

# Dual domain graph convolutional networks for skeleton based action recognition

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## Abstract

Skeleton-based action recognition is attracting more and more attention owing to the general representation ability of skeleton data. The Graph Convolutional Networks (GCNs) methods extended from Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) are proposed to directly extract spatial-

temporal information from the graphs. Previous GCNs usually aggregate the skeleton information locally in the vertex domain. However, the focus on the local information brought about the limited representation ability in some actions containing overall dynamics in both spatial and temporal, which pulled down the overall accuracy of the model. Therefore, this paper proposes a more comprehensive two-stream GCN architecture containing the vertex-domain graph convolution and the spectral graph convolution based on Graph Fourier Transform (GFT). One stream utilizes an efficient vertex-domain graph convolution to obtain effective spatial-temporal information via Graph Shift Blocks (GSB), while the other brings the global spectral information from our improved Residual Spectral Blocks (RSB). According to the analysis of the experimental results,

the action misalignment for certain actions is reduced. Moreover, along with other GCN methods that only focus on spatial-temporal information, our RSB strategies help improve their performance. DD-GCN is evaluated on three large skeleton-based datasets, NTU-RGBD 60, NTU-RGBD 120, and Kinetics-Skeleton. The experiment results demonstrate a comparable ability to the state-of-the-art.

**Keywords** Action recognition · Skeleton · Graph convolutional networks · Dual-domain · Spatial-temporal · Spectral

## 1 Introduction

Action recognition is a challenging task in the field of computer vision. And it is at the forefront of applications to understand the human social activity (Islam and Iqbal 2020). Action recognition based on RGB images/videos has been widely researched with deep learning methods, such as Convolution Neural Networks (CNNs). The motivation of most action recognition algorithms is to extract spatiotemporal feature representations from RGB videos. And then, a classifier is trained to distinguish different actions. Simonyan and Zisserman (2014) proposed a two-stream method to extract spatial and temporal information separately. Also, to obtain temporal features, Ji et al. (2013) extended the traditional 2D-CNN to 3D-CNN with a 3D convolution kernel. Meanwhile, owing to the concise and compelling data source, skeleton-based action recognition is attracting more and more attention. Concretely, skeleton-based methods can effectively focus on the joint transformation of different actions by discarding redundant background information. A more robust and more efficient network based on skeleton

data can be designed to recognize human actions than the RGB-based methods. And the most important thing is that skeletal data can articulate joints connection status and their dynamic changes.

Previous work construct the joint coordinates manually into a sequence of vectors (Vemulapalliet al. 2014; Jianget al. 2020). Then the recurrent neural network (RNNs) is utilized to process the vectors (Liu et al. 2016; Song et al. 2017; Zhang et al. 2017; Zheng et al. 2019). Alternatively, the skeleton joints are composed into a 2D pseudo-image. Then a CNN-based model is able to generate the final prediction (Liu et al. 2017; Li et al. 2017a, b; Zhanget al. 2019; Wang et al. 2021). However, both the RNN-based and CNN-based methods do not explicitly take advantage of spatial relationships and temporal dynamics. Therefore, a series of graph convolutional networks (GCNs) are proposed for skeleton-based action recognition (Yan et al. 2018; Shi et al. 2019a, b; Tang et al. 2018; Chen et al. 2020; Songet al. 2021; Shi et al. 2020; Penget al. 2021; Liu et al. 2021; Xie et al. 2021; Ahmad et al. 2021; Yoon et al. 2021). Inferred from CNNs, GCNs are able to process non-Euclidean data such as skeleton graphs through the regulation of the kernel size and the promotion of the convolution operation. Subsequently, a graph convolution module is widely used to construct the spatial-temporal GCN. Most of the GCN-based methods emphasize the improvement of a structure to obtain optimal spatial-temporal representations.

Finally, the spectral features are combined with the spatial-temporal features extracted from the vertex stream to recognize the action. Compared with our previous SS-GCN, the main contributions are summarized as follows:

- To extract spatial-temporal information more effectively, the shift operation on the graph is employed to our vertex stream inspired by Shift-GCN (Chen et al. 2020). This article further explores the effectiveness of the complementation of the vertex-domain and the spectral-domain features through a more efficient spatial-temporal stream, which proves the previous GCN is flawed in this task for some actions rely on global information.
- A more robust spectral GCN backbone consisting of RSB is proposed, proving to be more effective in extracting spectral features for action recognition. Though some experiments show that spectral-based GCN performs inferior to spatial-based GCN in some computer vision tasks, our RSB shows particular improvement to the simple spectral-based GCNs adopted by our previous SS-GCN owing to the deep architecture.
- In previous work, the motivation of the combination of the spatial-temporal information and the spectral information is not well expressed and supported. At the same time, this paper proposes using spectral-domain information to make up for the weak recognition ability of previous GCNs in some actions. An analysis of the improvement of each action category by the spectral-domain information is provided in the ablation study.
- More extensive experiments and more comprehensive analyses are performed. Owing to the improvement on both the spectral stream and the spatial-temporal stream, DD-GCN has greatly improved our previous model SS-GCN, with an increase of 5.3%/5.5% on the NTU-RGBD 60 dataset (Shahroudy et al. 2016). The top-1 and top-5 accuracy on the Kinetics-Skeleton dataset (Kay et al. 2017) are also improved by 0.9%/2.0%. Additional experiments on NTU-RGBD 120 (Liu et al. 2020) are performed and compared with the SOTA.

## 2 Relatedwork

Owing to the effectiveness data, there is more and more research focusing on skeleton-based action recognition. The skeleton data that indicates the coordinates dynamics shows robustness against illumination change, background variation, and body diversity. The methods are composed of the handcraft-feature methods and the deep learning methods. One typical handcraft feature is based on the theory of Lie Group (Vemulapalli et al. 2014; Jiang et al. 2020; Fernando et al. 2015). Vemulapalli et al. (2014) propose a Lie-group skeletal representation that uses rotations and translations in 3D space to model the 3D geometric relationships between different body parts specifically. Inspired by this work, Jiang et al. (2020) create a new spatial-temporal skeleton transformation descriptor (ST-STD) to obtain a comprehensive view of the skeleton in both spatial and temporal domain for each frame, followed by a denoising sparse long short term memory (DS-LSTM) net-work. Fernando et al. (2015) use the parameters from the ranking functions per video as a new video representation.

However, the deep learning features are more substantial than the handcraft-feature methods due to various deep models such as RNNs and CNNs. RNNs-based methods can extract the dynamic information with the ability of modeling sequences (Du et al. 2015; Liu et al. 2016, 2018; Song et al. 2017; Zhang et al. 2017; Li et al. 2018; Zheng et al. 2019). Du et al. (2015) propose an end-to-end hierarchical RNN for skeleton-based action recognition, based on the ability to model the long-term contextual knowledge of temporal sequences of the RNNs. Liu et al. (2016) further propose a tree-structure traversal method based on LSTM to deal with occlusion and noise in human skeleton data. To make better use of the multi-modal features extracted for each joint, then they (Liu et al. 2018) introduce a feature fusion method within the trust gate ST-LSTM unit. Song et al. (2017) combine the spatial attention subnetwork and the temporal attention subnetwork with the main LSTM network to pay various levels of attention to different frames. Zhang et al. (2017) propose a two-stream View Adaptive network for skeleton action recognition to eliminate the influence of the viewpoints by combining RNN features with CNN features. Li et al. (2018) introduce an independently RNN (IndRNN) architecture to avoid the gradient vanishing while learning long-term dependencies. Zheng et al. (2019) integrate the attention mechanism into LSTM to model spatial and temporal dynamics simultaneously.

Meanwhile, by forming the skeleton into pseudo-images, CNN-based methods are also widely studied (Ke et al. 2017; Liu et al. 2017; Kim and Reiter 2017; Li et al. 2017a,b; Cao et al. 2019). Ke et al. (2017) introduce a manual clip generation method for the skeleton joints of each frame which are replaced as a chain by concatenating the joints. Liu et al. (2017) present an enhanced visualization method for skeleton data according to a view-invariant transform, an image colorization, and a CNN-based model. Kim and Reiter (2017) re-design the Temporal Convolutional Neural Networks (TCN) to learn the spatial-temporal representations of the human skeleton data. Li et al.

## 2.1 Graph convolutional neural networks

Nevertheless, neither CNNs nor RNNs process the non-Euclidean graphs directly. Both these sequences in RNNs and the grids in CNNs have flaws while blending spatial and tempo-ral patterns. Therefore, several GCN-based models are proposed to capture spatiotemporal features from graphs (Yan et al. 2018; Shi et al. 2019a, b; Peng et al. 2021; Liu et al. 2021; Xie et al. 2021; Ahmad et al. 2021). Inferred by CNNs, these GCNs avoid the handcrafted part-assignment. Yan et al. (2018) propose to treat the skeleton sequences as spatiotemporal graphs and extend CNNs to the vertex domain of the graph by a spatiotemporal GCN (ST-GCN). The spatiotemporal information is shown vital for trajectory data in different domains (Knauf et al. 2016). Unlike CNNs, the convolution operation in the GCNs unit contains the input data and learnable weights and the adjacency matrix of the graph demonstrating the spatiotemporal connection. By constructing a naturally connected skeleton graph, ST-GCN eliminates the need to specify the data structure manually. Si et al. (2019) combine vertex-domain graph convolution with LSTM to capture features in both spatial configuration and temporal dynamics. Based on ST-GCN, Shi et al. (2019a) raise a two-stream adaptive GCN (2s-AGCN) to obtain the joint and the second-order information of the skeleton data. They add learnable adaptive parameters to the adjacency matrix to improve the limitations of natural connection in ST-GCN. Then 2s-AGCN is extended to MS-AAGCN (Shi et al. 2020) by a multi-stream architecture which combines the information from both joints and bones, as well as their motion trends. Another work from Shi et al. (2019b) propose a directed graph network (DGN) to model joints and bones in the natural human body, which are represented as a directed acyclic graph (DAG). Chen et al. (2020) propose a novel shift operation for spatial GCNs based on the previous work, which greatly reduces the GFLOPs and increases the inflexibility of the receptive fields. Inspired by this work, our vertex-domain stream consists of spatiotemporal shift GCN blocks, which is more effective while extracting non-local relationships between spatial and temporal domains.

Estrach et al. (2014) exploit a global structure of the graph with the spectrum of its graph-Laplacian matrix to generalize the convolution operator from CNNs. A vanilla GCN in the spectral domain is proposed by constructing a graph spectral convolution layer, in which the spatial filter is replaced with a spectral filter. Henaff et al. (2015) develop an improved spectral GCN by smooth the spectral filters. By smoothing the spectral filters in the spectral domain, a more localized filter in the space domain is obtained faster during the decay. Defferrard et al. (2016) learn the functions of the Laplacian directly to avoid the eigendecomposition while calculating the spectral convolution. Inspired by Chen et al. (2020), a dual-domain graph CNN is proposed to capture both spatiotemporal and spectral information with two kinds of graph convolution operators. Inferred by ResNet, a novel residual-connected spectral backbone is proposed to avoid gradient vanishing.

### 3 Graphconvolutionoperations

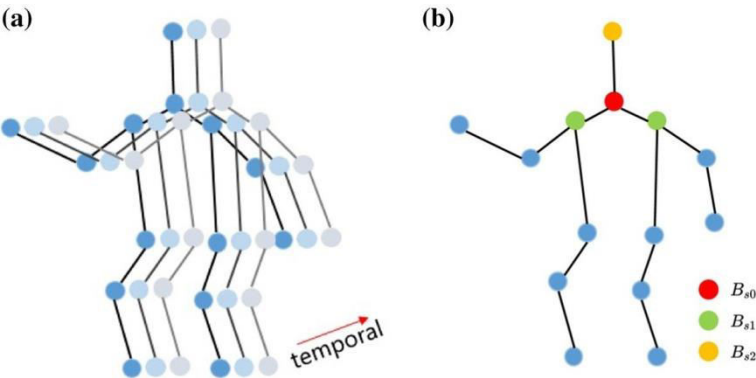
This section introduces two sorts of graph convolution operations according to graph signal processing (GSP) for skeleton action recognition.

#### 3.1 Vertex-domain graph convolution

GCNs have been a widely used architecture since the work of Yan et al. (2018). By constructing the skeleton data into graph  $G = (V, E)$  with  $N$  joints and  $T$  frames, a vertex-domain graph convolution operation is defined with the thought of template matching. Because of the absence of node ordering and the structure diversity, the simplest way to design a template to calculate the convolution is to use a scalar for all neighbors. Given an input vector  $h$  of  $l$  th layer in a GNN, the vertex-domain scalar convolution is shown as follows:

$$h_i^{l+1} = \sigma \left( \sum_{j \in N_i} w^l h_{ij}^l \right), \tag{1}$$

where  $\langle, \rangle$  is the product operation and  $\sigma$  is the activation function.  $w^l \in R$  is the template vector to obtain neighborhood information in layer  $l$ . And  $N_i$  denotes the set of all neighbor nodes of node  $i$ . For a general convolution in graph neural networks, the following formula is obtained:



**Fig.1** Illustration of the skeleton graph for vertex-domain graph convolution. The blue dots representing the body joints are connected in both spatial and temporal domain. For the vertex-domain convolution, they are divided into three handcrafted subsets: root subset  $B_{s0}$ , centripetal subset  $B_{s1}$  and centrifugal subset  $B_{s2}$  (Color figure online)

### 3.2 Spectral-domain graph convolution

In skeleton action recognition, the latest methods all treat joints and bones, as well as their motion trajectories, as a spatiotemporal graph to perform vertex-domain convolution operations. However, since the skeleton data is regarded as graphs, the ignored spectral-domain information is also vital according to the Spectral Graph Theory. The analysis of the properties of a graph concerning the characteristic polynomial, eigenvalues, and eigenvectors of the Laplacian matrix, is the main part of spectral graph theory in mathematics.

The spectral convolution is performed by the following steps: Graph Laplacian matrix, Fourier functions and Fourier transform, Convolution theorem. The  $N$ th skeleton sequence in time  $T$  is converted to a spatiotemporal graph  $G=(V,E)$ . According to spectral graph theory, The Adjacency matrix is represented as  $A$ . Another essential operator is the graph Laplacian matrix  $L$ . And the simple Laplacian matrix is defined as  $L = D - A \in R^{n \times n}$ .  $D = \text{diag}(d(v_1), \dots, d(v_N)) \in R^{n \times n}$ , is the diagonal degree matrix and  $d(\cdot)$  is the degree of node  $v_i$ . Then the normalized Laplacian matrix is defined as

$$L = D^{-1/2} (D - A) D^{-1/2} = I - D^{-1/2} A D^{-1/2}$$

It is obvious that the Laplacian matrix  $L$  is a real symmetric matrix. Given a vector related to vertex  $v_i$ ,  $\mathbf{h}$  is the output vector by calculating the product of the Laplacian matrix  $L$  and  $\mathbf{h}$ . And its physical implication can be clarified with the following formula:

$$\mathbf{h} = L(\mathbf{D} - \mathbf{A}) = \mathbf{D} - \mathbf{A}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \mathbf{h}[i] &= d(v_i)[i] - \sum_{v_j \in N(v_i)} A_{ij}[i] \\ &= \sum_{v_j \in N(v_i)} 1[i] - \sum_{v_j \in N(v_i)} 1[j] \\ &= \sum_{v_j \in N(v_i)} ([i] - [j]), \end{aligned}$$

where the output vector  $\mathbf{h}$  represents the difference between  $v_i$  and its neighbor vertex  $v_j$ .

Laplacian matrix is also a positive semidefinite matrix and can be proved with Eq. 5 by the following formula, the quadratic form of  $L$ :

$$\begin{aligned} f^T L f &= \sum_{v_i \in V} \sum_{v_j \in N(v_i)} ([i] - [j])^2 \\ &= \sum_{v_i \in V} \sum_{v_j \in N(v_i)} ([i] \cdot [i] - [i] \cdot [j]) \\ &= \sum_{v \in V} \sum_{i \in N(v)} 2 \sum_{i \in N(v)} 1[i] \cdot [i] - \sum_{i \in N(v)} [i] \cdot [j] + \sum_{j \in N(v)} \frac{1}{2} [j] \cdot [j] \\ &= 2 \sum_{v \in V} \sum_{i \in N(v)} ([i] - [j])^2. \end{aligned}$$

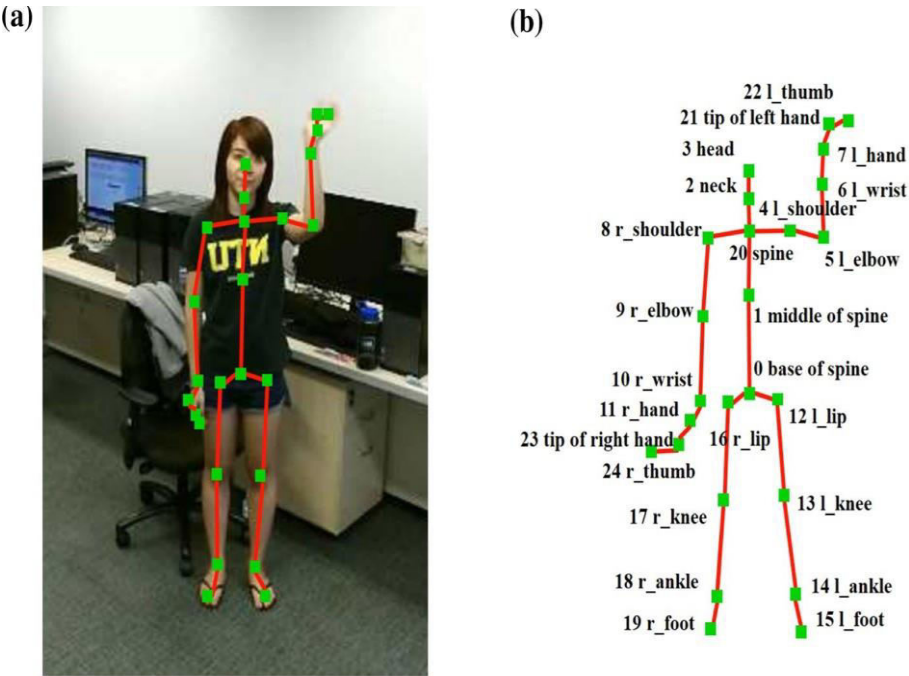
As shown in Eq. 7, the quadratic form of the Laplacian matrix  $L$  is the sum of the squares of the difference between each vertex and its neighborhoods in a graph. From both perspectives in Eqs. 5 and 7, the physical implication of the Laplacian matrix is that it is a mea-



different from the Adjacency matrix applied in vertex-domain graph convolution operation, which provides the strength of the connection of the edge between nodes.

The vital Laplacian matrix  $L$  is precisely the basic content of graph spectral convolution operation. The convolution in the vertex domain cannot be expressed as a meaningful operator roughly. However, the convolution operator  $\ast_G$  is easily defined in the spectral domain according to graph convolution theorem:

$$w \ast_G h = U^{-1} U^T w \odot U^T h,$$



**Fig.6**Examples for class “hand waving”. The red line and green dots represent the skeletons (Color figure online )

$$\begin{aligned} &w \\ &\ast \\ &G \\ &h \\ &= \\ &U \end{aligned}$$



### 3.2.1 NTU-RGBD120dataset

NTU RGBD 120 dataset is an extended version of the NTU-RGBD 60 dataset by adding another 60 classes and another 57,600 video/skeleton samples. It consists of 114,480 action samples divided into 120 action classes. The number of persons of different ages increase to 106. These samples are captured in three angles which is the same as NTU-RGBD 60. The skeleton data employed in this work consists of 25 human joints, as shown in Fig. 6. The two benchmarks are also defined as CS and CV. The action can be categories into Daily Actions (82), Medical Conditions (12), and Mutual Actions/Two Person Interactions (26).

### 3.2.2 Kinetics-Skeleton dataset

Kinetics is an activity recognition dataset for RGB-based action recognition, which consists of 300,000 videos clips in 400 classes (Kay et al. 2017). Yan et al. (2018) construct a skeleton data based on it by extracting 18 body joints for each frame with an open-source toolbox OpenPose. Then the large-scale skeleton-based dataset called Kinetics-Skeleton is obtained. The training data is set to 240,000 skeleton clips, and the test data consists of 20,000 clips. This dataset is challenging, so both the top-1 and top-5 accuracies are present as other methods do.

### 3.3 Implement detail of DD-GCN

The DD-GCN is implemented with Pytorch deep learning framework. Some hyperparameters are needed for both the vertex-domain stream and the spectral-domain stream. For NTU-RGBD 60 dataset and NTU-RGBD 120 dataset, the optimizer is SGD (stochastic gradient descent) method. And the loss function is cross-entropy loss. Similar to Chen et al. (2020), the weight decay and initial learning rate of the vertex-domain stream are set to 0.0001 and 0.1. The learning rate decays by 10 at epoch of 60th, 80th, 100th. For spectral-domain stream on NTU-RGBD 60 dataset and NTU-RGBD 120 dataset, the weight decay and initial learning rate of the vertex-domain stream are set to 0.003 and 0.1. The learning rate decays by 10 at epoch of 30th, 40th.

For the Kinetics-

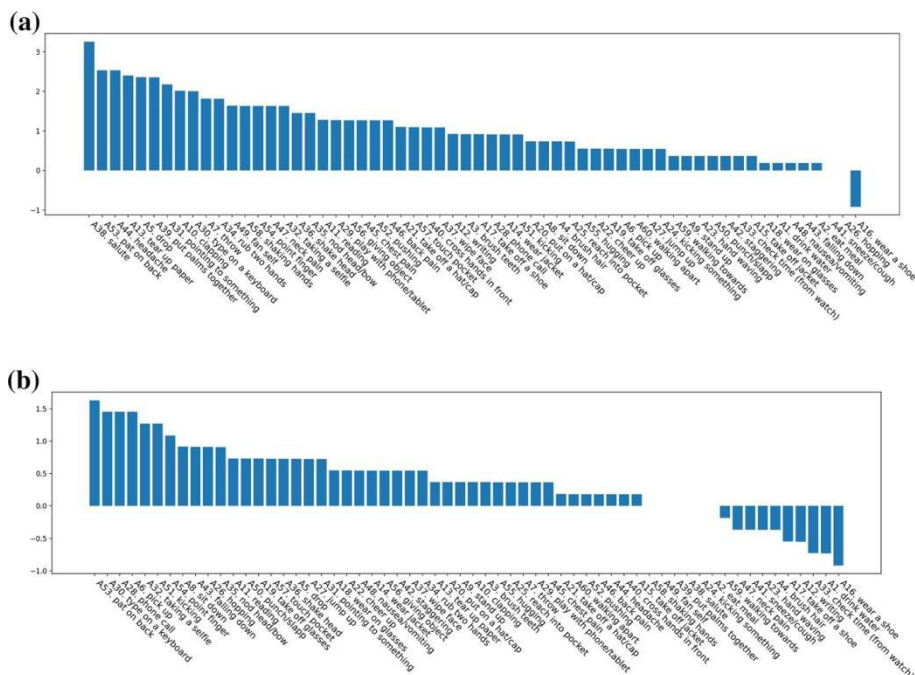
Skeleton dataset, the SGD is adopted as the optimizer. The settings of weight decay and the initial learning rate are the same with NTU-RGBD datasets in the vertex-domain stream. For spectral stream, the weight decay, Nesterov momentum for SGD, the base learning rate is set to 0.001, 0.9, 0.001. The learning rate decays by 10 at epoch of 45th, 55th.

3.3.1 RSBstrategies

The effectiveness of the spectral-domain backbone, which adopts the residual-connectedspectral block, is evaluated in Table 1. Compared with the stream adopting simple spectralgraph convolution, the residual spectral stream demonstrates a better performance with anincrease of 15.1% and 12.9% on NTU-RGBD 60 CS and CV. Some recent experimentsshow that spectral-based GCN performs inferior to spatial-based GCN in some computervision tasks. However, our experiments based on the RSB backbone show a certain developmentpotentialofthespectralconvolution.Thecriticalproblemofthepreviouspec-tral convolution network lies in relatively shallow architecture. At the same time, residual-connected architecture for the spectral-domain stream of DD-GCN is capable of capturingdeep spectral information. While combined with the vertex-domain stream, which focuseson the spatiotemporal information, the residual DD-GCN has a superior performance withanincreaseof1.1%and0.7%onCSandCV.Incontrast,thesimpleDD-GCNseemsstren-uoustoobtain adequatespectral informationforthe vertex-domainstream.

**Table1**TheablationstudyonNTU-RGBDdatasetdenotingtheeffectiveness of the Res-SpectralUnit

Methods	CS(%)	CV(%)
SimpleSpectralStream	55.2	65.3
ResidualSpectralStream	70.3	78.2
Vertex-domainStream(Shift)	87.8	95.1
DD-GCN(Simple)	88.6	95.3
DD-GCN(Residual)	88.9	95.8



**Fig.7** Illustration of the performance gain (%) of the spectral-domain stream with respect to the vertex-domain stream on the NTU-RGBD 60 dataset for the CS setting. The vertical axis is calculated by subtracting the DD-GCN accuracy of each action from the vertex-domain stream. The horizontal axis denotes the class of action as provided in Shahroudy et al. (2016)

### 3.3.2 Experiment on NTU-RGBD 120 dataset

On NTU-RGBD 120 Dataset, two standard evaluation protocols are applied in Liu et al. (2020). The comparison results are shown in Table 5. The experiment accuracy of DD-GCN is 84.9% for the CS set, 86.0% for the CV set. Compared with 3s RA-GCN, our two-stream model has a 3.8%/3.3% increase on CS and CV set. The performance of two-stream ST-TR-AGCN (Plizzari et al. 2021) concatenating spatial-temporal module with self-attention mechanism is 2.2%/1.3% lower than DD-GCN. The DD-GCN achieves 0.7% higher accuracy on CS set and 0.5% higher on CV set than the work in Wan et al. (2021). This demonstrates the superiority of our GCN model that utilizes the residuals spectral stream based on the spectral-domain graph convolution.

The results of DD-GCN on the NTU-RGBD 120 dataset are 0.4% lower than 2s Shift-GCN, which superimposes the same backbone repeatedly with additional preprocessed data, the bone graphs (the differential of spatial coordinates). Compared with the SO TA 4s Shift-GCN, our results are slightly inferior but with much lesser parameters. Nevertheless, our work has benefited by fusing two distinguishing graph convolution operators. The experiment results show that our two-stream network is reasonable and practical to obtain the local diversities and the global dynamics even without additional data.

**Table 5** The comparison of experiment results on NTU-RGBD120 dataset

Methods	CS(%)	CV(%)	Year
ST-LSTM(Liu et al. 2016)	55.7	57.9	2016
SkeleMotion(Caetano et al. 2019)	67.7	66.9	2019
TSRJI(Caetano et al. 2019)	67.9	62.8	2019
Part-Aware LSTM(Liu et al. 2020)	55.7	57.9	2020
2sShift-GCN(+bones)(Chen et al. 2020)	85.3	86.6	2020
4sShift-GCN(+bones and motions)(Chen et al. 2020)	<b>85.9</b>	<b>87.6</b>	2020
Fuzzy CNN (Banerjee et al. 2021)	74.8	76.9	2021
AMV-GCN(Liu et al. 2021)	76.7	79.0	2021
3sRA-GCN(Song et al. 2021)	81.1	82.7	2021
ST-TR-AGCN(Plizzari et al. 2021)	82.7	85.0	2021
SEMN(Wang et al. 2021)	84.2	85.5	2021
DD-GCN(ours)	<b>84.9</b>	<b>86.0</b>	2021

Experimental results and the state-of-the-art are highlighted in bold

## 4 Conclusion

In this paper, a dual-domain GCN (DD-GCN) for skeleton-based action recognition is proposed. We integrate spectral-domain information with spatial-temporal information through an end-to-end two-stream architecture. A spectral-GCN backbone is proposed based on the spectral-domain graph convolution. Compared with the previous GCN, which only focuses on the spatial-temporal information of the skeleton graphs, we explore the complementary spectral-GCN architecture and the necessity. With a deep residual-con-nected RSB backbone, the accuracy of most actions has been improved, primarily the actions with broader dynamic changes in global. The experiment results on three large-scale datasets demonstrate the effectiveness of our DD-GCN. The ablation studies explore the reasons for the superiority of DD-GCN for the task of skeleton-based action recognition. The extensive experiments on three large-scale datasets, NTU-RGBD 60, NTU-RGBD 120, and Kinetics-Skeleton, show competitive or state-of-the-art performance. In the future, we will optimize the spectral-domain backbone for skeleton-based action recognition and hope to inspire more work to focus on the dual-domain graph convolutions.

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**Author contributions** SC: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing-original draft, Software. KX: Supervision, Validation. ZM: Data Curation. XJ: Investigation, Visualization. TS: Writing-review and editing.

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**Data availability** The dataset supporting the results of this article are included within the article and its additional files.

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