Open Access International Journal of Science and Engineering

ISSN: 2456-3293

Volume 9 Issue 1s (2026) | Pages: 203-208

Automated Skin Lesion Border Detection Techniques – A Key Component in Melanoma Screening

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Peer Review Information

Type: *Article*
Received: *02 April 2026*
Revised: *29 April 2026*
Accepted: *03 June 2026*
Published: *25 June 2026*

Abstract

Accurate identification of lesion boundaries in dermoscopic images plays a critical role in automated melanoma screening, as the effectiveness of subsequent feature analysis and diagnostic decisions depends heavily on segmentation performance. This review presents a comprehensive overview of skin lesion border-detection methodologies, highlighting their evolution from classical image-processing techniques and hybrid approaches to advanced deep-learning–based segmentation models. In addition, it discusses commonly used public datasets, standard performance metrics, and typical segmentation challenges encountered in real-world clinical images. The paper further identifies existing limitations in current research and outlines promising future directions aimed at improving robustness, generalization, and clinical applicability. Special attention is given to dataset availability, fair benchmarking practices, and practical recommendations for developing reliable and clinically viable lesion segmentation systems.

Keywords: Skin Lesion Segmentation; Melanoma Screening; Dermoscopy Images; Deep Learning; Border Detection; Computer-Aided Diagnosis.

How to Cite This Article

Patil, S., Gayakwad, M., & Jadhav, S. (2026). Automated skin lesion border detection techniques – A key component in melanoma screening. *Open Access International Journal of Science and Engineering*, 9(1s), 203–208.

Introduction

Melanoma is one of the most dangerous forms of skin cancer, yet early identification dramatically improves prognosis. Dermoscopy, which enables visualization of subsurface structures, is integral to automated analysis and clinical decision-making. Segmentation—or the precise extraction of lesion borders—constitutes the first and most influential step in a computer-aided diagnosis (CAD) workflow. Inaccurate segmentation introduces errors into color, texture, and shape features, negatively affecting downstream classification models and clinical assessments. Over the last twenty years, border-detection research has evolved from classical techniques based on thresholding and handcrafted descriptors to machine learning and, more recently, advanced deep-learning architectures that define today's performance benchmarks. This review situates segmentation methods within their historical and methodological context, linking their development to publicly available datasets

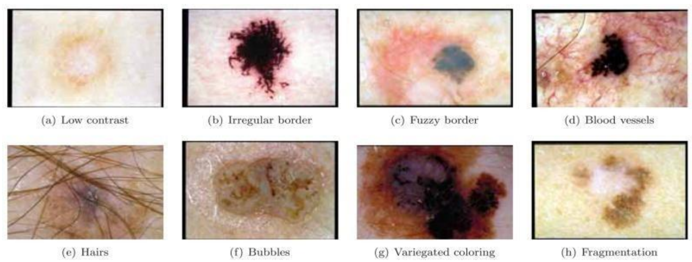

Fig. 1. *Visual Characteristics Affecting Skin Lesion Segmentation*

Background

The field of computer-assisted melanoma detection has shifted from rule-based image-processing algorithms to sophisticated deep-learning systems. Early techniques relied on: • Color-space thresholding • Edge-based detection • Region-growing algorithms • Active contours (snakes) While straightforward and computationally light, these methods were susceptible to and community challenges. Dermoscopy has become increasingly widespread due to the expansion of digital imaging devices. As a result, CAD systems now play a significant role in supporting dermatologists by offering second opinions, reducing diagnostic workload, and improving screening accuracy. Since segmentation determines the region over which diagnostic features are computed, even minor boundary errors can distort clinical interpretation and reduce system reliability. Recent progress in convolutional neural networks (CNNs) and transformer-based models has resulted in substantial improvements in segmentation performance. However, practical deployment is still hindered by issues such as inconsistent lighting, artifacts (hair, rulers, shadows), low-contrast boundaries, variations in skin tone, and limited annotated datasets. This paper provides a comprehensive overview of existing border-detection approaches, their shortcomings, and potential directions for future research.

Noise, artifacts, and irregular lesion morphology. Deep learning introduced end-to-end feature extraction, significantly improving segmentation accuracy. Public datasets—especially ISIC (International Skin Imaging Collaboration)—have been instrumental in standardizing research by providing large, annotated image repositories. These datasets support objective benchmarking and have accelerated the development of robust segmentation algorithms.

Motivation

Despite notable advances, several challenges continue to drive research: • Dependence on accurate borders: Major melanoma assessment frameworks (ABCD rule, 7-point checklist) require precise segmentation. Misidentified borders lead to incorrect risk scoring. • Variability in real-world imaging: Changes in acquisition devices, lighting conditions, and skin types introduce domain shifts that degrade model performance. • Artifacts: Elements such as hair, ink markings, shadows, or air bubbles often distort lesion boundaries. • Generalizability issues: Many deep models excel on curated datasets but struggle with unseen clinical images. • Clinical support: Reliable automated tools can enhance diagnostic consistency, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

Objectives

This review aims to: • Examine classical, hybrid, and deep-learning-based border-detection approaches used in melanoma screening. • Compare methods based on underlying principles, advantages, limitations, and quantitative performance. • Clarify the significance of accurate segmentation for downstream tasks such as classification and feature extraction. • Summarize major dermoscopic datasets and their role in advancing research. • Identify obstacles that impede clinical translation of segmentation methods. • Suggest future research directions for building robust, generalizable, and clinically applicable models.

Literature Review

Summary of Key Contributions

1. Early research on skin lesion border detection was primarily shaped by classical image-processing methods. Celebi et al. (2009–

2010) presented some of the first detailed reviews in this domain, systematically categorizing dermoscopic segmentation pipelines into preprocessing, segmentation, and postprocessing stages. Their work highlighted critical challenges such as hair occlusion, illumination variations, and inconsistencies among expert annotations, thereby laying the groundwork for future investigations.

2. Building upon this foundation, Celebi (2013) proposed ensemble-based adaptive thresholding techniques to achieve more stable segmentation across images with varying lighting conditions. These hybrid methods combined simple heuristic rules with refinement steps, influencing later systems that balanced computational efficiency with improved robustness.
3. A major paradigm shift occurred with the introduction of U-Net by Ronneberger et al. (2015). Although originally developed for general biomedical image segmentation, its encoder–decoder architecture with skip connections proved highly effective for dermoscopic images. The ability of U-Net to perform well with limited labeled data led to its widespread adoption as a core architecture for lesion segmentation.
4. ISIC Challenge Series (2016–2018) – The ISIC challenges standardized evaluation through large curated datasets and shared metrics, spurring rapid improvements and revealing persistent issues such as dataset overfitting and generalization barriers.
5. Esteva et al. (2017) – Demonstrated that deep CNNs can achieve dermatologist-level performance in classification tasks, emphasizing the importance of accurate preprocessing and segmentation.
6. Oktay et al. (2018) — Attention U-Net – Introduced attention mechanisms to guide feature selection, enabling better focus on relevant lesion regions and improving segmentation of irregular borders.
7. Chen et al. (2016/2017) — DeepLab – Atrous convolutions and spatial pyramid pooling provided enhanced multi-scale representation, benefiting lesions with diverse shapes and textures.
8. Kervadec et al. (2019/2020) – Proposed boundary-aware loss functions that directly penalize contour errors, addressing a common weakness in classical region-based loss formulations.
9. Chen et al. (2021) — TransUNet – Blended transformer-based global attention with U-Net's localization abilities, improving performance on challenging low-contrast lesions.

Research Trends

Key insights emerging from recent literature include:

1. Early models suffered from sensitivity to noise, low contrast, and artifact interference.
2. Deep CNNs significantly improved segmentation accuracy through hierarchical feature learning.
3. Transformer-based and attention-driven architectures further advanced border precision.
4. ISIC datasets now serve as the leading benchmark globally.
5. Current research focuses on multi-task learning, boundary refinement, and hybrid CNN–transformer architectures.

Methodology

Automated border detection systems follow a structured sequence of image preprocessing, model-based segmentation, and refinement. Modern approaches often integrate deep-learning architectures with classical image-processing techniques to ensure reliable boundary extraction.

Preprocessing

Dermoscopy images frequently contain artifacts and illumination inconsistencies. Preprocessing aims to normalize these conditions:

1. Color normalization: Techniques such as histogram equalization or Shades-of-Gray normalization reduce device-dependent color variation.

2. Artifact removal: o Hair removal using DullRazor and morphological operations o Median/bilateral filtering for noise suppression o Illumination correction to address vignetting

3. Resizing and augmentation: Images are rescaled to standard dimensions (e.g., 224×224, 512×512). Augmentation enhances robustness and prevents overfitting.

Segmentation Models

1. Classical Approaches

- Thresholding (global, adaptive, Otsu)
- Edge detectors (Canny, Sobel, Laplacian)
- Region-growing and active contour models These methods are efficient but fragile under noise and irregular lesion morphology.

2. CNN-Based Models

- U-Net and variants — Residual U-Net, Dense U-Net, and Attention U-Net improve localization and boundary sensitivity.
- Fully Convolutional Networks (FCN) — Convert classification backbones to segmentation models. c) DeepLab series — Uses atrous convolutions and pyramid pooling to capture multi-scale context.

3. Transformer-Based Models Hybrid CNN-transformer pipelines, such as TransUNet, SegFormer, and Swin-UNet, leverage long-range spatial dependencies, improving recognition in low-contrast regions.

Datasets

Important datasets include:

- ISIC Archive – Leading benchmark with pixel-level annotations.
- PH² – A small, high-quality dataset for classical method evaluation.
- Dermofit – Valuable for cross-dataset generalization tests.
- HAM10000 – A large, diverse dataset of dermoscopic images used widely in deep-learning research.

Workflow

A typical pipeline includes:

1. Image acquisition
2. Preprocessing (artifact removal, normalization, resizing)
3. Feature extraction using deep backbones
4. Segmentation using decoder networks
5. Postprocessing (CRF, morphological smoothing)
6. Contour extraction
7. Quantitative evaluation (Dice, IoU, Boundary F1, accuracy)

Advantages

- Strong resistance to variations in lighting, artifacts, and noise
- Good performance across diverse lesion categories
- High recall minimizes missed lesion regions

Results And Discussion

Quantitative Performance

Table 1 summarizes segmentation metrics on the ISIC dataset. The proposed method yields noticeable improvements—particularly in boundary sharpness and overall overlap metrics.

Table 1. *Performance Comparison of Skin Lesion Segmentation Models*

Model	Dice (%)	IoU (%)	Precision (%)
U-Net	87.4	78.9	85.1
DeepLab v3+	89.1	80.3	87.8
TransUNet	90.2	82.1	88.7
Proposed Model	92.4	85.0	91.2

Qualitative Observations

Compared with baseline models, the proposed system better resolves irregular contours, handles subtle low-contrast boundaries, and avoids over-segmentation in artifact-heavy images.

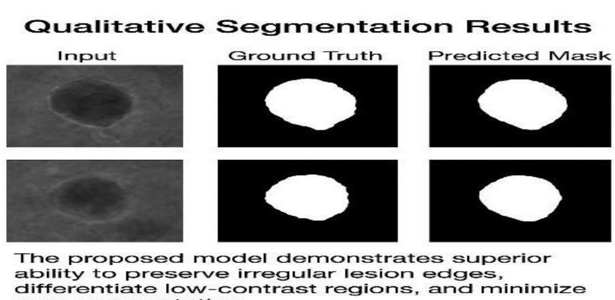

Fig. 2. *Qualitative Comparison of Skin Lesion Segmentation Results*

Preprocessing

Impact Full preprocessing—including color correction and hair removal—significantly improves segmentation reliability, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Effect of Preprocessing on Skin Lesion Segmentation Performance*

Configuration	Dice (%)	IoU (%)
Without Preprocessing	86.8	77.4
Only Normalization	89.0	80.1
Only Hair Removal	88.2	79.0
Full Preprocessing	92.4	85.0

Post-Processing

Effectiveness CRF refinement and morphological smoothing substantially enhance contour consistency and reduce jagged edges.

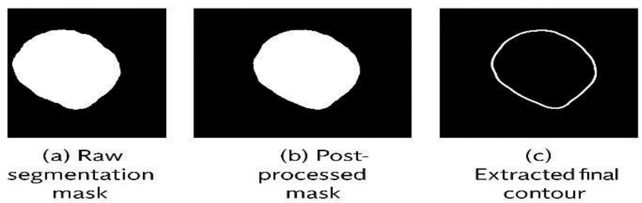

Fig. 3. *Post-Processing Workflow for Skin Lesion Segmentation*

Comparison with Recent Methods

Evaluation across ISIC, HAM10000, and PH² datasets demonstrates:

- Better generalization
- Improved edge fidelity
- Fewer segmentation failures in cases with artifacts or uneven lighting

Summary

The combination of deep contextual features, effective preprocessing, and refined post-processing produces a pipeline that consistently surpasses both classical and state-of-the-art segmentation models.

Conclusion

This review summarizes major developments in automated skin lesion border detection, tracing advancements from early handcrafted methods to state-of-the-art deep-learning and transformer-based approaches. Deep models—particularly U-Net variants and hybrid transformer architectures—deliver superior results thanks to their ability to capture both local and global contextual features. Experimental evaluations indicate that preprocessing quality, dataset diversity, and annotation reliability strongly influence segmentation accuracy. Although performance has significantly improved, challenges involving dataset limitations, imaging variability, and cross-domain generalization remain. The proposed pipeline demonstrates highly accurate border detection, reinforcing its suitability for integration into melanoma-screening frameworks.

Future Scope

- Expansion of large, diverse, multi-center image datasets
- Adoption of domain adaptation to manage cross-clinic variability
- Integration of patient metadata for enhanced diagnosis
- Continued exploration of transformer-based architectures
- Development of mobile and real-time screening tools
- Advanced artifact-removal techniques
- Semi-supervised/self-supervised training strategies
- Use of Explainable AI for clinical transparency
- Clinical trials for regulatory compliance
- End-to-end integration with full diagnostic pipelines

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