

GEP-NET radiomics: a systematic review and radiomics quality score assessment

Citation for published version (APA):

Staal, F. C. R., Aalbersberg, E. A., van der Velden, D., Wilthagen, E. A., Tesselaar, M. E. T., Beets-Tan, R. G. H., & Maas, M. (2022). GEP-NET radiomics: a systematic review and radiomics quality score assessment. *European Radiology*, 32(10), 7278-7294. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00330-022-08996-w>

Document status and date:

Published: 01/10/2022

DOI:

[10.1007/s00330-022-08996-w](https://doi.org/10.1007/s00330-022-08996-w)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Document license:

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GEP-NET radiomics: a systematic review and radiomics quality score assessment

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Received: 21 February 2022 / Revised: 25 May 2022 / Accepted: 26 June 2022
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Abstract

Objective The number of radiomics studies in gastroenteropancreatic neuroendocrine tumours (GEP-NETs) is rapidly increasing. This systematic review aims to provide an overview of the available evidence of radiomics for clinical outcome measures in GEP-NETs, to understand which applications hold the most promise and which areas lack evidence.

Methods PubMed, Embase, and Wiley/Cochrane Library databases were searched and a forward and backward reference check of the identified studies was executed. Inclusion criteria were (1) patients with GEP-NETs and (2) radiomics analysis on CT, MRI or PET. Two reviewers independently agreed on eligibility and assessed methodological quality with the radiomics quality score (RQS) and extracted outcome data.

Results In total, 1364 unique studies were identified and 45 were included for analysis. Most studies focused on GEP-NET grade and differential diagnosis of GEP-NETs from other neoplasms, while only a minority analysed treatment response or long-term outcomes. Several studies were able to predict tumour grade or to differentiate GEP-NETs from other lesions with a good performance (AUCs 0.74–0.96 and AUCs 0.80–0.99, respectively). Only one study developed a model to predict recurrence in pancreas NETs (AUC 0.77). The included studies reached a mean RQS of 18%.

Conclusion Although radiomics for GEP-NETs is still a relatively new area, some promising models have been developed. Future research should focus on developing robust models for clinically relevant aims such as prediction of response or long-term outcome in GEP-NET, since evidence for these aims is still scarce.

Key Points

- *The majority of radiomics studies in gastroenteropancreatic neuroendocrine tumours is of low quality.*
- *Most evidence for radiomics is available for the identification of tumour grade or differentiation of gastroenteropancreatic neuroendocrine tumours from other neoplasms.*
- *Radiomics for the prediction of response or long-term outcome in gastroenteropancreatic neuroendocrine tumours warrants further research.*

Keywords Neuroendocrine tumors · Gastrointestinal neoplasms · Artificial intelligence · Machine learning

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Abbreviations

AP	Arterial phase
DL	Deep learning
G1/2/3	Grade 1/2/3
GEP-NET	Gastroenteropancreatic neuroendocrine tumour
IBSI	Image Biomarker Standardisation Initiative
LASSO	Least absolute shrinkage and selection operator
LR	Logistic regression
ML	Machine learning
NEC	Neuroendocrine carcinoma
PDAC	Pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma
PFS	Progression-free survival
pNETs	Pancreatic neuroendocrine tumour
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analysis
PVP	Portal venous phase
RF	Random forest
RFS	Recurrence-free survival
ROI	Region of interest
RQS	Radiomics quality score
SVM	Support vector machine
WHO	World Health Organization

Introduction

During the past decades, it has been established that tumours are heterogeneous entities [1] and it is widely accepted that this heterogeneity has implications for tumour development, treatment outcome and survival [2]. Gastroenteropancreatic neuroendocrine tumours (GEP-NETs) are a rare group of heterogeneous tumours with neuro-endocrine differentiation within the gastrointestinal tract or pancreas [3], excluding the poorly differentiated neuroendocrine carcinoma (NEC). Even with available biomarkers and imaging, it remains a challenge to predict the clinical course of an individual patient and select the optimal treatment, because of the heterogeneity between and within tumours [4, 5].

Over the past years, it has been established that medical imaging contains more data than is visible to the naked eye [6, 7] and can be converted to innumerable features and thereby quantify tissue heterogeneity [6, 8, 9]. This technique, radiomics, can describe the relationship between the intensity and position of voxels within an image. Promising results have been achieved for diagnosis, response assessment and prediction of long-term outcome in several tumour types [9, 10]. For GEP-NETs, the potential of radiomics for several aims has been investigated: predicting tumour grade, distinguishing NET from other tumours, and prediction of response and long-term outcomes. However, radiomics has only recently been introduced to GEP-NETs and the number of studies is rapidly increasing, yet with conflicting results. Hence, it is unclear which specific applications of radiomics in the field

of GEP-NETs hold the most promise and what areas lack evidence. The radiomics quality score (RQS) is a tool that has been developed specifically to assess the methodological quality of radiomics studies and has not yet been used in GEP-NETs [8, 11, 12]. This systematic review aims to provide an overview of the available literature regarding the use of radiomics in GEP-NETs based on the main aims and to identify promising research directions for future radiomics studies.

Methods and materials

Search strategy

This study was conducted according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analysis (PRISMA) statement [13]. The review protocol is available through PROSPERO (CRD42021226844). The search strategy was conducted by a medical information specialist (E.W.). PubMed, Embase and Scopus were searched until August 2021 (Fig. 1). The following terms, including synonyms and closely related words, were used: ‘GEP-NET’ AND ‘radiomics’. A detailed search strategy is described in the supplement. Citations and references of eligible studies were searched using Scopus to identify further studies for inclusion, until no more new eligible articles were identified.

Study selection

Two reviewers independently reviewed titles and abstracts for eligibility. The first reviewer (F.S.) reviewed all studies and the role of the second reviewer was fulfilled by two reviewers (D.v.d.V. or E.A.). All radiomics analyses were considered for inclusion (i.e. texture analysis, machine learning and deep learning [DL] methods). Articles that met the following criteria were included: (1) patients with GEP-NETs, and (2) radiomics analysis on computed tomography (CT), magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) or positron emission tomography (PET). Reviews, case series ($n < 10$), letters to the editor, conference abstracts and studies with no English text were excluded. Disagreements were resolved by discussion and consensus.

Data collection

Two reviewers independently extracted from the included studies, using a pre-defined data extraction form: study population, clinical outcome, primary tumour, intervention, imaging modality, reference standard, region of interest (ROI), details about the radiomics workflow (including feature extraction, selection, and statistical analysis) and most relevant results. Disagreements were resolved by discussion and consensus. Results were grouped according to three categories based on the main aims: (1) predicting tumour grade, (2)

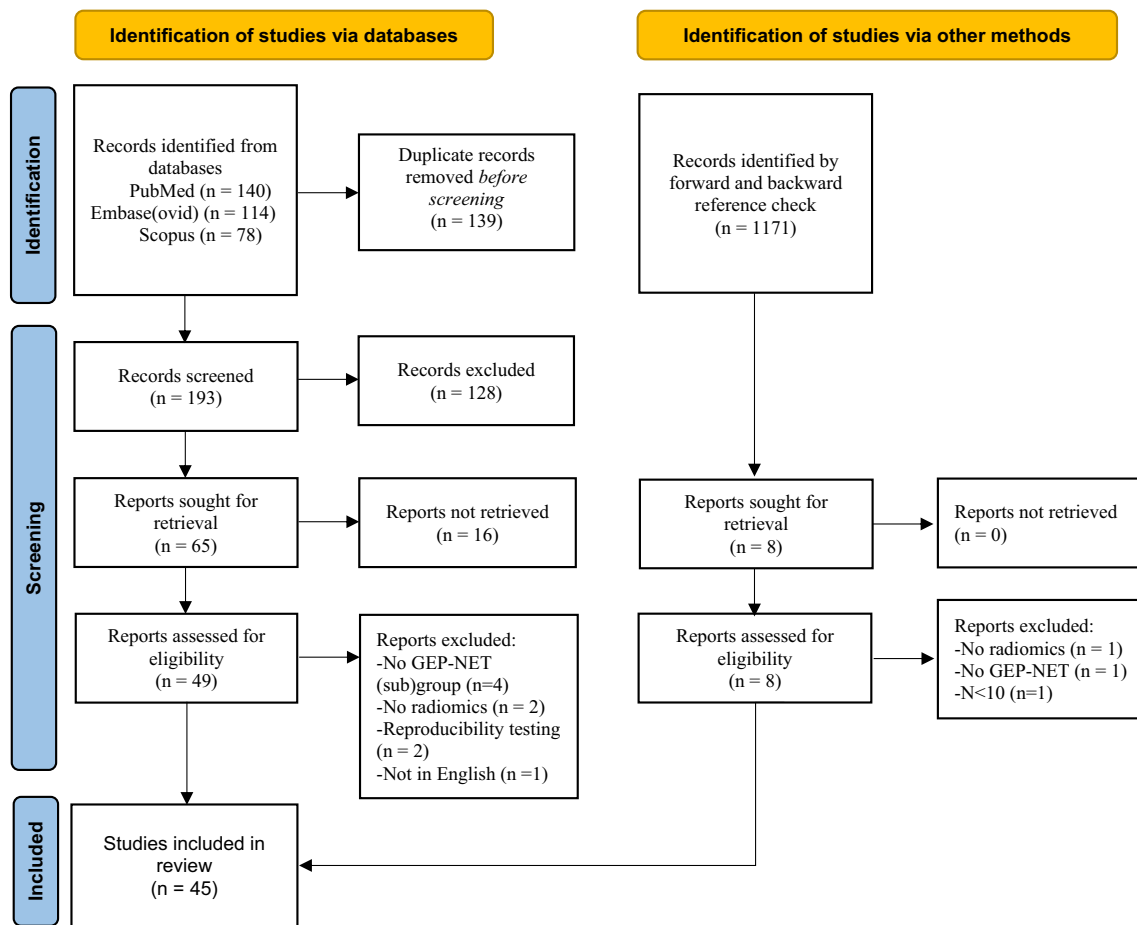


Fig. 1 PRISMA flowchart

distinguishing GEP-NETs from other tumours and (3) response and long-term outcome measures.

Quality assessment

The risk of bias and methodological quality of the studies were assessed independently by two reviewers, using the RQS [8]. This tool was developed to assess the quality of radiomics research. The RQS has 16 components that are rated resulting in a total score ranging from -8 to 36, which is then converted into a percentage score (0–100%). Since the RQS and its components were not developed for DL methods, these were excluded from the RQS evaluation. Disagreements between reviewers were resolved by discussion until consensus.

Statistical analyses

Subgroup analyses were performed to assess the differences in total RQS according to the study aim (predicting tumour grade, distinguishing NET from other tumours and response and long-term outcome measures) and imaging modality (CT, MRI or PET), using the Kruskal-Wallis test. If a study

evaluated multiple aims, it was taken into account for each aim. Statistical analyses were performed with Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, v27.0). A p value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results

Study selection

The initial search identified 193 relevant studies; 128 were excluded based on title and abstract screening. Full-text versions of the remaining 65 manuscripts were reviewed and 25 studies were excluded. The backward- and forward reference check of the 40 included studies identified another 5 studies for inclusion. Finally, 45 studies were included for analysis (Fig. 1).

Included studies

The study characteristics, details about radiomics workflow and main results are summarised in Tables 1 and 2. The included studies were published between 2015 and 2021 (Fig.

Table 1 Overview of included studies

Authors	Aim	# Patients	Primary tumour (ROI)	Modality (sequence/phase)	Outcome	Reference standard	Intervention	Main results/conclusion	RQS		
		GEP- NET	Other NET								
Azoulay (2020) [15]	Differentiate pNET from pNEC	14	23	37	pNET/pNEC (pancreas)	CT (AP and PVP)	G3 vs NEC	Pathology	-	Several first-order radiomics features can differentiate between pNET and pNEC	0%
Beleu (2020) [16]	Predict tumour grade	56	-	56	pNET (liver metastases)	CT (AP or PVP)	G1/2 vs G3	Pathology	-	First-order features can predict tumour grade better than shape, margin or calcifications	0%
Benedetti (2021) [17]	Predict tumour grade	39	-	39	pNET (pancreas)	CT (AP and nec)	G1 vs G2/3	Pathology	-	Only asphericity can predict tumour grade	0%
Bevilacqua (2021) [18]	Predict tumour grade	51	-	51	pNET (pancreas)	[⁶⁸ Ga]Ga-DOTANOC PET/CT	G1 vs G2	Pathology	-	A radiomics score with both radiomics and non-radiomics features has the same performance to predict tumour grade than a radiomics score with only radiomics features	36%
Bian (2020) [19]	Predict tumour grade	102	-	102	pNET (pancreas)	CT (PVP)	G1 vs G2	Pathology	-	A CT-based radiomics score is able to predict pNET tumour grade	50%
Bian (2020) [20]	Predict tumour grade	157	-	157	pNET (pancreas)	MRI (T1, AP, PVP)	G1 vs G2/3	Pathology	-	An MRI-based radiomics score is able to predict pNET tumour grade	50%
Bian (2020) [21]	Predict tumour grade	139	-	139	pNET (pancreas)	MRI (T1, T2)	G1 vs G2/3	Pathology	-	A ML model with both radiomics and non-radiomics features has the best performance to predict tumour grade	47%
Canellas (2018) [22]	1) Predict tumour grade 2) predict progression	101	-	101	pNET (pancreas)	CT (PVP)	1) G1 vs G2/3 2) PFS	1) Pathology 2) > 20% increase in size OR new lesion	surgical resection	First-order features can predict tumour grade	0%
Chakraborty (2018) [23]	Predict tumour grade	55	-	55	pNET (pancreas)	CT (AP)	G1/2 vs G3	Pathology	-	A radiomics ML model is able to predict tumour grade	3%
Cheng (2019) [24]	Predict tumour grade	37	-	37	pNET (pancreas)	CT (nec, ce [phase not specified])	G1 vs G2/3	Pathology	-	First-order features are able to predict tumour grade	0%
Choi (2018) [25]	Predict tumour grade	66	-	66	pNET (pancreas)	CT (AP and PVP)	G1 vs G2/3	Pathology	-	Several radiomics features from both AP and PVP on 3D and 2D can predict tumour grade	0%
D'Onofrio (2019) [26]	Predict tumour grade	100	-	100	pNET (pancreas)	CT (AP+PVP)	G1 vs G2 vs G3	Pathology	-	First-order features can predict tumour grade	0%
De Robertis (2018) [27]	Predict tumour grade	42	-	42	pNET (pancreas)	MRI (T1, T1FS, T2, T2FS, late phase, post contrast, ADC)	G1 vs G2/3	Pathology	-	Several first-order features can predict tumour grade	0%
		106	-	106	pNET (pancreas)	MRI (T1-cc)	G1 vs G2 vs G3	Pathology	-		*

Table 1 (continued)

Authors	Aim	# Patients		Primary tumour (ROI)	Modality (sequence/phase)	Outcome	Reference standard	Intervention	Main results/conclusion	RQS
		GEP- NET	Other NET							
Gao (2019) [28]	Predict tumour grade	138	-	138 pNET (pancreas)	CT (AP and PVP)	G1 vs G2/3	Pathology	-	Deep learning (CNN) can predict tumour grade	53%
Gu (2019) [29]	Predict tumour grade	37	-	37 pNET (pancreas)	CT (AP)	G1/2 vs G3 (incl NEC)	Pathology	-	A LR model with both radiomics and non-radiomics features has the best performance to predict tumour grade	0%
Guo (2019) [30]	Predict tumour grade	77	-	77 pNET (pancreas)	MRI (T2, DWI)	G1 vs G2 vs G3	Pathology	-	First-order features can predict pNET tumour grade	6%
Han (2021) [31]	Differentiate pNET from cystadenoma	54	66	120 pNET/pCystadenoma (pancreas)	CT (PVP)	pNET vs pCystadenoma	Pathology	-	A LR model is able to predict tumour grade	28%
He (2019) [32]	Differentiate pNET from PDAC	147	-	147 pNET/PDAC (pancreas)	CT (AP)	pNET vs PDAC	Pathology	-	Several radiomics ML models can differentiate pNETs from pancreatic cystadenomas	47%
Li (2018) [33]	Differentiate pNET from PDAC	25	50	75 pNET/PDAC (pancreas)	CT (PVP)	Hypovascular pNET vs PDAC	Pathology	-	A ML model with either radiomics only or a combination of radiomics and non-radiomics features has the best performance to discriminate pNET from PDAC, compared to a model with non-radiomics features only	0%
Li (2020) [34]	Differentiate pNET from SPN	61	58	119 pNET/SPN (pancreas)	MRI (T1, T2, ce/AP, PVP, DP1, DWI, ADC)	pNET vs SPN	Pathology	-	First-order features are able to differentiate PDAC from pNET	22%
Liang (2019) [35]	Predict tumour grade	137	-	137 pNET (pancreas)	CT (AP)	G1 vs G2/3	Pathology	-	A radiomics ML is better able to distinguish pNET from SPN, compared to radiological features only	47%
Liang (2020) [36]	Predict tumour grade	61	-	61 Rectal NET (rectum)	CT (AP, PVP)	G1 vs G2/3/NEC	Pathology	-	A radiomics nomogram combined with non-radiomics features has the best performance to predict pNET tumour grade	0%
Lin (2019) [37]	Differentiate pNET from accessory spleen	21	13	34 pNET/accessory Spleen (pancreas)	CT (AP)	pNET vs spleen	Pathology	-	Several first-order features can predict tumour grade	0%
Liu (2021) [38]	Predict tumour grade	123	-	123 pNET (pancreas)	ceCT (AP) + MRI (T2, AP, PP, PVP)	G1 vs G2/3	Pathology	-	First-order features can differentiate pNET from accessory spleen	44%
Luo (2020) [39]	1) Predict tumour grade 2) predict OS	110	-	110 pNET (pancreas)	CT (AP, PVP)	1) G1/2 vs G3 2) Death	Pathology	-	A ML model with both radiomics and non-radiomics features based on both CT or MRI can predict tumour grade	*
Mapelli (2020) [40]	1) predict tumour grade 2) predict RFS	61	-	61 pNET (pancreas)	[⁶⁸ Ga]Ga-DOTATOC PET/CT [¹⁸ F]FDG PET/CT	1) G1 vs G2/3 2) recurrence 3) Angioinvasion	1) Pathology 2) NS	Surgical resection	None of the first-order features are able to predict tumour grade, RFS yet not significantly better than a traditional ML radiomics model	0%

Table 1 (continued)

Authors	Aim	# Patients	Primary tumour (ROI)	Modality (sequence/phase)	Outcome	Reference standard	Intervention	Main results/conclusion	RQS			
		GEP- Other Total										
		NET										
Martini (2020) [57]	1) Predict tumour grade 2) Differentiate pNET from npNET 3) predict TTP 4) predict OS	23	48	25	48	25	48	4) #lymphnodes 1) pNET G1vsG2 2) pNET vs npNET 3) pNET Recurrence 4) pNET OS	1-2) Pathology 3) RECIST1.0 4) pNET Death	surgical resection	First-order features are able to predict TTP and OS	0%
Ohki (2020) [41]	Predict tumour grade	32	-	-	32	-	32	G1 vs G2/3	Pathology	-	First-order features can predict pNET tumour grade	8%
Onner (2020) [58]	Predict response	22	-	-	22	-	22	Response	Pathology	PRRT	First-order features can predict response to PRRT	0%
Pereira (2015) [42]	Predict tumour grade	22	-	-	22	-	22	G1 vs G2 vs G3	Pathology	-	First-order features can predict pNET tumour grade	0%
Pulvirenti (2021) [43]	Predict tumour grade	150	-	-	150	-	150	G1vsG2vsG3	Pathology	-	A LR radiomics model with both radiomics and non-radiomics features has the best performance to predict tumour grade	28%
Reimert (2020) [44]	Differentiate pNET from PDAC	42	53	95	42	53	95	1) pNET vs PDAC 2) pNET G1vsG2/3	Pathology	-	A LR radiomics model can differentiate PDAC from PNET	6%
Shi (2020) [45]	Differentiate pNET from SPT	31	35	66	31	35	66	pNET vs SPT	Pathology	-	A ML model with a combination of radiomics and non-radiomics features has the best performance to differentiate pNET from SPT, compared to subjective MRI diagnosis	50%
Shindo (2016) [46]	Differentiate pNET from PDAC	11	53	64	11	53	64	pNET vs PDAC	Pathology	-	First-order features can differentiate pNET from PDAC	0%
Song (2021) [47]	Predict recurrence	74	-	-	74	-	74	Recurrence	Imaging	surgical resection	A DL model can predict recurrence with a better performance than traditional ML radiomics model	39%
Song (2021) [48]	Differentiate pNET from SPN	22	57	77	22	57	77	pNET vs SPN	Pathology	-	A ML model based on MRI (AP) has the best performance in differentiating pNETs from SPNs compared to other MRI phases.	39%
van der Pol (2019) [49]	Differentiate pNET from RCC metastases	43	17	60	43	17	60	pNET vs RCC metastases	Pathology	-	First-order features can differentiate pNET from RCC pancreatic mets	0%
		18	32	40	18	32	40	pNET vs PDAC	Pathology	-		6%

Table 1 (continued)

Authors	Aim	# Patients	Primary tumour (ROI)	Modality (sequence/phase)	Outcome	Reference standard	Intervention	Main results/conclusion	RQS
		GEP- NET	Other	Total					
Wang (2019) [50]	Differentiate pNET from PDAC	21	63	84	MRI (DWI IVIM: Dfast, Dslow, f) CT (Pancreatic, PVP)	Pathology	-	A LR radiomics model can differentiate pNET from PDAC	28%
Wang (2020) [51]	Differentiate pNET from PDAC	31	-	31	[⁶⁸ Ga]Ga-DOTATOC PET/CT	1) RECIST1.1 2) Death	PRRT	First order features can differentiate pNET from PDAC	0%
Werner (2019) [52]	1) Predict PFS 2) predict OS	137	-	137	[⁶⁸ Ga]Ga-DOTATATE PET/CT	Pathology	-	First order features can predict OS	0%
Xu (2019) [53]	Predict tumour grade	137	-	137	CT (PVP)	Pathology	-	A radiomics signature is able to predict tumour grade, but no significant difference between 2D or 3D based radiomics signature	28%
Yu (2020) [54]	Differentiate non-hypovascular pNET from PDAC	40	80	120	CT (AP and PVP)	Pathology	-	A LR radiomics model based on the PVP is significantly better than AP or AP+PVP features and simple radiological features in differentiating pNET from PDAC	19%
Zhang (2021) [55]	Predict tumour grade	82	-	82	CT (AP)	Pathology	-	Different ML models can predict tumour grade	31%
Zhao (2020) [56]	Predict tumour grade	99	-	99	CT (not specified)	Pathology	-	A radiomics ML model can predict tumour grade	44%

AP arterial phase, ce contrast-enhanced, CT computed tomography, DL deep learning, DWI diffusion-weighted imaging, gNET gastric NET, G1/2/3 grade, LR logistic regression, ML machine learning, MRI magnetic resonance imaging, NEC neuroendocrine carcinoma, NET neuroendocrine tumour, OS overall survival, pNET pancreatic neuroendocrine tumour, PDAC pancreatic adenocarcinoma, PET positron emission tomography, PFS progression-free survival, PVP portal venous phase, PRRT peptide receptor radionuclide therapy, RECIST 1.1 Response Evaluation Criteria in Solid Tumours, SPN solitary pseudopapillary neoplasms, SPT solid pseudopapillary tumour, TTP time to progression

*These are the studies using deep learning methods and are excluded from the RQS as described in the main text

Table 2 Details about radiomics analysis

Authors	Outcome	Segmentation method	#Observers	Software	Pre-processing method	# Features		Analyses	Validation
						Extracted	Selected		
Azoulay (2020) [15]	G3 vs NEC	Manual (2D)	1	TexRAD	n/a	72	72	MwU test, ROC AUC	No
Beleu (2020) [16]	G1/2 vs G3	Manual (2D)	?	LIFEx (5.10)	n/a	5	5	ANOVA/Kruskal Wallis, ROC curves, binary LR	No
Benedetti (2021) [17]	G1 vs G2/3	Manual (3D)	1	CGITA	Voxel normalisation and rebinning (64)	69	69	ROC AUC, MwU	No
Bevilacqua (2021) [18]	G1 vs G2	Manual (3D, 40% SUVmax)	1	Matlab	n/a	60	60	LDA, ROC/AUC	Unseen*
Bian (2020) [19]	G1 vs G2	Manual (3D)	2	PyRadiomics	n/a	1029	1029	Kruskal-Wallis, X2, ROC curves, MLR	No
Bian (2020) [20]	G1 vs G2/3	Manual (3D)	2	PyRadiomics	Intensity normalisation, isotropic resampling, Bias field correction, resampling, intensity standardization	1409	1409	Kruskal-Wallis, X2, ROC curves, LR	No
Bian (2020) [21]	G1 vs G2/3	Manual (3D)	3	PyRadiomics	n/a	2126	2126	Rank sum test, X2, ROC AUC	Unseen
Canellas (2018) [22]	1) G1 vs G2/3 2) PFS	Manual (2D)	1	TexRAD	n/a	36	36	LR, ROC AUC	No
Chakraborty (2018) [23]	G1/2 vs G3	Manual (?)	?	?	Intensity normalisation	162	162	Naïve Bayes, RF, ROC	10-fold cross
Cheng (2019) [24]	G1 vs G2/3	Manual (2D)	1	TexRAD	Automatic motion correction	36	36	MwU	No
Choi (2018) [25]	G1 vs G2/3	Manual (2D+3D)	2	Medical imaging solution for segmentation and texture analysis Mazda	no	16	16	MwU/t-test, LR, ROC	No
D'Onofrio (2019) [26]	G1 vs G2 vs G3	Manual (3D)	2	Mazda	Reconstructed images (?)	5	5	Wilcox Mann-Whitman, ROC	No
De Robertis (2018) [27]	G1 vs G2/3	Manual (3D)	?	TensorFlow	n/a	14	14	MwU, ROC	No
Gao (2019) [28]	G1 vs G2 vs G3	Manual (3D), box	2	PyRadiomics	Isotropic resampling	-	-	CNN, GAN	External
Gu (2019) [29]	G1 vs G2/3	Manual (3D)	2	Omni-Kinetics	n/a	853	853	MLR, RF, ROC	External
Guo (2019) [30]	G1/2 vs G3 (incl NEC)	Manual (5 slices)	2	Inhouse, Matlab	n/a	5	5	Kruskal-Wallis, ANOVA, Spearman, ROC	No
Guo (2019) [31]	G1 vs G2 vs G3	Manual (3D)	2	LIFEx	n/a	68	68	Fisher's exact, LR, ROC	No

Table 2 (continued)

Authors	Outcome	Segmentation method	#Observers	Software	Pre-processing method	# Features		Analyses	Validation
						Extracted	Selected		
Han (2021) [32]	pNET vs pCystadenoma	Semi-automatic (3D)	1	PyRadiomics	n/a	40		ML (LDA, SVM, RF, AdaBoost, KNN, GaussianNB, GBDT, LR, DT) with AUC	Unseen
He (2019) [33]	pNET vs PDAC	Manual (3D)	2	?	n/a	647	7	LASSO, SVM, RF, ROC	Unseen
Li (2018) [34]	hypovascular pNET vs PDAC	Manual (3D)	1	Mazda	Intensity normalisation	10		T-test/MwU, ROC AUC	No
Li (2020) [35]	pNET vs SPN	Manual (2D)	2	Fire Voxel	n/a	300		RDA, PCA, linear and non-linear discriminant analysis, MwU, ROC LR	Unseen
Liang (2019) [36]	G1 vs G2/3	Manual (3D)	1	Inhouse, Matlab	Intensity normalisation, isotropic resampling	467			External
Liang (2020) [59]	G1 vs G2/3/NEC	Manual (3D)	2	Inhouse, Matlab	n/a	10		ROC AUC	No
Lin (2019) [37]	pNET vs spleen	Manual (3D, 5 slices)	2	PyRadiomics	Bias field correction, resampling, intensity standardization	12		MwU, ROC	No
Liu (2021) [38]	G1 vs G2/3	Manual (3D, multiple slices stacked)	1	Keras2.1.1	Voxel rescaling	1209		T-test/Kruskal Wallis (univariate), LDA, ROC/AUC	Unseen
Luo (2020) [39]	1) G1/2 vs G3 2) Death	Manual (3D rectangle) (DL) manual (3D) (ML) Automatic (3D) 40% SUVmax	?	CGITA	Rebinning (64)	> 8000		DL) CNN, 8-fold cross validation ML) SVM, LR, RF	External
Mapelli (2020) [40]	1) G1 vs G2/3 2) recurrence 3) Angioinvasion 4) #lymphnodes	Automatic (3D)	?	TexRAD	n/a	7	7	LR	No
Martini (2020) [57]	1) pNET G1 vs G2 2) pNET vs npNET 3) pNET Recurrence 4) pNET OS	Manual (3D)	2	Syngo	Intensity normalisation	36		MwU, Pearson, Cox LR	No
Ohki (2020) [41]	G1 vs G2/3	Manual (3D)	2	LIFEx (5.10)	n/a	50		ROC AUC	No
Omer (2020) [58]	Response	Semi-automatic (3D)	2 (consensus)	Image J	n/a	2		MwU, ROC	No
Pereira (2015) [42]	G1 vs G2 vs G3	Semi-automatic (3D)	1	?	Intensity normalisation	10		ANOVA, ROC	No
Pulvirenti (2021) [43]	G1 vs G2 vs G3	Manual (?)	1	Pyradiomics	Intensity normalisation	256		LR, SVM	Unseen

Table 2 (continued)

Authors	Outcome	Segmentation method	#Observers	Software	Pre-processing method	# Features		Analyses	Validation
						Extracted	Selected		
Reinert (2020) [44]	1) pNET vs PDAC 2) pNET G1 vs G2/3	Manual (2D)	2	Matlab	n/a	92		LR, ROC	No
Shi (2020) [45]	pNET vs SPT	Manual (3D)	2	Open-source (avllieres)	n/a	65		t-test, LR, ROC	Unseen
Shindo (2016) [46]	pNET vs PDAC	Manual (2D)	2	Synapse vincent	n/a	4		MwU, ROC	No
Song (2021) [47]	Recurrence	Manual (3D)	2	Inhouse	Image normalisation, isotropic resampling	143		SVM + 10-foldercrossvalidation, ROC, Kaplan-Meier	External
Song (2021) [48]	pNET vs SPN	Manual (3D)	2	PyRadiomics	Voxel resampling, grey-level discretion, image intensity normalisation.	396		mLR, ROC/AUC	Unseen
van der Pol (2019) [49]	pNET vs RCC metastases	Manual (2D)	2 (in 17%)	Image J	n/a	3		MLR, ROC	No
Wang (2019) [50]	pNET vs PDAC	Manual (2D), largest area	2	Inhouse (artificial intelligence Kit)	?	5		LR, ROC	No
Wang (2020) [51]	pNET vs PDAC	Manual (3D, 3 slices)	1	Image J	n/a	68		MwU/t-test, multivariable LR, ROC	Unseen
Werner (2019) [52]	1) PFS 2) OS	Manual (3D)	1	Interview Fusion Workstation	n/a	12		ROC, kaplan-Meier, Cox regression	No
Xu (2019) [53]	G1 vs G2/3	Manual (2D & 3D)	1	Inhouse, Matlab	Intensity normalisation, isotropic resampling	58		MwU, ROC, LR	Unseen
Yu (2020) [54]	pNET vs PDAC	Manual (3D)	1	Analysis-Kit	n/a	385		LR, ROC	No
Zhang (2021) [55]	G1 vs G2 vs G3	Manual (3D)	2	LIFEx	400-bit grey scale	40		ML (LDA, SVM, RF, AdaBoost, KNN, GaussianNB, LR, GBDT, DT)	Unseen
Zhao (2020) [56]	G1 vs G2	Manual (3D)	2	Inhouse, Matlab	Voxel rescaling	585		SVM, RBF, ROC, Kaplan-Meier, Cox regression	Unseen

2D delineation of 1 slice or only a part of the tumour volume, 3D delineation of whole tumour volume, AUC area under the curve, CNN convolutional neural network, DL deep learning, DT decision tree, G1/2/3 grade, GAN generative adversarial network, GBDT gradient boosting decision tree, LR logistic regression, ML machine learning, MwU Mann-Whitney U, KNN K-nearest neighbour, OS overall survival, pNET pancreatic neuroendocrine tumour, PDAC pancreatic adenocarcinoma, PFS progression-free survival, RBF radial basis function, RF random forest, ROC receiver operating curve, SVM support vector machine, χ^2 chi² test

*Validation in the same institute on an unseen dataset; usually the dataset is split into training and validation.

2). Forty-three studies focused on patients with pancreas (p)NETs [14–55], two studies on GEP-NETs [56, 57], and one study on rectum NETs [58]. Thirty-one studies analysed CT [14–16, 18, 21–25, 28, 29, 31–33, 35–38, 40, 42, 43, 46, 48, 50, 52–56, 58], thirteen MRI [19, 20, 26, 27, 30, 34, 37, 40, 41, 44, 45, 47, 49], four [^{68}Ga]Ga-DOTATOC or [^{68}Ga]Ga-DOTATATE PET/CT [17, 39, 51, 57], and one [^{18}F]FDG PET/CT [39]. Differentiation of GEP-NETs from other lesions was investigated by 13 studies [14, 31, 32, 34, 36, 43–45, 47–50, 53, 59], while 25 explored GEP-NET grade [15–25, 27–30, 35, 37–40, 42, 52, 54, 55, 58], and 6 response to treatment or long-term outcome [21, 39, 46, 51, 56, 57]. The median number of included GEP-NET patients was 61 (range 11–157). A median of 58 (range 2–2126) radiomics features were extracted, excluding two DL studies [27, 38]. More than half ($n = 27$) of the studies adjusted for multiple testing or used feature reduction. Forty-one (91%) studies [14–30, 32–38, 40, 42–56, 58] used manual segmentation. Thirty (67%) studies delineated the entire tumour volume, yet it was not specified in 2 studies [22, 42]. Thirteen studies [14–16, 23, 25, 26, 34, 36, 40, 41, 45, 56, 57] analysed individual radiomics features (univariate), while thirty-two [17–22, 24, 27–33, 35, 37–39, 42–44, 46–55, 58, 60]

developed models with multiple features. Seventeen studies performed multivariable analysis with non-radiomics features [18–21, 28, 29, 32, 34, 35, 37, 42, 44, 46, 47, 50, 53, 58].

Quality assessment

The included studies reached a median score of 2.0 points (range 4–19, Table 1 and S1), excluding two DL studies. The median total RQS was 2 (IQR 0–14), with a corresponding percentage of 5.6% (IQR 0–38.9%), due to a lack of prospective design, validation and open-access data. Noteworthy is that nineteen studies had a score of 0%. Most studies had a well-documented image protocol, included biological correlates, discussed potential clinical utility and compared results to a gold standard. Only one study employed a phantom to test the robustness of features [51]. Neither study had a prospective design, assessed cost-effectiveness or presented open-source scans or code. Only 11% of the studies externally validated their results, whereas 53% did not use any validation. Results of the subgroup analyses did not show a significant difference in neither aim nor imaging modality (Table 3). The RQS% distribution across the years is shown in Fig. 3.

Fig. 2 Included radiomics studies in GEP-NETs, sorted by number of publications per year (until August 2021)

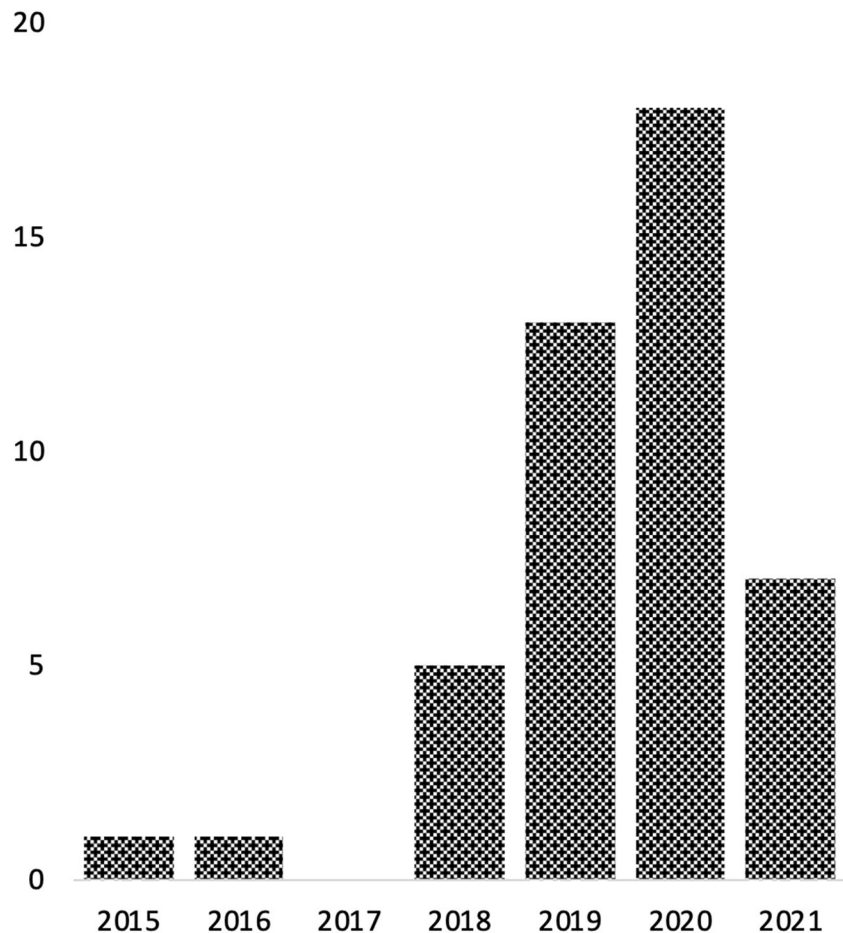


Table 3 Subgroup analysis according to the study aim and imaging modality

Group	Studies (n)	RQS	RQS-percentage	<i>p</i> value
Study aim				0.81
Differentiate	15	2.0 (0.0–10.0)	5.6 (0.0–27.8)	
Grade	25	1.0 (0.0–16.0)	5.6 (0.0–44.4)	
Response and long-term outcome	5	0.0 (0.0–7.0)	0.0 (0.0–19.4)	
Modality				0.46
CT	29	2.0 (0.0–12.5)	5.6 (0.0–34.7)	
MRI	12	5.0 (0.0–16.8)	15.3 (0.0–46.5)	
PET	4	0.0 (0.0–9.8)	0 (0.0–27.1)	

Values are expressed as number or median (interquartile range)

RQS radiomics quality score

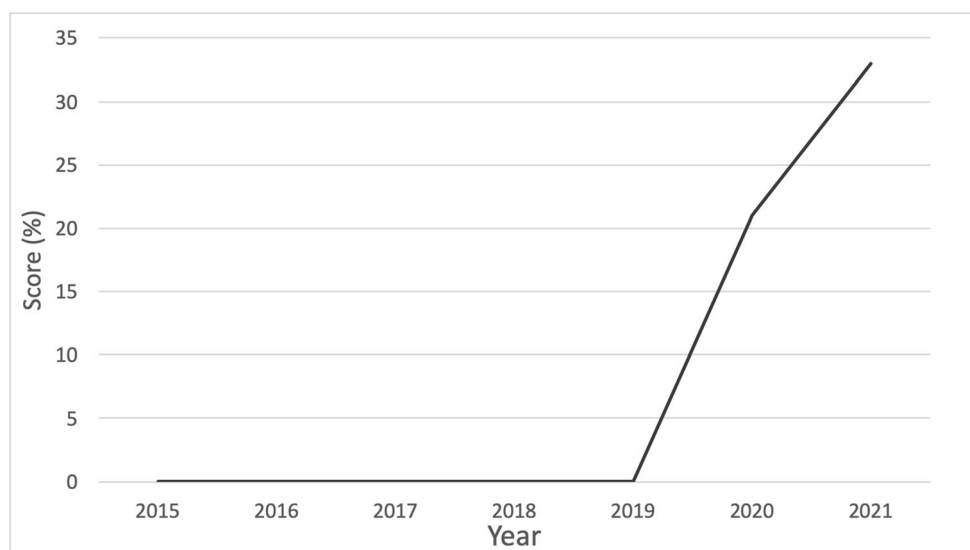
Predicting tumour grade

Computed tomography

Four studies constructed models to predict tumour grade with CT (G1/2 vs G3, including poorly differentiated NECs) on arterial phase (AP) with a good performance (AUC 0.74–0.96 [22, 29, 38] and accuracy of 69% [42]). Seven studies constructed models for the prediction of G2/3 [18, 21, 24, 28, 35, 37, 38, 52]. Three radiomics models were able to predict G2/3 pNETs with a good performance (AUC 0.86–0.96, RQS 28–44%) [18, 52, 55]. One study compared different methods of feature selection and ML and found that distance correlation (feature selection) combined with AdaBoost (ML) had the best performance (G1vsG2: AUC 0.82, G2vsG3: AUC 0.70 and G1vsG3: AUC 0.85) [54]. Another study used LR to classify grades in rectal NETs (AUC 0.93) [58]. Three studies combined radiomics with non-radiomics features (e.g. size, vascular invasion, tumour margin) to create a good predictive model for G2/3 (AUC 0.75–0.90) [28, 35, 37]. In general, combined models yielded higher

performance than models based on radiomics features only [21, 28, 35, 37], yet one study reported that performance was not improved by adding conventional radiographic features [42]. DL and traditional ML approaches had a similar performance to distinguish pNET grades [38]. Several radiomics features were selected as predictive variables in the constructed models [15, 21, 24, 28, 29, 35]. Both 2D- and 3D-rendered radiomics features on the portal venous phase (PVP) were predictive for G2/3 [24, 52]. First-order features were frequently selected, yet with conflicting results. Three studies found a lower entropy in high-grade tumours on AP [15, 29] with higher uniformity in G3 tumours [15], while a higher entropy was reported in G2/3 on PVP [21]. The abovementioned studies had a low sample size and were of low quality (RQS < 10%). Studies with a high RQS developed promising models, and predominantly higher-order features were selected for the prediction of pNET tumour grade [18, 28, 35, 37, 54, 55]. Only the features skewness [18, 37], GLRLM_GLV [28, 35], GLSZM_GreyLevelVariance [28, 35], and SizeZoneNonUniformity [28, 37] (with different filters or transformation methods) were selected in > 1 models.

Fig. 3 Line plot of the RQS% scores of the included articles per year



Individual radiomics features were frequently tested in univariate analysis. A majority analysed first-order features, including mean [14, 23–25, 29, 40, 52, 56], entropy [14, 21, 23, 25, 40, 52, 56, 58], uniformity [15, 29], skewness [14, 23, 24, 52, 56], kurtosis [24, 25, 29, 40, 52, 56], sphericity [24] and asphericity [16]. Kurtosis was higher in G2/3 on AP [25, 29, 40, 56], yet conflicting results were reported for PVP [24, 40, 52, 56]. A higher skewness was reported in G2/3 tumours on different phases [23, 24, 52], while no differences between G1 and G2 pNETs were reported [14]. Conflicting results were reported for entropy [14, 21, 23, 25, 40, 52, 56] and mean [14, 24, 25, 29, 40, 52, 56].

Magnetic resonance imaging

Eight studies used MRI for grade prediction [19, 20, 26, 27, 30, 37, 40, 41], predominantly for G2/3. Several studies were able to G2/3 based on radiomics features only (AUC 0.74–0.91) [19, 20, 27]. Two higher-quality studies constructed a combined model with a good performance to predict G2/3 (AUC 0.71–0.88) [19, 37]. One lower-quality study was able to predict G3 tumours with a high performance (AUC0.99) [30]. Several features were selected as independent predictors in the constructed models. Kurtosis was frequently reported as a predictor of tumour grade [19, 20, 26, 41], yet with conflicting results. Squareroot_glszm_SmallAreaLowGreyLevelEmphasis was selected in two studies as a relevant predictor of G2/3 [19, 37]. Various features were selected in a single study only (Table S2).

Predominantly first-order features were analysed in univariate analysis. Kurtosis was not predictive of tumour grade on ADC [41,42] or T2w imaging [26]. A higher skewness was reported between G3 and G1, but no differences were found between G1 and G2 on ADC [41]. Conflicting results were reported for mean [40, 41], entropy [26, 30, 40], uniformity [26] and percentiles [26, 41] on different sequences (T1/T2/ADC/DWI).

PET/CT

One study used PET/CT-based radiomics and reported a high performance to predict pNET grade (G1vsG2, AUC 0.90–0.92) [17].

Distinguishing NET from other tumours

Computed tomography

Five studies constructed a model to differentiate pNET from pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma (PDAC) on CT [32, 33, 43, 50, 53]. Overall, combined models achieved a better performance than radiomics-only models (AUC 0.83–0.88 vs. AUC0.79–0.87, respectively) [32, 50]. A LR model based on PVP-based features had a higher performance to distinguish pNETs from PDAC compared to an AP-based model

(AUC0.93 vs AUC0.86, respectively) [53]. A comparable performance for LASSO, SVM and RF models was reported in a high-quality study[32]. A lower-quality study was able to distinguish pNET from PDAC (AUC 0.89) [33]. First-order radiomics features [33, 43, 50] and GLRLM features [32, 53] were most frequently selected as predictive features. Specific combinations of feature selection and ML methods (distance correlation, Xgboost+RF) had the best performance to differentiate pNET from pancreatic cystadenoma on PVP (AUC0.997 and AUC0.989) [31].

Predominantly first-order and GLCM features were analysed in univariate analysis [33, 43, 50, 53, 59]. pNETs had a higher mean [33], higher median [43, 50], higher minimum [43, 50], higher percentiles [33, 43, 50], higher entropy [50], and lower skewness [33], compared to PDAC. Similarly, a higher mean and lower skewness were reported when pNETs were compared with non-pNETs [56]. Other features were selected in a single study only (Table S2). Two studies compared pNETs to tumours from another origin [36, 48] and found that several first-order radiomics features were able to distinguish pNET from renal cell carcinoma (RCC) [48] or SPN [36].

Magnetic resonance imaging

MRI was used for differentiation of pNET in 5 studies [34, 44, 45, 47, 49]. Three studies developed a model for the differentiation of pNET from other pancreatic tumours [34, 44, 49]. A LR-model was able to differentiate pNETs from PDAC on Intravoxel Incoherent Motion (IVIM), yet was of low quality (AUC 0.93) [49]. Three studies constructed a radiomics model to differentiate pNET from solitary pseudo-papillary neoplasms (SPN) of the pancreas [34, 44, 47]. Significantly better performance of a radiomics model was reported, compared to subjective evaluation by a radiologist (accuracy 86–92% vs 65–78%, respectively) [34, 44]. An AP-based model had the best performance to differentiate pNET from SPN, compared to T1, PVP and delayed phases (AUC 0.91 vs. AUC 0.77–0.85, respectively) [47]. In the constructed models, first-order features were most predictive on T1W [34] and T2W [44], GLCM features for DWI [34], and GLRLM and NGTDM features were most predictive on the apparent diffusion and apparent kurtosis [44].

Two studies analysed individual radiomics features between pNET and PDAC [45, 49] on different sequences. Predominantly, first-order features were studied. A lower entropy [45], lower skewness [45] and lower kurtosis [45] were reported in pNET compared to PDAC on ADC. Likewise, a lower entropy was found in pNET on IVIM [49].

Response and long-term outcome measures

In 6 studies, response to treatment or long-term outcome was analysed [21, 39, 46, 51, 56, 57].

A higher skewness and kurtosis were found in non-responders to PRRT in univariate analysis, based on ^{68}Ga -SSA PET/CT [57]. A DL model based on CT-based radiomics features had a higher performance to predict recurrence in pNETs (AUC 0.77) compared to traditional ML methods, or DL including clinical features [46]. A higher entropy was reported in patients with better PFS and OS [51] on ^{68}Ga -SSA PET/CT in patients treated with PRRT, while on contrast-enhanced CT, a lower entropy was found in patients with a better PFS [21, 56]. No features were predictive of recurrence-free survival (RFS) based on [^{68}Ga]Ga-DOTATOC PET/CT [39]. Regarding OS, a higher skewness on CT was reported in patients with a better OS [56]. Different radiomics features were predictive of vascular invasion on CT and [^{68}Ga]Ga-DOTATOC PET/CT (Table S2) [16, 39].

Discussion

Because radiomics in GEP-NETs is still in its early stages, methodology is less standardised and studies are more explorative compared to radiomics studies in other fields. A majority of the included studies investigated GEP-NET grade and differentiation of GEP-NETs from other neoplasms, while a minority analysed the response to treatment or long-term outcomes. Strikingly, 43 studies analysed pNETs, while only 2 studied other GEP-NETs, underlining the lack of evidence of radiomics studies for GEP-NETs other than in the pancreas. A majority of the included studies were of low quality (RQS < 30%), mainly due to explorative and univariable analyses with a lack of (external) validation, feature reduction, calibration and/or bootstrapping. Radiomics reviews in other tumours show a similar trend [11, 12, 61], with regard to the lack of (external) validation, calibration and comprehensive models including non-radiomics features in their models. The predictive power of radiomics may be overestimated in these lower-quality studies, as there is a risk of false positives if no feature selection is used or only univariable analyses are performed, because of the high feature-to-patient ratio. In addition, the risk of overfitting is high if no validation is employed. Studies with a higher quality (RQS > 30%) were all published quite recently (2019 or later) [17–19, 28, 32, 35, 37, 44, 46, 47, 50, 54, 55, 62]. In these studies, the best predictive models were constructed for the prediction of tumour grade, in which combined models achieved the best performance. A minority showed promising results for radiomics in the differentiation of pNETs from other tumours, yet these results still need to be reproduced in larger cohort studies to ensure reliability. Thus, for the aforementioned outcomes, some promising models were developed, yet none performed a prospective validation.

Overall, prediction of tumour grade was mainly studied in pNETs with promising results on different modalities [17–22, 24, 27–30, 35, 37, 38, 52, 54]. First-order features were

predominantly studied with conflicting results, but in general, an increased heterogeneity (higher entropy, kurtosis, max intensity and lower energy) was associated with higher-grade tumours. This is in line with biological studies that report that heterogeneous tumours, in general, have a worse outcome [63, 64]. It is noteworthy that the included studies used different versions of the World Health Organization (WHO) classification of NETs of i.e. 2010 [65], 2017 [66] and 2019 [67], which could have biased the results, since G3 well-differentiated tumours were only distinguished from poorly differentiated NECs in WHO 2017 and later.

Regarding the differentiation of GEP-NETs from other neoplasms, the best performance was achieved when radiomics features were combined with clinical features. Some studies even showed that a radiomics model performed better than a radiologist in differentiating pNETs from other lesions [34, 44]. The strongest evidence is available for distinguishing pNETs from PDACs on CT [32, 50, 53]. First-order statistics [33, 43, 45, 49, 50] and GLRLM features [32, 44, 53] were the best predictors in multivariable models.

From a clinical point of view, prediction of response or long-term outcome would be more relevant to explore, whereas only 13% studied these outcomes [21, 39, 46, 51, 56, 57] with conflicting results. Entropy was frequently reported as a predictor and might be worth further exploring. Nevertheless, evidence for the prediction of these outcomes with radiomics is still weak. An accurate prediction tool would allow for a timely adjustment of treatment strategy in GEP-NETs, and therefore, there is a need for further research exploring a more robust method for these outcomes.

An important prerequisite to enable high-quality reproducible radiomics research is to standardise the methodology as much as possible when a new model is constructed, according to guidelines suggested by the Image Biomarker Standardisation Initiative (IBSI) [68, 69]. One of the limitations that is harder to overcome in GEP-NET radiomics studies lies in the fact that GEP-NETs are quite rare and it is difficult to achieve a large homogeneous sample and validate studies. The lack of large samples could explain why the number of DL studies is low in this group of patients ($n = 2$), since this is a prerequisite for DL. Another limitation is the fact that in 98% of the included studies positive results were highlighted, while only one study did not find any predictive features for the studied outcomes. This is in line with a previous radiomics review (including 553 studies on GEP-NETs and other tumours) [70] and is likely to be a reflection of publication bias. The publication of negative findings in the field of radiomics is equally important to that of positive results to understand the directions for meaningful research that will bring the field to the next level. Future studies should focus on performing multicentre studies to develop integrated models, to be able to externally validate their models and explore DL.

In conclusion, the majority of radiomics studies in GEP-NETs is of low quality, which warrants new studies with a better methodology. Even though radiomics for GEP-NETs is still in its infancy, some robust and promising models have been developed.

However, these models predominantly focus on the identification of tumour grade or differentiation of GEP-NETs from other tumours and only few have externally validated their results. Finally, the quality of the studies that used radiomics for the prediction of response or long-term outcome, clinically more relevant endpoints, was quite low and more robust analyses are warranted before any definitive conclusions can be drawn.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00330-022-08996-w>.

Funding The authors state that this work has not received any funding.

Declarations

Guarantor The scientific guarantor of this publication is R. G. H. Beets-Tan.

Conflict of interest The authors of this manuscript declare no relationships with any companies whose products or services may be related to the subject matter of the article.

Statistics and biometry No complex statistical methods were necessary for this paper.

Informed consent Written informed consent was not required for this study because of the nature of the study (i.e. systematic review of the literature).

Ethical approval Institutional Review Board approval was not required because of the nature of the study (i.e. systematic review of the literature).

Methodology

- Retrospective
- Systematic review
- performed at one institution

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