A Comprehensive Review of Multimodal Large Language Models: Performance and Challenges Across Different Tasks

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Abstract

Multimodal Large Language Models (MLLMs) integrate text, images, audio, and video to enable contextual reasoning across heterogeneous data. While traditional Large Language Models (LLMs) excel in text-based tasks, their inability to process multimodal inputs limits real-world applications. This review systematically analyzes peer-reviewed studies to evaluate MLLM architectures, fusion strategies, and performance in domains like healthcare. We highlight advancements in cross-modal attention, benchmark datasets and emerging challenges such as explainability and scalability. A structured comparison reveals that models like CLIP and Cross-modal Transformers achieve state-of-the-art results but struggle with fine-grained medical reasoning. We propose future directions, including lightweight architectures and ethical frameworks, to address gaps in multimodal AI research.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Large Language Models (LLMs) such as GPT-4, Gemini 1.5, and T5 have revolutionized artificial intelligence by achieving exceptional performance in text-based tasks like machine translation, summarization, and dialogue generation [1-2]. These models leverage transformer architectures and vast text corpora to learn contextual relationships, enabling human-like linguistic fluency. However, real-world applications—from healthcare diagnostics to autonomous systems—rarely rely on text alone. Instead, they demand multimodal understanding, where AI systems process and correlate heterogeneous data types such as medical images, audio recordings, sensor inputs, and textual reports.

For instance, a radiologist diagnosing pneumonia must synthesize information from X-ray scans, patient histories, and lab results. Similarly, autonomous vehicles require real-time integration of LiDAR data, camera feeds, and textual traffic rules. Traditional LLMs, despite their linguistic prowess, operate in unimodal silos, unable to process or reason across visual, auditory, or temporal modalities. This limitation has spurred the emergence of Multimodal Large Language Models (MLLMs) [3], which unify text, images, audio, and video within a single architecture. By combining transformer-based language modeling with vision encoders, audio processors, and cross-modal attention mechanisms,

MLLMs like Flamingo, GPT-4V (Vision), and CLIP have begun bridging the gap between human-like reasoning and multimodal data complexity.

1.2 Motivation

Healthcare exemplifies the need for MLLMs: diagnosing diseases requires correlating X-rays, patient histories, and lab reports. Yet, existing models often operate in silos, lacking contextual fusion. This review addresses three critical questions:

1. How do MLLMs process and reason across multimodal data effectively?
2. What are the key advancements and challenges in multimodal fusion?
3. How can explainability and scalability be improved for real-world deployment?

2. Literature Review

2.1 MLLMs employ three primary fusion approaches:

1. **Early Fusion**: Concatenates raw data (e.g., pixel + text tokens).
2. **Late Fusion**: Processes modalities separately, combining outputs (e.g., CLIP).
3. **Cross-Modal Attention**: Dynamically aligns features (e.g., Cross-modal Transformers).

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Key MLLM Studies

Reference	Problem Statement	Model	Methodology	Benchmark Dataset	Outcome	Strength	Weakness	Research Gap
Chen et al. (2025) [4]	Explainable multimodal reasoning	ExplainMLLM	SHAP + attention visualization	COCO, VQA v2	88% accuracy with interpretability	High explainability	Computationally expensive	Needs lightweight implementation
Wang et al. (2024) [5]	Multimodal fusion for autonomous systems	AutoFuse	Early fusion + cross-attention	NuScenes, Waymo	92% accuracy in object detection	Real-time performance	High memory usage	Limited to autonomous driving
Radford et al. (2021) [6]	Aligning vision and language embeddings	CLIP	Contrastive learning	COCO, ImageNet	SOTA zero-shot classification	Robust modality alignment	Poor fine-grained reasoning	Limited healthcare applicability

Ramesh et al. (2022) [7]	Text-to-image generation	DALL-E	Transformer-based diffusion	LAION-5B	High-fidelity image synthesis	Creative output	High computational cost	Ethical risks in medical data
Zhang et al. (2023) [8]	Joint visual-textual processing	Cross-modal Transformer	Cross-attention layers	Flickr30K, VQA v2	89% accuracy on VQA	Strong task generalization	Memory-intensive	Scalability challenges
Johnson et al. (2019) [9]	Medical image-text alignment	CheXNet + BERT	Late fusion	MIMIC-CXR	78% pneumonia detection	Domain-specific optimization	Limited multimodal interaction	Needs dynamic fusion
Tan et al. (2020) [10]	Video question answering	Hierarchical Attention	Multi-layer attention	ActivityNet	82% QA accuracy	Captures temporal dependencies	Overfits small datasets	Requires diverse training data
Alayrac et al. (2022) [11]	Audio-visual recognition	Flamingo	Perceiver architecture	AudioSet	75% mAP on sound classification	Handles sequential data	Limited real-time inference	Lacks healthcare integration
Li et al. (2025) [12]	Multimodal reasoning for medical imaging	MedCLIP	Cross-modal attention	MIMIC-CXR, CheXpert	85% accuracy in disease detection	Improved clinical interpretability	Requires large labeled datasets	Limited to specific medical tasks
Yang et al. (2025) [13]	GPT-4V for multimodal reasoning	GPT-4V	Vision-language alignment	COCO, VQA v2	90% accuracy on vision-language tasks	High generalization across tasks	High computational cost	Limited fine-grained reasoning

2.2 Challenges

1. **Data Heterogeneity**:

One of the most significant challenges in MLLMs is **data heterogeneity**, where misaligned modalities, such as delayed audio in video or mismatched image-text pairs, degrade model performance by introducing noise and reducing the quality of cross-modal alignment. For instance, in medical imaging, inconsistent labeling and modality gaps can lead to suboptimal performance, as highlighted by **MedCLIP** (Li et al., 2025), which emphasized the need for domain-specific datasets to address these issues. Similarly, **AutoFuse** (Wang et al., 2024) demonstrated that while

early fusion can mitigate some heterogeneity problems, it often comes at the cost of increased computational complexity, making it less practical for real-world applications. These challenges underscore the need for robust preprocessing techniques and modality alignment strategies to ensure seamless integration of diverse data types.

2. **Explainability**:

Another critical challenge is the **lack of explainability** in MLLMs, particularly in domains like healthcare, where interpretability is crucial for trust and adoption. For example, attention maps in **CLIP**, while effective for aligning vision and language, lack clinical interpretability, making it difficult for healthcare professionals to understand and trust model predictions. To address this, **ExplainMLLM** (Chen et al., 2025) introduced SHAP-based explainability, which improves interpretability but remains computationally expensive, limiting its scalability and real-world deployment. In autonomous systems, the lack of explainability in models like **Cross-modal Transformers** raises concerns about decision-making transparency, especially in safety-critical applications where understanding model behavior is essential. These challenges highlight the need for more efficient and intuitive explainability frameworks that balance accuracy, transparency, and computational feasibility.

3. **Scalability**:

Scalability remains a major hurdle for MLLMs, as training and deploying these models often require significant computational resources. For instance, training **Cross-modal Transformers** demands **>1,000 GPU hours**, making it prohibitively expensive for many research and industry applications. Similarly, **Flamingo** (Alayrac et al., 2022), despite its innovative Perceiver architecture, struggles with real-time inference in large-scale deployments due to its high computational demands. While **AutoFuse** (Wang et al., 2024) achieved real-time performance in autonomous systems, it did so at the cost of high memory usage, highlighting the trade-off between scalability and efficiency. These challenges emphasize the need for lightweight architectures, efficient training strategies, and hardware optimizations to make MLLMs more accessible and practical for widespread use.

4. **Ethical and Regulatory Concerns**:

Ethical and regulatory challenges also pose significant barriers to the deployment of MLLMs, particularly in sensitive domains like healthcare. For example, **DALL-E** (Ramesh et al., 2022) raised ethical concerns due to its potential for generating biased or harmful content, which could have serious implications in medical applications. Additionally, the lack of **FDA-approved**

MLLMs for medical diagnostics underscores the need for robust regulatory frameworks to ensure the safe and ethical deployment of these models. These challenges highlight the importance of addressing biases, ensuring data privacy, and developing clear guidelines for the responsible use of MLLMs in critical applications.

3. Future Directions

Future research in Multimodal Large Language Models (MLLMs) must focus on addressing scalability, explainability, and data quality to unlock their full potential. **Lightweight architectures**, such as diffusion models and techniques like low-rank adaptation (LoRA) and quantization, are essential for reducing computational overhead and enabling real-time deployment in applications like autonomous systems and telemedicine. Simultaneously, improving **explainability frameworks** by integrating SHAP (SHapley Additive exPlanations) with attention visualization and natural language explanations will enhance transparency, particularly in high-stakes domains like healthcare, where trust and interpretability are critical. The development of **curated datasets**, including multimodal healthcare repositories with paired X-rays, EHRs, and genomics data, will address data heterogeneity and improve model performance, as demonstrated by **MedCLIP** (Li et al., 2025). Collaborative efforts between researchers, healthcare providers, and regulatory bodies are needed to ensure these datasets are ethically sourced and annotated. Finally, establishing **ethical and regulatory frameworks** is crucial to address biases, ensure data privacy, and guide the responsible use of MLLMs in sensitive domains. This includes rigorous testing for FDA approval and exploring federated learning and differential privacy to enable secure, decentralized training. By prioritizing these directions, MLLMs can achieve greater scalability, transparency, and real-world usability while safeguarding ethical and regulatory compliance.

5. Conclusion

Multimodal Large Language Models (MLLMs) represent a paradigm shift in artificial intelligence, enabling contextual reasoning across text, images, audio, and video. While these models have achieved remarkable success in tasks like medical diagnosis, image captioning, and multimedia retrieval, significant challenges remain in terms of scalability, explainability, and ethical deployment. Healthcare applications, in particular, demand domain-specific adaptations, with cross-modal attention emerging as the most promising fusion strategy for aligning heterogeneous data types.

Looking ahead, future research must prioritize lightweight architectures to improve computational efficiency, explainability frameworks to enhance transparency, and curated datasets to address data heterogeneity. Additionally, the development of ethical and regulatory

frameworks will be essential to ensure the responsible use of MLLMs in critical applications. By addressing these challenges, MLLMs can unlock their full potential, driving innovation in healthcare, autonomous systems, and beyond while ensuring real-world usability and regulatory compliance.

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