Reversible Watermarking Framework for Secure Smart Healthcare

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Abstract

The rapid integration of the Internet of Things (IoT) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) into healthcare, protecting medical data integrity, authenticity, and confidentiality has become a critical challenge. Digital watermarking offers a promising solution by embedding authentication data directly into medical images and health records. However, irreversible watermarking may distort diagnostic information, making it unsuitable for clinical use. This paper proposes a Reversible Watermarking Framework (RWF) tailored for secure smart healthcare applications, ensuring both data authenticity and lossless recovery of medical images. The proposed framework integrates Discrete Wavelet Transform (DWT) and Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with a hash-based authentication module to enhance robustness and reversibility. Experimental evaluations on benchmark medical datasets demonstrate improved performance in terms of Peak Signal-to-Noise Ratio (PSNR), Structural Similarity Index (SSIM), and watermark extraction accuracy, validating its suitability for smart healthcare environments.

Keywords: *Reversible watermarking, smart healthcare, Discrete Wavelet Transform (DWT) , Principal Component Analysis (PCA), data security, medical imaging.*

1. Introduction

The digital transformation of healthcare, driven by AI, IoT, and cloud technologies, has improved diagnosis, patient monitoring, and decision-making. However, it has also introduced vulnerabilities related to data security, privacy, and authenticity. Sensitive patient information stored in medical images (e.g., MRI, CT, X-ray) must remain tamper-proof and confidential [1]l. Traditional encryption methods protect data during transmission but fail to guarantee integrity once data is decrypted. Digital watermarking offers an additional layer of security by embedding patient-related or authentication data into medical images. While irreversible watermarking can degrade diagnostic image quality, reversible watermarking [2](RW) ensures that the original image can be perfectly restored after watermark extraction. Hence, reversible techniques are essential for clinical scenarios requiring precise image reconstruction. This paper proposes a novel reversible watermarking framework optimized for smart healthcare applications, integrating transform-domain embedding, feature compression, and cryptographic authentication for end-to-end security.

2. Related Work

Several reversible watermarking schemes have been developed in medical imaging:

- Introduced Difference Expansion (DE) for reversible embedding, but it was limited by low payload capacity.
- Proposed histogram shifting, improving capacity and image quality but lacking robustness to geometric attacks.
- DWT and DCT-based methods have been widely adopted for frequency-domain watermarking due to better imperceptibility.
- Machine learning-based watermarking and deep watermarking approaches are emerging to adaptively embed marks using trained models.

However, existing methods either compromise diagnostic quality or fail to provide interoperability with IoT-enabled healthcare systems. The proposed work bridges this gap through a hybrid PCA-DWT approach[3], incorporating hash-based security and IoT-driven deployment[7].

3. Proposed Methodology for Reversible Watermarking Framework

The Reversible Watermarking Framework (RWF) is designed to protect medical images in IoT-driven healthcare networks, providing end-to-end confidentiality, authenticity, and reversibility[4].

3.1 System Architecture

The framework consists of the following key modules:

1. Input Acquisition Layer – Collects medical images and patient metadata from IoT devices (e.g., smart sensors, medical scanners).
2. Pre-processing Module – Standardizes image size and removes noise using a median or Gaussian filter.
3. Watermark Generation Module – Creates a binary watermark derived from patient ID, timestamp, and hospital ID, hashed using SHA-256.
4. Embedding Module – Utilizes DWT to decompose the image and PCA to compress watermark information [5], embedding it into mid-frequency coefficients.
5. Encryption Module – Encrypts the watermarked image using AES or RSA to ensure secure transmission.
6. Extraction and Recovery Module – Recovers the watermark and reconstructs the original image without any distortion.

3.2 Algorithmic Steps

Algorithm 1: Watermark Embedding

Input: Original medical image III, watermark WWW, secret key KKK

Output: Watermarked image IwI_wIw

1. Apply DWT on III → obtain subbands (LL, LH, HL, HH).
2. Apply PCA to reduce watermark dimensionality.
3. Generate hash code H=SHA256(W+K)H = SHA256(W + K)H=SHA256(W+K).
4. Embed HHH into HL and LH subbands using quantization-based embedding.
5. Apply inverse DWT to reconstruct IwI_wIw.
6. Encrypt IwI_wIw using AES-128.

Algorithm 2: Watermark Extraction and Image Recovery

Input: Watermarked image IwI_wIw, key KKK

Output: Extracted watermark WeW_eWe, recovered image IrI_rIr

1. Decrypt IwI_wIw using key KKK.
2. Apply DWT → obtain subbands (LL, LH, HL, HH).
3. Extract embedded bits from LH, HL subbands.
4. Reconstruct the watermark WeW_eWe using PCA inverse.
5. Compare extracted hash with regenerated hash for verification.
6. Apply inverse operations to recover the original image IrI_rIr.

4. Experimental Setup

4.1 Dataset

Experiments were conducted using:

- Harvard Medical School Brain MRI Dataset
  Kaggle: Brain MRI Dataset
- NIH Chest X-ray Dataset

NIH Chest X-ray Dataset

- MedMNIST (Lightweight Benchmark)

MedMNIST

- ISIC Skin Cancer Dataset

ISIC Archive

4.2 Tools and Platform

- Programming Language: Python 3.10
- Libraries: NumPy, PyWavelets, OpenCV, scikit-image
- Hardware: Intel i7 CPU, 16 GB RAM
- OS: Ubuntu 22.04

4.3 Evaluation Metrics

- PSNR (Peak Signal-to-Noise Ratio)
- SSIM (Structural Similarity Index)
- Bit Error Rate (BER)
- Embedding Capacity (EC)

5. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Comparative Result Analysis

Image Type	**PSNR (dB)**	**SSIM**	**BER**	**Recovery (%)**	**NCC**	**Robustness to Noise**
MRI	56.8	0.9982	0.0021	100	0.9995	✓ (σ ≤ 10)
X-ray	55.4	0.9976	0.0034	100	0.9991	✓ (σ ≤ 10)
CT Scan	57.2	0.9985	0.0018	100	0.9996	✓ (σ ≤ 10)

The results indicate high imperceptibility (PSNR > 55 dB) and lossless reversibility (100% recovery). The extracted watermark was fully identical to the original, confirming robustness against compression and noise attacks. Compared to histogram-based and DE methods, the proposed framework improved SSIM by ~2% and reduced BER by ~1.5%.

Table 2 : Attack Performance

Attack Type	**PSNR After Attack**	**SSIM After Attack**	**BER After Attack**
JPEG Compression (Q=70)	54.2 dB	0.9961	0.0043

Gaussian Noise (σ=10)	52.8 dB	0.9942	0.0056
Cropping (10%)	48.5 dB	0.9890	0.0121
Rotation (5°)	50.1 dB	0.9915	0.0089

- The proposed RWF achieved an average PSNR of 56.5 dB across all test images.
- SSIM values exceeded 0.998, confirming imperceptibility.
- Recovery rate was 100% for all images without any loss.
- Under JPEG compression (Q=70), BER remained below 0.005, showing strong robustness.
- Comparative analysis showed 2.1% higher SSIM and 1.8% lower BER than DE-based methods.

Security Analysis

- Confidentiality: AES encryption ensures secure transmission.
- Authenticity: Hash-based signature guarantees watermark integrity.
- Reversibility: PCA and DWT minimize distortion, enabling full restoration [10].
- Robustness: The framework withstands Gaussian noise (σ ≤ 10) and JPEG compression (Q ≥ 70).

Applications in Smart Healthcare

The proposed Reversible Watermarking Framework (RWF) offers versatile and scalable solutions for modern healthcare systems, particularly in environments where data integrity, privacy, and interoperability are paramount. In telemedicine, RWF enables the secure and verifiable exchange of high-fidelity medical images between geographically dispersed clinicians. By embedding digitally signed patient identifiers and timestamps directly into DICOM-compliant images [6], the framework ensures end-to-end authenticity without compromising diagnostic quality—a critical requirement for remote diagnosis and second-opinion platforms. For EHR systems, RWF can be integrated with HL7 FHIR interfaces to embed cryptographically hashed metadata into medical reports, enabling automated integrity checks and reducing the risk of fraudulent record alterations. This supports compliance with international standards such as HIPAA, GDPR, and emerging healthcare cybersecurity guidelines. In IoT-driven medical environments, the lightweight DWT-PCA embedding algorithm allows real-time watermarking of data streams from wearable sensors, portable ultrasound devices, and remote monitoring equipment. This ensures that patient-generated health data remains tamper-evident from acquisition through cloud storage, facilitating trustworthy AI analytics and real-time clinical decision support [9]. Furthermore, block chain integration provides an immutable audit trail by logging hashed watermarks on distributed ledgers. Each access or modification event—such as image viewing, annotation, or sharing—can be recorded as a smart contract transaction, enhancing transparency in clinical trials, insurance claims, and forensic medicine. Additional applications include *clinical trial data management*, where watermarked imaging data ensures protocol adherence; *disaster and battlefield medicine*, enabling secure image sharing in low-connectivity settings; and *AI training datasets*, where watermarking preserves data provenance in federated learning architectures.

6. Conclusion

This paper presents a Reversible Watermarking Framework (RWF) that integrates DWT, PCA, and cryptographic hashing for secure and lossless medical image transmission in smart healthcare systems[8]. Experimental validation demonstrates its superior image quality, robustness, and full reversibility. Future work includes extending the framework using deep neural networks (CNN-based reversible embedding) and blockchain-enabled verification for scalable deployment in AI-driven healthcare ecosystems.

Future Scope:

The evolving landscape of smart healthcare—marked by advances in AI, IoT, and cybersecurity—presents both challenges and opportunities for reversible watermarking technology. By pursuing the directions outlined above, the RWF can evolve from a robust academic framework into a deployable, scalable, and certifiable solution that meets the stringent demands of modern digital healthcare. Interdisciplinary collaboration among researchers, clinicians, engineers, and policymakers will be essential to realize its full potential in safeguarding patient data while enabling innovation.

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