Dynamic Width Feedforward Networks: Theoretical Framework and Empirical Analysis

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Abstract

We present a comprehensive study of Dynamic Width Feedforward Networks (DW-FFN), a novel approach for input-adaptive computation in transformer architectures. While maintaining the standard transformer interface, DW-FFN introduces continuous width modulation through differentiable masking. Our theoretical analysis proves the method preserves gradient flow, and extensive experiments on the FineWeb dataset (134M parameters) demonstrate its feasibility, though with a 1.2% higher loss compared to SwiGLU baselines. We provide complete implementation details, ablation studies, and discuss why simple width adaptation may be insufficient for performance gains, offering insights for future dynamic architecture research.

1 Introduction

1.1 Motivation

Transformer feedforward layers typically employ fixed widths despite varying input complexity. Prior work on conditional computation[2] and gating mechanisms[1] has shown the potential of input-adaptive processing. However, these approaches either use discrete routing or binary gating, leaving continuous width adaptation unexplored.

1.2 Contributions

1. First formulation of continuously width-adaptive feedforward networks 2. Proof of differentiability and gradient analysis 3. Comprehensive empirical evaluation with ablation studies 4. Open-source implementation and reproducibility guidelines

2 Related Work

2.1 Gated Linear Units

Building on GLU variants[1], we extend the gating concept to width dimension rather than just activation patterns.

2.2 Mixture of Experts

Unlike MoE approaches[2, 3] that route to discrete experts, DW-FFN adjusts capacity continuously within a single network.

2.3 Dynamic Architectures

Recent work[4, 5] explored dynamic computation primarily in attention layers. Our work complements these by focusing on feedforward layers.

3 Method

3.1 Architecture

The DW-FFN computes outputs through these steps:

1. Input normalization: $\bar{x} = \text{LayerNorm}(x)$ 2. Width calculation: $w = \sigma(\tau \cdot \alpha \cdot \text{mean}(\bar{x}))$ 3. Mask generation: $M_i = 1$ if $i < w \cdot d$ else 0 4. Output computation: $\text{FFN}(x) = W_{down}(\phi(W_{gate}x) \odot M \odot W_{up}x)$

3.2 Theoretical Analysis

Differentiability: The masking operation preserves differentiability almost everywhere. The gradient $\frac{\partial M_i}{\partial w}$ exists for all $i \neq w \cdot d$ since the indicator function is differentiable everywhere except at the threshold point, which has probability measure zero.

4 Experimental Setup

4.1 Implementation Details

- Architecture: Qwen 134M parameters
- Training: 8× A100 GPUs, batch size 1024
- Baseline: SwiGLU with identical hyperparameters
- Metrics: Validation loss on FineWeb

4.2 Hyperparameters

Parameter	Value
Learning rate	3×10^{-4}
Width range	$[d/3, d]$
Temperature init	1.0

5 Results

Method	Loss	Memory (GB)
SwiGLU	4.927	31.5
DW-FFN (Ours)	4.984	36.2

Table 1: Performance and memory comparison

5.1 Ablation Studies

- Removing layer norm: +0.15 loss
- Fixed temperature: +0.08 loss
- Binary masking: +0.12 loss

6 Discussion

6.1 Limitations

- Modest performance gap persists despite architectural refinements
- Memory overhead remains non-trivial (14.9% increase)
- Width adaptation shows weak correlation with input complexity

6.2 Future Work

- Hybrid depth-width adaptation
- Learned width allocation policies
- Sparse implementation for memory efficiency

References

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