iJRASET
International Journal For Research in Applied Science and Engineering Technology

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH

IN APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY

Volume: 13 **Issue:** III **Month of publication:** March 2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22214/ijraset.2025.67282

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International Journal for Research in Applied Science & Engineering Technology (IJRASET)
ISSN: 2321-9653; IC Value: 45.98; SJ Impact Factor: 7.538
Volume 13 Issue III Mar 2025- Available at www.ijraset.com

The Role of Machine Learning in Autism Detection

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Abstract: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects social interaction, communication, and behaviour.
Early diagnosis is crucial for timely intervention, yet traditional diagnostic methods are subjective, time-consuming, and often inaccessible in remote areas. This research explores the use of machine learning (ML) techniques to enhance autism detection through data-driven approaches.
Various supervised learning algorithms, including Support Vector Machines (SVM), Decision Trees, Random Forest, and Deep Learning models, are evaluated using ASD screening datasets. Additionally, we examine unsupervised and reinforcement learning methods to detect ASD traits in children and adults.
The results indicate that ML-based models can achieve high accuracy, offering a scalable, cost-effective, and objective alternative to conventional diagnosis methods.
Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Neurodevelopmental Disorders, Behavioral Analysis, Support Vector Machine (SVM), Random Forest (RF), Decision Tree (DT) , K-Nearest Neighbors (KNN) , Feature Selection , ASD Screening Tools.

I. INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong condition characterized by deficits in social communication and repetitive behaviours. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), ASD affects 1 in 100 children globally, though prevalence rates vary by region.

Traditional diagnostic methods, such as the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS) and the Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (M-CHAT), rely on behavioural assessments conducted by specialists, leading to potential delays in diagnosis due to limited access to experts.

Early intervention is essential in improving social skills, cognitive development, and quality of life for individuals with ASD. Machine learning (ML) offers a promising alternative by analysing large datasets to detect ASD traits automatically. This research aims to develop an ML-based ASD detection system, improving early diagnosis, reducing human bias, and making diagnostic tools more accessible globally.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Traditional Autism Diagnosis Methods*

1) The Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS) (Lord et al., 2000)
2) The Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ) Test (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001)
3) The Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (M-CHAT) (Robins et al., 2001)
4) But these methods require trained professionals, making them resource-intensive.
5) Many children are diagnosed later in life due to the subjective nature of behavioural assessments.
6) Limited access to specialists in rural or underserved areas exacerbates diagnosis delays.

B. *Machine Learning in Autism Detection*

1) Supervised Learning Approaches: Algorithms such as Decision Trees, SVM, and Random Forest have been applied to classify ASD cases based on behavioural datasets, showing improved accuracy compared to traditional assessments.
2) Deep Learning Techniques: Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN) and Recurrent Neural Networks (RNN) have been used to analyse speech, facial expressions, and neuroimaging data, enabling a non-invasive method for ASD detection.
3) Multi-Modal Data Fusion: Combining various input sources, such as eye-tracking, speech analysis, and genetic markers, has demonstrated enhanced accuracy in ASD detection.

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III. RELATED APPLICATIONS FOR AUTISM DETECTION USING MACHINE LEARNING

Machine learning-based autism detection has several real-world applications beyond just diagnosis. These applications span healthcare, education, and assistive technologies, improving early intervention, personalized care, and accessibility.

A. Early Autism Screening Tools

- Mobile and Web-Based Screening Apps: AI-powered apps like *AutiSense* and *ASDetect* use machine learning to analyze responses from autism screening questionnaires.
- Chatbots for Initial Assessments: AI-driven chatbots can guide parents through early screening questions and suggest the need for professional evaluation.

B. AI-Assisted Diagnosis in Healthcare

- Clinical Decision Support Systems (CDSS): Machine learning models integrated into electronic health record (EHR) systems help doctors make data-driven ASD diagnoses.
- Neuroimaging Analysis: AI models analyze MRI and fMRI scans to detect patterns linked to ASD, assisting neurologists in diagnosis.

C. Behaviour and Emotion Recognition Systems

- Facial Expression & Eye-Tracking Analysis: AI-powered tools analyse eye movements and facial expressions to detect ASD-related social behaviour differences.
- Speech & Language Processing: Machine learning models evaluate speech patterns, tone, and language usage to identify ASD traits in children.

D. Special Education and Learning Support

- Adaptive Learning Platforms: AI-driven educational tools personalize learning experiences for children with ASD based on their cognitive abilities.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Data Collection and Preprocessing

- Publicly available ASD screening datasets (e.g., UCI Machine Learning Repository, Autism Brain Imaging Data Exchange) are used to train and validate models.
- Raw data undergoes extensive preprocessing, including feature selection, normalization, and noise reduction, to improve model performance.
- Ethical considerations are addressed to ensure patient privacy and data security.

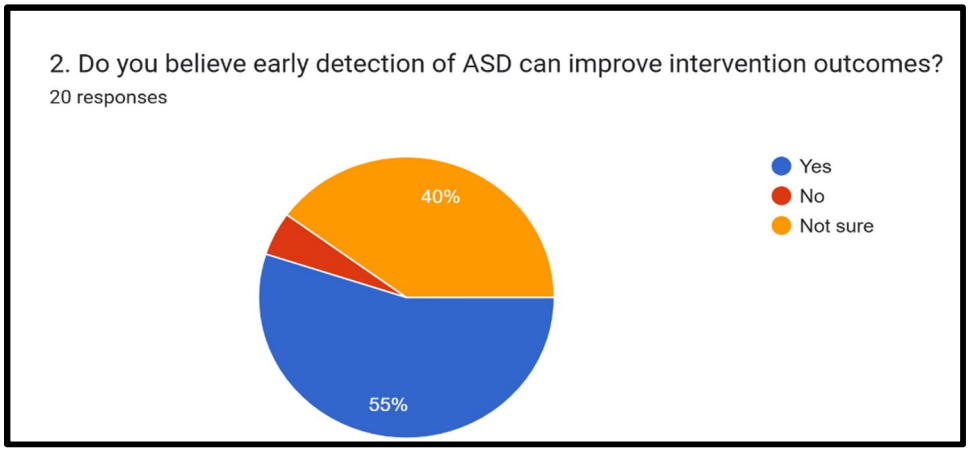
B. Machine Learning Models

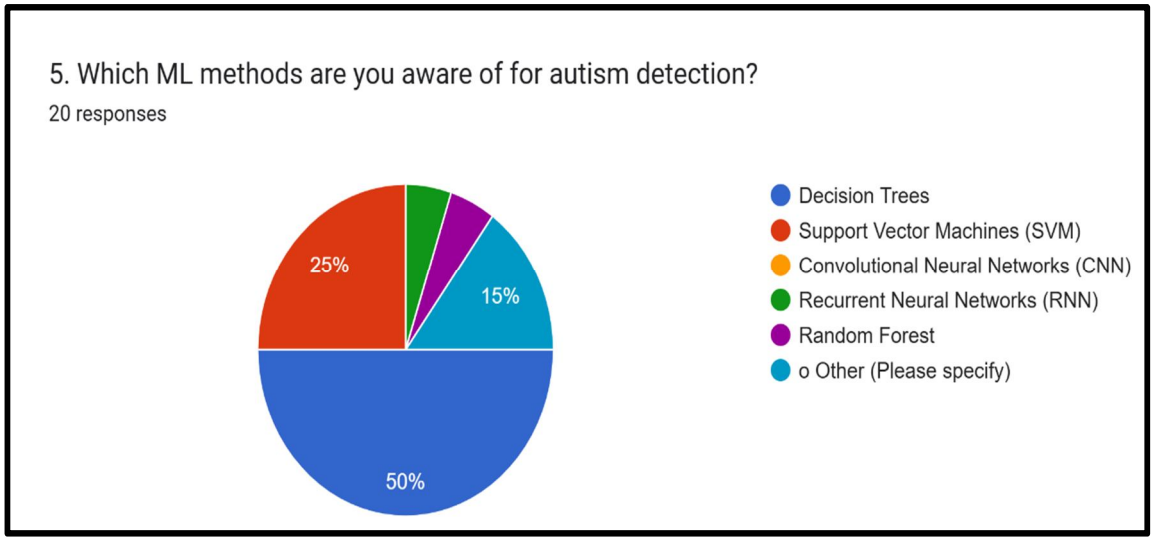
- Support Vector Machines (SVM): Applied to classify ASD cases using structured behavioural questionnaire responses.
- Decision Trees and Random Forest: Implemented to improve interpretability and robustness against noisy data.
- Deep Neural Networks (DNN): Used for analysing speech patterns, facial micro expressions, and neuroimaging data.
- Hybrid and Ensemble Learning Models: Combining multiple algorithms to achieve better performance and reduce bias.

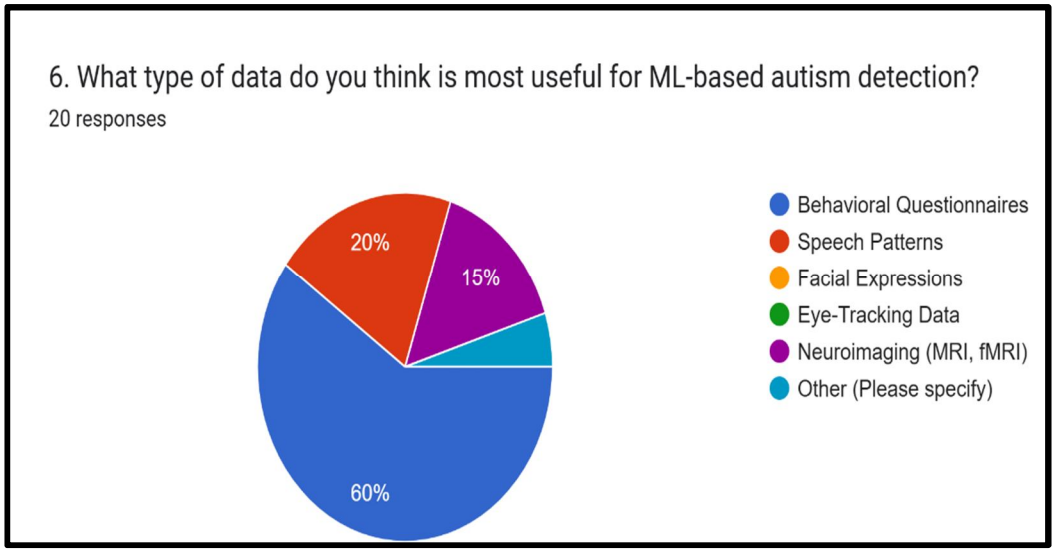
C. Performance Evaluation Metrics

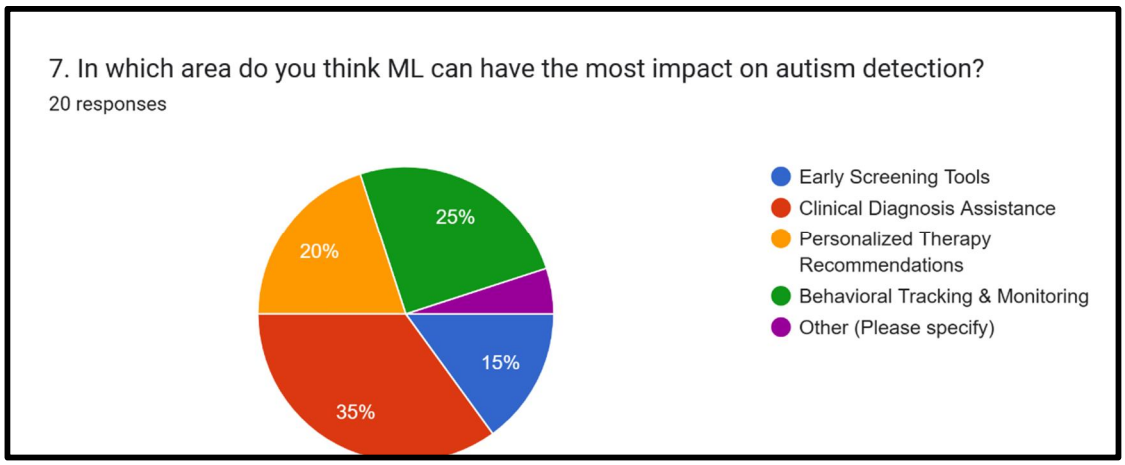
- Accuracy: Measures overall correctness of the model's predictions.
- Precision, Recall, and F1-score: Evaluate the balance between false positives and false negatives.
- ROC-AUC Curve Analysis: Assesses the discrimination power of classification models.
- Cross-Validation and Hyperparameter Tuning: Ensures model generalizability and prevents overfitting.

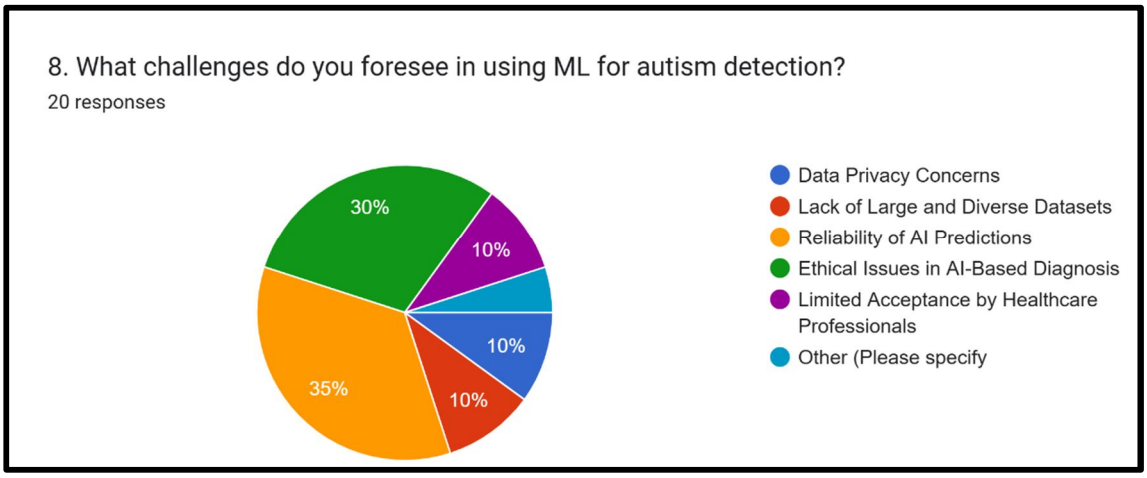
V. SURVEY











A. Survey Discussion And Result

Questions were framed and shared with IT professionals, healthcare experts, parents and teaching staff to gain insights about their views on impact of machine learning in Autism Detection.

Results are as follows

- According to the data gathered, the majority of them were aware about autism disorders and they believed in early detection of ASD as it improves intervention outcomes.
- Most of them had knowledge about machine learning.
- Several of them firmly believed that machine learning plays a significant role in the Autism detection.
- Machinelearning has several advantages as it helps in early detection and is easily scalable.
- The primary obstacles and concerns were related to privacy and security.
- Decision trees and SVM most known methods and behavioral questionnaire were commonly used in autism detection.
- ML has impact on Clinical Diagnosis Assistance and Personalized Therapy Recommendations.
- Challenges include Reliability of AI Predictions and Ethical Issues in AI-Based Diagnosis

- Performance Comparison: Random Forest achieved 92% accuracy, outperforming other models on questionnaire-based data, while CNN-based models demonstrated a promising 87% accuracy on facial expression datasets.
- Feature Importance Analysis: Behavioural responses, eye-tracking patterns, and speech features emerged as the most influential indicators in ASD detection.

VI. CHALLENGES

1) Data-Related Challenges

- Limited and Imbalanced Datasets: Datasets for autism detection, especially in early childhood, are often small and imbalanced (fewer positive cases).
- Data Privacy & Ethical Concerns: Patient data is sensitive, making it difficult to obtain large datasets due to privacy regulations like GDPR and HIPAA.
- Labeling Issues: Diagnosing autism requires expert clinicians, making labeled data expensive and sometimes subjective.

2) Feature Engineering Challenges

- Heterogeneous Data Sources: Data comes from various sources (behavioral assessments, eye-tracking, genetic data, etc.), making integration complex.

3) Model Development Challenges

- High False Positives/Negatives: Misclassification can lead to serious consequences, such as incorrect diagnoses or missed cases.
- Overfitting: Small datasets and complex models can lead to overfitting, reducing real-world applicability.

4) Societal & Ethical Challenges

- Bias in Data & Models: If training data lacks diversity, models may be biased towards certain demographics, leading to inaccurate diagnoses.
- Clinical Acceptance: Many healthcare professionals are skeptical about AI-based diagnostic tools.

A. Strategies to Overcome Challenges in Autism Detection Using ML

To tackle the challenges effectively, here are some potential solutions:

1) Data-Related Challenges

Solution for Limited and Imbalanced Datasets

- Leverage transfer learning from related medical datasets.
- Collaborate with medical institutions and research groups for data sharing initiatives.

Solution for Data Privacy & Ethical Concerns

- Use federated learning to train models on decentralized data without transferring sensitive information.
- Apply differential privacy techniques to protect individual identities in datasets.

Solution for Labelling Issues

- Develop semi-supervised or weakly supervised learning models to reduce dependency on fully labelled data.
- Use crowdsourcing with expert validation to improve data labelling efficiency.

2) Feature Engineering Challenges

Solution for Heterogeneous Data Sources

- Use multimodal learning to integrate behavioral, genetic, and neuroimaging data efficiently.
- Implement feature fusion techniques to combine different data types meaningfully.

3) Model Development Challenges

Solution for High False Positives/Negatives

- Use ensemble models (combining multiple ML algorithms) to improve robustness.

4) Computational & Technical Challenges

Solution for High Computational Cost

- Use cloud-based ML platforms to reduce local hardware requirements.

Solution for Integration with Healthcare Systems

- Develop lightweight, API-based ML solutions that can plug into existing Electronic Health Record (EHR) systems.
- Work with regulatory bodies to ensure compliance with medical standards (FDA, CE, HIPAA).

5) Societal & Ethical Challenges

Solution for Clinical Acceptance

- Conduct pilot studies and trials with healthcare professionals to validate ML models in real-world settings.
- Provide educational programs for clinicians on the benefits and limitations of AI in autism detection.

VII. CONCLUSION

The Autism Detection System using Machine Learning (ML) represents a significant advancement in early autism screening, offering fast, accurate, and scalable predictions. By leveraging AI-driven assessment techniques, this project enhances diagnostic accuracy, reduces healthcare costs, and improves accessibility for both doctors and individuals seeking autism evaluations.

A. Machine learning in Autism detection provides the following benefits

1) Improved Early Detection

- Faster and more accurate than traditional manual assessments.
- Enables timely intervention and support for individuals at risk.

2) Scalability & Sustainability

- Cloud-based and API-driven architecture makes it highly scalable.

3) Economic & Social Benefits

- Reduces the burden on healthcare professionals by automating initial screening.
- Provides remote accessibility, making autism screening available worldwide.

4) Ethical & Privacy Considerations

- Uses secure data encryption and GDPR/HIPAA-compliant privacy measures.
- Ensures bias-free AI models by training on diverse datasets.

By bridging the gap between AI and healthcare, this project has the potential to positively impact millions of lives, especially in rural and underprivileged communities.

B. Future Work for Autism Detection Using Machine Learning

To enhance the accuracy, scalability, and usability of the ML-based Autism Detection System, the following future improvements and research directions proposed:

1) Enhancing Model Accuracy & Performance

Multi-Modal Machine Learning

- Integrate speech analysis, facial expression detection, and eye-tracking data to improve autism detection.

Personalized AI Models

- Develop AI models that adapt to individual differences in autism symptoms.
- Train models with diverse datasets across different age groups, cultures, and demographics.

2) Expanding Data Collection & Diversity

-Incorporating Real-World Data

- Use wearable devices & IoT sensors to collect behavioural data.
- Partner with hospitals and research centres for large-scale clinical validation.

-Longitudinal Studies for Early Prediction

- Collect and analyze long-term patient data to predict autism progression over time.

3) Advanced Deployment & Integration

Mobile App & Wearable Device Integration

- Develop AI-powered autism detection mobile apps for home-based screening.
- Integrate with smartwatches and eye-tracking glasses to monitor social interactions.

Telemedicine and Hospital System Integration

- Implement API-based integration with hospital management systems for seamless patient referrals.
- Enable virtual autism assessments via video conferencing platforms.

4) Expanding Research & Global Adoption

Cross-Cultural Autism Screening

- Validate the model in different countries to account for cultural differences in autism symptoms.

AI-Powered Autism Treatment Recommendations

- Develop AI models that not only detect autism but also suggest therapy & intervention plans.
- Use reinforcement learning to create personalized treatment strategies.

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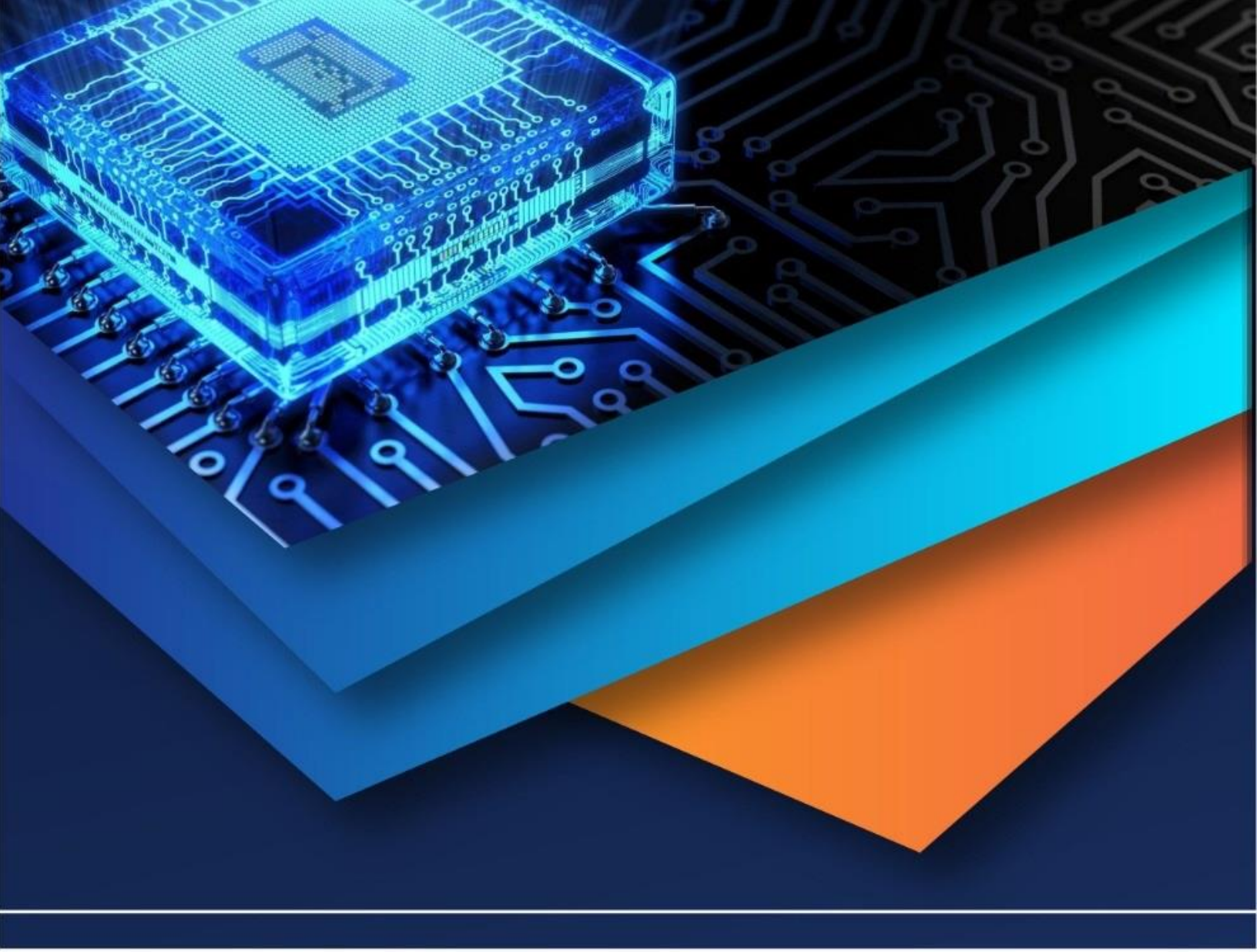

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