Robust Long-Tailed Image Classification via Adversarial Feature Re-Calibration

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Abstract: Long-tailed data distribution is a common issue in many practical learning-based approaches, causing Deep Neural Networks (DNNs) to under-fit minority classes. Although this biased problem has been extensively studied by the research community, the existing approaches mainly focus on the class-wise (inter-class) imbalance problem. In contrast, this paper considers both inter-class and intra-class data imbalance problems for network training. To this end, we present Adversarial Feature Re-calibration (AFR), a method that improves the standard accuracy of a trained deep network by adding adversarial perturbations to the majority samples of each class. To be specific, an adversarial attack model is fine-tuned to perturb the majority samples by injecting the features from their corresponding intra-class long-tailed minority samples. This procedure makes the dataset more evenly distributed from both the inter- and intra-class perspectives, thus encouraging DNNs to learn better representations. The experimental results obtained on CIFAR-100-LT demonstrate the effectiveness and superiority of the proposed AFR method over the state-of-the-art long-tailed learning methods.

1 INTRODUCTION

Deep Neural Networks (DNNs) have achieved great success in many practical computer vision tasks, e.g., image classification (He et al., 2016; Tan and Le, 2019), object detection (Ren et al., 2015; Szegedy et al., 2013), semantic segmentation (Girshick et al., 2014; Long et al., 2015), etc. One key to the success of the existing deep learning methods is the existence of big and balanced training data. However, the training samples in many real-world datasets usually have a long-tailed distribution across classes, where a small number of classes have a huge number of samples but the others only possess a few (Cui et al., 2019; Kang et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2019; Menon et al., 2020). Fig. 1 shows the sample distribution of the CIFAR-100-LT dataset (with the imbalance factor of 0.01) which is the long-tailed version of CIFAR-100. Such imbalanced datasets can negatively impact the final performance of a trained DNN, which can easily overfit to the majority classes with many training samples so generalize poorly to minority classes (Cao et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023).

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Figure 1: The distribution of the number of class samples of CIFAR-100-LT. The red and yellow histograms represent the distributions of the feature embeddings of all the samples within the 'apple' and 'chair' classes, respectively.

In recent years, a variety of methods have been proposed to deal with this long-tailed data imbalance problem. These methods include resampling (Chawla et al., 2002; Maciejewski and Stefanowski, 2011; Oquab et al., 2014), class-sensitive learning (Cui et al., 2019), logit adjustment (Menon et al., 2020), transfer learning (Kang et al., 2021), data augmentation (Kim et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020), etc. However, almost all the existing studies focus on the inter-class long-tailed problem only. To the best of our knowledge, no existing research tries to investi-

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Figure 2: The proposed Adversarial Feature Re-calibration (AFR) pipeline for intra- and inter-class balancing. The term 'PGD' represents the Projected Gradient Descent (Madry et al., 2018a) for adversarial perturbation generation.

gate and address the intra-class long-tailed problem. For a specific class in a training set, some samples could be far away from the distribution of the majority samples. In Fig. 1, the red and yellow histograms illustrate the distances of the embeddings of the samples to their corresponding mean embeddings of the 'apple' and 'chair' classes, respectively. We can see that the samples are not evenly distributed within a class, which could further degrade the performance of a trained DNN model.

Now the problem becomes finding the long-tailed data in each class and balancing its distribution without damaging the original learning process. To this end, we propose a novel framework, namely Adversarial Feature Re-calibration (AFR), that uses adversarial examples to balance the training data of a class with long-tailed distribution. It is well-known that the prediction accuracy of a well-trained DNN is vulnerable to adversarial perturbations (Madry et al., 2018b) that are imperceptible to human eyes. To deal with this challenge, many countermeasures have been developed to defend against adversarial perturbations. Adversarial training (Kurakin et al., 2016) has become the most widely applied method to improve the adversarial robustness of a trained DNN model. It uses augmented adversarial samples to improve the robustness of a trained deep network against adversarial attacks. Despite the problem caused by adversarial perturbations, they also show useful features to improve clean accuracy (Ilyas et al., 2019). A generated adversarial example preserves more features of the attacked target label than its original label features. This inspires us to use adversarial examples in the proposed AFR method to balance long-tailed intra-class data.

In the proposed AFR method, we first use a pretrained model that solves the common inter-class long-tailed problem. Specifically, we use Contextrich Minority Oversampling (CMO) (Park et al., 2022) as the pre-trained model. Then we use the pretrained model to project all the training samples into

their feature embeddings and propose an adaptive distance measure to distinguish the minority samples of each class in the training set. Then, the minority samples are used to fine-tune the Projected Gradient Descent (PGD) (Madry et al., 2018a) model that could attack the pre-trained CMO network. The resulting PGD model possesses a better understanding of minority samples and could be used to inject long-tailed data features to the majority samples, resulting in an intra-class balanced dataset. It should be noted that, unlike most adversarial perturbations, the adversarial examples generated in this method do not contain toxic information to the clean accuracy of the trained model. Last, we apply CutMix (Yun et al., 2019) to the original long-tailed dataset and the augmented dataset with both oversampled (with standard data augmentation method for inter-class balancing) and adversarial samples (for intra-class balancing) to generate a balanced dataset set for fine-tuning the pretrained CMO network. Fig. 2 illustrates the intra- and inter-class long-tailed data balancing pipeline of the proposed AFR method.

In summary, the main contributions of the proposed AFR method include:

- We propose a novel framework that performs intra-class balancing for the long-tailed image classification task. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first work that considers both intra- and inter-class balancing in image classification.
- We develop a class-wise minority sample identification method that adaptively splits the training samples of each class into 'majority' and 'minority' samples for intra-class balancing.
- We propose to apply adversarial attacks to recalibrate the intra-class distribution by injecting minority features into majority samples. This helps to improve the performance of a trained DNN on long-tailed data.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. We first introduce the related work in Section 2. Then we

present the proposed AFR method in Section 3. Last, we report the experimental results in Section 4, and the conclusion is drawn in Section 5.

2 RELATED WORK

In this section, we introduce the most relevant studies in long-tailed learning and adversarial training.

2.1 Long-Tailed Learning

Regular neural network training learns features from randomly sampled datasets. However, researchers have identified that traditional algorithms tend to favor the majority classes if the dataset is unbalanced, resulting in poor performance of minority classes (Cui et al., 2019; Kang et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2019; Menon et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). This has motivated the development of specialized techniques to handle class imbalance, such as data re-sampling, cost-sensitive learning, and data augmentation. These techniques aim to re-balance the class distribution and give more emphasis to the tail classes during training.

Re-sampling (Liu et al., 2008) was proposed to solve this problem by increasing (over-sample) or decreasing (under-sample) the number of each class's samples in each batch during network training. Over-sampling (Chawla et al., 2002; Estabrooks et al., 2004) techniques duplicate or generate synthetic samples from the minority classes to increase their representation in the dataset. This could result in overfitting to minority classes because the minority information in the dataset is lacking. Undersampling (Tomek, 1976) techniques reduce the number of samples from the majority classes to balance the class distribution. But it would waste a lot of data in the majority class.

Conventional DNNs use softmax cross-entropy loss that ignores the imbalance distribution. A positive sample of one class could be regarded as a negative sample of other classes. So that majority classes have more supporting gradients than the minority classes. Re-weighting techniques multiply the training loss of different classes with different weights (Huang et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2017). Some multi-stage methods (Alshammari et al., 2022; Kang et al., 2019) decouple the training of a classifier on long-tailed datasets. The idea is to first obtain a decent feature extractor and then adjust the feature extractor and fine-tune the classifier.

As another solution to the data imbalance problem, data augmentation has been widely used to increase the quality and quantity of the tail data. Reg-

ular data augmentation methods include contrast and brightness adjustment, image translation, image cropping, image rotation, etc., as well as the recently proposed data enhancement methods such as copypaste (Ghiasi et al., 2021), MixUp (Zhang et al., 2018), mosica (Ge et al., 2021), etc. One way of data augmentation in long-tailed learning is transferbased augmentation. This method tries to transfer knowledge from the majority classes to the minority classes. Major-to-minor translation (M2m) (Kim et al., 2020) presents an augmentation procedure by adding adversarial perturbations to the majority class samples. The perturbed samples containing minority class features can build a more balanced training set. In contrast to M2m, the proposed Adversarial Feature Re-calibration (AFR) method considers the inter- and intra-class imbalance problems simultaneously.

2.2 Adversarial Training

Adversarial perturbations have become a major threat to DNNs since they can fool a trained network and intentionally cause wrong prediction results. Fast Gradient Sign Method (FGSM) (Goodfellow et al., 2015) is the most widely-used one-step-gradient-based attack method. It obtains the label of an input image predicted by the target model and computes its loss based on its corresponding ground-truth label. Then FGSM calculates the gradients of the loss with respect to the image. Last, it generates the adversarial example based on the sign of the gradients. Unlike FGSM which is completed in one optimization iteration, the Projected Gradient Descent (PGD) method is a typical iterative-gradient-based attack that can generate the highest degree of adversarial examples that maximizes the loss of a classification model (Madry et al., 2018a). After each step of perturbation, PGD projects the adversarial noise back into the L_{∞} norm ball of the input image in this step.

Various types of approaches have been studied to make DNNs more robust to adversarial attacks. Adversarial training (Madry et al., 2018b; Kurakin et al., 2016) is the most effective method for defending against adversarial attacks. The idea of adversarial training is very simple and straightforward. It replaces the training datasets with the adversarial samples generated by an adversarial attack algorithm. The trained model can then learn the features of the injected adversarial examples and improve its robustness against adversarial attacks.

The objective function used by most of the existing state-of-the-arts adversarial training algorithms (Ding et al., 2019; Rony et al., 2019; Sinha

et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2019) is:

$$\underset{\boldsymbol{\theta}}{\arg\min} \mathbb{E}_{(x,y) \sim \mathbb{D}}[\max_{\boldsymbol{\varepsilon} \in \mathbb{S}} \mathcal{L}(\boldsymbol{\theta}, x + \boldsymbol{\varepsilon}, y)], \qquad (1)$$

where $\mathcal{L}(\cdot, \cdot, \cdot)$ is the loss function, θ is the network parameter, $\varepsilon \in \mathbb{R}^{C \times H \times W}$ is the perturbation and \mathbb{S} is the allowed perturbation range, \mathbb{D} is the underlying data distribution, $x \in \mathbb{R}^{C \times H \times W}$ is input image and $y \in \mathbb{R}^1$ is its corresponding ground truth label.

The long-tailed image classification problem can be regarded as the lack of information in the tail classes. Previous studies have found that adversarial examples contain more features of the target label rather than original labels (Ilyas et al., 2019). Therefore our method generates samples that contain more minority features by applying adversarial attacks to majority samples of the same class for intra-class data balancing.

3 THE PROPOSED METHOD

In this section, we present the proposed Adversarial Feature Re-calibration (AFR) method, which aims to solve the long-tailed image recognition task by considering data imbalance of both inter- and intraclass distributions. To be specific, we use adversarial perturbations to re-calibrate the intra-class distribution. While adversarial examples could cause misclassification, they contain strong features of their corresponding attack target labels (Ilyas et al., 2019). Based on this observation, we propose a databalancing solution via adversarial attack.

Given a long-tailed training dataset, the proposed AFR method has the following main steps:

- 1. We first use a pre-trained model that is trained with a general long-tailed learning method. In this paper, we use Context-rich Minority Oversampling (CMO) (Park et al., 2022) as the pretrained model. This model deals with the interclass imbalance problem.
- 2. Second, we over-sample the long-tailed class samples with data augmentation and project them to their feature embeddings by the forward pass of CMO. Then an adaptive intra-class discrimination function is used to split the samples of each class into majority and minority samples.
- 3. Third, we fine-tune an attack model on the minority samples of all the classes. In this paper, we use the Projected Gradient Descent (PGD) (Madry et al., 2018a) model. The aim is to generate adversarial samples from majority samples that contain minority features. We add the generated adver-



Figure 3: Illustration of long-tailed sample identification.

sarial samples to each class to balance intra-class samples.

 Last, we fine-tune the CMO model on the intraand inter-class balanced training set to obtain the final network.

In the rest of this section, we first present the metric that identifies the long-tailed samples in each class. Then, we introduce how to generate samples containing features from minority classes. Last, we propose an adaptive algorithm to adjust the threshold of majority and minority samples dynamically.

3.1 Identifying Long-Tailed Samples

The training samples of each class in a typical longtailed dataset are usually heavily imbalanced in size, which could vary up to 100:1. This inter-class imbalance problem has been widely studied in the existing literature. In this paper, we use CMO as a pretrained model to address this problem. However, for each class, we argue that the training samples are not evenly distributed. One way to fix this intra-class data imbalance issue is to generate new minority samples for data augmentation. However, unlike inter-class long-tailed problems that directly regard the number of classes as the measurement of imbalance, we do not have an obvious metric to decide which sample is a minority (long-tailed sample) in each class. To generate more minority samples from majority samples by adversarial attack, we need to first separate the samples of each class into majority and minority samples.

A simple solution to the above problem is to calculate the distance of the feature embedding of a sample to the mean feature embedding of a class. Fig. 3 shows the pipeline to separate the majority from the minority. First, we get the feature embeddings of all the training samples from the pre-trained CMO model, which are the outputs of CMO before the last fully connected layer. We use the embedding of each sample instead of the raw image because its embedding shows a more meaningful representation. The embedding of similar images should be close to each other, and visually different images should be far away in the embedding space. Then a threshold λ is set to decide the sample boundary of each class. We label samples beyond λ as the long-tailed data (minority) and samples within λ as the majority. The label of each sample L(x) is defined as follows:

$$L(x) = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } \cos(\mathbf{e}_x, \mathbf{e}_\mu) < \lambda \\ 1 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}, \quad (2)$$

where \mathbf{e}_x is the embedding of the sample, \mathbf{e}_μ is the mean embedding of all the samples in the class of *x*, cos(,) is the Cosine similarity distance. The labels 0 and 1 represent the majority and minority classes, respectively. The choice of λ is adaptive, which will be introduced in Section 3.3.

3.2 **Re-Balancing Data Distribution**

In Fig. 2, we demonstrate the pipeline of the rebalancing procedure. Given a long-tailed training dataset, we first use normal inter-class over-sampling with data augmentation to perform inter-class balancing. Then we use the approach specified in Section 3.1 to identify intra-class majority and minority samples of each class. Next, we fine-tune the PGD model on the minority samples to attack the majority samples to their corresponding minority ones in each class. Note that, we cannot directly generate adversarial examples of the same class using the pretrained CMO model because we cannot deliberately generate the minority adversarial perturbation. The key idea of fine-tuning PGD is to consider the minority and majority samples in a class as two categories. Therefore, we modify the standard adversarial attack step of PGD and restrict the generated adversarial perturbation towards the minority of each class. Then we use the fine-tuned PGD model to attack 50% of the majority samples randomly. This procedure calibrates the majority dataset toward the minority distribution but still keeps the features of the original samples, which is different from the classic re-sampling approaches (Chawla et al., 2002; Liu et al., 2008) that could make the trained DNNs overfitting towards head or tail classes.

Now we obtain a new dataset consisting of both original samples and adversarial samples which has an equal sample size across all the classes. We further apply CutMix (Yun et al., 2019) to 25% of the original long-tailed dataset with the new dataset to obtain an intra- and inter-class balanced dataset. CutMix combines two images by directly replacing part of the image with a patch from the other image. The combination ratio between two images is sampled from the beta distribution $Beta(\alpha, \alpha)$. By default, we set α to 1. Last, we fine-tune the pre-trained CMO model on the balanced dataset as the final network.

3.3 Adaptive Class-Wise Re-Balancing

In Section 3.1, we introduced a method that could identify the minority samples of each class in the dataset. However, just like the general class imbalance problem, each class may have different classification accuracy during the training stage. In this case, we need to set different thresholds λ for various classes.

To this end, we introduce an adaptive class-wise threshold decision strategy. The individual accuracy of each class is recorded just before identifying the minority or majority samples. We tried various complicated strategies and found that simply using individual class accuracy a_c achieves the best results. While the training accuracy a_{train} reaches a certain level (between 60% to 70%), the threshold of each class is set to λ or a_c depending on the condition. λ is a hyperparameter and we set it to 0.8 in advance. If a_{c_i} of the *i*th class is lower than a_{train} , the threshold λ is set to a_{c_i} . Otherwise, we keep the threshold λ still.

This adaptive procedure allocates a more precise majority-minority sample split of each class instead of a fixed threshold. Hence, 'harder' classes tend to keep more original samples to learn the class minority distribution, and 'easier' classes have more attacked samples to enhance the classification boundary.

4 EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

4.1 Implementation Details

Dataset. We evaluate the proposed method on CIFAR-100-LT, which is a subset of the CIFAR-100 (Krizhevsky et al., 2009) dataset. CIFAR-100 consists of 60000 32x32 color images of 100 classes. Each class has 500 training samples and 100 test samples. CIFAR-100-LT is created by reducing the training samples of CIFAR-100 with an imbalance factor that indicates the ratio between the class with the smallest sample size and the class with the largest sample size. In this paper, the imbalance factor is set to 0.01.

Experimental Settings. We use ResNet32 (He et al., 2016) as the backbone network. In our AFR method, we first train the CMO model for 200 epochs in the first stage with only inter-class balancing. Then we fine-tune it for 50 epochs in the second stage with the proposed balancing strategy. The batch size is set to 128. The optimizer is SGD with a momentum of 0.9 and a weight decay of 2e-4. The learning rate starts at 0.1 and decays by a factor of 1e-2 at epoch 160 and 1e-4 at epoch 180. For training data augmentation,

Method	Top-1 Accuracy	
Cross Entropy (CE)	38.96	
CE-DRW	41.43	
LDAM-DRW*	41.70	
Balanced Softmax (BS)	43.18	
IB Loss*	45.00	
Remix*	45.80	
MiSLAS*	47.00	
BS+CMO (200 epochs)	46.13	
BS+CMO (400 epochs)	50.49	
Our AFR (200 epochs)	47.32	
Our AFR (400 epochs)	51.91	

Table 1: A comparison between the proposed AFR method with other state-of-the-art solutions, evaluated in the Top-1 accuracy on CIFAR-100-LT (Imbalance factor = 0.01). "*" indicates the results reported in (Park et al., 2022).

we use random crop, horizontal flip, AutoAugment & CutOut in the first stage and only random crop & horizontal flip in the second stage.

We adopt Projected Gradient Descent (PGD) (Madry et al., 2018a) as the adversarial attack method to generate adversarial examples (on the fly) in the second stage for every 10 epochs. For PGD, the perturbation size ε is set to 0.6, the number of iterations is 3 and the attack step size is 1/255.

The methods are all evaluated in terms of the best Top-1 Accuracy.

4.2 **Performance Evaluation**

We first compare the proposed method with existing over-sampling, over-weighting, and other stateof-the-art long-tailed solutions on the CIFAR-100-LT dataset. Those methods include:

- Remix (Chou et al., 2020) uses Mixup to oversample minority classes.
- Deferred re-weighting (DRW) (Cao et al., 2019) fine-tunes the classifier's balance.
- Balanced Softmax (BS) (Ren et al., 2020) modifies the Softmax to make it unbiased.
- The Label-distribution-aware margin (LDAM) loss (Cao et al., 2019) increases the minorities' margins to the decision boundary.
- The Influence-balanced (IB) loss (Park et al., 2021) re-weights samples base on their influences.
- MiSLAS (Zhong et al., 2021) enhances classifier learning and calibration during the training stage via label-aware smoothing.
- The state-of-the-art Context-rich Minority Oversampling (CMO) (Park et al., 2022) method transfers rich information from the majority to the



Figure 4: A comparison of the proposed AFR method with the state-of-the-art 'BS' and 'BS+CMO' approaches on different subsets of CIFAR-100-LT (Imbalance factor = 0.01).

minority to overcome the inter-class long-tailed problem using CutMix.

The imbalance factor of CIFAR-100-LT is set to 0.01 to validate our method under strong unbalanced circumstances. Table 1 shows the image classification performance of the aforementioned methods, as well as the proposed method. Our method does not present an obvious improvement to MiSLAS under the default setting of 200 epochs. But when we extend the training epochs to 400, the proposed AFR method achieves 51.91% Top-1 Accuracy, which is significantly better than that of MisLAS and CMO.

We also report the Top-1 accuracy on three subsets of CIFAR-100-LT: 'Many' (over 100 training images), 'Med' (20-100 training images), and 'Few' (under 20 training images) in Fig. 4. AFR achieves the best accuracy for all the subsets, especially in the Med and Few subsets. This is because there are enough samples in the 'Many' subset so our method could not provide more useful information. However, there are not sufficient samples in the 'Med' and 'Few' subsets. Simply over-sampling/over-weighting does not give more diverse or useful features. AFR generates more minority features which was rare in the original dataset, so the performance improvement is more significant.

Table 2: A comparison of applying different CutMix and MixUp proportion on CIFAR-100-LT (Imbalance factor = 0.01) after 400 epochs.

Method	Propotion		
Methou	0.25	0.5	1
CutMix	51.91	51.74	51.24
MixUp	51.65	51.21	51.14

4.3 Ablation Study

We apply an ablation study on the CIFAR-100-LT dataset to investigate the effect on our proposed method. In Table 2, we report the results obtained by AFR with different data augmentation and proportions to apply. MixUp (Zhang et al., 2018) and Cut-Mix are the two choices of data augmentation used in the second stage of AFR to fuse the original longtailed data and the new dataset with adversarial samples into a balanced dataset. MixUp generates mixed images by linearly interpolating two images and their corresponding labels of different classes. The mixing ratio is also sampled from the beta distribution Beta(1,1). We gradually changed the percentage of MixUp and CutMix to find the optimal spot. The results illustrate that applying CutMix to 25% of the long-tailed samples could get the best performance.

5 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we proposed the Adversarial Feature Re-calibration (AFR) method to fix the long-tailed problem in image classification. The existing studies focus on the imbalance number of samples among different classes via over-sampling, over-weighting, or other techniques, but do not consider the imbalance within each class. To overcome this limitation, we investigated the distribution and re-calibrated the balance of each class in our AFR method. The experimental results obtained on the CIFAR-100-LT dataset indicate that AFR achieves significantly better Top-1 accuracy than the existing state-of-the-art approaches. The proposed method further verifies that, in realworld scenarios, the long-tailed problem exists not only among different classes but also in each class. This should be further considered in future research on long-tailed data learning tasks.

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