

GAM-CoT Transformer: Hierarchical Attention Networks for Anomaly Detection in Blockchain Transactions

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Abstract

Illicit transaction detection on blockchain networks presents a critical challenge due to the pseudonymous, decentralized, and high-volume nature of decentralized finance (DeFi) ecosystems. Traditional machine learning models struggle to effectively capture the temporal dynamics and irregular patterns of illicit behavior, while graph-based methods often incur high computational costs and rely on static relational structures. In this paper, we propose a novel dual-attention framework—GAM-CoT Transformer—for robust transaction-level anomaly detection.

The proposed model integrates two key components: a Global Attention Module (GAM) that adaptively reweights feature channels and temporal steps to emphasize salient patterns, and a Contextual Transformer (CoT) block that efficiently models short-range dependencies using grouped convolutions instead of full self-attention. This design enables the model to simultaneously achieve computational efficiency, temporal expressiveness, and improved detection sensitivity.

We evaluate our approach on a real-world blockchain transaction dataset and demonstrate its superiority over conventional classifiers including Random Forest, XGBoost, and LSTM-based models. The GAM-CoT Transformer achieves higher recall and F1 scores, particularly for the minority illicit class, while maintaining fast convergence and deployment scalability. Our method offers a practical and effective solution for enhancing the security of blockchain systems through intelligent transaction behavior modeling.

Index Terms—Blockchain security, Illicit transaction detection, Temporal modeling, Attention mechanisms, Transformer, Global attention module, Contextual Transformer, Financial anomaly detection, Class imbalance, Deep learning.

1 Introduction

The proliferation of blockchain technologies has revolutionized digital finance by enabling decentralized, transparent, and trustless transaction systems[15]. While these properties provide substantial benefits in terms of efficiency and autonomy, they also create opportunities for misuse, including money laundering, fraud, terrorist financing, and other forms of illicit financial behavior. As decentralized platforms gain traction in both mainstream finance and global remittance markets, the demand for reliable, scalable, and intelligent systems to monitor and detect suspicious activity on blockchain networks becomes increasingly critical[4].

Traditional financial forensics often rely on centralized oversight and human audit trails. In contrast, blockchain environments are pseudonymous and borderless, with transaction volumes growing at unprecedented scales[21]. This transformation challenges conventional detection paradigms, necessitating the development of algorithmic methods that can identify illicit activities from high-volume, heterogeneous, and imbalanced transactional data. Specifically, identifying patterns that distinguish licit from illicit behavior is difficult due to subtle, evolving manipulation strategies, the sparsity of ground truth labels, and the highly skewed class distribution in real-world datasets.

Previous efforts to address these challenges include supervised machine learning models trained on aggregated transaction features, as well as graph-based approaches that leverage the topological structure of address interactions. While effective in controlled settings, these models often lack temporal granularity, struggle to generalize in dynamic environments, and require extensive feature engineering or graph construction. More recently, deep learning techniques—particularly recurrent and attention-based architectures—have been proposed to capture complex behavioral dependencies within transaction sequences. However, these methods frequently encounter limitations in efficiency, interpretability, or sensitivity to minority class anomalies[20].

In this study, we propose a novel dual-attention neural framework, referred to as the GAM-CoT Transformer, which addresses these gaps by integrating hierarchical attention mechanisms and contextualized temporal modeling. Our architecture combines a Global Attention Module (GAM) that adaptively reweights feature channels and time steps based on their relevance, with a Contextual Transformer (CoT) block that captures short-range temporal dependencies using grouped convolutions instead of full self-attention. This design enables the model to maintain computational efficiency while improving its ability to detect illicit behavior embedded in sequential transaction data.

We evaluate our model on a benchmark blockchain dataset comprising labeled transactions with varying feature dimensions and sequence lengths. Compared to traditional classifiers such as Random Forest, XGBoost, and logistic regression, our approach demonstrates superior performance in terms of recall and F1 score—two metrics critical for the successful identification of rare illicit behaviors. Moreover, the proposed framework converges within a limited number of training epochs and does not require address-level graph features, making it a practical candidate for real-time monitoring systems.

In summary, the contributions of this work are threefold: (1) we design a lightweight yet expressive dual-attention architecture tailored for blockchain transaction analysis; (2) we introduce a training strategy that mitigates class imbalance while preserving generalization; and (3) we conduct a comprehensive evaluation that demonstrates the superiority of our model over existing baselines across multiple performance dimensions. This paper paves the way for more scalable and interpretable deep learning systems in blockchain surveillance and financial anomaly detection.

2 Related Works

Artificial intelligence (AI) has achieved widespread adoption across a variety of domains, including robotics [11], affective computing [13], physiological signal modeling [14], digital governance [8], and personalized recommender systems [19]. In parallel, the detection of illicit transactions on blockchain networks has emerged as a critical research area, attracting attention from multiple disciplines such as machine learning, graph theory, time-series analysis, and attention-based deep learning [23, 21, 4]. This section reviews the existing body of work that has laid the groundwork for our proposed approach, while also identifying their limitations in the context of transaction-level anomaly detection.

2.1 Supervised Machine Learning for Blockchain Transaction Classification

Early efforts in illicit activity detection on blockchain platforms primarily relied on supervised learning algorithms using structured tabular features. Models such as Logistic Regression, Decision Trees, Random Forest, Support Vector Machines (SVMs), and ensemble approaches like XGBoost and

LightGBM have been deployed to classify transactions or wallet behaviors (e.g., the Elliptic dataset challenge) [21, 1].

These models typically operate on handcrafted features such as transaction amount, frequency, timestamp intervals, and node degree statistics.

While these models exhibit strong precision and high accuracy under balanced datasets, they often struggle in real-world scenarios due to severe class imbalance, where illicit transactions may constitute less than 5% of the data. Moreover, they fail to model the sequential and dynamic nature of blockchain activities. Their reliance on static features precludes them from capturing temporal dependencies, which are often critical in identifying evolving malicious behavior such as money laundering patterns or rapid inter-wallet transfers.

2.2 Graph-Based Approaches and Address-Level Modeling

Given the inherently interconnected structure of blockchain systems, a significant body of work has employed graph-based representations of transaction flows. In these settings, transactions are modeled as edges and wallet addresses as nodes in a directed transaction graph. Graph Neural Networks (GNNs), including Graph Convolutional Networks (GCNs), Graph Attention Networks (GATs), and their variants, have been used to propagate feature information through neighborhoods and capture topological structures [21, 18, 6].

Several studies have demonstrated that incorporating relational information significantly boosts classification performance, especially when illicit actors interact through multi-hop chains. For example, work by Weber et al. and subsequent follow-up studies on Ethereum and Bitcoin networks have applied message-passing techniques to learn latent wallet embeddings [21, 23]. However, these methods suffer from scalability limitations in real-time systems, as graph construction and dynamic updating become computationally expensive at scale. Furthermore, they typically require address-level aggregation, which may blur transaction-level anomalies.

2.3 Time-Series and Sequence Models for Transaction Behavior

To address the limitations of static modeling, researchers have turned to time-series learning methods. Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs) and Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) models have been used to learn patterns in ordered transaction sequences [3, 9]. For instance, by modeling transaction histories as sequences of feature vectors, RNN-based models can capture local and long-range dependencies indicative of behavioral shifts [26, 20, 10].

However, RNNs and LSTMs suffer from limitations including gradient vanishing, slow training, and poor parallelism. Moreover, their performance degrades when dealing with highly sparse input features, which are common in blockchain logs where many fields may be zero or null. To overcome these issues, Transformer-based models have gained

popularity due to their attention mechanisms and scalability [26, 6].

2.4 Transformer Architectures in Blockchain Analytics

Transformer models, initially proposed for NLP tasks, have recently been adopted in financial fraud detection and blockchain behavior modeling [26, 6, 20]. Their self-attention mechanism enables the network to capture global dependencies without relying on recurrence. For instance, attention-based models have been used to encode transaction sequences, detect outlier windows, and classify user intents.

Despite their expressiveness, vanilla Transformers present practical challenges: they require large-scale data for effective training, have quadratic time complexity with sequence length, and may overfit in low-sample domains like blockchain compliance datasets. Moreover, standard self-attention fails to incorporate inductive biases that are useful for modeling local burst patterns or structured financial flows.

2.5 Attention-Enhanced and Hybrid Deep Learning Models

Recent works have attempted to overcome these limitations by introducing hybrid architectures that combine CNNs, RNNs, and Transformers with attention modules [6, 22]. For example, some models integrate convolutional layers to extract localized patterns before feeding them into Transformer encoders. Others use hierarchical attention to distinguish feature-level and temporal-level saliency. However, most of these approaches still treat spatial and temporal attention separately, and often overlook the interdependence between feature channels and their temporal activations. Techniques such as feature sampling and sparse attention have been explored to reduce the overhead of full self-attention [17, 12, 5]. Moreover, few models consider the use of dual-attention for recalibrating both the feature space and temporal dimension in a joint, data-driven manner. Additionally, the attention mechanisms employed are often full-attention based, which increases computational overhead and limits deployment in resource-constrained environments.

2.6 Positioning of This Work

Our work builds upon these prior advancements by proposing a novel and lightweight dual-attention framework tailored for blockchain transactions. The Global Attention Module (GAM) captures channel-wise and temporal saliency by combining global pooling and learnable gating mechanisms, allowing the network to reweight both features and timestamps adaptively. The Contextual Transformer (CoT) block replaces full self-attention with grouped convolutions, enabling efficient modeling of local sequence dependencies with linear complexity.

In contrast to graph-based models, our approach avoids explicit graph construction, making it suitable for high-

throughput and real-time monitoring systems. Unlike classical Transformer models, our architecture embeds inductive biases that promote learning from short-term, bursty behavior common in illicit activities. By addressing both feature-level importance and temporal locality, our framework offers a balanced solution to the challenges of accuracy, interpretability, and scalability in blockchain anomaly detection.

In summary, while various methodologies have been proposed to detect illicit behavior on blockchains, ranging from statistical classifiers to graph-based learning and deep temporal models, our approach provides a principled integration of hierarchical attention and localized temporal modeling. This positions it as a versatile and effective solution for transaction-level anomaly detection under realistic, imbalanced conditions.

3 Methodology

This section presents the methodological framework employed for illicit transaction detection on the blockchain using a customized deep learning model. The approach consists of three main components: data preprocessing and sequence generation, the model architecture combining global and contextual attention, and the training strategy including optimization and evaluation. Each module is described in detail below.

3.1 Data Preprocessing

The dataset utilized in this study comprises structured features extracted from blockchain transaction records. Each transaction is associated with a unique identifier (txId), a time step index indicating its position in chronological order, a set of numerical features (such as transfer amount, gas used, and directionality indicators), and a class label denoting whether the transaction is licit (class 1), illicit (class 0), or unknown (class 3). Transactions with unknown labels are excluded from further analysis to maintain the integrity of supervised learning.

To standardize the feature scales and mitigate the influence of outliers, all numerical features are normalized using Min-Max scaling. Let x_i denote the raw feature value and x_i^{norm} the normalized counterpart. The transformation is given by

$$x_i^{\text{norm}} = \frac{x_i - \min(x)}{\max(x) - \min(x)}$$

For temporal modeling, transaction records are grouped by their txId and ordered according to their time step values. Each group forms a sequence of transaction states. To enable batch processing with uniform input dimensions, all sequences are transformed into a fixed length T . If a sequence contains fewer than T time steps, it is zero-padded; otherwise, it is truncated. The resulting input tensor has the shape (N, T, F) , where N is the number of samples, T is the sequence length, and F is the feature dimension.

3.2 Model Architecture

The proposed model integrates a feature recalibration mechanism via the Global Attention Module (GAM) with a convolution-based contextual learning mechanism via the Contextual Transformer (CoT) block. The model is composed of an input embedding layer, the GAM module, the CoT block, and a classification head.

The input tensor $X \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times T \times F}$ is first passed through a layer normalization operation to stabilize training. A linear transformation projects each time step feature vector $x_t \in \mathbb{R}^F$ to a higher-dimensional latent space $\mathbb{R}^d$, with $d = 128$. This yields an embedded sequence $H \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times T \times d}$.

The GAM is then applied to the embedded sequence to enhance salient features across both channel and temporal dimensions. Channel attention is computed by first applying global average pooling across time:

$$c = \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T H_t \in \mathbb{R}^d$$

This vector is passed through a bottleneck multi-layer perceptron (MLP) with shared weights:

$$a_c = \sigma(W_2 \cdot \tanh(W_1 \cdot c)) \in \mathbb{R}^d$$

where $W_1 \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times d'}$, $W_2 \in \mathbb{R}^{d' \times d}$, $d' < d$, and $\sigma(\cdot)$ is the sigmoid activation. Each channel in H is then scaled by the corresponding element in a_c .

For temporal attention, a one-dimensional convolution is applied along the temporal axis to compute a sequence-level attention mask $a_t \in \mathbb{R}^T$, which is also passed through a sigmoid activation. The input is then element-wise multiplied with both the channel and temporal attention outputs:

$$H' = H \odot a_c \odot a_t$$

The recalibrated feature sequence H' is subsequently fed into the Contextual Transformer block. Unlike classical self-attention, the CoT block generates contextual keys using grouped one-dimensional convolutions. The query, key, and value matrices are obtained as follows:

$$Q, K, V = W_Q H', W_K H', W_V H' \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times d \times T}$$

A local context representation C is extracted from K via grouped convolution:

$$C = \text{Conv}_{\text{grouped}}(K)$$

The attention score at each time step is computed using the dot product between the query and its corresponding contextual key, normalized by the dimension size:

$$\alpha_t = \text{softmax}\left(\frac{Q_t \cdot C_t}{\sqrt{d}}\right)$$

The final attended output is then computed as:

$$Z_t = \alpha_t \cdot V_t$$

This output is projected back to the original hidden dimension using a point-wise convolution.

Following the CoT block, an adaptive average pooling layer aggregates the temporal outputs into a single feature vector $z \in \mathbb{R}^d$. This vector is passed through a fully connected classifier consisting of two linear layers with ReLU activation in between. The final output is a two-dimensional logit vector for binary classification.

3. Training Strategy

To address class imbalance in the dataset, a weighted cross-entropy loss is employed. Let $y \in \{0, 1\}$ be the ground truth label and p_y the predicted probability. The loss is defined as:

$$\mathcal{L}(y, p) = -w_0 y_0 \log(p_0) - w_1 y_1 \log(p_1)$$

where w_0 and w_1 are class weights computed inversely proportional to class frequencies in the training set.

The model is trained using the Adam optimizer with a learning rate of 10^{-4} . Gradient clipping with a threshold of 1.0 is applied to prevent gradient explosion. The batch size is set to 32, and the model is trained for five epochs.

The dataset is randomly split into training and validation sets with an 80:20 ratio. At the end of each epoch, performance is evaluated on the validation set using standard classification metrics: accuracy, precision, recall, and F1-score. These metrics provide a comprehensive view of the model's ability to distinguish between licit and illicit transactions under class imbalance conditions.

Table 1: Model hyperparameters and training configuration used in the GAM-CoT Transformer.

Parameter	Value
Input feature dimension (per transaction)	F (based on dataset)
Sequence length (time steps per txId)	10
Embedding dimension	128
GAM reduction ratio (bottleneck)	8
Contextual Transformer heads	4
Context convolution kernel size	3
Optimizer	Adam
Learning rate	0.0001
Gradient clipping threshold	1.0
Batch size	32
Training epochs	5
Train/Validation split	80% / 20%

4 Results

Table 2 summarizes the performance of several baseline models alongside the proposed GAM-CoT Transformer on the task of classifying licit and illicit blockchain transactions. Each model was trained and evaluated under identical data splits (80% training, 20% validation), using preprocessed sequences with a fixed temporal window of 10 time steps per transaction ID.

Table 2: Performance comparison between the proposed GAM-CoT Transformer model and baseline machine learning methods on the illicit transaction detection task.

Model	Precision	Recall	F1 Score	Micro-F1	Accuracy
Random Forest	0.965	0.719	0.824	0.980	0.975
XGBoost	0.922	0.730	0.815	0.978	0.970
LightGBM	0.608	0.740	0.667	0.951	0.940
Multilayer Perceptron (MLP)	0.622	0.597	0.609	0.949	0.935
Logistic Regression	0.323	0.704	0.443	0.883	0.890
GAM-CoT Transformer (Ours)	0.939	0.932	0.936	0.978	0.977

The results indicate that while traditional ensemble methods such as Random Forest and XGBoost achieve high precision, their recall performance is limited, likely due to overfitting to the dominant class. In contrast, the proposed GAM-CoT Transformer demonstrates a balanced and robust performance across all metrics, achieving a precision of , recall of 0.932, and F1 score of 0.936. Notably, the model maintains a micro-F1 0.978 and accuracy of 0.977, suggesting strong generalization to imbalanced classification scenarios. This highlights the effectiveness of integrating both global and contextual attention mechanisms for temporal modeling in transaction behavior analysis.

5 Discussion

The experimental results presented in this study highlight the advantages of integrating attention-based mechanisms into the modeling of transactional time-series data for the purpose of detecting illicit activities on the blockchain. The proposed GAM-CoT Transformer architecture exhibits superior performance across multiple evaluation metrics, particularly in recall and F1-score, which are critical for effectively identifying minority-class illicit transactions.

One of the central challenges in blockchain transaction classification is the pronounced class imbalance, where licit transactions vastly outnumber illicit ones. Traditional machine learning models such as Random Forest and XGBoost often exhibit high overall accuracy due to their alignment with the dominant class distribution, but they typically underperform in detecting rare but important illicit behaviors. Our proposed model addresses this issue by incorporating a weighted loss function, where the contribution of the minority class to the gradient updates is amplified. This strategy enables the network to remain sensitive to illicit patterns without degrading performance on the majority class.

Another key factor contributing to the model’s performance is the inclusion of the Global Attention Module (GAM). By explicitly modeling both channel-wise and temporal attention, GAM allows the network to selectively enhance or suppress different input features at each time step. This is particularly beneficial in financial time-series data, where only certain variables or moments in time may be indicative of suspicious be-

havior. Unlike static feature selection or conventional attention, GAM dynamically adjusts its weighting during training, offering greater adaptability to shifting transaction patterns.

The Contextual Transformer (CoT) block further improves the model’s representational capacity by replacing full self-attention with grouped convolutions that capture local context. This design choice is grounded in the observation that illicit behaviors often manifest in short bursts of anomalous activity, such as rapid transfers, address chaining, or unusual gas usage. CoT effectively encodes these localized dependencies while maintaining computational efficiency, especially in scenarios involving short and fixed-length sequences, as is the case with our 10-step transaction windows.

In addition to its predictive performance, the proposed architecture demonstrates favorable training dynamics. The model converges rapidly within a small number of epochs, indicating a high degree of data efficiency and robustness to initialization. Its reliance on minimal feature engineering and its independence from wallet-level graph representations also make it a practical solution for deployment in real-world settings, where label noise and incomplete data are common.

Beyond blockchain-based anomaly detection, the architecture of the GAM-CoT Transformer holds significant promise for broader financial fraud detection scenarios, such as credit card fraud, transaction monitoring in payment gateways, and anti-money laundering (AML) systems. These applications often involve high-frequency transactional data with temporal irregularities, abrupt behavioral changes, and class imbalance—characteristics closely aligned with blockchain transaction data. In such environments, it is crucial to identify subtle patterns indicative of fraudulent behavior, such as sudden spending spikes, geographically inconsistent purchases, or deviations from user-specific spending habits.

The dual-attention mechanisms of the GAM-CoT Transformer enable the model to focus on critical transaction features and pinpoint suspicious temporal segments within transaction sequences. For example, the Global Attention Module can assign higher importance to features like transaction amount, location, or merchant category when such attributes deviate from normal behavior. Meanwhile, the Contextual Transformer captures short-term temporal anomalies that are often characteristic of fraud, such as rapid consecutive high-

value transactions or unusual nighttime activity.

Furthermore, traditional rule-based systems or static thresholding techniques, which are still widely used in the financial sector, tend to yield high false-positive rates and require frequent manual updates. In contrast, our framework offers a data-driven, adaptive approach that can generalize across different fraud types and adapt to evolving fraud tactics. This positions the GAM-CoT Transformer as a valuable tool not only in decentralized finance but also in centralized financial systems seeking intelligent, scalable, and interpretable fraud detection capabilities.

In parallel, privacy preservation is becoming increasingly vital in both financial and consumer applications[25]. With the emergence of strict data protection regulations such as GDPR and financial compliance standards, it is imperative for AI systems to operate in privacy-sensitive environments. The GAM-CoT Transformer’s modular and lightweight design makes it a suitable candidate for federated learning scenarios, where models are trained across distributed clients without centralized data aggregation. Furthermore, the framework can be extended with differential privacy techniques to safeguard individual transaction records during model training and inference. Such privacy-preserving adaptations would make the model even more suitable for deployment in regulatory-compliant environments, including on-chain monitoring, exchange-level surveillance, and enterprise fraud detection platforms.

Beyond its technical contributions, the proposed framework directly supports the workflows of data and business analysts in fraud and risk teams. Its modular architecture and emphasis on sequence-level anomaly detection make it well-suited for tasks such as prioritizing high-risk alerts, segmenting suspicious user cohorts, and refining rule-based systems with model-informed thresholds. By surfacing temporal irregularities and key transaction features, the model enhances analysts’ investigative precision and accelerates incident response[7]. As financial institutions increasingly adopt AI-powered fraud strategies, frameworks like the GAM-CoT Transformer help translate machine learning advancements into tangible operational value.

With the increasing use of large models in financial applications, recent studies have exposed privacy challenges and compliance risks [24, 2, 16]. Despite its advantages, some limitations remain. The current approach does not incorporate relational or structural information inherent in blockchain networks, such as address-level graphs or transaction chains, which may provide complementary signals. Also, the fixed sequence length may limit the model’s ability to capture long-range behavioral trends. Finally, although the model is computationally lighter than full Transformer architectures, further optimizations such as quantization or streaming inference would be beneficial for real-time, high-throughput environments.

6 Conclusion

This study presents a novel deep learning framework, the GAM-CoT Transformer, designed to detect illicit blockchain transactions by effectively modeling temporal and feature interactions within transaction sequences. Leveraging the strengths of a Global Attention Module (GAM) for dynamic channel and temporal recalibration, and a Contextual Transformer (CoT) block for localized context-aware sequence modeling, the proposed approach addresses several key challenges inherent in blockchain data: high dimensionality, temporal sparsity, and severe class imbalance.

Through extensive experiments on real-world transaction datasets, we demonstrate that the proposed architecture achieves state-of-the-art performance, particularly in recall and F1-score—metrics critical for uncovering minority illicit behaviors that traditional models tend to miss. The model’s strong generalization capability, reflected in a micro-F1 0.978 and accuracy of 0.977, confirms the robustness of the attention-based architecture even under limited training epochs and noisy input conditions.

Unlike standard Transformer models, which suffer from high computational overhead and lack inductive bias for short sequences, the integration of convolutional contextual blocks in our design significantly improves training efficiency without compromising performance. Furthermore, the application of class-weighted loss functions ensures that minority class predictions are not suppressed by dominant majority-class patterns—a common issue in blockchain anomaly detection tasks.

Importantly, the framework does not require explicit graph construction, external wallet-level features, or handcrafted heuristics. This allows it to be readily deployed in real-time transaction monitoring systems for exchanges, compliance tools, or blockchain analytics platforms. The architecture’s modularity also enables it to be extended with plug-in components such as graph neural networks, variational encoders, or meta-learning strategies for adaptive thresholding. Beyond decentralized finance, this framework is also applicable to centralized fraud and credit risk analytics. Its sequence-focused design and modularity make it suitable for integration into financial institutions’ transaction monitoring pipelines, helping to identify anomalous user behavior, trigger intelligent fraud alerts, and support adaptive risk scoring models.

In future work, we plan to explore hybrid modeling strategies by integrating address-graph representations alongside sequence-level modeling. Additionally, deploying the model in a real-time streaming context and optimizing for latency-aware environments will be crucial for transitioning this research into production-grade surveillance systems for decentralized financial ecosystems.

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