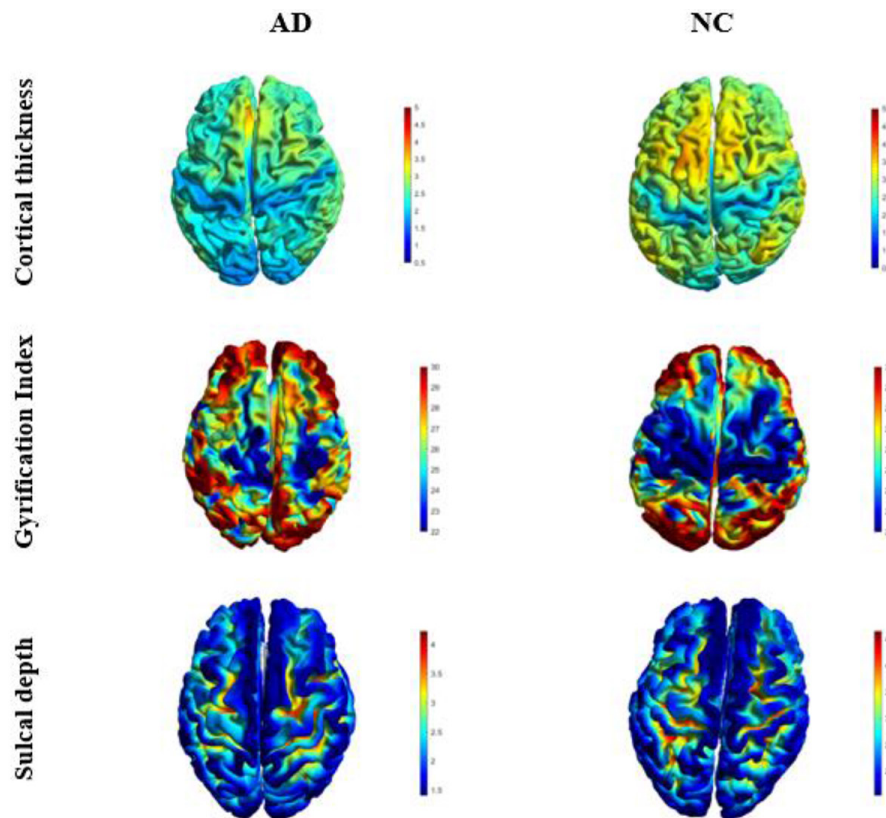
#### Relief-F Algorithm

Relief-F is one of the filter methods used for feature selection that is particularly sensitive to feature interactions [43], designed originally for binary classification, and replaced with Relief-F as the most utilized algorithm [44].

This algorithm aimed to assess the quality of features according to the ability of their values to separate between the cases that are close to each other [45], including three important steps: the nearest hit and miss, calculation of the weights of features, and presentation of a ranked list of features. Based on this list of features, the top 12 ranked optimal features were selected. The t-test is a statistical test to determine a difference in the means of two samples and either dependent or independent samples. T-tests were used as a feature ranking algorithm in a variety of machine-learning studies [46,47]. The formula of the t-test is defined as follows:

$$t - \text{value} = \frac{\mu_1 - \mu_2}{\sqrt{\frac{\sigma_1^2}{n_1} + \frac{\sigma_2^2}{n_2}}} \quad (1)$$

where  $n_1$ ,  $n_2$  are the number of samples,  $\mu_1$ ,



**Figure 2:** Brain mapping of cortical thickness, gyrification index, and sulcus depth maps estimated using CAT12 toolbox. Each column denotes a subject in the normal control (NC) and Alzheimer’s disease (AD) groups.

$\mu_2$  are the means, and  $\sigma_1, \sigma_2$  are the standard deviation of two classes.

T-value measures the significance of the difference between two samples relative to the variation in each sample. Therefore, the high t-value of a specific feature for the two samples AD and NC leads to reliability in the classification and selection.

The absolute t-value for each feature was computed, and all features were ranked depending on their t-values. The 12 top discriminative features were selected.

**One Way ANOVA**

ANOVA stands for analysis of variance was used to compare the sample means for two independent groups, or more, determining whether one group has a statistically significant difference in its mean than the others based on the following formula:

$$F - \text{value} = \frac{MS_b}{MS_w} \tag{2}$$

$$MS_b = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^k n_i (\bar{x}_i - \bar{x})^2}{k - 1} \tag{3}$$

$$MS_w = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^k \sum_{j=1}^n (x_{ij} - \bar{x}_i)^2}{n - k} \tag{4}$$

where F is the variance ratio for the overall test,  $MS_b$  is the mean square between groups,  $MS_w$  is the mean square within groups, k is the number of classes, and n is the number of observations.

The F-value was measured for all features and ranked from the highest F-value to the lowest; the 12 top-ranked features were then



obtained.

## Classification

### Support Vector Machine (SVM)

SVM is a discriminative classifier for the selection of the best hyper-plane or a group of hyper-planes that maximizes the distance of the margin to classify the data into many classes. The hyperplane is defined by the following equation:

$$g(x)=wTx+b$$

where  $w$  is the weight vector, and  $b$  is the offset parameter for the input vector  $x$ .

The maximum and minimum margin widths are  $2/(||w||)$  and  $1/2 ||w||$ , respectively.

For non-linearly separable data, SVM uses a kernel function with an added dimension to the data and transforms data to a higher-dimensional space, such as the Gaussian kernel defined [48] as follows:

$$(x,y)=exp(-\gamma|x-y|^2)$$

where  $\gamma$  is gamma, and  $|x-y|^2$  is defined as squared Euclidean distance between the two feature vectors. The gamma hyperparameter ( $\gamma$ ) controls the training points, which affected the decision boundary.

### K-Nearest Neighbor

In the training phase, K-Nearest Neighbor, as one of the simplest supervised machine-learning classifiers, stores and arranges all labeled data in the memory. Therefore, it is memory-based without any need to model fitting and classifies the test point based on a similarity measure between the test point and its nearest neighbors. For example, with  $x_0$  as a new point, the k-nearest neighbor search obtained the k closest points in distance to  $x_0$ . Among these k neighbors, the number of the data points in each class was counted. Based on the most votes from the neighbors, the data point is classified.

Weighted KNN takes the majority votes from the neighbors without caring about their distance from the test point.

### Decision Tree

The decision tree is a classification model

in a shape of a diagram used in data analysis. In the training step, this algorithm aimed to divide the data into smaller sets of data based on a specific feature. The node in the tree states a condition of a feature; each branch falling from that node corresponds to one of the possible attribute values. Each leaf represents class labels related to the case. Cases in the training set are classified by guiding them from the tree's root down to a leaf, depending on the result of the tests.

## Results

A total of 154 individuals participated in this study, 108 and 46 for the training and testing the performance of classifiers, respectively. The features were organized into four main groups: volume features, cortical thickness, sulcal depth, and gyrification index. Volume was measured for 71 regions of interest (ROI) in the brain. Each of the other three features was measured for 68 ROIs.

The t-test, Relief-F algorithm, and ANOVA were used for the feature ranking process and selected the 12 top-ranked features from each of them, as indicated in Table 2. The 9 common features were selected among the 12 top-ranked features (group1), including the right amygdala, cortical thickness left entorhinal, left amygdala, left hippocampus, cortical thickness right entorhinal, right ambient and parahippocampus, right hippocampus, left ambient and parahippocampus, and left inferior middle temporal gyri.

A total of 9 top-ranked features were then selected, and then the 7 common features were selected among the 9 features. The 7 Common features were considered group2, including the right amygdala, cortical thickness left entorhinal, left Amygdala, left hippocampus, right ambient and parahippocampus, right hippocampus, left ambient, and parahippocampus.

The four classifiers, such as decision tree, linear SVM, Gaussian SVM, and weighted KNN were executed using all features com-

bined and the two groups of features with 46 test points to assess the performance of the proposed feature selection, as shown in Table 3.

Linear SVM and weighted KNN classifiers showed the best performance with 100% accu-

racy when these 7 features were used (Tables 3 and 4, and Figures 3 and 4). Further, Table 3 illustrates that the average time required for all classifiers to predict one observation when using 7 features is much less compared to the prediction time for using the original features.

**Table 2:** Top-ranked features for the studied algorithms

Features from t-test ranking	t -value	Features from ANOVA ranking	F score	Features from Relief-F ranking	Weight
Right Amygdala	11.8	Cortical thickness_left entorhinal	114.5	Cortical thickness_left entorhinal	0.176
Cortical thickness_left entorhinal	11.71	Right Amygdala	114.4	Left Amygdala	0.135
Left Amygdala	11.02	Right Amygdala	112.2	Left Hippocampus	0.133
Left Hippocampus	10.7	Left Hippocampus	100.4	Cortical thickness_right entorhinal	0.130
Left Inferior Middle Temporal Gyri	10.66	Left Inferior Middle Temporal Gyri	92.8	Right Hippocampus	0.129
Right Ambient and Parahippocampus Gyri	10.12	Right Ambient and Parahippocampus Gyri	89.1	Right Amygdala	0.124
Right Hippocampus	10.08	Right Hippocampus	88.04	Left Ambient and Parahippocampus Gyri	0.110
Left Ambient and Parahippocampus Gyri	10.06	Left Ambient and Parahippocampus Gyri	87.9	Left Fusiform Gyrus	0.108
Right Inferior Middle Temporal Gyri	9.83	Right Inferior Middle Temporal Gyri	84.7	Right Ambient and Parahippocampus Gyri	0.092
Left Anterior Medial Temporal Lobe	9.74	Left Anterior Medial Temporal Lobe	83.2	Cortical thickness right temporal pole	0.080
Cortical thickness_right entorhinal	9.55	Cortical thickness_right entorhinal	78.69	Cortical thickness left inferior temporal	0.077
Left Posterior Temporal Lobe	9.2	Right Anterior Medial Temporal Lobe	76.4	Left Inferior Middle Temporal Gyri	0.072

**Table 3:** Accuracy and prediction time for using the original features, 9 common features, and 7 common features.

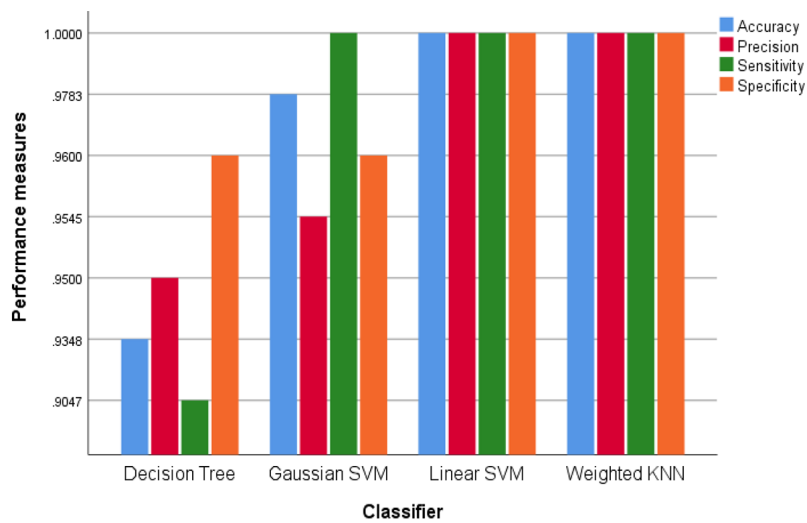
	Decision tree (%)	Linear SVM (%)	Gaussian SVM (%)	Weighted KNN (%)	Avg prediction time (milliseconds/ one obs) (msec)
Original features	95.65	95.65	93.48	86.95	3
9 common features	93.48	97.83	97.83	97.83	0.7
7 common features	93.48	100.00	97.83	100.00	0.6 msec

SVM: Support Vector Machine, KNN: K-Nearest Neighbors, obs: Observation

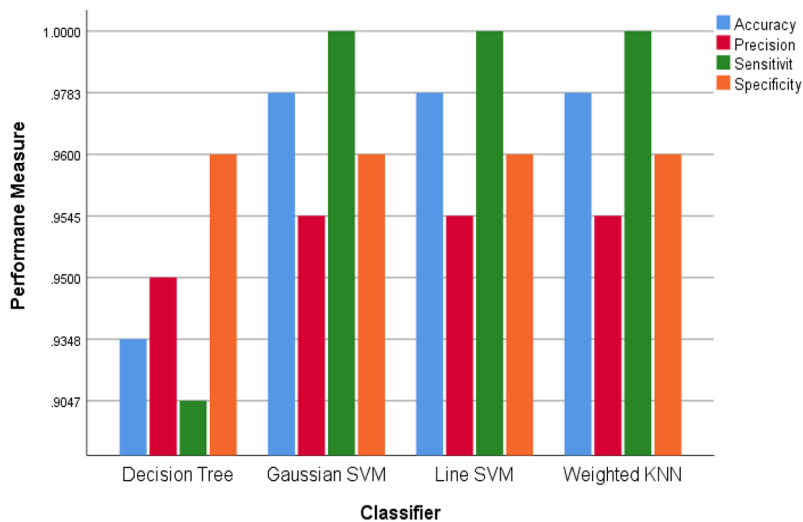
**Table 4:** Classification performance of applied classifiers

	number of features=7			number of features=9		
	precision	sensitivity	specificity	precision	sensitivity	specificity
Decision Tree	0.95	0.9047	0.96	0.95	0.9047	0.96
Linear SVM	1	1	1	0.9545	1	0.96
Gaussian SVM	0.9545	1	0.96	0.9545	1	0.96
Weighted KNN	1	1	1	0.9545	1	0.96

SVM: Support Vector Machine, KNN: K-Nearest Neighbors



**Figure 3:** Performance measurements for 7 common features



**Figure 4:** Performance measurements for 9 common features

As a result, the suggested approach would provide the most critical characteristics with the least time and the greatest accurate outcomes compared to earlier efforts. We considered the following measurements:

$$\text{Sensitivity} = \frac{TP}{(TP+FN)}, \text{Specificity} = \frac{TN}{(TN+FP)}$$

$$\text{Precision} = \frac{TP}{TP+FP}, \text{Accuracy} = \frac{TP+TN}{TP+TN+FP+FN}$$

where TP, TN, FP, and FN are true positive, true negative, false positive, and false negative, respectively.

Figure 5 shows that cortical thickness right entorhinal and left inferior middle temporal gyri features, excluded when creating group 2, have large overlapping areas between AD (class 1) and NC (class 2). Therefore, the elimination of them increased the accuracy of detection for LSVM and W- KNN.

### Discussion

In this work, 4 machine-learning models were proposed, including decision tree, linear SVM, Gaussian SVM, and weighted KNN for differentiating AD individuals from brain MRI images. Based on the results, linear SVM and weighted KNN achieved the same performance with accuracy of 100% using 7

features. The SVM and KNN provide good performance with 7 and 9 features with sensitivity (recall), selected as the models to decrease missed AD cases as much as possible.

When volume features were combined with surface-based features (CT, SD, and GI), sulcal depth and gyrification index were underestimated. As a result, sulcal depth and gyrification index did not rank amongst the top features. GI and sulcal depth (SD) do not contribute to the detection of AD stage compared to volume features. Therefore, we can rely primarily on the volumes of the hippocampus (left and right), amygdala (left and right), and parahippocampus (left and right) as parts of the limbic brain system. Furthermore, the left cortical thickness of the entorhinal cortex can be added to the previous volume features to improve detection performance.

Table 5 compares various results from previous techniques for detecting Alzheimer’s disease and the proposed method. One compared study developed an approach for classifying AD from NC with accuracy up to 92.86% by using fusion of texture and morphemtric features, RFE-SVM for the feature selection process and SVM for the classification process [40]. Another study depended on 31 morphemtric features selected using RFE

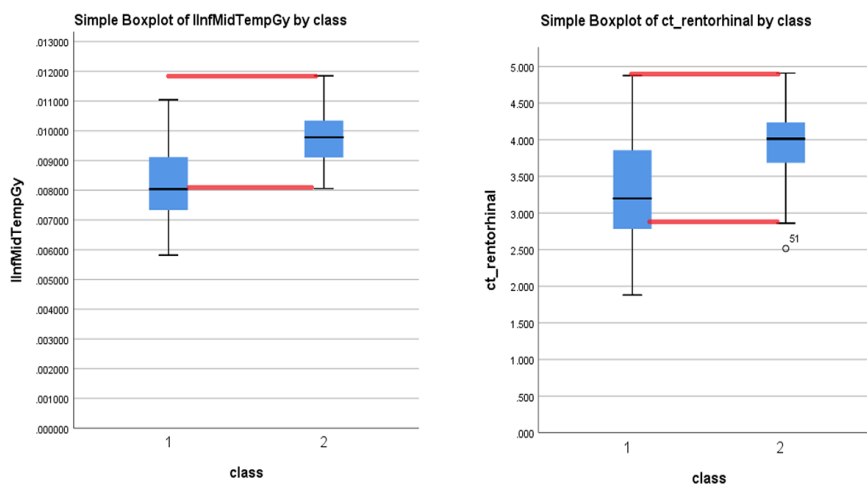


Figure 5: Boxplot of the two excluded features



**Table 5:** Techniques used in related works

References	Year	AD diagnosis	#Of features	Techniques used	Dataset	Accuracy (%)
[33]	2020	Segmentation And feature extraction, Feature selection, Classification	138 anatomical morphometry: 40 subcortical volumes. 98 cortical thickness.	Segmentation And feature extraction: MALPEM, Feature selection: PCA, Classification: SVM	701 subjects (326 GARD, 123 ADNI, 121 ARWIBO, 131 NACC) AD:168 NC: 274	For GARD data: 95.45
[38]	2011	Feature extraction, feature reduction, classification	20 features	Feature Extraction: VBM, Feature reduction: PCA, Classification: SRAN	OASIS Dataset, Subject=60, AD=30, NC=30	91.18
[39]	2013	Feature extraction, Feature selection, Classification	20 features	Feature extraction: VBM, Feature Selection: PCA, Classification: ELM	OASIS dataset, subjects=218, AD=70, NC=98	94.63 (5788 features) 91 (20 features)
[40]	2015	Feature extraction, Feature selection, Classification	9 features	Feature extraction: Gray-Level Co-occurrence Matrix (GLCM) method and Gabor filter (Texture features) and VBM analysis (Morphometric feature), Feature selection: SVM-RFE, Classification: SVM	ADNI database, subjects=112, AD=54, NC=58	92.86
[41]	2015	Feature extraction, Feature selection, Classification	31 features	Feature extraction: VBM, Feature Selection: RFE, Classification: PBLMcRBFN	OASIS dataset, subjects=60, AD=30, NC=30	89.81
[49]	2020	Data labeling Building, CNN model, Performance evaluation		12 layers CNN	OASIS dataset, subjects= 416, AD=100, NC=316	97.65
[50]	2021	Segmentation, Feature extraction, Classification		Segmentation: 3D deep U-Net, Feature extraction and classification: CNN model	ADNI dataset, AD=194, NC=216	85.9
[51]	2013	Feature extraction, Feature selection, Classification	10 features	Feature extraction: VBM, Feature selection and classification: ICGA with an ELM classifier	OASIS dataset, subjects=60, AD=30, NC=30	91.86
Proposed work	2021	Feature extraction, Feature selection, Classification	7 Features	Feature extraction: ROI Feature selection: ANOVA+t test+ ReliefF, Classification: LSVM, W-KNN	ADNI dataset, Subjects=154, AD=78, NC=76	100

AD: Alzheimer's Disease, NC: Normal Control, OASIS: The Outcome and Assessment Information Set, VBM: Voxel Based Morphometry, PCA: Principle Component Analysis, SRAN: Self Adaptive Resource Allocation Network classifier, ICGA: Integer Coded Genetic Algorithm, ELM: Extreme Learning Machine classifier, SVM-RFE: Support Vector Machine - Recursive Feature Elimination, PBLMcRBFN: Projection Based Learning for Meta-Cognitive Radial Basis Function Network, MALPEM: A package involves software and data files to accomplish a brain extraction and segmentation into 138 cortical and subcortical structures, GARD: Gwangju Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementia Dataset, ARWIBO: Alzheimer's Disease Repository Without Borders, NACC: National Alzheimer's Coordinating Center, ADNI: Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative, CNN: Convolutional Neural Network, ROI: Region of Interest, ANOVA: Analysis of variance, W-KNN: Weighted K-Nearest Neighbors

algorithm to differentiate between AD and NC with accuracy equal to 89.81% [41]. One report developed a method based on 12 layers convolutional neural network (CNN) model for AD diagnosis with an accuracy of 97.65% using MRI images acquired from OASIS database [49].

The main reason for this output is using a small number of very associated features with AD and removing redundant features. The existence of unrelated features reduces the classification ability of the model and the overall accuracy, showing the enhancement in the models' performance when excluding right cortical thickness of entorhinal and left inferior temporal gyrus features from the 9 features. Furthermore, this study didn't depend on one feature selection methods to select features.

The limitation of the proposed study is to use filter feature selection technique without consideration of the features correlation or dependency.

The presented work can be improved by using the MCI stage in the future, requiring more relevant features and implementation of more feature engineering steps, which we are working on to develop an approach to classify the three stages of Alzheimer's NC, MCI, and AD.

## Conclusion

In this study, an efficient classification system for Alzheimer's disease diagnosis is proposed, based on combining more than one feature selection method (t test, one way ANOVA, and Relief-F algorithm) to acquire the most significant features representing AD from a huge pool of features. Furthermore, four classifiers (decision tree, linear SVM, Gaussian SVM, weighted KNN) was applied to select the highest accuracy. The experiment explained that linear SVM and weighted KNN and the following features are the most precise classifiers: left hippocampus, right hippocampus, left amygdala, right amygdala, left ambient and parahippocampus, right ambient and parahippocampus, and cortical thickness\_left

entorhinal. In addition, combining volume features with cortical thickness features will provide more accurate results than using either volume or cortical thickness independently. However, the traditional techniques of classifiers have been used and applied on extracted features, the maximum accuracy together with the minimum number of features have been collected.

In the future of this study, we plan to implement an approach to classify the three stages of Alzheimer's NC, MCI, AD and to increase the dataset for a robust classification system.

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### Authors' Contribution

EM. Arabi and KS. Ahmed conceived the design of the study. EM. Arabi accomplished the gathering and analyzing of the data, developed and applied the approach of the study, prepared the original draft. KS. Ahmed carried out the critical revision of the manuscript. All the steps of the study were supervised by KS. Ahmed and AS. Mohra All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

### Ethical Approval

All data have been taken under the ADNI approval. ADNI protocol and ethics statement: [http://adni.loni.usc.edu/wp-content/themes/freshnews-dev-v2/documents/clinical/ADNI-2\\_Protocol.pdf](http://adni.loni.usc.edu/wp-content/themes/freshnews-dev-v2/documents/clinical/ADNI-2_Protocol.pdf).

### Conflict of Interest

None

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