Impact of Dataset Size and Distillation Techniques on Image Captioning Performance: An Empirical Study

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Abstract. Image captioning is a task that combines computer vision and natural language processing, in which a model generates descriptive text from an input image. High-performance captioning systems have traditionally depend on computationally intensive models and big datasets such as MSCOCO. But building such models from the ground up requires a lot of resources, and people without a lot of processing power frequently cannot afford it. This study aims to investigate how well pre-trained architectures, like ResNet-50, GIT, and GPT-2, work in combination with dataset distillation strategies to minimize the large volumes of training data without substantially affecting model performance. We use random selection and gradient-based distillation as sampling techniques to assess models trained on distilled subsets of different sizes (25%, 50%, 75%, and 100%), and we evaluate their performance using BLEU and CIDEr measures.

Keywords: Image Captioning, Dataset Distillation, Gradient-Based Selection, Random Sampling, ResNet-50 + LSTM, CLIP + GPT-2, GIT Model, MSCOCO Dataset, BLEU Score, CIDEr Score, Deep Learning, Vision-Language Models, Pretrained Transformers, Data Efficiency, Model Evaluation, Caption Quality, Low-Resource Training

1 Introduction

Image captioning [1] is about teaching computers to look at an image and describe it in words, similar to how a person might say "a cat sitting on a couch" on the shown a photo. It blends computer vision and natural language processing and has been studied through models like Show and Tell or Show, Attend and Tell, which combine convolutional neural networks (CNNs) with recurrent neural networks (RNNs). In recent years, transformer-based models like GIT have taken this further by generating more fluent and context-aware captions. However, these models are often very large, require huge datasets like MSCOCO, and take a long time to train, which makes them hard to use in resource-limited situations. That's where dataset distillation comes in. Instead of training on all available data, distillation tries to find the most informative samples so that models can learn faster and with less data. This is especially helpful in real-world environments like mobile apps, embedded devices, or schools and clinics, where

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computing resources are limited. Smaller models like GPT-2 can be used for 045 captioning by converting image features into a form the language model under- 046 stands. This makes it possible to build lightweight captioning systems that are 047 still quite accurate and useful. Our project focuses on making these models more 048 efficient by combining pre-trained architectures with data distillation strategies. 049 The end goal is to create accessible captioning tools that could help with things 050 like better image search, personalized recommendations, or even assistive tech 051 for visually impaired users.

Even with all the recent progress, there are still some roadblocks to using 053 image captioning widely. The best models need a lot of labeled data and pow- 054 erful hardware to train properly, which isn't always available. Models like GIT 055 perform really well but are hard to run in settings where speed or cost matters. 056 Past research has mostly explored distillation for simpler tasks like classification, 057 where the goal is to pick a label from a list. For image captioning, which involves 058 generating full sentences with proper grammar and meaning, distillation is more 050 challenging and less studied.

In our work, we explore how different captioning models respond to reduced 061 training data using two methods: random sampling and gradient-based selection. We test these across a range of dataset sizes to see how performance changes, using BLEU and CIDEr scores to measure quality, along with training and inference time. Our goal is to understand how much data is really needed, how distillation can help, and which models work best when resources are limited.

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Related Work 2

Dataset Distillation for Efficient Training: Our work is different from these 070 prior efforts in several key aspects. Yu et al. (2023) [2] provide a comprehensive 071 survey of dataset distillation techniques, classifying them based on optimization strategies, data modality, and application domains. However, their work remains largely theoretical and review-based, without conducting new experimental comparisons across distillation methods. In contrast, our approach focuses 0.75 on an empirical evaluation of gradient-based and random selection methods to 076 construct distilled datasets of varying sizes (25%, 50%, 75%, and 100%). This allows us to systematically analyze the trade-offs between dataset size, selection strategy, and downstream model performance. Furthermore, Lopes et al. [3] propose a data-free knowledge distillation method that synthesizes inputs using prior information from pre-trained models. Their method is particularly useful in privacy-sensitive scenarios where training data is unavailable. However, our work is rooted in the practical context where full datasets are available, and the goal is to reduce training data size for efficiency, without introducing synthetic inputs or relying on student-teacher architectures. By comparing distilled subsets obtained through different strategies, our work offers insights for practitioners aiming to balance training cost with accuracy.

Image Captioning with Pre-trained Models: The paper "Show and Tell: A Neural 088 Image Caption Generator" [4] merges convolutional neural networks for image 089

feature extraction and LSTM networks to produce natural language captions. 090 "Show, Attend and Tell: Neural Image Caption Generation with Visual Atten- 091 tion" [5] provides information on how enabling the model to dynamically focus 092 on the right areas of the image while generating each word in the caption. The 093 research shown in the paper "Bottom-Up and Top-Down Attention for Image 094 Captioning and Visual Question Answering" [6] improves caption quality using 095 bottom-up and top-down attention, where object-level features learned using 096 Faster R-CNN are selectively focused on while decoding.

In comparison to these existing works, our work is looking to improve efficiency and scalability instead of focusing on architectural complexity. Instead of operations leveraging the attention-heavy models or relying on the object detectors themselves, our work uses pretrained models like ResNet-50 to effectively extract to features from images. Instead of attempting to enhance the quality of captions depending on the complex mechanisms of attention, our work promotes training optimization, simplifying the dataset size with distillation and adding examples to it. Because it reduces training time and computational demand at the expense of competitive performance, this is especially well-suited to environments with limited resources. In image captioning research, there has been a noticeable shift from model-centric to data-centric innovation with the use of pre-trained models in conjunction with data-centric optimization strategies such as dataset distillation.

3 Methodology

To study the effect of reduced training data, we used a 5,000-image subset from the MSCOCO 2017, each image annotated with five human-written captions. All images were resized to 224×224 pixels, and captions were tokenized, numericalized, and padded to a maximum length of 32 tokens. As a baseline, we are using random sampling, where we constructed training subsets by randomly selecting 118 25%, 50%, 75%, and 100% of the full dataset using Python's random.sample() over the list of image IDs. This approach simulates low-resource environments and provides a naïve benchmark to compare against more targeted distillation.

To evaluate the effects of dataset distillation, we trained and compared three distinct image captioning models. The first architecture combined a pretrained ResNet-50 encoder with an LSTM decoder. Specifically, we removed the classification head of ResNet-50 and used the extracted 2048-dimensional feature vector, which was projected down to 256 dimensions using a linear layer. This vector was then passed as the initial input to a single-layer LSTM with a hidden size of 256. The LSTM output was mapped to vocabulary scores through a fully connected layer, and the model was trained using the Adam optimizer with a learning rate of 1e-4 for 20 epochs using sparse categorical cross entropy as loss, where padding tokens were ignored in the loss calculation.

The second model in our experimental pipeline combined a CLIP-based 132 visual encoder with a GPT-2 language decoder. We utilized the CLIP ViT- 133 B/32 architecture to extract 512-dimensional embeddings for each image in the 134

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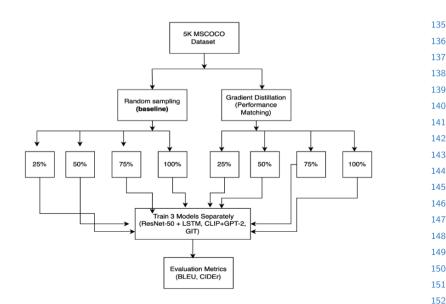


Fig. 1. A flowchart showing an overview of the experiments

dataset. To enable compatibility with the GPT-2 decoder, which operates in a 768-dimensional embedding space, we employed a learnable linear projection layer that mapped the CLIP image features to the GPT-2 token embedding space. During training, the projected image embedding was prepended as the first token in the caption sequence, effectively grounding the textual generation in visual context. The tokenized caption was then passed to a pretrained GPT2LMHeadModel from HuggingFace's transformers library. We fine-tuned both the projection layer and GPT-2 weights end-to-end using the AdamW optimizer with a learning rate of 5e-5 for 20 epochs. This architecture allowed us to repurpose a text generation model for image captioning tasks with minimal structural changes, enabling efficient multimodal learning.

Finally, we used the GIT model, which integrates both a Vision Transformer ¹⁶⁵ (ViT) encoder and a transformer-based language decoder into a unified, end-to-end architecture for image captioning. Unlike the other models, GIT does ¹⁶⁷ not require separate feature extraction or projection layers; instead, it takes raw ¹⁶⁸ image tensors as input and internally handles multimodal alignment. Preprocessing was handled using the GitProcessor, which tokenizes captions and applies ¹⁷⁰ the appropriate image transformations to align with GIT's pretrained pipeline. ¹⁷¹ Due to the model's scale and computational demands, we fine-tuned GIT for ¹⁷² 20 epochs using the AdamW optimizer with a learning rate of 5e-5. Evaluation ¹⁷³ was conducted using BLEU-1 through BLEU-4 and CIDEr scores, consistent ¹⁷⁴ with our methodology across all experiments. This architecture required mini- ¹⁷⁵ mal intervention and demonstrated high performance, making it well-suited for ¹⁷⁶ captioning tasks.

To explore performance with smarter data reduction, we implemented gradient¹⁷⁸ based distillation using the same subset of MSCOCO dataset. In this approach, ¹⁷⁹

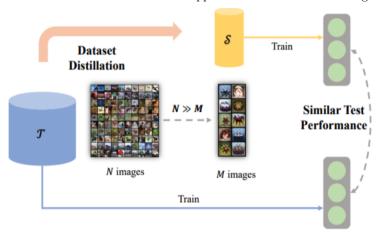


Fig. 2. An overview showing the dataset distillation process

we first trained the model on a small subset and computed per-sample gradient 2011 norms and storing this information across batches. We then ranked all samples 2022 based on these gradient norms and selected the top 25%, 50%, and 75% most 203 informative examples to create distilled datasets. This ensures we retain examples that cause the model to learn more, akin to keeping only the hardest or 2015 most educational questions in a study guide. Each distilled subset was used to train the same three models described above. All models were trained using the same architecture, batch sizes (typically 64), and learning rates as in the random baseline to ensure fair comparison. The BLEU-1 to BLEU-4 and CIDEr 2009 scores were used to evaluate caption quality, while training time and inference efficiency were monitored to assess computational impact. This dual comparison 211 allowed us to assess not just model performance but also whether smarter data 212 curation could save compute while preserving or improving quality.

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Table 1. Comparison of Image Captioning Models

| Feature | ResNet-50 + LSTM | GIT Model | CLIP + GPT-2 |
|----------------------------|---|---|--|
| Image Encoder | ResNet-50 (pre- trained CNN) | | CLIP pretrained or image-text pairs |
| Text Decoder | LSTM RNN | Multimodal Transformer Decoder | GPT-2 Transformer Decoder |
| Image-Text Con- nection | Image features fed as initial LSTM input | Unified vision- language model | Linear projection maps image features to GPT-2 space |
| Training Type | _ | Fine-tune full model (encoder + decoder) | |
| Pretraining Used | ResNet-50 ImageNet pretrained | Pretrained on large image-text datasets | CLIP and GPT-2 both pretrained |
| Strength | / | Strong multimodal understanding | Strong language modeling capabili- ties |
| Weakness | LSTM less powerful than Transformers | Heavy model; more compute needed | Needs strong image embedding quality |

Experiments

In this project, we propose the following experiments to test how effective of dataset distillation is in improving image captioning models. Also, we will be looking into how different models act under the experiment setup for image captioning.

Experiment 1: Comparing Distillation Methods on Full Dataset ²⁵⁶ Using ResNet-50

- Main purpose: In this experiment, we trained a ResNet-50 [7] + LSTM captioning model on the subset of MSCOCO dataset (5.000 images) to compare two distillation methods: random sampling and gradient-based selection. The random approach served as a baseline for our experiment. Gradient-based selection prioritized images with the highest per-sample gradient norms, assuming that these examples would be more informative. The model was trained over 20 epochs using the Adam optimizer (learning rate = 1e-4), with BLEU-1 to BLEU-4 and CIDEr scores used for evaluation.
- Evaluation Metric(s):
 - BLEU: To measure the n-gram precision of the generated captions ²⁶⁷ against reference captions, providing a standard metric for caption qual- ²⁶⁸ ity [8] [9].

• CIDEr: To evaluate the consensus between generated and reference cap- 270 tions, which is particularly useful for human-like captioning tasks [10] 271 [11].

• Training Time: To assess computational efficiency and determine how 273 much faster training can be completed using distilled datasets.

- Results:

Results showed that gradient-based distillation slightly outperformed random sampling across all metrics. For instance, BLEU-4 improved from 0.098 277 (random) to 0.105 (gradient), and CIDEr rose from 0.246 to 0.259. Although 270 training speed was slightly slower for gradient-based selection (27.46 vs. 28.37 270 iters/sec), the generated captions were more detailed and semantically accurate. This suggests that examples taken with higher focus during training 281 can improve generalization.

We also observed a consistent trend where gradient-based selection led to 283 better performance than random sampling, indicating that not all examples contribute equally to learning. By focusing on the important samples, 285 the model was able to extract richer information, leading to higher quality 286 captions despite identical data volumes.

However, this experiment leaves open some questions about scalability and broader generalization. Would the same benefit hold for larger datasets or with different architectures? Also, gradient-based selection is computationally expensive, requiring extra forward and backward passes per sample, so future work should explore whether similar gains can be achieved using cheaper approximations (e.g., entropy-based filtering or active learning). A promising next step is to analyze the interaction between model complexity and distillation methods.

| Model | Distillation Method | BLEU-1 | BLEU-2 | BLEU-3 | BLEU-4 | CIDEr |
|----------|---------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| ResNet50 | Random | 0.427 | 0.273 | 0.166 | 0.098 | 0.246 |
| ResNet50 | Gradient | 0.455 | 0.292 | 0.177 | 0.105 | 0.259 |

Table 2. Comparison of random and gradient-based distillation methods using 301 ResNet50.

Experiment 2: Varying the Size of Distilled Datasets Using ResNet-

- Main purpose: Building on the first experiment, this setup explores how ³⁰⁹ reducing the size of the training dataset affects model performance. We used the same ResNet-50 + LSTM architecture and tested it across four dataset sizes, 25%, 50%, 75%, and 100% of the MSCOCO subset (5,000 images). For each size, we compared both random sampling and gradient-based distillation while holding all hyperparameters constant: 20 training epochs, Adam 314

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optimizer (learning rate = 1e-4), and sparse categorical cross-entropy loss, 315 The goal was to understand how much data is truly necessary for acceptable 316 captioning performance, especially under limited computational resources.

Evaluation Metric(s):

• BLEU: To track changes in caption precision as dataset size decreases 319 [9].

- CIDEr: To assess how closely captions generated from smaller datasets 321 match those from full datasets [11].
- Training Time: To evaluate computational cost reduction as the dataset 323 size is reduced

- Results:

The results tells us that captioning performance improves with more data, 326 but most of the gains become stagnant after 75%. For example, BLEU-4 327 for gradient-based distillation rises from 0.099 at 25% to 0.109 at 75%, but 200 barely improves beyond that. Interestingly, the 75% gradient-based model 200 nearly matches the 100% performance, with CIDEr increasing from 0.251 to 330 0.292. This suggests that smaller, carefully selected datasets can approach 231 full-dataset performance while reducing training time and compute costs. This could be vital for training in environments where resources are limited. While the improvements from increasing the dataset are consistent, the marginal gains diminish past the 75% mark. This opens up an important direction for future work: Can we combine advanced distillation techniques with model pruning or quantization to further optimize performance? Additionally, these results raise questions about the optimal balance between dataset size and model complexity, especially when larger models are involved.

| Model | Distillation Method | Dataset Size | | BLEU-2 | BLEU-3 | BLEU-4 | CIDEr |
|----------|------------------------|-----------------|-------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| ResNet50 | Random | 25% | 0.433 | 0.277 | 0.167 | 0.096 | 0.251 |
| ResNet50 | Random | 50% | 0.428 | 0.273 | 0.165 | 0.097 | 0.247 |
| ResNet50 | Random | 75% | 0.426 | 0.272 | 0.165 | 0.097 | 0.245 |
| ResNet50 | Random | 100% | 0.427 | 0.273 | 0.166 | 0.098 | 0.246 |
| ResNet50 | Gradient | 25% | 0.459 | 0.299 | 0.183 | 0.099 | 0.251 |
| ResNet50 | Gradient | 50% | 0.446 | 0.283 | 0.172 | 0.101 | 0.258 |
| ResNet50 | Gradient | 75% | 0.446 | 0.282 | 0.170 | 0.109 | 0.292 |
| ResNet50 | Gradient | 100% | 0.455 | 0.292 | 0.177 | 0.105 | 0.259 |

Table 3. Performance comparison across different dataset sizes and distillation methods using ResNet-50.

Experiment 3: Comparing Different Pretrained Models

- Main purpose: In this final experiment, we evaluated the impact of model 357 architecture on image captioning performance by training three different ³⁵⁸ models under identical experimental conditions. We kept the training setup,

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dataset, and distillation techniques constant using 75% of the MSCOCO sub- 360 set based on insights from Experiment 2 and varied only the model architecture. Specifically, we compared ResNet-50 + LSTM (used as our baseline), 362 CLIP [12] + GPT-2 [13] (where image embeddings from CLIP were mapped 363 into GPT-2's language space using a learnable projection), and GIT [14] 364 (a powerful, transformer-based vision-language model pretrained end-to-end 365 for captioning tasks).

Evaluation Metric(s):

Like in the previous experiments we will be evaluating our experiment via 368 the BLEU, CIDEr scores as well as training time. In addition to this we will 360 evaluate the generated caption manually to understand how accurately the 370 model is able to explain the image through the generated captions.

- Results:

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The results clearly demonstrated that model architecture had the strongest 373 influence on captioning performance. GIT consistently achieved the highest scores, with a BLEU-4 of 0.788 and CIDEr of 2.133 under gradientbased distillation, followed by GPT-2 + CLIP (BLEU-4: 0.624, CIDEr: 276 1.792). ResNet-50 + LSTM, while much faster to train (23.34 iterations/sec), 277 showed the weakest captioning ability (BLEU-4: 0.097–0.105, CIDEr: 0.25). Notably, gradient-based distillation provided slight improvements across all 270 models. but the gap between architectures was far more impactful than the gap between distillation methods. A general trend we observed was that 381 transformer-based models like GIT and GPT-2 benefited more from distilled data than the ResNet-based baseline, possibly because they are better at leveraging contextual signals when trained on more informative samples. The GPT-based model, while not as powerful as GIT, showed strong results with significantly lower training time than GIT, suggesting a useful balance for mid-resource scenarios. GIT's superior performance aligns with its design, it's pretrained end-to-end for vision-language tasks, allowing it to generalize better, even on smaller or distilled datasets. However, some important questions remain open. For instance, while we manually inspected caption outputs, we did not formally evaluate fluency or factual correctness beyond BLEU/CIDEr metrics, which may not always align with human judgment. Additionally, our experiments were conducted on a relatively small subset (5K images), and it is unclear how these trends would scale on the full MSCOCO or other datasets. Future directions include testing on larger datasets, applying other distillation techniques, and exploring multi-modal fine-tuning of GIT to reduce its training time without sacrificing quality.

Fig. 3 illustrates how BLEU-1 scores vary with dataset size across different models and distillation methods. It shows that GIT achieves the highest scores overall, and that gradient-based distillation slightly boosts performance, especially for smaller models, with most gains plateauing after 75% dataset size.

Fig. 4 compares CIDEr scores across models and distillation techniques as dataset size increases. GIT consistently outperforms other models, while gradient-403 based distillation provides a modest improvement for GPT and ResNet-50. The 404



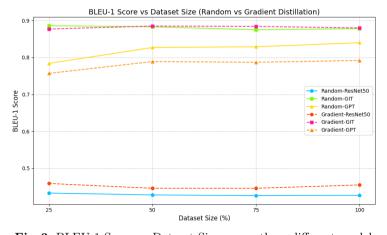
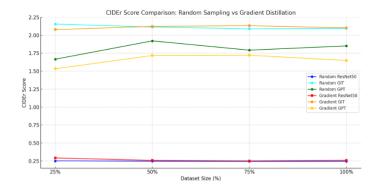


Fig. 3. BLEU-1 Score vs Dataset Size across three different models



 ${f Fig.\,4.}$ A flowchart showing an overview of the experiments

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| Model | Method | BLEU-1 | BLEU-2 | BLEU-3 | BLEU-4 | CIDEr | (iters/sec) |
|----------|----------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-------------|
| ResNet50 | Random | 0.426 | 0.272 | 0.165 | 0.097 | 0.245 | 23.34 |
| GIT | Random | 0.875 | 0.828 | 0.796 | 0.773 | 2.089 | 1.45 |
| GPT | Random | 0.829 | 0.745 | 0.676 | 0.624 | 1.792 | 10.46 |
| ResNet50 | Gradient | 0.446 | 0.282 | 0.170 | 0.099 | 0.251 | 23.34 |
| GIT | Gradient | 0.884 | 0.841 | 0.811 | 0.788 | 2.133 | 1.46 |
| GPT | Gradient | 0.787 | 0.688 | 0.610 | 0.548 | 1.722 | 10.46 |

Distillation

Table 4. Comparison of BLEU. CIDEr scores, and training speed across models and distillation methods.

performance largely saturates beyond 75% dataset size, reaffirming that highquality subsets can approximate full-data performance.

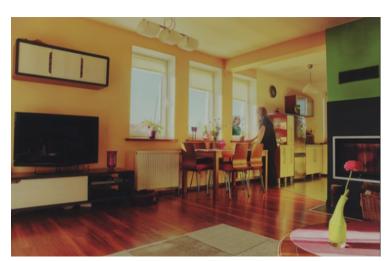


Fig. 5. A sample test image

The test image fig.5 depicts a dining room scene with a table, a visible fireplace, and a person standing in the area. An ideal caption would reference these key components, for example, "a woman standing near a table in front of a 484 fireplace." While the GIT model generates the most contextually relevant caption, it still omits some critical details. The ResNet-50 model repeats objects redundantly, and CLIP + GPT-2 produces a vague and incomplete output. This discrepancy highlights a key limitation of automatic evaluation metrics. As a result, models may perform well quantitatively but still struggle to generate 489 comprehensive and human-like captions in real-world scenarios.

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| Model | Generated Caption |
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| ResNet-50 + LSTM | image of a fireplace in a table with a table and a fireplace |
| GIT | a woman stands in the dining area at the table |
| CLIP + GPT-2 | A window and home with yellow in the United States of America, |
| | a man was walking |

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Table 5. Captions generated by different models for the same input image as shown in Fig 5.

Conclusions 5

This study tells us how effective the technique of dataset distillation is in enhancing the efficiency of image captioning models under constrained data and computational resources. We conducted systematic evaluation of three pretrained 500 architectures: ResNet-50 with LSTM, CLIP with GPT-2, and GIT. These models were tested across two strategies: random sampling and gradient-based selection. Our findings show that gradient-based distillation provides consistent but modest improvements over random sampling across all dataset sizes and model architectures. Furthermore, performance gains become stagnant beyond the 75 percent data. This indicates that carefully selected subsets can offer performance comparable to full-scale training while substantially reducing computational overhead.

Among the evaluated models, GIT achieved the highest BLEU and CIDEr scores, showcasing its strength in capturing visual-semantic alignment. The CLIP and GPT-2 combination provided a good trade-off between performance and efficiency, while ResNet-50 with LSTM established a solid baseline. However, manual inspection of generated captions revealed a limitation in standard evaluation metrics. Despite high BLEU and CIDEr scores, some captions lacked key semantic details. This highlights the inadequacy of relying solely on n-gram-based metrics, which may overestimate caption quality in real-world scenarios.

From the point of view of ethics for this work, we have used open-source data and pretrained models for our research. The thing that could negatively impact this could be biased training of model which could result in the model providing improper captions. This could have a negative impact on the application as well as the user. If we can maintain an unbiased mode of training and regularly monitor the data that is fed to the model for training then this research and its further studies could really have a positive impact.

Future directions for this work could include exploring more robust evaluation frameworks that combine automatic and human-centered assessments to better capture caption relevance. In addition to this, integrating dataset distillation with model compression methods such as pruning, quantization, or knowledge distillation could further enhance the deployability of captioning systems on lowpower devices. Another avenue for further expanding on our work is extending this methodology to multilingual and low-resource settings, or using synthetic data augmentation to increase diversity without requiring additional labeling. 539

| Finally, applying these techniques to other vision-language tasks, including visual question answering and image-text retrieval, may provide broader insights into the benefits and limitations of distillation strategies. Overall, our research supports the development of scalable, efficient, and | 541 542 |
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| accessible image captioning systems. It demonstrates that smart data selection | 544 |
| combined with strong architectures can result in high-quality outputs even in | 545 |
| low-resource environments. | 546 |
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