MixCon: Adjusting the Separability of Data Representations for Harder Data Recovery

Xiaoxiao Li∗ Yangsibo Huang† Binghui Peng‡ Zhao Song§ Kai Li¶

Abstract

To address the issue that deep neural networks (DNNs) are vulnerable to model inversion attacks, we design an objective function, which adjusts the separability of the hidden data representations, as a way to control the trade-off between data utility and vulnerability to inversion attacks. Our method is motivated by the theoretical insights of data separability in neural networking training and results on the hardness of model inversion. Empirically, by adjusting the separability of data representation, we show that there exist sweet-spots for data separability such that it is difficult to recover data during inference while maintaining data utility.

∗xl32@princeton.edu. Princeton University.
†yangsibo@princeton.edu. Princeton University.
‡bp2601@columbia.edu. Columbia University.
§zhaos@princeton.edu. Columbia University and Princeton University.
¶li@cs.princeton.edu. Princeton University
\section{Introduction}

Over the past decade, deep neural networks have shown superior performances in various domains, such as visual recognition, natural language processing, robotics, and healthcare. However, recent studies have demonstrated that machine learning models are vulnerable in terms of leaking private data \cite{HZL19, ZLH19, ZJP+20}. Hence, preventing private data from being recovered by malicious attackers has become an important research direction in deep learning research.

Distributed machine learning \cite{SS15, KMA+19} has emerged as an attractive setting to mitigate privacy leakage without requiring clients to share raw data. In the case of an edge-cloud distributed learning scenario, most layers are commonly offloaded to the cloud, while the edge device computes only a small number of convolutional layers for feature extraction, due to power and resource constraints \cite{KHG+17}. For example, service provider trains and splits a neural network at a “cut layer,” then deploys the rest of the layers to clients \cite{VGSR18}. Clients encode their dataset using those layers, then send the data representations back to cloud server using the rest of layers for inference \cite{TMK17, KNAM18, VGSR18}. This gives an untrusted cloud provider or a malicious participant a chance to steal sensitive inference data from the output of “cut layer” on the edge device side, i.e. inverting data from their outputs \cite{FJR15, ZJP+20}.

In this paper, we investigate how to design a hard-to-invert data representation function (or hidden data representation function), which is defined as the output of the neural network’s intermediate layer. We focus on defending data recovery during inference. The goal is to hide sensitive information and to protect data representations from being used to reconstruct the original data while ensuring that the resulted data representations are still informative enough for decision making. The core question here is how to achieve the goal.

We propose data separability, also known as the minimum (relative) distance between (the representation of) two data points, as a new criterion to investigate and understand the trade-off between data utility and hardness of data recovery. Recent theoretical studies show that if data points are separable in the hidden embedding space of a DNN model, it is helpful for the model to achieve good classification accuracy \cite{AZLS19a}. However, larger separability is also easier to recover inputs. Conversely, if the embeddings are non-separable or sometimes overlap with one another, it is challenging to recover inputs. Nevertheless, the model may not be able to learn to achieve good performance. Two main questions arise. First, is there an effective way to adjust the separability of data representations? Second, are there “sweet spots” that make the data representations difficult for inversion attacks while achieving good accuracy?

This paper aims to answer these two questions by learning a feature extractor that can adjust the separability of data representations embedded by a few neural network layers. Specifically, we propose to add a self-supervised learning-based novel regularization term to the standard loss function during training. We conduct experiments on both synthetic and benchmark datasets to demonstrate that with specific parameters, such a learned neural network is indeed difficult to recover input data while maintaining data utility.

Our contributions can be summarized as:

\begin{itemize}
  \item To the best of our knowledge, this is the first proposal to investigate the trade-off between data utility and data recoverability from the angle of data representation separability;
  \item We propose a simple yet effective loss term, Consistency Loss – \texttt{MixCon} for adjusting data separability;
  \item We provide the theoretical-guided insights of our method, including a new exponential lower bound on approximately solving the network inversion problem, based on the Exponential
Time Hypothesis (ETH); and

- We report experimental results comparing accuracy and data inversion results with/without incorporating MixCon. We show MixCon with suitable parameters makes data recovery difficult while preserving high data utility.

The rest of the paper is organized as follow. We formalize our problem in Section 2. In Section 3, we present our theoretical insight and introduce the consistency loss. We demonstrate the experiment results in Section 4. We defer the technical proof and experiment details to Appendix.

2 Preliminary

Distributed learning framework. We consider a distributed learning framework, in which users and servers collaboratively perform inferences [TMK17, KNAM18, KHG+17]. We have the following assumptions: 1) Datasets are stored at the user sides. During inference, no raw data are ever shared among users and servers; 2) Users and servers use a split model [VGSR18] where users encode their data using our proposed mechanism to extract data representations at a cut layer of a trained DNN. Servers take encoded data representations as inputs and compute outputs using the layers after the cut layer in the distributed learning setting; 3) DNN used in the distributed learning setting can be regularized by our loss function (defined later).

Threat model. We consider the attack model with access to the shared hidden data representations during the client-cloud communication process. The attacker aims to recover user data (i.e., pixel-wise recovery for images in vision task). To quantify the upper bound of privacy leakage under this threat model, we allow the attacker to have more power in our evaluation. In addition to having access to extracted features, we allow the attacker to see all network parameters of the trained model.

Problem formulation. We focus on the pipelines combining local data representation learning with a global model learning manner at a high level. Formally, let $h : \mathbb{R}^d \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^m$ denote the local feature extractor function, which maps an input data $x \in \mathbb{R}^d$ to its feature representation $h(x) \in \mathbb{R}^m$. The local feature extractor is a shallow neural network in our setting. The deep neural network on the server side is denoted as $g : \mathbb{R}^m \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^C$, which performs classification tasks and maps the feature representation to one of $C$ target classes. The overall neural network $f : \mathbb{R}^d \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^C$, and it can be written as $f = g \circ h$.

Our overall objectives are:

- Learn the feature representation mechanism (i.e. $h$ function) that safeguards information from unsolicited disclosure.
- Jointly learn the classification function $g$, and the feature extraction function $h$ to ensure the information extracted is useful for high-performance downstream tasks.

3 Consistency Loss for Adjusting Data Separability

To address the issue of data recovery from hidden layer output, we propose a novel consistency loss in neural network training, as shown in Figure 1. Consistency loss is applied to the feature extractor $h$ to encourage encoding closed but separable representations for the data of different
classes. Thus, the feature extractor \( h \) can help protect original data from being inverted by an attacker during inference while achieving desirable accuracy.

\[
L_{	ext{mixup}} = \text{dist} + \frac{\beta}{\text{dist}}
\]

\[
\delta_h := \min_{i \neq j \in [n]} \| h(x_i) - h(x_j) \|_2. \quad \text{(controlling accuracy)}
\]

\[
\Delta_H := \max_{(i,j) \in S} \| h(x_i) - h(x_j) \|_2. \quad \text{(controlling invertibility)}
\]

Lower bound on data separability implies better accuracy Recent line of deep learning theory [AZLS19a] indicates that data separability is perhaps the only matter fact for learnability (at least for overparameterized neural network), leading into the following results.

**Theorem 3.2.** Suppose the training data points are separable, i.e., \( \delta_h > 0 \). If the width of a \( L \)-layer neural network with ReLU gates satisfies \( m \geq \text{poly}(n, d, L, 1/\delta_h) \), initializing from a random weight matrix \( W \), (stochastic) gradient descent algorithm can find the global minimum of neural network function \( f \).
Essentially, the above theorem indicates that we can (provably) find global minimum of a neural network given well separated data, and better separable data points requires narrower neural network and less running time.

**Upper bound on data separability implies hardness of inversion.** When all data representation is close to each other, i.e. $\Delta_H$ is sufficiently small, we expect the inversion problem is hard. We support this intuition by proving that the neural network inversion problem is hard to approximate within some constant factor when assuming $\text{NP} \neq \text{RP}$.\(^1\)

Existing work [LJDD19] indicates that the decision version of the neural network inversion problem is \text{NP}-hard. However, this is insufficient since it is usually easy to find an approximate solution, which could leak much information on the original data. It is an open question whether the approximation version is also challenging. We strengthen the hardness result and show that by assuming $\text{NP} \neq \text{RP}$, it is hard to recovery an input that approximates the hidden layer representation. Our hardness result implies that given hidden representations are close to each other, no polynomial time can distinguish their input. Therefore, it is impossible to recover the real input data in polynomial time.

**Theorem 3.3** (Informal). Assume $\text{NP} \neq \text{RP}$, there is no polynomial time algorithm that is able to give a constant approximation to the neural network inversion problem.

The above result only rules out the polynomial running time recovery algorithm but leaves out the possibility of a subexponential time algorithm. To further strengthen the result, we assume the well-known Exponential Time Hypothesis (ETH), which is widely accepted in the computation complexity community.

**Hypothesis 3.4** (Exponential Time Hypothesis (ETH) [IPZ98]). There is a $\delta > 0$ such that the 3SAT problem cannot be solved in $O(2^{\delta n})$ time.

Assuming ETH, we derive an exponential lower bound on approximately recovering the input.

**Corollary 3.5** (Informal). Assume ETH, there is no $2^{o(n^{1-o(1)})}$ time algorithm that is able to give a constant approximation to neural network inversion problem.

### 3.2 Consistency loss — MixCon

Follow the above intuitions, we propose a novel loss term MixCon loss — $\mathcal{L}_{\text{mixcon}}$ — to incorporate in training. MixCon adjusts data separability by forcing the consistency of hidden data representations from different classes. This additional loss term balances the data separability, punishing feature representations that are too far or too close to each other. Noting that we choose to mix data from different classes instead of the data within a class, in order to bring more confusion in embedding space and potentially hiding data label information\(^2\).

**MixCon loss $\mathcal{L}_{\text{mixcon}}$:** We add consistency penalties to force the data representation of $i$-th data in different classes to be similar, while without any overlapping for any two data points.

$$
\mathcal{L}_{\text{mixcon}} := \frac{1}{p |C| \cdot (|C| - 1)} \sum_{i=1}^{p} \sum_{c_1 \in C} \sum_{c_2 \in C} (\text{dist}(i, c_1, c_2) + \beta / \text{dist}(i, c_1, c_2)). \tag{1}
$$

\(^1\)The class $\text{RP}$ consists of all languages $L$ that have a polynomial-time randomized algorithm $A$ with the following behavior: If $x \not\in L$, then $A$ always rejects $x$ (with probability 1). If $x \in L$, then $A$ accepts $x$ in $L$ with probability at least $1/2$.

\(^2\)We show the comparison in Appendix D.1.
A practical choice for the pairwise distance is \( \text{dist}(i, c_1, c_2) = \|h(x_{i,c_1}) - h(x_{i,c_2})\|_2^2 \), where \( x_{i,c} \) is the \( i \)-th input data point in class \( c \), \( p := \min_{c \in C} |c| \), and \( \beta > 0 \) balances the data separability. The first term punishes large distance while the second term enforces sufficient data separability. In general, we could replace \((\text{dist} + \beta / \text{dist})\) by convex functions with asymptote shape on non-negative domain, that is, function with value reaches infinity on both ends of \([0, \infty)\).

We consider the classification loss \( L_{\text{class}} := -N \sum_{i=1}^{N} \sum_{c=1}^{C} y_{i,c} \cdot \log(\hat{y}_{i,c}) \) (cross entropy) (2)

where \( y_i \in \mathbb{R}^C \) is the one-hot representation of true label and \( \hat{y}_i = f(x_i) \in \mathbb{R}^C \) is the prediction score of data \( i \in \{1, \ldots, N\} \). The final objective function is \( L := L_{\text{class}} + \lambda \cdot L_{\text{mixcon}} \). We simultaneously train \( h \) and \( g \), where \( \lambda \) and \( \beta \) are tunable hyper-parameters associated with consistency loss regularization to adjust separability. We discuss the effect of \( \lambda \) and \( \beta \) in experiments (Section 4).

4 Experimental Results

4.1 Data recovery model

To empirically evaluate the quality of inversion, we formally define the white-box data recovery (inversion) model [HZL19] used in our experiments. The model aims to solve an optimization problem in the input space. Given a representation \( z = h(x) \), and a public function \( h \) (the trained network that generates data representations), the inversion model tries to find the original input \( x \):

\[
x^* = \arg \min_s L(h(s), z) + \alpha \cdot R(s)
\]

where \( L \) is the loss function that measures the similarity between \( h(s) \) and \( z \), and \( R \) is the regularization term. We specify \( L \) and \( R \) used in each experiment later. We solve Eq. (3) by iterative gradient descent.

4.2 Experiments with synthetic data

In this section, we want to answer the following questions:

Q1 What is the impact of having \( \beta \) in Eq.(1) to bound the smallest data pairwise distance?

Q2 Is feature encoded with MixCon mechanism harder to invert?

To allow precise manipulation and straightforward visualization for data separability, our experiments use generated synthetic data with a 4-layer fully-connected network.

Network, data generation and training. We defined the network as

\[
y = q(\text{softmax}(f(x))), \quad f(x) = W_4 \cdot \sigma(W_3 \cdot \sigma(W_2 \cdot (\sigma(W_1 x + b_1) + b_2) + b_3) + b_4)
\]

\( x \in \mathbb{R}^{10}, W_1 \in \mathbb{R}^{500 \times 10}, W_2 \in \mathbb{R}^{2 \times 500}, W_3 \in \mathbb{R}^{100 \times 2}, W_4 \in \mathbb{R}^{2 \times 100}, b_1 \in \mathbb{R}^{500}, b_2 \in \mathbb{R}^{2}, b_3 \in \mathbb{R}^{100}, b_4 \in \mathbb{R}^{2} \). For a vector \( z \), we use \( q(z) \) to denote the index \( i \) such that \( |z_i| > |z_j|, \forall j \neq i \). We initialize each entry of \( W_k \) and \( b_k \) from \( \mathcal{N}(u_k, 1) \), where \( u_k \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \alpha) \) and \( k \in \{1, 2, 3, 4\} \).

\(^a\)In practice, we normalize \( \|h(x)\|_2 \) to 1. To avoid division by zero, we can use a positive small \( \epsilon (\ll 1) \) and threshold distance to the range of \([\epsilon, 1/\epsilon]\).
Vanilla $E = 0$

MixCon $\beta = 0.01$ $E = 0$

MixCon $\beta = 0.01$ $E = 20$

MixCon $\beta = 0$ $E = 0$

MixCon $\beta = 0$ $E = 20$

Figure 2: Data hidden representation $h(x) \in \mathbb{R}^2$ from the 2nd fully-connected layer of synthetic data at different epoch ($E$). Two settings of MixCon are given default $\lambda = 0.1$ but have different $\beta$. Compare to Vanilla, MixCon squeezes data representations to a smaller space over training. When $\beta = 0$, MixCon map all data to $h(x) = (0,0)$, which is not learnable.

|                | Vanilla | MixCon $\beta = 0.01$ | MixCon $\beta = 0$ |
|----------------|---------|------------------------|---------------------|
|                | default | deeper net wider net   | default deeper net wider net |
| Train Accuracy (%) | 91.5 | 88.9 89.5 91.5 | 50.0 50.0 50.0 |
| Test Accuracy (%)   | 91.5 | 88.0 88.5 90.5 | 50.0 50.0 50.0 |

Table 1: Data utility (accuracy). Vanilla is equivalent to ($\lambda = 0, \beta = 0$). Two MixCon “default” settings both use $\lambda = 0.1$ but vary in $\beta = 0.01$ and $\beta = 0$. “Deeper”/“Wider” indicate increasing the depth/width of layers in the network on server side $g(x)$.

We generate synthetic samples $(x, y)$ from two multivariate normal distribution. Positive data are sampled from $\mathcal{N}(0, I)$, and negative data are sampled from $\mathcal{N}(-1, I)$, ending up with 800 training samples and 200 testing samples, where the covariance matrix $I$ is an identity diagonal matrix. $L_{\text{mixcon}}$ is applied to the 2nd fully-connected layer.

We train the network for 20 epochs with cross-entropy loss and SGD optimizer with 0.1 learning rate. We apply noise to the labels by randomly flipping 5% of labels to increase training difficulty.

Testing setup. We compare the results under the following settings:

- Vanilla: training using only $L_{\text{class}}$.
- MixCon: training with MixCon loss with parameters ($\lambda$, $\beta$).²

We perform model inversion using Eq. (3) without any regularization term $\mathcal{R}(x)$ and $\mathcal{L}$ is the $\ell_1$-loss function. Detailed optimization process is listed in Appendix C.1.

Results. To answer Q1, we visualize the change of data representations at initial and ending epochs in Figure 2. First, in vanilla training (Figure 2 a-b), data are disperesely distributed and enlarge their distance after training. The obvious difference for MixCon training (Figure 2 c-f) is that data representations become more and more gathering through training. Second, we direct the data utility results of Vanilla and two “default” MixCon settings – ($\lambda = 0.1, \beta = 0.01$) and ($\lambda = 0.1, \beta = 0$) to Table 1. When $\beta = 0$, MixCon achieves chance accuracy only as it encodes all the $h(x)$ to hidden space $(0,0)$ (Figure 2 f). While having $\beta > 0$ balancing the separability, MixCon achieves similar accuracy as Vanilla.

²$\lambda$ is the coefficient of penalty and $\beta$ is balancing term for data separability.
Based on Theorem 3.2, we further present two strategies to ensure reasonable accuracy while comprise of reducing data separability by increasing the depth or the width of the layers \( g(z) \), the network after the layer that is applied \( L_{\text{mixcon}} \). In practice, we add two more fully-connected layers with 100 neurons after the 3rd layer for “deeper” \( g(x) \), and change the number of neurons on the 3rd layer to 2048 for “wider” \( g(x) \). We show the utility results in Table 1. Using deeper or wider \( g(z) \), MixCon \((\lambda = 0.1, \beta = 0.01)\) improves accuracy. Whereas MixCon \((\lambda = 0.1, \beta = 0)\) fails, because zero data separability is not learnable no matter how \( g(z) \) changes. This gives conformable answer that \( \beta \) is an important factor to guarantee neural network to be trainable.

To answer Q2, we evaluate the quality of data recovery using the inversion model. We use both mean-square error (MSE) and mean-cosine similarity (MCS) of \( x \) and \( x^* \) to evaluate the data recovery accuracy. We show the quantitative inversion results in Table 2. Higher MSE or lower MCS indicates a worse inversion. Apparently, data representation from MixCon trained network is more difficult to recover compared to Vanilla strategy.

### 4.3 Experiments with benchmark datasets

In this section, we would like to answer the following questions:

Q3 How does MixCon loss affect data separability and accuracy on image datasets?

Q4 Are there parameters \((\lambda, \beta)\) in MixCon (Eq. (1)) to reach a “sweet-spot” for data utility and the quality of defending data recovery?

#### Network, datasets and training setup.

The neural network architecture used in the experiments is LeNet5 [LeC15]⁵. \( L_{\text{mixcon}} \) is applied to the outputs of the 2nd convolutional layer blocks of LeNet5. The experiments use three datasets: MNIST [LBBH98], Fashion-MNIST [XRV17], and SVHN [NWC⁺11].

Neural network is optimized using cross-entropy loss and SGD optimizer with learning rate 0.01 for 20 epochs. We do not use any data augmentation or manual learning rate decay. MixCon loss is applied to the output of 2nd convolutional layer blocks in LeNet5. We train the model with different pairs of \((\lambda, \beta)\) in Eq. (1) for the following testing. Specifically, we vary \( \lambda \) from: \( \{0.01, 0.1, 0.5, 1, 2, 5, 10, 100\} \) and \( \beta \) from: \( \{10^{-2}, 10^{-3}, 10^{-4}, 10^{-5}, 10^{-6}, 10^{-7}, 10^{-8}\} \).

#### Testing setup.

We record the testing accuracy and pairwise distance of data representation under each pair of \((\lambda, \beta)\) for each dataset. Following a recent model inversion method [HZL19], we define \( L \) in Eq. (3) as \( \ell_2\)-loss function, \( R \) as the regularization term capturing the total variation of a 2D signal defined as \( R(a) = \sum_{i,j}((a_{i+1,j} - a_{i,j})^2 + (a_{i,j+1} - a_{i,j})^2)^{1/2} \). The inversion attack is applied to the output of 2nd convolutional layer blocks in LeNet5 and find the optimal of Eq. (3) though SGD optimizer. Detailed optimization process is listed in Appendix C.2.

We use metrics normalized structural similarity index metric (SSIM) [WBSS04] and perceptual similarity (PSIM) [JAFF16] to measure the similarity between the recovered image and the original image. The concrete definitions of SSIM and PSIM are listed in Appendix C.3.

Table 2: Inversion results on synthetic dataset. Higher MSE or lower MCS indicates a worse inversion. \((\lambda, \beta)\) denoted in header.

|                | Vanilla | MixCon \((0.1, 0.01)\) | MixCon \((0.1, 0)\) |
|----------------|---------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| MSE            | 1.92    | 2.08                    | 2.35                |
| MCS            | 0.169   | 0.118                   | 0.161               |

⁵We change input channel to 3 for SVHN dataset.
Figure 3: The trade-off between data separability and data utility. We show testing accuracy and mean pairwise distance (data separability) on three datasets with different $\lambda$ and $\beta$. $\lambda$ and $\beta$ show complementary effort on adjusting data separability. A sweet-spot can be found at the $(\lambda, \beta)$, achieving small data separability and high data utility.

Results To answer Q3, we plot the complementary effects of $\lambda$ and $\beta$ in Figure 3. Note that $\beta$ bounds the minimal pairwise of data representations, and $\lambda$ indicate the penalty power on data separability given by MixCon. Namely, a larger $\lambda$ brings stronger penalty of MixCon, which enhances the regularization of data separability and results in lower accuracy. Meanwhile, with a small $\beta$, $\lambda$ is not necessary to be very large, as smaller $\beta$ leads to a smaller bound of data separability, thus resulting in lower accuracy. Hence, $\lambda$ and $\beta$ work together to adjust the separability of hidden data representations, which can affect on data utility.

To answer Q4, we evaluate the quality of inversion qualitatively and quantitatively through a model inversion attack defined in “Test setup” paragraph. Specifically, for each private input $x$, we execute the inversion attack on $h_{\text{mixcon}}(x)$ and $h_{\text{vanilla}}(x)$ of testing images. As it is qualitatively shown in Figure 4, first, the recovered images using model inversion from MixCon training (such as given $(\lambda, \beta) \in \{(1, 1 \times 10^{-7}), (10, 1 \times 10^{-2}), (100, 1 \times 10^{-2})\}$) are visually different from the original
FashionMNIST a spot, where data utility is reasonable but harder for data recovery, such as \( \lambda \) more difficult to invert original inputs. Thus by visiting through possible \( \lambda, \beta \) settings of MixCon model are less realistic and distinguishable from the original images without significant accuracy dropping.

Further, we quantitatively measure the inversion performance by reporting the averaged similarity between 100 pairs of recovered images by the inversion model and their original samples. We present in mean ± std and worst-case (in parentheses) format. Lower scores indicate harder to invert.

![Original Images](image1) ![Vanilla](image2) ![MixCon (1,1e-2)](image3) ![MixCon (1,1e-5)](image4) ![MixCon (1,1e-7)](image5) ![MixCon (0.1,1e-2)](image6) ![MixCon (10,1e-2)](image7) ![MixCon (100,1e-2)](image8)

**Figure 4**: Qualitative evaluation for image inversion results. (\( \lambda, \beta \)) settings of MixCon denoted on the header. The corresponding testing accuracy of each dataset is denoted on the top of each row. Compared to vanilla training, inversions from the MixCon model are less realistic and distinguishable from the original images without significant accuracy dropping.

| MNIST | Vanilla | MixCon (1,1e-2) | MixCon (1,1e-5) | MixCon (1,1e-7) | MixCon (0,1e-2) | MixCon (10,1e-2) | MixCon (100,1e-2) |
|-------|---------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| ACC   | 99.1%   | 99.0%          | 99.4%          | 99.0%          | 99.0%           | 98.4%           | 98.0%            |
| FashionMNIST | Vanilla | MixCon (1,1e-2) | MixCon (1,1e-5) | MixCon (1,1e-7) | MixCon (0,1e-2) | MixCon (10,1e-2) | MixCon (100,1e-2) |
| ACC   | 89.8%   | 88.0%          | 87.5%          | 88.0%          | 88.0%           | 87.3%           | 86.5%            |
| SVHN  | Vanilla | MixCon (1,1e-2) | MixCon (1,1e-5) | MixCon (1,1e-7) | MixCon (0,1e-2) | MixCon (10,1e-2) | MixCon (100,1e-2) |
| ACC   | 88.78%  | 87.51%         | 85.96%         | 88.08%         | 88.32%          | 85.72%          | 84.52%           |

**Table 3**: Quantitative evaluations for image recovery results. For fair evaluation, we match the data utility (accuracy) for Vanilla and MixCon. SSIM and PSIM are measured on 100 testing samples. Those scores are presented in mean ± std and worst-case (in parentheses) format. Lower scores indicate harder to invert.

Inputs, while the recovered images from Vanilla training still look similar to the originals. Second, with the same \( \lambda \) (Figure 4 column c3-c5), the smaller the \( \beta \) it is, the less similar of the recovered images to original images. Last, with the same \( \beta \) (Figure 4 column c3 and c6-c8), the larger the \( \lambda \) it is, the less similar of the recovered images to original images.

Further, we quantitatively measure the inversion performance by reporting the averaged similarity between 100 pairs of recovered images by the inversion model and their original samples. We select (\( \lambda, \beta \)) to match the accuracy results of MixCon to be as good as Vanilla training (see Accuracy in Table 3), and investigate if MixCon makes the inversion attack harder. The inverted results (see SSIM and PSIM in Table 3) are reported in the format of mean ± std and the worst case (the best-recovered data) similarity in parentheses for each metric. Both qualitative and quantitative results agree with our hypothesis that 1) adding \( \mathcal{L}_{\text{mixcon}} \) in network training can reduce the mean pairwise distance (separability) of data hidden representations; and 2) smaller separability makes it more difficult to invert original inputs. Thus by visiting through possible (\( \lambda, \beta \)), we are able to find a spot, where data utility is reasonable but harder for data recovery, such as (\( \lambda = 100, \beta = 1e - 2 \)) for MNIST (Figure 4).
5 Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we have proposed and studied the trade-off between data utility and data recovery from the angle of the separability of hidden data representations in deep neural network. We propose using MixCon, a consistency loss term, as an effective way to adjust the data separability. Our proposal is inspired by theoretical data separability results and a new exponential lower bound on approximately solving the network inversion problem, based on the Exponential Time Hypothesis (ETH).

We conduct two sets of experiments, using synthetic and benchmark datasets, to show the effect of adjusting data separability on accuracy and data recovery. Our theoretical insights help explain our key experimental findings: MixCon can effectively adjust the separability of hidden data representations, and one can find “sweet-spot” parameters for MixCon to make it difficult to recover data while maintaining data utility. Our experiments are limited to small benchmark datasets in the domain of image classifications. It will be helpful to conduct experiments using large datasets in multiple domains to further the study of the potential of adjusting data separability of data representations to trade-off between data utility and data recovery.

Acknowledgments

This project is supported in part by Princeton University fellowship, Schmidt Foundation, Simons Foundation, NSF, DARPA/SRC, Google and Amazon AWS.

References

[AB09] Sanjeev Arora and Boaz Barak. Computational complexity: a modern approach. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

[ADH+19a] Sanjeev Arora, Simon Du, Wei Hu, Zhiyuan Li, and Ruosong Wang. Fine-grained analysis of optimization and generalization for overparameterized two-layer neural networks. In International Conference on Machine Learning (ICML), pages 322–332, 2019.

[ADH+19b] Sanjeev Arora, Simon S Du, Wei Hu, Zhiyuan Li, Russ R Salakhutdinov, and Ruosong Wang. On exact computation with an infinitely wide neural net. In Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS), pages 8141–8150, 2019.

[AGKM12] Sanjeev Arora, Rong Ge, Ravi Kannan, and Ankur Moitra. Computing a nonnegative matrix factorization—provably. In STOC, 2012.

[AZLL19] Zeyuan Allen-Zhu, Yuanzhi Li, and Yingyu Liang. Learning and generalization in overparameterized neural networks, going beyond two layers. In Advances in neural information processing systems (NeurIPS), pages 6158–6169, 2019.

[AZLS19a] Zeyuan Allen-Zhu, Yuanzhi Li, and Zhao Song. A convergence theory for deep learning via over-parameterization. In ICML, 2019.

[AZLS19b] Zeyuan Allen-Zhu, Yuanzhi Li, and Zhao Song. On the convergence rate of training recurrent neural networks. In NeurIPS, 2019.
[BBB+19] Frank Ban, Vijay Bhattiprolu, Karl Bringmann, Pavel Kolev, Euiwoong Lee, and David P Woodruff. A ptas for lp-low rank approximation. In Proceedings of the Thirtieth Annual ACM-SIAM Symposium on Discrete Algorithms (SODA), pages 747–766. SIAM, 2019.

[BGKM18] Arnab Bhattacharyya, Suprovat Ghoshal, Karthik C. S., and Pasin Manurangsi. Parameterized intractability of even set and shortest vector problem from gap-eth. In ICALP, pages 17:1–17:15, 2018.

[Bis95] Christopher M Bishop. Neural networks for pattern recognition. Oxford university press, 1995.

[BJW19] Ainesh Bakshi, Rajesh Jayaram, and David P Woodruff. Learning two layer rectified neural networks in polynomial time. In Conference on Learning Theory (COLT), pages 195–268. PMLR, 2019.

[BPSW20] Jan van den Brand, Binghui Peng, Zhao Song, and Omri Weinstein. Training (over-parametrized) neural networks in near-linear time. arXiv preprint arXiv:2006.11648, 2020.

[BR92] Avrim L Blum and Ronald L Rivest. Training a 3-node neural network is np-complete. Neural Networks, 5(1):117–127, 1992.

[CCK+17] Parinya Chalermsook, Marek Cygan, Guy Kortsarz, Bundit Laekhanukit, Pasin Manurangsi, Danupon Nanongkai, and Luca Trevisan. From gap-eth to fpt-inapproximability: Clique, dominating set, and more. In 2017 IEEE 58th Annual Symposium on Foundations of Computer Science (FOCS), pages 743–754. IEEE, 2017.

[CFM18] Rajesh Chitnis, Andreas Emil Feldmann, and Pasin Manurangsi. Parameterized approximation algorithms for bidirected steiner network problems. In ESA, pages 20:1–20:16, 2018.

[CKM20] Sitan Chen, Adam R. Klivans, and Raghu Meka. Learning deep relu networks is fixed-parameter tractable. arXiv preprint arXiv:2009.13512, 2020.

[Dan16] Amit Daniely. Complexity theoretic limitations on learning halfspaces. In Proceedings of the forty-eighth annual ACM symposium on Theory of Computing (STOC), pages 105–117, 2016.

[DB16] Alexey Dosovitskiy and Thomas Brox. Inverting visual representations with convolutional networks. In Proceedings of the IEEE conference on computer vision and pattern recognition (CVPR), pages 4829–4837, 2016.

[Din16] Irit Dinur. Mildly exponential reduction from gap 3sat to polynomial-gap label-cover. In Electronic Colloquium on Computational Complexity (ECCC), volume 23, 2016.

[Din17] Irit Dinur. Personal communication. 2017.

[DM18] Irit Dinur and Pasin Manurangsi. Eth-hardness of approximating 2-csps and directed steiner network. In ITCS, 2018.

[DSS16] Amit Daniely and Shai Shalev-Shwartz. Complexity theoretic limitations on learning dnf’s. In Conference on Learning Theory (COLT), pages 815–830, 2016.
Amit Daniely and Gal Vardi. Hardness of learning neural networks with natural weights. arXiv preprint arXiv:2006.03177, 2020.

Simon S Du, Xiyu Zhai, Barnabas Poczos, and Aarti Singh. Gradient descent provably optimizes over-parameterized neural networks. In ICLR, 2019.

Amir Erfan Eshratifar, Mohammad Saeed Abrishami, and Massoud Pedram. Jointdnn: an efficient training and inference engine for intelligent mobile cloud computing services. IEEE Transactions on Mobile Computing, 2019.

Uriel Feige. Relations between average case complexity and approximation complexity. In Proceedings of the thirty-fourth annual ACM symposium on Theory of computing (STOC), pages 534–543. ACM, 2002.

Matt Fredrikson, Somesh Jha, and Thomas Ristenpart. Model inversion attacks that exploit confidence information and basic countermeasures. In Proceedings of the 22nd ACM SIGSAC Conference on Computer and Communications Security (CCS), pages 1322–1333, 2015.

Yingwei Fu, Huaimin Wang, Kele Xu, Haibo Mi, and Yijie Wang. Mixup based privacy preserving mixed collaboration learning. In 2019 IEEE International Conference on Service-Oriented System Engineering (SOSE), pages 275–2755. IEEE, 2019.

Surbhi Goel, Varun Kanade, Adam Klivans, and Justin Thaler. Reliably learning the relu in polynomial time. In Conference on Learning Theory (COLT), pages 1004–1042. PMLR, 2017.

Rong Ge, Jason D. Lee, and Tengyu Ma. Learning one-hidden-layer neural networks with landscape design. In ICLR, 2018.

Johan Håstad. On bounded occurrence constraint satisfaction. Information Processing Letters, 74(1-2):1–6, 2000.

Johan Håstad. Some optimal inapproximability results. Journal of the ACM (JACM), 48(4):798–859, 2001.

Johann Hauswald, Thomas Manville, Qi Zheng, Ronald Dreslinski, Chaithali Chakrabarti, and Trevor Mudge. A hybrid approach to offloading mobile image classification. In 2014 IEEE International Conference on Acoustics, Speech and Signal Processing (ICASSP), pages 8375–8379. IEEE, 2014.

Yangsibo Huang, Zhao Song, Danqi Chen, Kai Li, and Sanjeev Arora. Texthide: Tackling data privacy in language understanding tasks. In The Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing (Findings of EMNLP), 2020.

Yangsibo Huang, Zhao Song, Kai Li, and Sanjeev Arora. Instahide: Instance-hiding schemes for private distributed learning. In Internation Conference on Machine Learning (ICML), 2020.

Zecheng He, Tianwei Zhang, and Ruby B Lee. Model inversion attacks against collaborative inference. In Proceedings of the 35th Annual Computer Security Applications Conference, pages 148–162, 2019.
[IPZ98] Russell Impagliazzo, Ramamohan Paturi, and Francis Zane. Which problems have strongly exponential complexity? In Proceedings. 39th Annual Symposium on Foundations of Computer Science (FOCS), pages 653–662. IEEE, 1998.

[JAFF16] Justin Johnson, Alexandre Alahi, and Li Fei-Fei. Perceptual losses for real-time style transfer and super-resolution. In European Conference on Computer Vision (ECCV), pages 694–711. Springer, 2016.

[JGH18] Arthur Jacot, Franck Gabriel, and Clément Hongler. Neural tangent kernel: Convergence and generalization in neural networks. In Advances in neural information processing systems (NeurIPS), pages 8571–8580, 2018.

[KHG+17] Yiping Kang, Johann Hauswald, Cao Gao, Austin Rovinski, Trevor Mudge, Jason Mars, and Lingjia Tang. Neurosurgeon: Collaborative intelligence between the cloud and mobile edge. ACM SIGARCH Computer Architecture News, 45(1):615–629, 2017.

[KM18] B Laekhanukit KCS and P Manurangsi. On the parameterized complexity of approximating dominating set. In Proceedings of the 50th Annual ACM SIGACT Symposium on Theory of Computing (STOC), pages 1283–1296, 2018.

[KMA+19] Peter Kairouz, H. Brendan McMahan, Brendan Avent, Aurélien Bellet, Mehdi Bennis, Arjun Nitin Bhagoji, Keith Bonawitz, Zachary Charles, Graham Cormode, Rachel Cummings, Rafael G. L. D’Oliveira, Salim El Rouayheb, David Evans, Josh Gardner, Zachary Garrett, Adrià Gascón, Badih Ghazi, Phillip B. Gibbons, Marco Gruteser, Zaid Harchaoui, Chaoyang He, Lie He, Zhouyuan Huo, Ben Hutchinson, Justin Hsu, Martin Jaggi, Tara Javidi, Gauri Joshi, Mikhail Khodak, Jakub Konečný, Aleksandra Korolova, Farinaz Koushanfar, Sanmi Koyejo, Tancrède Lepoint, Yang Liu, Prateek Mittal, Mehryar Mohri, Richard Nock, Ayfer Özgür, Rasmus Pagh, Mariana Raykova, Hang Qi, Daniel Ramage, Ramesh Raskar, Dawn Song, Weikang Song, Sebastian U. Stich, Ziteng Sun, Ananda Theertha Suresh, Florian Tramèr, Praneeth Vepakomma, Jianyu Wang, Li Xiong, Zheng Xu, Qiang Yang, Felix X. Yu, Han Yu, and Sen Zhao. Advances and open problems in federated learning, 2019.

[KMR15] Jakub Konečný, Brendan McMahan, and Daniel Ramage. Federated optimization: Distributed optimization beyond the datacenter. arXiv preprint arXiv:1511.03575, 2015.

[KNAM18] Jong Hwan Ko, Taesik Na, Mohammad Faisal Amir, and Saibal Mukhopadhyay. Edge-host partitioning of deep neural networks with feature space encoding for resource-constrained internet-of-things platforms. In 2018 15th IEEE International Conference on Advanced Video and Signal Based Surveillance (AVSS), pages 1–6. IEEE, 2018.

[KS09] Adam R Klivans and Alexander A Sherstov. Cryptographic hardness for learning intersections of halfspaces. Journal of Computer and System Sciences, 75(1):2–12, 2009.

[KTW+20] Prannay Khosla, Piotr Teterwak, Chen Wang, Aaron Sarna, Yonglong Tian, Phillip Isola, Aaron Maschinot, Ce Liu, and Dilip Krishnan. Supervised contrastive learning. arXiv preprint arXiv:2004.11362, 2020.
[LBBH98] Yann LeCun, Léon Bottou, Yoshua Bengio, and Patrick Haffner. Gradient-based learning applied to document recognition. *Proceedings of the IEEE*, 86(11):2278–2324, 1998.

[LeC15] Yann LeCun. Lenet-5, convolutional neural networks. *http://yann.lecun.com/exdb/lenet*, 20(5):14, 2015.

[LJDD19] Qi Lei, Ajil Jalal, Inderjit S Dhillon, and Alexandros G Dimakis. Inverting deep generative models, one layer at a time. In *Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS)*, pages 13910–13919, 2019.

[LL18] Yuanzhi Li and Yingyu Liang. Learning overparameterized neural networks via stochastic gradient descent on structured data. In *Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS)*, pages 8157–8166, 2018.

[LLTMK19] Alice Lucas, Santiago Lopez-Tapia, Rafael Molina, and Aggelos K Katsaggelos. Generative adversarial networks and perceptual losses for video super-resolution. *IEEE Transactions on Image Processing*, 28(7):3312–3327, 2019.

[LSS+20] Jason D Lee, Ruoqi Shen, Zhao Song, Mengdi Wang, and Zheng Yu. Generalized leverage score sampling for neural networks. In *NeurIPS*, 2020.

[LSSS14] Roi Livni, Shai Shalev-Shwartz, and Ohad Shamir. On the computational efficiency of training neural networks. In *Advances in neural information processing systems (NeurIPS)*, pages 855–863, 2014.

[LY17] Yuanzhi Li and Yang Yuan. Convergence analysis of two-layer neural networks with ReLU activation. In *Advances in neural information processing systems (NIPS)*, pages 597–607, 2017.

[Man17] Pasin Manurangsi. Almost-polynomial ratio eth-hardness of approximating densest k-subgraph. In *STOC*, pages 954–961. ACM, 2017.

[MR10] Dana Moshkovitz and Ran Raz. Two-query pcp with subconstant error. In *Journal of the ACM (JACM)*, volume 57(5), page 29. A preliminary version appeared in the Proceedings of The 49th Annual IEEE Symposium on Foundations of Computer Science (FOCS 2008), 2010.

[MR17] Pasin Manurangsi and Prasad Raghavendra. A birthday repetition theorem and complexity of approximating dense csp. In *ICALP*, pages 78:1–78:15, 2017.

[MR18] Pasin Manurangsi and Daniel Reichman. The computational complexity of training relu (s). *arXiv preprint arXiv:1810.04207*, 2018.

[NWC+11] Yuval Netzer, Tao Wang, Adam Coates, Alessandro Bissacco, Bo Wu, and Andrew Y Ng. Reading digits in natural images with unsupervised feature learning. 2011.

[OS20] Samet Oymak and Mahdi Soltanolkotabi. Towards moderate overparameterization: global convergence guarantees for training shallow neural networks. In *IEEE Journal on Selected Areas in Information Theory*. IEEE, 2020.

[RMC15] Alec Radford, Luke Metz, and Soumith Chintala. Unsupervised representation learning with deep convolutional generative adversarial networks, 2015.
[RSW16] Ilya Razenshteyn, Zhao Song, and David P Woodruff. Weighted low rank approximations with provable guarantees. In Proceedings of the 48th Annual Symposium on the Theory of Computing (STOC), 2016.

[SS15] Reza Shokri and Vitaly Shmatikov. Privacy-preserving deep learning. In Proceedings of the 22nd ACM SIGSAC Conference on Computer and Communications Security (CCS), pages 1310–1321, 2015.

[SWZ17] Zhao Song, David P Woodruff, and Peilin Zhong. Low rank approximation with entrywise l1-norm error. In Proceedings of the 49th Annual ACM SIGACT Symposium on Theory of Computing (STOC), pages 688–701, 2017.

[SWZ19] Zhao Song, David P Woodruff, and Peilin Zhong. Relative error tensor low rank approximation. In SODA, 2019.

[SY19] Zhao Song and Xin Yang. Quadratic suffices for over-parametrization via matrix chernoff bound. arXiv preprint arXiv:1906.03593, 2019.

[SZ14] Karen Simonyan and Andrew Zisserman. Very deep convolutional networks for large-scale image recognition. arXiv preprint arXiv:1409.1556, 2014.

[TM17] Surat Teerapittayanon, Bradley McDanel, and Hsiang-Tsung Kung. Distributed deep neural networks over the cloud, the edge and end devices. In 2017 IEEE 37th International Conference on Distributed Computing Systems (ICDCS), pages 328–339. IEEE, 2017.

[Tre01] Luca Trevisan. Non-approximability results for optimization problems on bounded degree instances. In Proceedings of the thirty-third annual ACM symposium on Theory of computing (STOC), pages 453–461, 2001.

[VBT16] Paul Vanhaesebrouck, Aurélien Bellet, and Marc Tommasi. Decentralized collaborative learning of personalized models over networks. arXiv preprint arXiv:1610.05202, 2016.

[VGSR18] Praneeth Vepakomma, Otkrist Gupta, Tristan Swedish, and Ramesh Raskar. Split learning for health: Distributed deep learning without sharing raw patient data. arXiv preprint arXiv:1812.00564, 2018.

[WBS04] Zhou Wang, Alan C Bovik, Hamid R Sheikh, and Eero P Simoncelli. Image quality assessment: from error visibility to structural similarity. IEEE transactions on image processing, 13(4):600–612, 2004.

[WXT18] Chaoyue Wang, Chang Xu, Chaohui Wang, and Dacheng Tao. Perceptual adversarial networks for image-to-image transformation. IEEE Transactions on Image Processing, 27(8):4066–4079, 2018.

[WZC18] Tsui-Wei Weng, Huan Zhang, Hongge Chen, Zhao Song, Cho-Jui Hsieh, Duane Boning, Inderjit S Dhillon, and Luca Daniel. Towards fast computation of certified robustness for relu networks. In ICML, 2018.

[XRV17] Han Xiao, Kashif Rasul, and Roland Vollgraf. Fashion-mnist: a novel image dataset for benchmarking machine learning algorithms. arXiv preprint arXiv:1708.07747, 2017.
[ZCDLP18] Hongyi Zhang, Moustapha Cisse, Yann N Dauphin, and David Lopez-Paz. mixup: Beyond empirical risk minimization. In *International Conference on Learning Representations (ICLR)*, 2018.

[ZJP+20] Yuheng Zhang, Ruoxi Jia, Hengzhi Pei, Wenxiao Wang, Bo Li, and Dawn Song. The secret revealer: generative model-inversion attacks against deep neural networks. In *Proceedings of the IEEE Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition (CVPR)*, pages 253–261, 2020.

[ZLH19] Ligeng Zhu, Zhijian Liu, and Song Han. Deep leakage from gradients. In *NeurIPS*, 2019.

[ZPD+20] Yi Zhang, Orestis Plevrakis, Simon S Du, Xingguo Li, Zhao Song, and Sanjeev Arora. Over-parameterized adversarial training: An analysis overcoming the curse of dimensionality. In *NeurIPS*, 2020.

[ZSD17] Kai Zhong, Zhao Song, and Inderjit S. Dhillon. Learning non-overlapping convolutional neural networks with multiple kernels. *arXiv preprint arXiv:1711.03440*, 2017.

[ZSJ+17] Kai Zhong, Zhao Song, Prateek Jain, Peter L. Bartlett, and Inderjit S. Dhillon. Recovery guarantees for one-hidden-layer neural networks. In *ICML*, 2017.
Roadmap of Appendix  The Appendix is organized as follows. We discuss related work in Section A. We provide theoretical analysis in Section B. The details of data recovery experiment are in Section C and additional experiment details are in Section D.

A  Related Work

A.1  Hardness and Neural Networks

When there are no further assumptions, neural networks have been shown hard in several different perspectives. [BR92] first proved that learning the neural network is NP-complete. Different variant hardness results have been developed over past decades [KS09, Dan16, DSS16, GKKT17, LSSS14, WZC+18, MR18, LJDD19, DV20, HSLA20, HSC+20]. The work of [LJDD19] is most relevant to us. They consider the neural network inversion problem in generative models and prove the exact inversion problem is NP-complete.

A.2  Data Separability and Neural Network Training

One popular distributional assumption, in theory, is to assume the input data points to be the Gaussian distributions [ZSJ+17, LY17, ZSD17, GLM18, BJW19, CKM20] to show the convergence of training deep neural networks. Later, convergence analysis using weaker assumptions are proposed, i.e., input data points are separable [LL18]. Following [LL18, AZLS19a, AZLS19b, AZLL19, ZPD+20], data separability plays a crucial role in deep learning theory, especially in showing the convergence result of over-parameterized neural network training. Denote $\delta$ is the minimum gap between all pairs data points. Data separability theory says as long as the width ($m$) of neural network is at least polynomial factor of all the parameters ($m \geq \text{poly}(n,d,1/\delta)$), i.e., $n$ is the number of data points, $d$ is the dimension of data, and $\delta$ is data separability. Another line of work [DZPS19, ADH+19a, ADH+19b, SY19, BPSW20, LSS+20] builds on neural tangent kernel [JGH18]. It requires the minimum eigenvalue ($\lambda$) of neural tangent kernel is lower bounded. Recent work [OS20] finds the connection between data-separability $\delta$ and minimum eigenvalue $\lambda$, i.e. $\delta \geq \lambda/n^2$.

A.3  Distributed Deep Learning System

Collaboration between the edge device and cloud server achieves higher inference speed and lowers power consumption than running the task solely on the local or remote platform. Typically there are two collaborative modes. The first is collaborative training, for which training task is distributed to multiple participants [KMR15, VBT16, KMA+19]. The other model is collaborative inference. In such a distributed system setting, the neural network can be divided into two parts. The first few layers of the network are stored in the local edge device, while the rest are offloaded to a remote cloud server. Given an input, the edge device calculates the output of the first few layers and sends it to the cloud. Then cloud perform the rest of computation and sends the final results to each edge device [EAP19, HMZ+14, KHG+17, TMK17]. In our work, we focus on tackling data recovery problem under collaborative inference mode.

A.4  Data Security

The neural network inversion problem has been extensively investigated in recent years [FJR15, HZL19, LJDD19, ZJP+20]. As used in this paper, the general approach is to cast the network inversion as an optimization problem and uses a problem specified objective. In particular, [FJR15]
proposes to use confidence in prediction as to the optimized objective. [HZL19] uses a regularized maximum likelihood estimation. Recent work [ZJP+20] also proposes to use GAN to do the model inversion.

Motivated by the success of mixing data [ZCDL18], there is a line of work focusing on using data augmentation to achieve security [FWX+19, HSLA20, HSC+20]. The most recent result [HSLA20] proposes the Instahide method, which makes a linear combination of training data and adds a random sign on each coordinate. As these methods generally rely on data augmentation, they do not apply to our setting.

B Hardness of neural network inversion

B.1 Preliminaries

We first provide the definitions for 3SAT, ETH, MAX3SAT, MAXE3SAT and then state some fundamental results related to those definitions. For more details, we refer the reader to the textbook [AB09].

Definition B.1 (3SAT problem). Given n variables and m clauses in a conjunctive normal form CNF formula with the size of each clause at most 3, the goal is to decide whether there exists an assignment to the n Boolean variables to make the CNF formula be satisfied.

Hypothesis B.2 (Exponential Time Hypothesis (ETH) [IPZ98]). There is a δ > 0 such that the 3SAT problem defined in Definition B.1 cannot be solved in O(2^{δn}) time.

ETH is a stronger notion than NP \neq P, and is well acceptable the computational complexity community. Over the few years, there has been work proving hardness result under ETH for theoretical computer science problems [CCK+17, Man17, CFM18, BGKM18, DM18, KM18] and machine learning problems, e.g. matrix factorizations [AGKM12, RSW16, SWZ17, BBB+19], tensor decomposition [SWZ19]. There are also variations of ETH, e.g. Gap-ETH [Din16, Din17, MR17] and random-ETH [Fei02, RSW16], which are also believable in the computational complexity community.

Definition B.3 (MAX3SAT). Given n variables and m clauses, a conjunctive normal form CNF formula with the size of each clause at most 3, the goal is to find an assignment that satisfies the largest number of clauses.

We use MAXE3SAT to denote the version of MAX3SAT where each clause contains exactly 3 literals.

Theorem B.4 ([Hås01]). For every δ > 0, it is NP-hard to distinguish a satisfiable instance of MAXE3SAT from an instance where at most a 7/8 + δ fraction of the clauses can be simultaneously satisfied.

Theorem B.5 ([Hås01, MR10]). Assume ETH holds. For every δ > 0, there is no 2^{o(n^{1-\eta(1)})} time algorithm to distinguish a satisfiable instance of MAXE3SAT from an instance where at most a fraction 7/8 + δ of the clauses can be simultaneously satisfied.

We use MAXE3SAT(B) to denote the restricted special case of MAX3SAT where every variable occurs in at most B clauses. Hästad [Hås00] proved that the problem is approximable to within a factor 7/8 + 1/(64B) in polynomial time, and that it is hard to approximate within a factor 7/8 + 1/(\log B)^{(1)} in 2001, Trevisan improved the hardness result,
\textbf{Theorem B.6 ([Tre01])}. Unless RP=NP, there is no polynomial time $(7/8 + 5/\sqrt{B})$-approximate algorithm for MAXE3SAT$(B)$.

\textbf{Theorem B.7 ([Hås01, Tre01, MR10])}. Unless ETH fails, there is no $2^{\Omega(n^{1-o(1)})}$ time $(7/8 + 5/\sqrt{B})$-approximate algorithm for MAXE3SAT$(B)$.

\section{Our results}

We provide a hardness of approximation result for the neural network inversion problem. In particular, we prove unless RP=NP, there is no polynomial time that can approximately recover the input of a two-layer neural network with ReLU activation function. Formally, consider the inversion problem

\begin{equation}
    h(x) = z, \quad x \in [-1,1]^d,
\end{equation}

where $z \in \mathbb{R}^{m_2}$ is the hidden layer representation, $h$ is a two neural network with ReLU gates, specified as

\[ h(x) = W_2 \sigma(W_1 x + b), \quad W_2 \in \mathbb{R}^{m_2 \times m_1}, W_1 \in \mathbb{R}^{m_1 \times d}, b \in \mathbb{R}^{m_1} \]

We want to recover the input data $x \in [-1,1]^d$ given hidden layer representation $z$ and all parameters of the neural network (i.e., $W^{(1)}, W^{(2)}, b$). It is known the decision version of neural network inversion problem is NP-hard [LJDD19]. It is an open question whether approximation version is also hard. We show a stronger result which is, it is hard to give to constant approximation factor. Two notions of approximation could be consider here, one we called solution approximation.

\textbf{Definition B.8 (Solution approximation)}. Given a neural network $h$ and hidden layer representation $z$, we say $x' \in [-1,1]^d$ is an $\epsilon$ approximation solution for Eq. (4), if there exists $x \in [-1,1] \in \mathbb{R}^d$, such that

\[ \|x - x'\|_2 \leq \epsilon \sqrt{d} \text{ and } h(x) = z. \]

Roughly speaking, solution approximation means we recovery an approximate solution. The $\sqrt{d}$ factor in the above definition is a normalization factor and it is not essential.

One can also consider a weaker notion, which we called function value approximation.

\textbf{Definition B.9 (Function value approximation)}. Given a neural network $h$ and hidden layer representation $z$, we say $x' \in [-1,1]^d$ is $\epsilon$-approximate of value to Eq. (4), if

\[ \|h(x') - y\|_2 \leq \epsilon \sqrt{m_2}. \]

Again, the $\sqrt{m_2}$ factor is only for normalization. Suppose the neural network is $G$-Lipschitz continuous for constant $G$ (which is the case in our proof), then an $\epsilon$-approximate solution implies $G\epsilon$-approximation of value. For the purpose of this paper, we focus on the second notion (i.e., function value approximation). Given our neural network is (constant)-Lipschitz continuous, this immediately implies hardness result for the first one.

Our theorem is formally stated below. In the proof, we reduce from $\text{MAX3SAT}(B)$ and utilize Theorem B.6

\footnote{We remark there is a polynomial time algorithm for one layer ReLU neural network recovery}
Theorem B.10. There exists a constant $B > 1$, unless RP = NP, it is hard to $\frac{1}{60B}$-approximate Eq. (4). Furthermore, the neural network is $O(B)$-Lipschitz continuous, and therefore, it is hard to find an $\Omega(1/B^2)$ approximate solution to the neural network.

Using the above theorem, we can see that by taking a suitable constant $B > 1$, the neural network inversion problem is hard to approximate within some constant factor under both definitions. In particular, we conclude

Theorem B.11 (Formal statement of Theorem 3.3). Assume NP $\not=$ RP, there exists a constant $\epsilon > 0$, such that there is no polynomial time algorithm that is able to give an $\epsilon$-approximation to neural network inversion problem.

Proof of Theorem B.10. Given an 3SAT instance $\phi$ with $n$ variables and $m$ clause, where each variable appears in at most $B$ clauses, we construct a two layer neural network $h_\phi$ and output representation $z$ satisfy the following:

- Completeness. If $\phi$ is satisfiable, then there exists $x \in [0,1]^d$ such that $h_\phi(x) = z$.
- Soundness. For any $x$ such that $\|h_\phi(x) - z\|_2 \leq \frac{1}{60B} \sqrt{m_2}$, we can recover an assignment to $\phi$ that satisfies at least $\left(\frac{7}{8} + \frac{5}{\sqrt{B}}\right)m$ clauses
- Lipschitz continuous. The neural network is $O(B)$-Lipschitz.

We set $d = n$, $m_1 = m + 200B^2 n$ and $m_2 = m + 100B^2 n$. For any $j \in [m]$, we use $\phi_j$ to denote the $j$-th clause and use $h_{1,j}(x)$ to denote the output of the $j$-th neuron in the first layer, i.e., $h_{1,j}(x) = \sigma(W^{(1)}_j x + b_j)$, where $W^{(1)}_j$ is the $j$-th row of $W^{(1)}$. For any $i \in [n]$, we use $X_i$ to denote the $i$-th variable.

Intuitively, we use the input vector $x \in [-1,1]^n$ to denote the variable, and the first $m$ neurons in the first layer to denote the $m$ clauses. By taking

$$W^{(1)}_{j,i} = \begin{cases} 1, & X_i \in \phi_j; \\ -1, & X_i \in \phi_j^c; \\ 0, & \text{otherwise}. \end{cases}$$

for any $i \in [n], j \in [m]$, and viewing $x_i = 1$ as $X_i$ to be false and $x_i = -1$ as $X_i$ to be true. One can verify that $h_{1,j}(x) = 0$ if the clause is satisfied, and $h_{1,j}(x) = 1$ if the clause is unsatisfied. We simply copy the value in the second layer $h_j(x) = h_{1,j}(x)$ for $j \in [m]$.

For other neurons, intuitively, we make $100B^2$ copies for each $|x_i|$ ($i \in n$) in the output layer. This can be achieved by taking

$$h_{m+(i-1)-100B^2+k}(x) = h_{m+(i-1)-100B^2+k}(x) + h_{1,m+100B^2n+(i-1)-100B^2+k}(x)$$

and set

$$h_{1,m+(i-1)-100B^2+k}(x) = \max\{x_i, 0\} \quad h_{1,m+100B^2n+(i-1)-100B^2+k}(x) = \max\{-x_i, 0\}$$

for any $i \in [n], k \in [100B^2]$. Finally, we set the target output as

$$z = (0, \cdots, 0, 1, \cdots, 1)_{m/100B^2n}$$
We are left to prove the three claims we made about the neural network $h$ and the target output $z$. For the first claim, suppose $\phi$ is satisfiable and $X = (X_1, \cdots, X_n)$ is the assignment. Then as argued before, we can simply take $x_i = 1$ if $X_i$ is false and $x_i = -1$ is $X_i$ is true. One can check that $h(x) = z$.

For second claim, suppose we are given $x \in [-1, 1]^d$ such that

$$\|h(x) - z\|_2 \leq \frac{1}{60B\sqrt{m}}$$

We start from the simple case when $x$ is binary, i.e., $x \in \{-1, 1\}^n$. Again, by taking $X_i$ to be true if $x_i = -1$ and $X_i$ to be false when $x_i = 0$. One can check that the number of unsatisfied clause is at most

$$\|h(x) - z\|_2 \leq \frac{1}{3600B^2 m} \leq \frac{1}{12} m + \frac{3}{3600B^2 m} \leq \frac{1}{8m} - \frac{5}{\sqrt{B} m}$$

The third step follows from $n \leq 3m$, and the last step follows from $B \geq 15000$.

Next, we move to the general case that $x \in [-1, 1]^d$. We would round $x_i$ to $-1$ or $+1$ based on the sign. Define $\overline{x} \in \{-1, 1\}^n$ as

$$\overline{x}_i = \arg \min_t \{t - x_i\}$$

We prove that $\overline{x}$ induces an assignment that satisfies $(\frac{7}{8} + \frac{5}{\sqrt{B}})m$ clauses. It suffices to prove

$$\|h(\overline{x}) - z\|_2 - \|h(x) - z\|_2 \leq \frac{3}{100} m$$

since this implies the number of unsatisfied clause is bounded by

$$\|h(\overline{x}) - z\|_2 \leq \|h(x) - z\|_2 + (\|h(\overline{x}) - z\|_2 - \|h(x) - z\|_2)$$

$$\leq \frac{1}{12} m + \frac{3}{100} m$$

$$\leq \frac{1}{8m} - \frac{1}{5\sqrt{B} m},$$

where the second step follow from Eq. (5)(6), and the last step follows from $B \geq 10^7$.

We define $\Delta_i := |\overline{x}_i - x_i| = 1 - |x_i| \in [0, 1]$ and $T := m + 128B^2 n$. Then we have

$$\|h(\overline{x}) - z\|_2 - \|h(x) - z\|_2 = \sum_{j=1}^{T} (h_j(\overline{x}) - z_j) - (h_j(x) - z_j)^2$$

$$= \sum_{j=1}^{m} (h_j(\overline{x}) - z_j)^2 - (h_j(x) - z_j)^2$$

$$+ \sum_{j=m+1}^{T} (h_j(\overline{x}) - z_j)^2 - (h_j(x) - z_j)^2$$
\[
= \sum_{j=1}^{m} h_j(\overline{x})^2 - h_j(x)^2 - 100B^2 \sum_{i=1}^{n} \Delta_i^2 \\
\leq 2 \sum_{j=1}^{m} |h_{1,j}(\overline{x}) - h_{1,j}(x)| - 100B^2 \sum_{i=1}^{n} \Delta_i^2 \\
\leq 2 \sum_{j=1}^{m} \sum_{i \in \phi_j} \Delta_i - 100B^2 \sum_{i=1}^{n} \Delta_i^2 \\
\leq 2B \sum_{i=1}^{n} \Delta_i - 100B^2 \sum_{i=1}^{n} \Delta_i^2 \\
\leq \frac{n}{100} \\
\leq \frac{3m}{100}
\]

The third step follow from \( z_j = 0 \) for \( j \in [m] \) and for \( j \in \{m + 1, \cdots, m + 100B^2n\} \), \( z_j = 1 \), \( \|h_j(\overline{x}) - z_j\| = 0 \) and \( \|h_j(x) - z_j\|_2^2 = \Delta_i \) given \( j \in [m + (i - 1) \cdot 100B^2 + 1, i \cdot 100B^2] \). The fourth step follows from that \( h_j(x) = h_{1,j}(x) \in [0, 1] \) for \( j \in [m] \). The fifth step follows from the 1-Lipschitz continuity of the ReLU. The sixth step follows from each variable appears in at most \( B \) clause. This concludes the second claim.

For the last claim, by the Lipschitz continuity of ReLU, we have for any \( x_1, x_2 \)
\[
h(x_1) - h(x_2) = W^{(2)} \sigma(W^{(1)}x_1 + b) - W^{(2)} \sigma(W^{(1)}x_2 + b) \\
\leq \|W^{(2)}\| \cdot \|W^{(1)}\| \|x_1 - x_2\|_2
\]
It is easy to see that
\[
\|W^{(2)}\| \leq 2
\]
and
\[
\|W^{(2)}\| \leq \sqrt{200B^2 + 3B} \leq \sqrt{203B^2} \leq 15B,
\]
where the second step follows from \( B \geq 1 \).

Thus concluding the proof.

By assuming ETH and using Theorem B.7, we can conclude

**Corollary B.12** (Formal statement of Corollary 3.5). *Unless ETH fails, there exists a constant \( \epsilon > 0 \), such that there is no \( 2^{o(n^{1-o(1)})} \) time algorithm that is able to give an \( \epsilon \)-approximation to neural network inversion problem.*

The proof is similar to Theorem B.10, we omit it here.

## C Details of Data Recovery Experiments

### C.1 Inversion Model Details for Synthetic Dataset

In synthetic experiment, a malicious attacker recover original input data \( x \in \mathbb{R}^d \) by solving the the following optimization:
\[
x^* = \arg \min_{s \in \mathbb{R}^d} \|h(s) - z\|_1
\]
To estimate the optimal, we run an SGD optimizer with a learning rate of 0.01 and decayed weight $10^{-4}$ for 500 iterations. We test data recovery results on all the 200 testing samples. Namely, we solve the above optimization problems 200 times. Each time for a testing data point.

C.2 Inversion Model Details for Benchmark Dataset

In benchmark experiment, a malicious attacker recover original input data $x \in \mathbb{R}^d$ by solving the following optimization:

$$x^* = \arg \min_{s \in \mathbb{R}^d} \|h(s) - z\|_2 + \zeta \sum_{i,j} ((s_{i+1,j} - s_{i,j})^2 + (s_{i,j+1} - s_{i,j})^2)^{1/2},$$

where $i, j$ are the indexes of pixels in an image.

To estimate the optimal, we run an SGD optimizer with a learning rate of 10 and decayed weight $10^{-4}$ for 500 iterations. We used a grid searching on the space of $\zeta$. We find that the best data recovery comes from $\zeta = 0.01$ for SVHN dataset and $\zeta = 10^{-5}$ for MNIST and FashionMNIST by grid search.

C.3 Quantitative Metrics for Image Similarity Measurement

We adopt the following two known metrics to measure the similarity between $x^*$ and $x$:

- Normalized structural similarity index metric (SSIM), a perception-based metric that considers the similarity between images in structural information, luminance and contrast. It is widely used in image and video compression research to quantify the difference between the original and compressed images. The detailed calculation can be found in [WBSS04]. We normalize SSIM to take value range $[0, 1]$ (original SSIM takes value range $[-1, 1]$).

- Perceptual similarity (PSIM). Perceptual loss [JAFF16] has been widely used for training image generation and style transferring models [JAFF16, LLTMK19, WXWT18]. It emerges as a novel measurement for evaluating the discrepancy between high-level perceptual features that extracted by deep learning model of the reconstructed image and ground-truth image. We define PSIM as $1 -$ perceptual loss.

D Additional Experimental Results

D.1 Compare Penalty Strategies

A natural approach arise to reduce data separability could be adding a penalty on the pair-wise distance for the data representations within a class. We name this approach as UniCon. Its loss function denoted as $L_{\text{unicon}}$ can be written as:

$$L_{\text{unicon}} = \frac{1}{C \cdot |C_c|} \cdot \frac{1}{|C_c| - 1} \sum_{c \in C} \sum_{i \in C_c} \sum_{j \in C_c} \|h(x_i) - h(x_j)\|_2^2,$$

The final objective function $L := L_{\text{class}} + \lambda \cdot L_{\text{unicon}}$. This approach is similar to contrastive learning [KTW+20]. However, we observed that the approach is not as ideal as our proposed MixCon, in the sense of defending inversion attack. The intuition is that MixCon can induce confusing patterns to fool the neural network learning typical patterns from a class. Here we show the visualization for the three benchmark datasets in Figure 5. We select $\lambda = 1$ for MNIST and FashionMNIST and $\lambda = 0.5$ for SVHN in both UniCon and MixCon. Then we choose the $\beta = 1e-4$ for MixCon to match
the accuracy to Vanilla and UniCon. We use the same training and testing of MixCon for UniCon experiment. From the representative samples (while typical to the rest of the data samples), we observe worse data recovery quality of MixCon. Notably, the recovered results from UniCon keep the pattern of their class. While MixCon results in more blurred and indistinguishable patterns across classes. We compare the quantitative evaluation results between MixCon and UniCon in Table 4. We use metric SSIM and PSIM to evaluate the similarity between the recovered image and the original image. Lower scores indicate worse data recovery results. The data recovery experiment is performed on 100 testing samples, and we report the mean ± std and worst case (the best-recovered data) results. Except for the PSIM scores evaluated on MNIST, we get conformable evidence showing MixCon training is apt to defend inversion.

![Figure 5: Qualitative evaluation for image inversion results.](image)

|   | MNIST | FashionMNIST | SVHN |
|---|-------|--------------|------|
|   | Original Image | Vanilla | UniCon | MixCon | Original Image | Vanilla | UniCon | MixCon |
| MNIST | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) |
| FashionMNIST | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) |
| SVHN | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) | ![Image](image) |

Table 4: Quantitative evaluations for image recovery results. For fair evaluation, we match the data utility (accuracy) for Vanilla and MixCon. SSIM and PSIM are measured on 100 testing samples. Those scores are presented in mean ± std and worst-case (in parentheses) format. The smaller scores indicate harder data recovery.

### D.2 Additional Results on Cifar10

To further validate our method, we compare the inversion results on Cifar10, training with VGG16 [SZ14] with the default implementation. MixCon is applied to the output of the second convolutional block. The classification loss is a cross-entropy loss. Neural network training uses an SGD optimizer with a momentum of 0.1 and a weight decay of 5e-4. The total training epoch is 300, and the batch size is 300. The initial learning is 0.1, which decreases to 0.01 after the 150th epoch and decreases to 0.001 after the 250th epoch. To match accuracy with vanilla training, we select $\lambda = 1$ and $\beta = 1e - 8$ for MixCon, which achieves 91.70% accuracy, while the vanilla training achieves 92.03% accuracy.

---

7I have presented the comparison between MixCon and vanilla training in Table 3.
After training the network, we follow the white-box inversion attack approach by learning a decoder network to invert [Bis95, DB16]. Specifically, we have modified the existing generative adversarial neural network (GAN) [RMC15] by adding the last term in Eq. 7 and aim to generate an input-like image from hidden layer output as a supervised learning task. Suppose the target function is $h(x)$ (the trained encoder) and the attacker aims to estimate input of $x$ given its output $z = h(x)$, by solving an optimization problem for the following loss function:

$$ L_{\text{attack}} = -\frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} \left( \log(D(x_i)) + \log(1 - D(G(z_i))) + \xi \| x_i - G(z_i) \|_1 + \xi \| z_i - \Phi(G(z_i)) \|_1 \right),$$  \hspace{1cm} (7)$$

where we set $\xi = 10$, $D$ denotes discriminator and $G$ denotes generator. For training the attacker, we iteratively optimize $D$ and $G$ for 50 epochs. The batch size is set as 128. We use Adam optimizers with a learning rate of 0.002. We show the visualization results in Figure 6 and quantitative evaluation in Table 5. Figure 6 shows the recovered image using MixCon training strategy is much harder to recognize and less perceptually similar to the original images when comparing to vanilla training. The lower scores of MixCon in Table 5 attest our findings.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 6: Qualitative evaluation for image inversion results.**

|                  | SSIM      | PSIM       |
|------------------|-----------|------------|
|                  | mean ± std| worst      |
| Vanilla          | 0.53 ± 0.15| 0.9418     |
| MixCon (1e-8)    | 0.33 ± 0.15| 0.66       |
|                  | 0.85 ± 0.03| 0.94       |

Table 5: Quantitative evaluations for image recovery results. For fair evaluation, we match the data utility(accuracy) for Vanilla and MixCon. SSIM and PSIM are measured on 100 testing samples. Lower scores indicate harder to invert.