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## From Just Noticeable Differences to Image Quality

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► **To cite this version:**

Ali Ak, Andreas Pastor, Patrick Le Callet. From Just Noticeable Differences to Image Quality. 2nd Workshop on Quality of Experience in Visual Multimedia Applications (QoEVMA '22), October 14 2022, Lisboa, Portugal. ACM,, Oct 2022, Lisbon, Portugal. hal-03127756v1

**HAL Id: hal-03127756**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03127756v1>**

Submitted on 1 Feb 2021 (v1), last revised 6 Oct 2022 (v2)

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# D-JNDQ: LEARNING IMAGE QUALITY FROM JUST NOTICEABLE DIFFERENCES

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## ABSTRACT

According to recent psycho-physics studies, the visibility of distortions is highly correlated with the overall perceived quality of a certain stimulus. Subjective quality evaluation of images relies mainly on mean opinion scores (MOS) to provide ground-truth for measuring image quality on a continuous scale. Alternatively, just noticeable difference (JND) defines the visibility of distortions as a binary measurement based on an anchor point. By using the pristine reference as the anchor, the first JND point can be determined. This first JND point provides an intrinsic quantification of the visible distortions within the stimulus. Therefore, it is intuitively appealing to develop a quality assessment model by utilizing the JND information as the fundamental cornerstone. In this work, we use the first JND point information to train a Siamese Convolutional Neural Network to predict image quality scores on a continuous scale. To ensure generalization, we first process the input images to acquire achromatic responses. Cross dataset evaluation of the proposed model on the TID-2013 dataset provides a competitive correlation with MOS, proving the generalization of the model on unseen distortion types and supra-threshold distortion levels.

**Index Terms**— Image Quality, Just Noticeable Difference, Siamese Convolutional Neural Network

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Subjective assessment of image quality commonly relies on collecting mean opinion scores (MOS) from a set of observers, as it provides a continuous image quality measurement. Just Noticeable Difference provides a binary measurement to quantify the perceptual differences between a given image pair, and thus could serve as a potential workaround for quality prediction. It is defined as the smallest intensity change of a stimuli, which can be noticed by the human visual system(HVS). Concisely, when the  $1_{st}$  JND is obtained by using the pristine reference as an anchor, it also represents the minimum visible distortion intensity. In another words, it measures sub-threshold and near-threshold distortions. Without loss of generality, the following JNDs, *i.e.*, the  $2_{nd}, 3_{rd}, \dots, n_{th}$  JND, are the perceptual difference obtained

by utilizing the previous JND point as the anchor. Since the anchor points are distorted images, these JND points provide information regarding to supra-threshold distortions. Only the first JND measures to which extend observers may start to notice the distortions when degrading the quality, while the following JNDs only provide preferences information between different distortion levels. Since the first JND point [1] indicates directly the minimum noticeable distortion-intensity, it may also reveal how our HVS perceive the distortions quantitatively. It is thus of great potential to be explored for the development of perceptual based quality assessment metric.

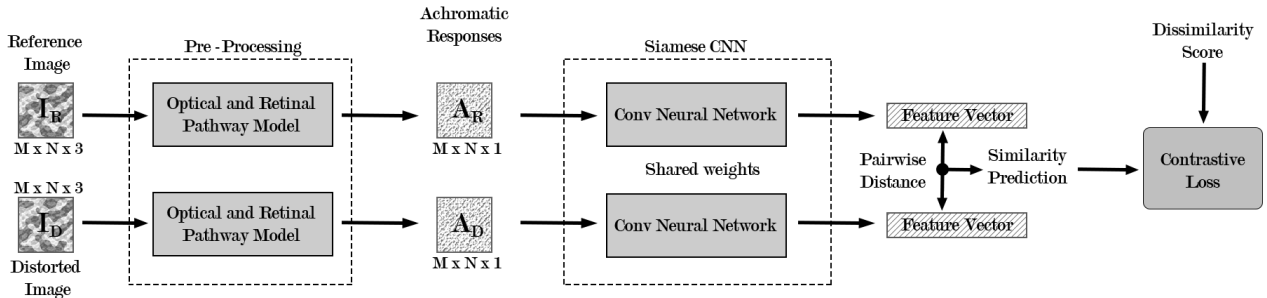
Recently, several novel JND datasets were released for the measurement of the visual differences between different distortion levels [1, 2, 3, 4]. Nonetheless, the collected JND points of the same content may have high variation among observers. Therefore, additional models are often used to fuse observer responses into one single JND point [5].

Identifying the JND points of certain content from one observer requires a series of comparisons between pairs. Limited by the budget, existing datasets contain only a handful of Source Content (SRC) and distortion types, *i.e.*, the *Hypothetical Reference Circuit (HRC)* [1, 2]. There may not be sufficient data to develop a learning-based model directly. Therefore, it is inevitable to adopt alternative approaches to overcome the problem of lack of training data. For instance, transfer learning was adopted in [6] to predict Satisfied User Ratio (SUR) using the MCL-JCI dataset [1]. Siamese Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) was frequently adopted in the quality domain for predicting the quality-ranking of the stimuli, where pairwise inputs indirectly augment the limited data.

To this end, in this work, we proposed<sup>1</sup> to train a Siamese CNN by exploiting the perceptual information provided by the first JND. Furthermore, to further ensure model generalization with limited data, we also exploit the intermediate perceptual representation introduced in the Optical and Retinal Pathway model[7] to bridge the gap between the perceptual distortion space within HVS and the latent representation output by our Siamese network. According to experimental results on the TID-2013 dataset [8], the proposed model achieves competitive performances compared to state-of-the-art quality metrics. It was also verified via experiments that

This work has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Grant Agreement No. 765911 (RealVision)

<sup>1</sup>model weights and code: <https://github.com/kyillene/D-JNDQ>



**Fig. 1.** Diagram of the proposed model where  $I_{R/D}$  indicates the input images, and  $A_{R/D}$  denotes the achromatic responses.

the model is generalized in image quality task for unseen distortion types in both sub-threshold and supra-threshold ranges.

## 2. RELATED WORKS

There are several JND datasets in the literature for image compression and video compression with varied pre-process approaches to obtain accurate and representative JNDs. MCL-JCI dataset [1] is composed of 50 source image (SRC) with varying number of JND points on JPEG compression levels. After getting the raw JND points, a Gaussian mixture model was adapted to generate a staircase quality function from a set of JND points [5]. MCL-JCV dataset was released from [3], which contains JND data obtained from 50 observers preprocessed by a similar staircase quality function designed for H.264/AVC. JND-PANO dataset contains JND samples for 40 reference panoramic images over JPEG compression levels[2]. VideoSet is a large-scale dataset that provides JND samples for H.264 compression levels at varying resolution [9]. PWJNDInfer is consist of JND samples over 202 reference images over compression levels.

The booming of JND subjective studies over the past several years has sparked a lot of interest and have spurred a lot of interesting ideas for the development of JND prediction models. Liu *et al.* proposed a picture-wise binary JND prediction model by defining JND prediction as a multi-label classification task and reducing it to a series of binary classification problems [10]. Fan *et al.* proposed a model to predict the satisfied user ratio and the first JND point over MCL-JCI dataset. Analogously, Zhang *et al.* proposed a satisfied user ratio prediction model for video compression distortions [11]. According to our best knowledge, this is the first work that utilizes the first JND points to predict overall image quality on a continuous scale for various distortion types in sub-threshold and supra-threshold ranges.

## 3. PROPOSED MODEL

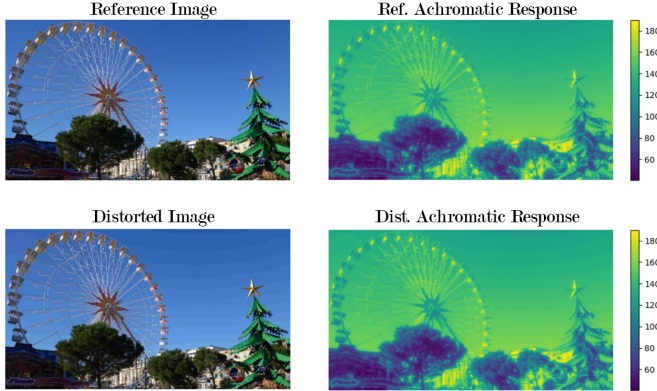
Human Visual System is a very complex system and not yet fully understood. Based on relevant studies [12], it can mainly

be split into four broad parts as optical, retinal, lateral geniculate nucleus, and visual cortex processing. In the proposed framework, as a preliminary study, we simplify our approach by dividing this complex process into two. We first use an existing Optical and Retinal Pathway model to pre-process input images, *i.e.*, the Optical and Retinal Pathway proposed by Mantiuk *et al.* This module provides an estimation of the achromatic responses for displayed images. Optical and Retinal processing of HVS highly affects the visibility of distortions. Hence, including this module as a pre-processing tool simplifies the similarity prediction task. After acquiring achromatic responses of both the reference and distorted images, the remaining task is to predict the similarity between the achromatic responses inputs. Regarding its proven success in visual similarity, and pairwise ranking prediction tasks [13], Siamese CNN was employed to predict the similarity between input pair. In general, Siamese networks are equipped with two or more identical networks with shared weights to learn the embedding between a pair or triplet of input data. More concretely, we aim to learn the first JND point distributions of the observers using the Siamese network.

The overall structure of the proposed model is shown in Fig. 1. All the achromatic responses are acquired by pre-processing input RGB images with the optical and retinal pathway model from HDR-VDP 2. Then, they are fed into the Siamese CNN to extract their latent representation, *i.e.*, *feature vectors*. Afterwards, the pairwise distance between outputted feature vectors is calculated to compute a similarity score. During training, contrastive loss [14] is used between the predicted outputs and the ground truth dissimilarity scores acquired from MCL-JCI dataset. In the following sections, a detailed information is given regarding the pre-processing stage and the Siamese CNNs.

### 3.1. Optical and Retinal Pathway Model

Optical and Retinal Pathway is modeled as a combination of 4 sub-modules in the HDR-VDP 2 [7]. The first module accounts for the light scattering that occurs in the cornea, lens, and retina. It is defined by a modulation transfer function estimated via psychophysical studies. The second module calcu-



**Fig. 2.** Reference and distorted image (QP=17) with corresponding achromatic responses for SRC-7 in MCL-JCI.

lates the probability of a photo-receptor sensing a photon at a corresponding wavelength. It outputs cone and rod responses of the input image. The third module mimics the non-linear response to light of the photo-receptors. It is modeled as a non-linear transducer function. The final module converts the non-linear responses into joint cone and rod achromatic responses by simple summation.

By incorporating Optical and Retinal Pathway into pre-processing stage, the masking effects occurring at this stage of the visual pipeline could be well taken into account. By enhancing or masking the distortions visibility with existing knowledge in the domain, the training complexity of the similarity network could be well simplified and accelerated. Nevertheless, it enhances the generalization of the model for tackling not only unseen distortion types but also supra-threshold distortion values.

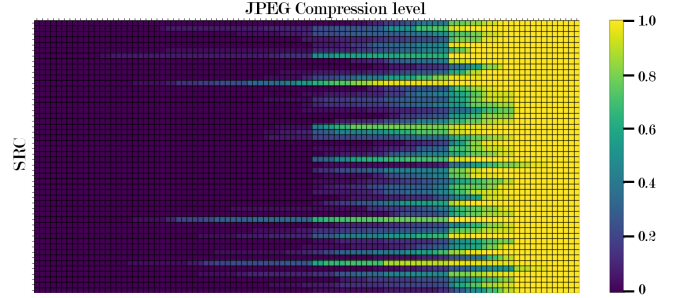
### 3.2. Siamese Convolutional Neural Network

The Siamese network is utilized as a feature extractor without any fully connected layers. On top of this backbone, we directly compute the pairwise distances. This architecture facilitates arbitrary input resolutions. We design our Siamese network from the scratch. It consists of 5 convolutional layers with batch normalization, ReLU activation layers. To reduce the spatial resolution, a stride of 2 was adapted for the first 4 convolutional layers.

For the last layer of the network, a Sigmoid activation function is employed without stride. After flattening the output feature vector, they are then used to calculate the similarity score between the reference and distorted images.

## 4. DATASET AND TRAINING DETAILS

MCL-JCI dataset [1] was used to train our network. MCL-JCI dataset contains 50 SRCs with a resolution of  $1920 \times 1080$ . Each SRC is encoded using JPEG encoder [15] with varying Quantization Parameter (QP) levels in a range of [0, 100], where 100 correspond to the highest quality. This results in a



**Fig. 3.** Dissimilarity scores acquired by using first JND steps of each observer. Each row represents an SRC. Columns are ordered from the highest QP level to lowest, left to right.

total of 5050 images including the reference images. 30 subjects provided 3 to 8 JND points for each SRC image with the bisection method. Individual JND points were fused for each SRC [5].

As described in Sec. 3.1, reference and distorted images from the MCL-JCI dataset are first converted into achromatic responses using the Optical and Retinal Pathway model from HDR-VDP 2. The obtained achromatic responses share the same spatial resolution with input images. However, pixel values are represented in a single channel, resulting in an array of size  $1920 \times 1080 \times 1$ .

After experimenting on the MCL-JCI dataset, it was observed that the task of detecting the first JND point and following JND points are different. While identifying the first JND point, an observer tried to identify the difference between the reference and distorted image. However, for the later JND points, this task gradually turned into a preference task, *i.e.*, which stimulus is preferred compared to the other. More specifically, instead of “at which QP level the distortion becomes visible”, question evolved into “at which QP level the distortion becomes more disturbing”. This observation encourages us to utilize only the first JND point for labeling the training dataset. In order to capture the uncertainty of the observers, we utilized the individual observer scores as done in [16, 6]. For each SRC, uncompressed image was paired with 100 compressed images with different QP levels. Each pair was assigned with a dissimilarity score ranging from 0 to 1. It is defined by the number of observers, whose JND points are beyond the corresponding QP level. In Fig. 3, each SRC is represented by a line. With a decreasing QP level, the dissimilarity between the reference and distorted image increases.

After pre-processing the dataset as described above, we conducted hyper parameter tuning for the Siamese network. Contrastive loss function was used with a batch size of 32 during training. We found out that 0.03 learning rate with Adam optimizer provides us the best convergence speed and lowest validation loss with the final network structure. Finally, Siamese network trained for 100 epochs over the training dataset with the optimal hyper parameters. We also exper-

imented with weight decay and regularization terms during hyper parameter search, however we observed no improvement on training convergence or model accuracy.

## 5. EVALUATION AND RESULTS

**Table 1.** SROCC values for selected metrics in TID-2013

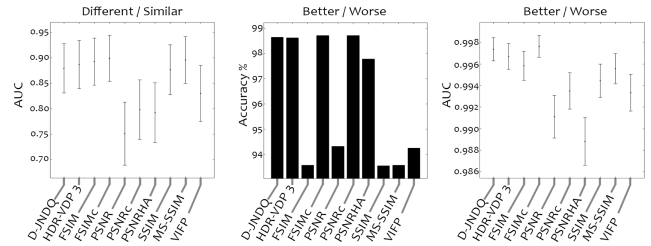
	Noise	Actual	Simple	Exotic	New	Color	Full
D-JNDQ	0.851	0.881	0.894	0.315	<b>0.842</b>	<b>0.813</b>	0.589
HDR-VDP 3	0.829	0.847	0.929	0.822	0.679	0.635	0.772
FSIM	0.897	0.911	0.949	<b>0.844</b>	0.649	0.565	0.801
FSIMc	0.902	0.915	0.947	0.841	0.788	0.755	0.851
PSNR	0.822	0.825	0.913	0.597	0.618	0.535	0.640
PSNRc	0.769	0.803	0.876	0.562	0.777	0.734	0.687
PSNRHA	<b>0.923</b>	<b>0.938</b>	<b>0.953</b>	0.825	0.701	0.632	0.819
SSIM	0.757	0.788	0.837	0.632	0.579	0.505	0.637
MSSSIM	0.873	0.887	0.905	0.841	0.631	0.566	0.787
VIFP	0.784	0.815	0.897	0.557	0.589	0.506	0.608

**Table 2.** SROCC values with and without pre-processing.

	Noise	Actual	Simple	Exotic	New	Color	Full
A.R. Input	0.851	0.881	0.894	0.315	0.842	0.813	0.589
RGB Input	0.742	0.750	0.801	0.141	0.703	0.734	0.446

It is worth mentioning that our model was trained only on JPEG distortions with the first JND. To prove the generalization of the proposed model on unseen distortions and novel supra-threshold distortion levels, we conducted a cross-dataset evaluation on the TID-2013 dataset [8]. TID-2013 dataset contains 24 different distortions including but not limited to noise, blur, transmission error, compression distortions. They are categorized into 6 overlapping groups. In total, there are 3000 distorted images with varying distortion intensity and distortion types.

We tested the model on all 3000 images without any pre-training. We used the scripts provided by the authors to calculate the correlation of between the predicted results and the MOS. As such, correlation results are directly comparable with other metric correlations acquired by the authors. Table 5 reports the Spearman rank order correlation coefficients of the proposed model and the other methodologies provided by [8]. The proposed model, *i.e.*, D-JNDQ, provides competitive results with the compared metrics in Noise, Actual and Simple categories and providing better results in New and Color category of distortions compared to other evaluated metrics. The proposed model achieved the lowest performance on the subset of exotic category. This is mainly due to the preferential nature of the distortions in this category. For distortions, such as local block-wise distortion, detecting the distortion plays a minimal role since the distortions are visible at all levels with different variations rather than different intensities. Therefore, we expected a poor prediction performance in this category, which also reduces the overall correlation results. Table. 2 depicts the ablation study results. Best model parameters for each input type was trained for same amount of iterations. Results show that the model with



**Fig. 4.** Metric performances on TID-2013 dataset excluding part of the “Exotic” category.

achromatic response input has a higher correlation with the MOS compared to the one using RGB inputs.

In addition to Spearman correlation evaluation, we also conducted an analysis on the performance of identifying significant pairs. In this analysis, we have excluded the aforementioned 4 distortion types (out of total 24 types) from the “Exotic” category. We followed the strategy proposed in [17] to stress out the performances of considered models, readers are recommended to refer to [17] for more details. In Fig. 4, the left sub-figure presents the area under curve (AUC) values for each metric at identifying significant and non-significant pairs. Similarly, right figure shows AUC values for each metric in identifying better or worse image pairs, while the middle figure indicates the accuracy of the metric in terms of distinguishing better or worse images in significant pairs. Although there is no significant difference in many of the metric performances, proposed metric (D-JNDQ) has a competitive performance in identifying significant versus similar pairs. For better/worse analysis, all metrics seem to perform well overall. D-JNDQ, HDR-VDP 3, FSIM and FSIMc have a significantly better performance than the rest of the evaluated metrics in terms of AUC values. D-JNDQ, HDR-VDP 3, FSIMc and PSNRc have more than 98% accuracy on identifying whether a stimulus within a significant pair is significantly better or worse than another.

## 6. CONCLUSION

We propose a learning based metric, D-JNDQ trained using the first JND point information. The optical and retinal pathway model from HDR-VDP 2 is used as a pre-processing module to improve performance of the metric. Our experimental results show that the metric is well generalized in quality assessment of various types of distortions in both sub and supra threshold intensities. It is demonstrated that the first JND points provide rich information for image quality assessment. Additionally, proposed metric shows poor performance for certain distortion types, where the image quality task is related to distortion preference rather than distortion visibility. Since we utilized a distortion visibility database to develop the metric, this is not a surprising outcome. We also believe that the proposed approach can be extended on video quality evaluation task following a similar recipe.

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