

Vision + X: A Survey on Multimodal Learning in the Light of Data

Ye Zhu, *Member, IEEE*, Yu Wu, *Member, IEEE*, Nicu Sebe, *Senior Member, IEEE*, and Yan Yan, *Senior Member, IEEE*

Abstract—We are perceiving and communicating with the world in a multisensory manner, where different information sources are sophisticatedly processed and interpreted by separate parts of the human brain to constitute a complex, yet harmonious and unified sensing system. To endow the machines with true intelligence, multimodal machine learning that incorporates data from various sources has become an increasingly popular research area with emerging technical advances in recent years. In this paper, we present a survey on multimodal machine learning from a novel perspective considering not only the purely technical aspects but also the intrinsic nature of different data modalities. We analyze the commonness and uniqueness of each data format mainly ranging from vision, audio, text, and motions, and then present the methodological advancements categorized by the combination of data modalities, such as *Vision+Text*, with slightly inclined emphasis on the visual data. We investigate the existing literature on multimodal learning from both the representation learning and downstream application levels, and provide an additional comparison in the light of their technical connections with the data nature, e.g., the semantic consistency between image objects and textual descriptions, and the rhythm correspondence between video dance moves and musical beats. We hope that the exploitation of the alignment as well as the existing gap between the intrinsic nature of data modality and the technical designs, will benefit future research studies to better address a specific challenge related to the concrete multimodal task, prompting a unified multimodal machine learning framework closer to a real human intelligence system.

Index Terms—Multimodal representation learning, discriminative and generative multimodal tasks, data characteristics, survey



1 INTRODUCTION

WE perceive and communicate with the world through a multisensory human system, by seeing objects, hearing sounds, speaking languages, as well as writing and reading texts. The information from these varied sources is processed by different parts of the human brain, as indicated by [5], [20], [252]. For instance, the occipital lobe acts as the primary center for visual processing, interpreting the distance and locations of objects, while the temporal lobe processes auditory information, helping us understand sounds. Language comprehension, facilitated by Wernicke's area in the posterior superior temporal lobe, is crucial for decoding both written and spoken words. Other sensory information, such as touch and movement, is processed by distinct brain areas. These integrated yet distinct functions form a complex and harmonious human sensing system. The specialized divisions in human neural processing, which highlight both unique and shared characteristics across different modalities, inspire us to think about the multimodal machine learning problem in the light of data in this paper.

Historically, the vision, audio and textual data were usually studied in separate research fields (i.e., computer vision, digital signal processing, and natural language processing).

With the ultimate objective to bring true intelligence to machines, the research in Artificial Intelligence (AI) nowadays has gone far beyond the exploitation of a single perception perspective but entered an era where the interplay of multiple sensing systems is studied in a collaborative way just as in human brain systems. As the research of multimodal learning has become increasingly popular in recent years, we present a survey that not only studies the technical development of recent literature but also elaborates on the data characteristics, as well as examines the connections between the logic of such technical designs and their respective data natures.

To better structure the paper, we adopt a taxonomy centered on computer vision literature, using vision as the primary data modality while incorporating others, including *audio*, *text*, and others. These modalities share commonalities but also have unique characteristics in terms of nature, format, and assessment criteria. For example, audio data can be categorized into music, speech, or ambient sounds, with speech closely linked to text and music often associated with motion in a more subjective manner. We then discuss multimodal representation learning, differentiating between *supervised* and *unsupervised* settings, alongside popular network architectures for processing various modalities. This categorization underscores a shift in research focus from traditional supervised learning with manually annotated data to large-scale pre-training on unlabeled data.

Subsequently, we delve into the downstream aspects of multimodal learning, categorizing multimodal applications into two primary directions: discriminative and generative applications. For each direction, we group the existing literature in the form of **vision+X**, where *X* primarily represents non-visual data modalities. This framework highlights the

- Y. Zhu is with the Department of Computer Science, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08540 USA. E-mail: yezhu@princeton.edu
- Y. Wu is with the School of Computer Science, Wuhan University, China.
- N. Sebe is with the Department of Information Engineering and Computer Science, University of Trento, Italy.
- Y. Yan is with the Department of Computer Science, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, IL 60616, USA.

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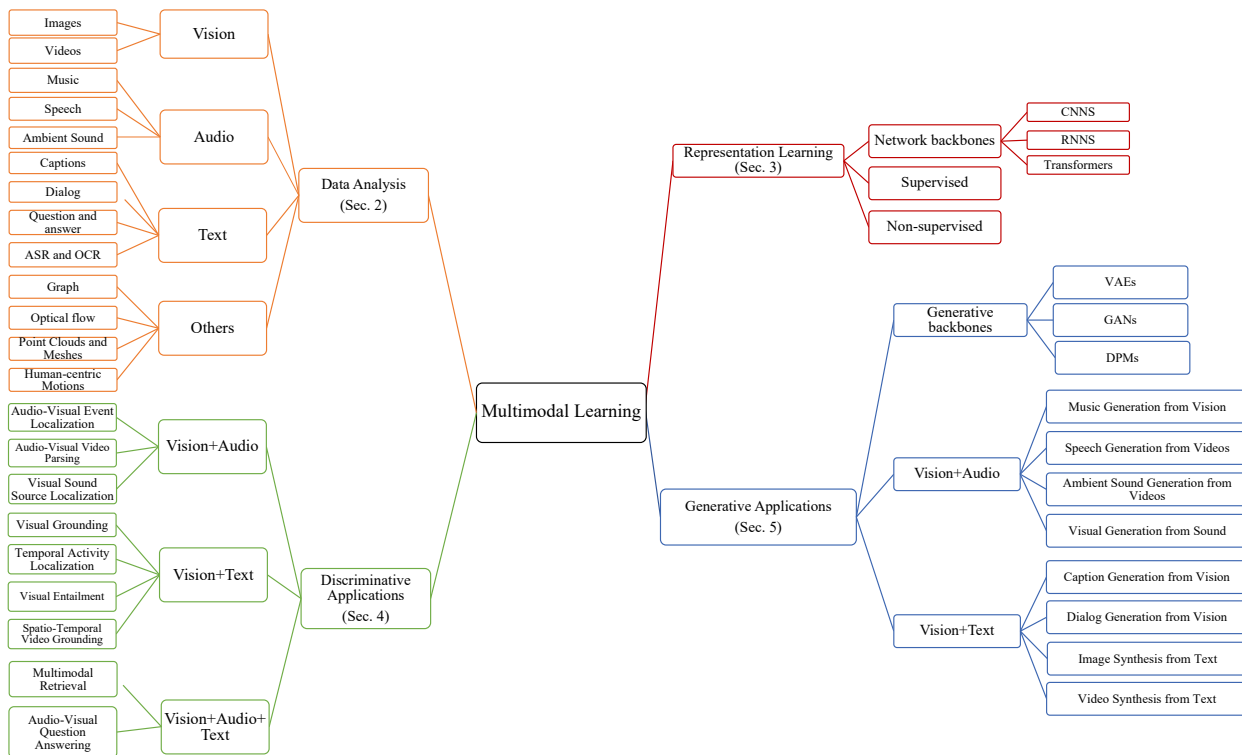


Fig. 1. **Overall structure of our survey.** We first present different data modalities and their characteristics, along with examples of multimodal datasets. We then introduce the representation learning area categorized with learning settings. Next, we mainly divide the application area into the discriminative and the generative directions, with more detailed classifications following the combination of data modalities.

adaptability and practicality of multimodal learning across diverse scenarios. For instance, akin to human multisensory perception, combining vision and language is essential for tasks like captioning, which provides textual descriptions of visual content, or imagining sounds based on visual cues. Reviewing various prominent multimodal tasks reveals that, despite differing data modalities and objectives, shared technical approaches emerge. Our detailed analysis examines these technical intricacies and their reflection on underlying data properties, strengthening the link between data types and model strategies. This exploration also addresses prevailing challenges and future directions in multimodal learning.

Compared to other surveys on multimodal learning [15], [18], [91], [115], [143], [283], we approach the problem from the unique perspective of data itself. This novel perspective allows us to establish connections between the inherent characteristics of multimodal data and the design of methodologies, leading to a profound discussion on the future of multimodal research in two major aspects. On the one hand, we believe that emphasizing and exploiting the unique characteristics of specific data modalities will contribute to solving concrete application problems associated with those modalities. On the other hand, recognizing the commonalities among different modalities will enable researchers to construct a more unified and collaborative framework that mirrors the capabilities of a real human intelligence system.

The overall structure of the paper, illustrated in Fig. 1, is as follows: In Sec. 2, we first provide an analysis in terms of data characteristics for different modalities with a focus on vision, audio, and text. Next, we explore the multimodal representation learning in Sec. 3, sub-categorized

by the current popular model architectures and different learning settings. In Sec. 4 and 5, we present concrete multimodal applications with discriminative and generative tasks, respectively. In addition to the task-wise and technical introduction, we also make extra efforts by connecting the existing literature with their data characteristics as mentioned in Sec. 2, revealing which data attribute is handled and addressed in specific methods and models. The above revisit forms the basis for our discussions on the existing challenges and possible future directions in Sec. 6. Sec. 7 includes final remarks and conclusions.

2 DATA ANALYSIS

In this section, we elaborate on the intrinsic nature of multiple data modalities by analyzing their characteristics and commonalities. A list of commonly used multimodal datasets is included in Appendix A with detailed descriptions.

2.1 Vision

We categorize visual data into images and videos. As a primary information source in both human sensory systems and computer vision literature, visual data is often considered “raw data” with its high dimensionality. It encompasses a wealth of features and details, representing rich visual content. However, the redundancy in continuous spatial and temporal aspects poses challenges for processing, analysis, and efficient utilization in multimodal learning tasks.

Images. Images are fundamental to computer vision research, characterized by their inherent invariance to transformations. This key attribute drives the development of classic image processing methods and deep learning techniques like CNNs to extract meaningful visual features.

In the pre-deep learning time, image processing and computer vision research primarily aimed at deciphering image content and patterns through a manual feature extraction and analysis pipeline using machine learning techniques. For example, the scale-invariant feature transform (SIFT) [156] and the histogram of oriented gradients (HOG) [54], and Speeded-Up Robust Feature (SURF) [17] are three examples of popular image feature descriptors largely used for computer vision and image processing. After having extracted those descriptive features, some machine learning algorithms such as Support-Vector Machines (SVM) [51] and Principal Component Analysis (PCA) [267] are used to further analyze the feature data. With the rapid development in the deep neural network architectures [95], [131], [216] and the availability of large-scale image datasets such as ImageNet [62], [202], computer vision entered a new era where the classic procedure of feature extraction and analysis has been automatically integrated into neural network designs.

Moreover, the applications of computer vision in the image domain have been extensively extended and enriched from simple image classifications [216], [216] to various task scenarios like object detection [310] and segmentation [154] within the image. In addition to the above-mentioned discriminative task applications that aim to mine the data patterns from existing images, there is another branch of applications that aim to synthesize the image data using generative neural networks.

Videos. Video is another form of common visual data that has been extensively studied in the computer vision community [177], [183], [281]. Unlike static images, videos encapsulate information across the temporal dimension. For instance, human actions in videos are usually defined by a series of specific movements depicted in consecutive video frames over time, as such consistency and transformation in the visual context can only be presented in the format of videos. This temporal characteristic of video data also influences video-based applications, which often require additional understanding and analysis of temporal elements (*e.g.*, actions, motions, optical flow) [46], [230]. While the conventional image representation encoded by neural networks can be applied to individual frames, extracting video representations necessitates addressing the connections between temporally related frames. An intuitive and classic approach to learning video data representation is to extend the conventional 2D convolutional neural network into 3D architectures with an additional temporal dimension, a notable example is the I3D model [30] proposed for action recognition in videos.

Regarding video-based applications, the tasks are similar to those in the image domain, where the most popular discriminative tasks include video classification (sometimes referred to as action recognition) [30] and segmentation [241], and the generative tasks that seek to directly synthesize videos [243]. For the latter, Sora from OpenAI [24] stands out as a most recent large video generator.

2.2 Audio

Traditionally, the study of audio processing has predominately resided within the research field of digital signal processing. In this survey, we focus on introducing three primary types of audio data: speech, music, and ambient sound.

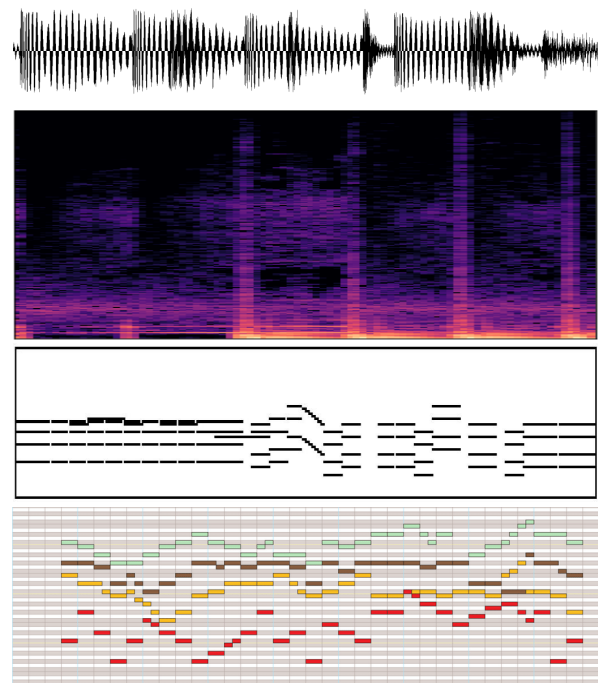


Fig. 2. **Illustrations of different audio data representations.** From top to bottom: (a) raw audio data in waveform; (b) audio data in mel-spectrogram; (c) music piece in 1D piano-roll from [72], where the horizontal and vertical axis represent the timestamps and the audio pitch, respectively; (d) music piece in MIDI from [184], where colors represent different instrument types.

Each of these audio types holds relevance and applicability in various multimodal task applications, further emphasizing the diverse nature of audio data within the context of multimodal learning. Similar to visual data, audio signals are a form of “raw data” that can be directly captured from the environment. However, unlike static images, audio signals possess inherent continuity in the temporal dimension.

Music. Music is a specific type of audio data that plays a significant role in our daily lives. As a form of expressive art, music is considered as the carrier and reflection of one’s inner world. Generally speaking, the music itself has various genres such as traditional classical music, symphony, modern pop, country music, etc. Furthermore, music can also be classified into diegetic and incidental categories. Diegetic music is integral to the narrative, existing within the story’s universe and perceived by its characters. In contrast, incidental music is intended solely for the audience’s experience, underscoring emotions and scenes without being part of the story’s world. The music categorization can often be subjective, with less strict and rigorous taxonomy for a specific genre. One common feature of those genres is that a music piece with high auditory quality has a relatively large sampling rate. For example, for the music with CD quality, the sampling rate is 44.1kHz [67], which leads to over 2 million data points for a one-minute musical piece.

From the perspective of scientific research, the high dimensionality of musical audio waveform imposes difficulties in data processing, therefore, researchers have developed different forms of musical data representations. In this survey, we classify the musical data representations into “*non learning-based*” and “*learning-based*” depending on whether

the representations are obtained via deep learning techniques. For the “*non learning-based*” musical representations, we can further divide them into continuous and discrete subcategories. The most general non-learning based continuous data format for audio, including the music, is the waveform as shown in Fig. 2(a). The waveform is a two-dimensional data that depicts the sound pressure variation measured by the air vibration in the time domain. Another popular and general type of audio representation is the spectrogram. Compared to the waveform that emphasizes the temporal variations of the audio signals, spectrogram also reflects the frequency content of sounds over time, as illustrated in Fig. 2(b). In most cases, we refer to the waveform as the raw audio data. 1D piano-roll [72] and 2D Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) are classic discrete representations [22]. As illustrated in Fig. 2(c), piano-roll is a sparse data representation format, where the horizontal axis is the time stamps, and the vertical axis represents the acoustic pitch. 2D MIDI can be interpreted as a composed piano-roll format with instrument types, as represented by different colors in Fig. 2(d). Both 1D piano-roll and 2D MIDI discrete forms can be decoded back to raw audio space by pre-defined music synthesizers. On the other hand, the “*learning-based*” representations can be similarly specified by their discrete and continuous natures. Recent progress in deep learning has introduced novel learning-based discrete representations, namely the *vector quantization* (VQ), to further reduce the high dimensional data into a discrete token space [179], [197]. Continuous learning-based musical representations share similar attributes as those in vision data, where we usually adopt neural networks such as CNNs to encode the raw audio signals to an embedding feature with desired dimensions.

Compared to other data modalities, music audio signals have several unique features to consider while applied to specific downstream tasks. Firstly, the musical data is a sequence where the temporal coherence within a complete music piece should be emphasized. Also, in addition to the temporal dimension, the audio data are often characterized by their frequency features in the form of spectrogram representation. Other than temporal coherence, rhythm is another important unique music characteristic to consider while assessing the music quality.

Speech. Speech primarily refers to audio signals of spoken languages, closely related to natural languages with their intrinsic correspondence. The data representations for speech are similar to music, where the waveform and the spectrogram are commonly used types in the non-learning based category. However, one noticeable uniqueness of speech audio lies in its natural correlation to language, where discrete representations of speech audio align with language tokens. As a result, the discrete language token-driven representation of speech features a more unified format compared to the learning-based VQ representation used in music audio. This characteristic also influences the methodology design when it comes to architecture selection, as detailed in the following of the paper.

In the application areas of speech, classic tasks like speech separation, which aims to isolate individual speech tracks from a composite audio mix, are well-studied [14]. Another pivotal task is automatic speech recognition (ASR) [295], which focuses on converting spoken language into text. ASR

systems are designed to accurately transcribe human speech, making them essential for voice-activated interfaces and transcription services. At the same time, due to the intrinsic correspondence nature between speech and language natures, speech data are often applied in multilingual translation problems [70] or cross-modal translation between the audio and text [49]. More recent works in the multimodal generative area also look into the speech generation from visual input with talking lips [124].

There exists another special type of speech-language for the hard-of-hearing and speech-impaired community, which is the “sign language”. Unlike audible speech, sign language necessitates the interpretation of visual signals from gestures, thereby exhibiting natural connections with visual and motion data. Research focused on sign languages explores tasks such as sign language recognition and generation [21], [196]. Essentially, sign language recognition aims to translate specific hand gestures into textual data, whereas generation addresses the reverse process. Although sign language is discussed within the “speech” category, the datasets [74], [172] typically comprise visual data, such as images and videos, accompanied by language annotations.

Ambient Sound. Beyond speech and music, there are other types of audio signals, such as the sound accompanying certain events, which we refer to as “*ambient sound*” in this survey. Compared to music, which is subjective, and speech, which is closely related to natural languages, ambient sound is more frequently encountered in conjunction with videos to characterize specific actions and events. For instance, we naturally relate the sound of a crying baby with a video showing the corresponding visual scenes. This unique correspondence enables ambient sound to provide additional information to conventional video action recognition tasks, leveraging the audio modality [113], [239]. The aforementioned audio representations are also applicable to ambient sound.

However, in contrast to music and speech audio signals, ambient sound exhibits a more noisy nature with less preprocessing. Unlike music, which can be represented using highly processed data formats like musical MIDI, and speech, which benefit from natural correspondence to text, the representation of ambient sound is more ambiguous. It lacks explicit formats like discrete token representations in speech or specific features like rhythm in music. These characteristics contribute to the inherent ambiguity and challenges in representing ambient audio.

2.3 Text

Text has been studied within the Natural Language Processing (NLP) communities from the early years. While there exist diverse formats of textual data, in this survey of multimodal learning, we mainly focus on introducing several types of textual data that exhibit close connections with other data modalities. The NLP community has witnessed significant attention in recent years, especially with the remarkable success in developing Large Language Models (LLMs) such as GPT-3 [193]. The tremendous achievements in NLP are closely linked to the nature of textual data and language. Unlike visual and audio information, which can be considered as “raw data”, textual data undergoes substantial processing. More specifically, it is a data type that has evolved through human civilizations, characterized

by a highly unified format and precise semantics despite linguistic differences. It signifies the fact that text is highly informative and compact, while visual and audio signals usually contain abundant information redundancy. Another unique characteristic of text on the application side is that the problem formulation of most NLP tasks can be unified under the notion of “next word token prediction”. This formulation represents a common underlying structure in various NLP tasks, which contributes to the coherence and consistency within the field and its potential to solve multiple tasks via a large foundation model [19].

Captions. Captions provide sentence descriptions that summarize either the entirety or a portion of the visual content in vision and text-related multimodal works. They may consist of single sentences or extend into longer paragraphs composed of multiple sentences. Bag-of-Words (BOW) [168] is a classic form of text representation, representing a text corpus as a multiset (*i.e.*, a bag) of its words. Following the development in deep learning, the captions are also frequently processed by Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs) (*e.g.*, LSTM [105]) with an internal memory state to obtain the learning-based representations. Compared to the visual data processed by CNNs, the memory state design in RNNs allows for establishing the recurrent connections among consecutive words in a given sentence to better interpret the overall textual features. A more recent breakthrough in the NLP community is the success of BERT (Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers) [66], which is a large-scale pre-trained model for word embedding. This unique characteristic has been widely addressed in the subsequent research studies involved with captions.

Dialogue. Dialogue is another common form of textual data in multimodal machine learning, distinct from captions due to its inherently interactive nature, which involves conversation among participants with logical coherence rather than a unilateral description of visual content. Therefore, when handling dialogue data, special attention should be paid not only to the words within a sentence like plain captions but also to the connections between different sentences within a complete dialogue. In the literature on multimodal learning for vision and language, these unique characteristics of dialogue are often addressed by constituting an additional data component - history - in the design of the framework. This component typically captures the flow of the conversation, including prior exchanges, and is processed by dedicated mechanisms that operate alongside the processing module for individual sentences.

Question and Answer. A more specific categorization of textual data is *question and answer*. While its representation is overall similar to its other textual counterparts (tokens), they are often leveraged in vision-language tasks as an approach to study the visual reasoning ability of networks or to evaluate specific task performance. Visual question answering (VQA) [9] is a representative task that uses question and answer to reason the visual context. Question and answer are often closely related to the dialogue, as the interactions within the dialogue can take the form of questions and answers.

ASR and OCR Text. While captions and dialogue are correlated with the visual context in a more high-level and semantic manner, automatic speech recognition (ASR)

and optical character recognition (OCR) based texts present a slightly different connection to the audio and visual information. Specifically, ASR and OCR are foundational multimodal research topics that have matured over decades, they exhibit precise correspondence between text and other data modalities [80], [117]. In addition, OCR also serves as a technique to obtain textual data from textual corpus.

2.4 Other Modalities

Multimodal learning encompasses a wide array of data modalities beyond vision, audio, and text. For instance, 3D data represents a significant category, including subcategories like point clouds and meshes. This survey focuses on exploring data modalities with cognitive significance that mirror the human perceptual system. Therefore, we categorize data modalities other than vision, audio, and text together, highlighting their relationships with these primary modalities for a more integrated understanding and presentation structure.

Graph. Graph data offers structured representations of relational information via nodes and edges which captures the connections and interactions between elements. While it may not be a data modality that naturally exists through a human perception system, it plays a significant role in machine learning when connected to other data modalities. For example, the scene graph establishes a graphical representation from the images to interpret the connections among objects. A typical example of a multimodal application that leverages both visual and graph data is the scene graph generation from the visual context [142], [157]. The non-Euclidean nature of graph data also inspires the design of graph neural networks [274], [299], which serve as a powerful model architecture to process graph data.

Optical Flow. The concept of optical flow has been first proposed in the last century as a measurement to characterize the movement of objects in a visual scene caused by the relative motion between an observer and a scene [108]. With the advancement of computer vision, especially with the deep learning techniques, the optical flow has also been studied together with visual data [236], [251], [257], [264]. Compared to other motion data formats, optical flow is usually defined in a more precise manner via the pixel-level change within the consecutive image sequences. However, the calculation of optical flow itself has been a quite challenging research problem, due to the fact that environmental lighting can also impose large effects on the pixel values of images. Overall speaking, optical flow can be considered as a specific motion presentation explicitly derived from visual information.

Point Clouds and Meshes. Point clouds and meshes are both important forms of 3D data, providing spatial and structural information that enriches our understanding of physical environments. While point clouds are collections of vertices in a three-dimensional coordinate system, meshes further build on this by connecting points with edges and faces, creating a comprehensive model that represents the shape and topology of 3D objects. Like the other data modalities discussed in this section, point clouds and meshes are not directly captured by our sensory systems but are constructed through processes that often incorporate human insights.

Human-Centric Motions. Human motions are often used to define various daily activities. 2D skeleton data of human

body is a common representation form for human motions, which captures the keypoints of the human body and represents them as axis coordinates within an image. They can be used to define various daily activities, which can be practically applied in real-life applications. For instance, automatic detection of human actions is particularly valuable in human-centered assistant systems, such as the health assistant to detect falls for elderly people. Typically, we can extract 2D skeleton data for each frame via pre-trained networks such as OpenPose [28], [29]. 3D human motion data can usually provide richer information with the extra data dimension. A classic form of 3D motion data involves incorporating depth information alongside the conventional 2D keypoints data. Besides the RGB camera-based methods mentioned for keypoint acquisition, keypoints can also be derived through alternative approaches within the keypoint detection domain, such as geometric reasoning from 3D data [231] and SLAM techniques applied to lidar sensor data [226]. Furthermore, there are other forms of 3D motion representations that are more frequently adopted in the Computer Graphics (CG) field, such as the Skinned Multi-Person Linear Model (SMPL) [155]. SMPL integrates skinning and blends shapes to represent human bodies. Compared to optical flow, which captures the motion of all pixels between two frames, keypoint movement, on the other hand, tracks specific points of interest across frames, allowing for a more focused analysis of object or feature dynamics. Meanwhile, 3D video features extend this analysis into the spatial domain, integrating depth information with motion to provide a richer, more detailed representation of the visual structure and movement patterns.

3 MULTIMODAL REPRESENTATION LEARNING

In this section, we focus on multimodal representation learning studies. We structure this section into three parts: the introduction to several popular network architectures and evaluation, the supervised learning setting, and the non-supervised setting. The rationale behind this categorization is based on the fact that the multimodal representation learning field has gone through a shift from conventional supervised representation to large-scale pretraining. Classic methods under the supervised learning setting usually require fully annotated data to train the networks, thus imposing limitations on the size of available training datasets due to the tedious human labor work for labeling.

To overcome the bottleneck, the research trend in the multimodal representation learning has turned to “non-supervised” setting, using data that do not necessarily require human annotations. These datasets are often collected directly from the Internet and consist of paired data from different modalities. It is important to note that while these datasets possess intrinsic correspondence between modalities, they are considered non-supervised in this survey due to the lack of manual labeling. Notably, these non-supervised approaches benefit from larger dataset sizes and have witnessed an increase in model scale. Therefore, in Section 3.3 for non-supervised representation learning works, we mainly focus on introducing the large-scale pre-training studies, which have been attracting much research attention in recent years. The primary research objective in representation learning under the multimodal context is to

learn an effective and discriminative mapping between the corresponding data representations from multiple modalities.

3.1 Network Architectures

We introduce several popular network architecture backbones for learning data representations of the above-mentioned principal data modalities (*i.e.*, visual, audio and text). Nevertheless, we note that there exists other popular network designs for specified data modality, *e.g.*, Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) [205] for graph data and PointNet [188] for point clouds.

Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs). As one of the most classic network architectures in the computer vision field, CNNs [95], [131], [216] have been widely adopted as the backbone architecture in representation learning for visual data. The core idea of CNNs is to extract high level data representations from the raw data via complex functions composed of convolutional layers and activation functions. Similarly, the same idea has also been adapted in learning data representations for audio signals [96]. In the context of representation learning for classic visual and audio data, the training of CNNs often leverages the multi-class cross-entropy loss for classification tasks using:

$$l = - \sum_{c=1}^N y_c \log(p_c), \quad (1)$$

where y_c is the class label, and p_c denotes the predicted probability. Then features extracted from the last layer of the CNNs are further used as the actual data representation.

Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs). A specific demand for learning data representations for natural languages is to consider its temporal correlations with sequential order for words. Therefore, NLP community follows a different vein of network architectures to address this challenge using recurrent neural networks (RNNs) and LSTM [85], [105]. Efforts have also been made to learn audio data representations via RNNs [77].

Transformers. Transformers [245] have gained great popularity in machine learning community in both computer vision and natural language processing areas. The core technical design of Transformers is the self-attention mechanism, which operates on sequential data to learn the overall information. Compared to CNNs and RNNs, Transformers have several distinctive advantages in model designs: the flexibility to deal with sequential data with variant lengths; the efficiency to allow for parallel computing instead of following the sequential processing as for RNNs. Despite the fact that the Transformers are initially designed for NLP tasks [25], it has been successfully applied in representation learning for visual [94] and audio data [240].

Recently, Mamba [87] comes out as a new popular model that shows promising downstream performance on long language and audio sequence processing compared to Transformers [245]. One of its key strengths is to address the computational challenges by incorporating a selective mechanism into the state space models.

For the representation learning of textual data, commonly referred to as Language Model Pre-training, a widely used problem formulation involves “next token prediction”, which frames learning as a joint conditional probability challenge.

As a result, the foundational approach for optimizing neural networks in this context frequently involves maximizing the likelihood, typically achieved through the use of cross-entropy loss. However, it is worth noting that various other objective functions have been introduced to further enhance the modeling ability of neural networks.

Overall, data representation learning has always been an important research direction in machine learning, and it is a topic that lies within the upstream of the research pipeline. Consequently, the evaluation of multimodal representation learning methods usually relies on concrete downstream tasks, which we will present in detail in Section 4.

3.2 Supervised Learning

Supervised setting requires the annotations from multimodal sources to guide the learning process, which is also the most classic representation learning setting [65], [300].

Generally speaking, there are two approaches that are widely adopted for the supervised representation learning. One possible way is to establish mapping after having obtained the data representations from their respective feature space, which can be considered as a two-stage method denoted “representation learning in individual modality domain + mapping among modalities”, usually with fixed backbone models for the first feature extraction stage [151], [167], [263]. Alternatively, another way to tackle the multimodal representation problem is to learn a unified representation for a given data pair in an end-to-end manner, freely optimizing the feature extraction backbones [10], [258].

For the first approach, Liu *et al.* [151] exploit the existing pre-trained semantic embeddings from visual content, and propose a collaborative experts model to aggregate the multimodal information. [167] learns the text-video embedding from heterogeneous data with a Mixture-of-Embedding-Experts (MEE) model. Wang *et al.* [263] focus on global-local sequence alignment of video and textual representations. For the second approach, [258] proposes to learn two-branch neural networks for matching the text and image data. In the audio-visual domain, [10] learns the mutual representation via a “audio-visual correspondence” learning task.

3.3 Non-supervised Learning

In contrast to supervised learning where exhaustive manual annotations are required in training, there are other paradigms to learn data representation in the multimodal context. In the existing literature, “unsupervised”, “weakly-supervised”, and “self-supervised” are representative terminologies to describe the setting with slight nuance. Specifically, “unsupervised” often refers to the network training without human supervision, “weakly-supervised” describes the case where the supervisions may be noisy, limited, or imprecise; “self-supervised” is used to describe the model trains itself to learn one part of the input from another part of the input. In this section, we refer to them as “non-supervised” only for easy structure and presentation purposes.

The fundamental idea for non-supervised learning setting relies on the premise of the intrinsic synchronization nature among paired data from multiple modalities [192], [290], [319]. For example, certain video actions are naturally accompanied with characteristic sounds as described in the ambient sound section in Section 2.2. The images and captions are also paired to train the vision and language models.

Nowadays, there are several large-scale pre-trained models in multimodal learning research area, especially in the text-image domain, that have been attracting much attention, due to their impressive performance as well as the wide downstream applications [160], [173], [195]. We can consider the large-scale pre-training as a specific type of multimodal representation learning, since the primary goal of pre-training is to learn a joint and unified cross-modal representation that can be flexibly transferred to other domain or downstream tasks.

There are in general two popular methods for the pre-training field, which are contrastive learning based [4], [192] and mask reconstruction based [45], [135], [158]. One of the most popular examples of such models include CLIP (Contrastive Language-Image Pre-Training) [192] for the vision and language pre-training. Most of those models are developed following the BERT [66] and GPT (Generative Pre-trained Transformer) models for natural language [25] and images [41], whose the core design consists of transformer architectures [245] pre-trained for text and image generation tasks. Inspired by the success of GPT models in showing the potential to use the language or image to guide a large neural network to accomplish a variety of generation tasks in their respective domains, researchers naturally proceed to the multimodal area to bridge these modalities. The CLIP model is trained on 400 millions text-image pairs, and is considered as one of the first large-scale pre-trained models for the multimodal learning area to bridge the text and image data space. Another example is VATT (Video-Audio-Text Transformer) [4], which is a transformer-based self-supervised large-scale model for learning representations from raw video, audio and text. It first processes raw data from different modalities via linear projection, and trains the model to learn a semantically latent space via the Noise Contrastive Estimation (NCE). One commonness among those pre-training works is that the proposed models are trained with enormous amount of data using extensive computational resources. From the technical point of view, CLIP follows the general idea to align the embedding space of paired images and the corresponding textual descriptions. It adopts the batch construction technique [218] by encoding the entire sentence description as an entirety, instead of processing the textual word by word. CLIP jointly trains a text and an image encoder by optimizing the similarity scores of a given pair. During the inference time, the model can be used for zero-shot prediction by embedding the names or the descriptions of the target dataset’s classes in textual form via the learned text encoder.

It is worth noting that while those large-scale models [4], [192], [193] are able to achieve very impressive results, there are few radical novelties in the model architecture and training techniques. Therefore, while they have received large attention, there are also controversies regarding those works. One of the discussions over such large-scale pre-trained models is that the impressive results are largely due to the diverse and enormous data that have been carefully designed to train the model, as well as their scale on the existing models on large. Other concerns over the privacy and ethic issues have also been raised against these works. Overall speaking, despite the controversial voices over the topic, those models do help with building a more unified

toolkit in connecting the visual and textual space in the multimodal learning area, which also promotes large number of following works that are developed based on the aligned feature space for various downstream tasks.

3.4 Trend in Representation Learning

The machine learning and computer vision research community is rapidly advancing, with a trend towards scaling up data representation learning using emerging foundation models, empowered by the upgrade on the dataset scale and computational resources. The multimodal representations learned by large pre-trained models such as CLIP [192] have been successfully applied in various multimodal downstream tasks, boosting the performance, especially in the axes of generalization ability of models.

However, we also want to emphasize that scaling up is not a panacea. Despite the benefits, fundamental issues persist, such as out-of-distribution challenges and amplified model bias [253]. While large pre-trained models are powerful for many multimodal tasks, future research needs to focus on real-world scenarios with more edge cases and complex data formats for safe and responsible deployment.

4 DISCRIMINATIVE APPLICATIONS

In this section, we discuss the multimodal learning works for discriminative task applications, with subsections categorized with specific data modality combination in form of “Vision+X”, where X stands for the additional data modalities.

For discriminative applications, popular approaches usually inherit the neural networks from general representation learning in Sec. 3.1 with additional modules to adapt to task-specific objectives. A general methodological design in multimodal learning follows the ideas of “*separate processing*” and “*unified fusion*”. To be more specific, data of different modalities are first processed with respective network branches, and then the inter-modality learning is further performed by extra mutual modules before outputting the final results for different tasks. Since the exact objectives depend on the task scenarios, we leave the detailed introduction in the following subsections. In terms of the evaluations, different multimodal tasks have their corresponding evaluation protocols. Similarly to the specific methodology design, we detail the evaluations in the subsections below.

4.1 Vision+Audio

Audio-Visual Event Localization (AVEL). The Audio-Visual Event (AVE) is defined as an event that is both audible and visible in a video segment [239], and the AVEL task aims to localize the AVE within an unconstrained video [73], [147], [239], [273], [285]. This task was first proposed in [239], together with the AVE video dataset (details in Table 1 and Appendix A). The overall task objective resembles the action recognition with ambient audio data and the requirement for temporal localization under supervised or weakly-supervised settings. To tackle the additional ambient sound accompanying an event, a common method is to achieve the cross-modal interactions via different attention modules [73], [239], [273], [296]. Many of the existing works follow the framework that processes audio and visual data with separate encoders, and fuses the processed information for temporal localization and activity classification. The

temporal connection from the video stream is often addressed via the model backbone such as LSTM [105]. Evaluation of the AVEL task usually utilizes the prediction accuracy metric. **Audio-Visual Video Parsing (AVVP).** The AVVP problem aims to parse a video into temporal segments and label them as either audible, visible or both [146], [238], [271]. It is initially developed from the AVEL task, with its task emphasis on the recognition, while the AVEL focuses more the temporal localization. As a variant of the AVEL task, several works have been developed with the common core idea that seeks to learn an effective audio-visual feature as the foundation, and then to incorporate further refined technical designs to address specific task requirements. For instance, Lin *et al.* [146] introduced a sequence-to-sequence manner integration of audio and visual features. Yu *et al.* [296] explore the AVVP task by taking the potential audio-visual asynchrony into account.

Visual Sound Source Localization (VSSL). Visual Sound Source Localization (VSSL) task aims to locate the corresponding visual locations within an image given the sound [180], [190], [191], [209], [210], [223]. While the original sound source localization task (SSL) has been widely studied in the signal processing field [86], the deep learning based visual localization was first proposed in [209]. The high-level idea also focuses on learning the correlations between paired audio and visual data, except for the visual part, the VSSL task tends to switch the regions of interest within the visual data given different ambient audio signals. Overall pipeline often consists of separate encoders for visual and audio input, and then fuses the audio-visual information for learning a localization module during training. More technical details may differ in terms of how to perform the fusion via attention mechanisms [190], [209], the training technique using various localization or contrastive loss [190], [191], [209]. To assess the performance of the VSSL task, metrics such as the cIoU (Complete IOU) and AUC (Area under the ROC Curve) scores are often used to quantify the precision of the predicted areas for sound sources.

4.2 Vision+Text

Visual Grounding. As a popular discriminative vision and language task, visual grounding aims to localize the object within an image given a text description as input [61], [63], [78], [106], [112], [140], [148], [153], [214], [276], [291], [292], [298]. The idea of realizing cross-reference between sentences and visual context was first proposed and studied in [122], where the task was also known as “*referring expression comprehension*”. Pioneering works on the referring usually only require the grounding of a single object from the description sentence input [110], [161], [297], working on the premise that the region of interest is expected to achieve the maximum posterior probability for the given textual description. More recent works tackle a more challenging visual grounding setting, where the task is refined into two sub-objectives: phrasing and grounding. For the first sub-objective, models are expected to localize all the objects mentioned in the given textual description, and then to individually detect their corresponding boxes in the image [152], [186].

In terms of methodology designs for the visual grounding task, most works [61], [63], [78], [106], [110], [112], [140], [148],

[153], [161], [214], [276], [291], [292], [297], [298] can be categorized into supervised, weakly-supervised and unsupervised settings. The supervised setting refers to the condition where the annotation of phrase-object pairs is provided, the weakly supervised removes the phrase annotations for the textual description input, and the unsupervised setting completely removes annotations for both data modalities. As for general pipelines, most methods follow either a two-stage or one-stage framework. For the two-stage frameworks, models first extract region proposals for potential objects within the image, and then rank and match the proposals with language phrases. For the one-stage frameworks, visual objects and textual phrases are aligned and connected during the learning process to avoid redundant region proposals as in two-stage designs. In the case of weakly- or unsupervised settings, some extra regularization losses such as structural loss and discriminative loss [229], [276] are usually needed to better learn the correlations between corresponding object regions and textual phrases. The evaluation for the visual grounding resembles other visual localization tasks, which often use the IoU (intersection over union) between the predicted and ground truth boxes as a quantitative measurement, with a threshold value of 0.5. Another unique metric for the visual grounding task is *PointIt* (pointing game metric) [276], which computes the pixel location with maximum predicted attention weight, if the selected hit point lies within the ground truth box area, the prediction is counted as valid.

Temporal Activity Localization (TAL). Activity localization task (TAL) is also known as the video grounding, which seeks to locate the temporal segment of a video clip given the language description of a certain activity as query [8], [43], [44], [81], [261], [305], [305]. Compared to the visual grounding within the image, TAL requires additional reasoning and matching along the temporal direction as indicated by its name. For this task, the models are expected not only to capture the correlations between the visual activity and the language, but also able to temporally localize the segment among consecutive video frames. While the high-level framework structure remains similar to previous multimodal discriminative tasks with separate encoders, a multimodal processing module for fusing the features, a decoder module adapted for specific task objectives, and early representative works for TAL task introduce different techniques to emphasize the network ability for temporal reasoning. Gao *et al.* [81] propose a Cross-modal Temporal Regression Localizer (CTRL) with a Temporal localization regression network to align the fused visual-textual information with video temporal locations. The popular quantitative metrics used for evaluation include the *mean IoU* and *IoU@ α* , with α standing for the percentage of overlap between the predicated segment and the ground truth annotations.

Visual Entailment (VE). Visual entailment (VE) seeks to predict the logical relationship of a piece of text to an image [237], [278], [279]. It is developed from the textual entailment task [52], whose initial objective is to decide if a hypothesis can be logically deduced from the premise. Xie *et al.* [278] extends the textual entailment to the multimodal context, which replaces the textual premise with an image. Thomas *et al.* [237] further refines the task by introducing different levels of granularity. The emphasis of the VE task lies within the multimodal reasoning ability of networks. To achieve the

reasoning between the image and textual hypothesis, early methods [278], [279] adopt separate network branches to process visual and textual data and leverage the attention interaction for interactions. A refined framework [237] further disentangles the textual hypothesis into its constituent parts and proposes to enhance the reasoning by introducing an abstract meaning representation (AMR) graph for the decomposed textual components. The performance is often evaluated via prediction accuracy given the premise as input. **Spatio-Temporal Video Grounding (STVG).** Spatio-Temporal Video Grounding (STVG) is a recent multimodal task that lies at the intersection of visual grounding and temporal localization, integrating reasoning among space, time, and language within the visual context of videos [119], [228], [287], [307]. Specifically, given an untrimmed video and a textual description of an object, the task seeks to localize a spatio-temporal tube (*i.e.*, a sequence of bounding boxes) for the target object described. Most existing methods for STVG either build upon the idea from visual grounding or focus on temporal localization designs. One popular paradigm for tackling the task adopts the two-stage design, which leverages pre-extracted object proposals and then integrates the temporal localization via attention mechanisms [260], [289]. In the meantime, another thread of works proposes one-stage frameworks and does not rely on prior for object proposals [121], [287]. In terms of network architectures, Transformers are widely adopted as the backbone for such methodology designs [228], [287], [307]. STVG is usually evaluated via IoU metrics by comparing the frame overlap between the ground truth and the predicted timestamps.

4.3 Vision+Audio+Text

Multimodal Retrieval. Another multimodal discriminative task that has been widely studied is the retrieval [47], [88], [255], [256], [266], [311]. Most retrieval works operate on the representation space by measuring the similarities among learned representations from different modalities. As consequences, retrieval task is also one of the most frequently used downstream tasks in representation learning works.

While the retrieval task can be conducted within a single modality of data, multimodal retrieval seeks to extend its original setting to cross-modality scenarios, where we want to retrieve items that match the input from a different data modality, *e.g.*, text based vision retrieval, audio based vision retrieval. For example, CAMP [265] learns the text and image embedding via message passing across modalities. Gu *et al.* [88] propose to improve the text-visual retrieval with auxiliary generative models. [263] looks into the task of text based video retrieval by additionally looking into the local details via a global-local alignment method in the learned representation space. [319] learns a mutual audio-visual latent space via VAE-based framework for audio-visual cross-modality retrieval. Oncescu *et al.* [178] propose to retrieve audio signals given natural language queries.

Audio-Visual Question Answering. Audio-Visual Question Answering, as indicated by its name, is an extension based on visual question answering with integrated audio modality [136], [137], [288], [301]. Specifically, AVQA often involves questions regarding different visual objects, sounds, and their associations in videos. Existing methodology designs are often extended from VQA frameworks with extra interactions

with audio data. For instance, an intuitive framework [137] expands the two-branch encoder design into three-branch and separately processes video, audio, and textual data before introducing interactions via the attention mechanism. Answer prediction accuracy is often used for evaluation.

5 GENERATIVE APPLICATIONS

In this section, our focus is on cross-modality synthesis tasks for generative applications. These tasks involve generating data from a specific modality or multiple modalities as input.

There are usually typically two high-level approaches to generating data in cross-modality synthesis tasks: retrieving an item from a given database, or directly synthesizing and decoding data via the neural networks. For the retrieval-based generations, the core idea follows the logic to search for an item or several items that mostly resemble the “generated” data. A large percentage of the retrieval-based works perform the similarity measurement on the data representation level without actually considering the decoding part. Technically, we argue that such works are categorized in the *Representation Learning* section. As consequence, we mainly focus on introducing the works that “truly generate” data instead of retrieving items in this section for generative applications.

5.1 Generative Networks

Before diving into the concrete application tasks, we first introduce three popular backbone models for general generative tasks that have been widely adopted in multimodal generative literature.

VAE-Based Models. Variational Auto Encoders (VAEs) [126] are classic generative models proposed based on the deep neural autoencoders [100] under the unsupervised learning setting. The core of autoencoders relies on the premise that an effectively trained encoder should learn the data representation in a way that the encoded representations can be decoded to reconstruct the original data input by a decoder. Compared to conventional autoencoders, VAEs introduce regularizations on the bottleneck level by re-parameterizing the latent space using the Gaussian priors, where the learned Gaussian parameters allow for sampling new data, as illustrated in Fig. ??(a). Typical training of VAEs often includes two types of losses, which are the variational loss (ELBO) [126] that consists of a regularization loss on the latent representation space (e.g., Kullback–Leibler divergence) and the reconstruction losses on the output data (e.g., Mean Square Errors (MSE)). The classic variational objective can be formulated and derived from the following equation:

$$\log p(x) = \mathbb{E}_{q(x|z)}[\log p(x|z)] - D_{KL}[q(z|x)||q(z)], \quad (2)$$

where p represents the decoder, q is the encoder, x and z denote the original raw data and the learned latent embedding, respectively. In the actual implementation, the re-parameterization technique, which assumes $z \sim \mathcal{N}(\mu, \sigma)$, allows us to minimize the KL divergence based on sampling from N samples:

$$\sum_{i=1}^n \sigma_i^2 + \mu_i^2 - \log(\sigma_i) - 1. \quad (3)$$

VAEs have been widely exploited in various generative tasks in audio and images [99], [126] as well as in the multimodal context for cross-modality generations [224], [319].

GAN-Based Models. The generative adversarial networks (GANs) [83] are another mainstream backbone type for various generative models. From a high-level perspective, GANs involve two agents (i.e., the generator \mathcal{G} and the discriminator \mathcal{D}) playing an adversarial game. The generator aims to synthesize realistic data that resemble real data for fooling the discriminator, while the goal of the discriminator is to distinguish between the synthesized data by \mathcal{G} from the real data. Similar to VAEs, the training of GAN-based models does not require external annotations but only the real raw data, and therefore is frequently used in unsupervised or weakly-supervised settings. The standard training of GANs also minimizes losses from two aspects with latent space regularization (also known as adversarial losses) and reconstruction optimizations [83], [204]. Following the original work, multiple variants of the GAN models and adversarial losses have been proposed such as the Wasserstein GANs with the Wasserstein loss [11], [90] and conditional GANs [170]. The classic GAN loss is formulated as follows:

$$\min_G \max_D V(D, G) = \mathbb{E}_{x \sim p_{data}(x)}[\log D(x)] + \mathbb{E}_{z \sim p_z(z)}[\log(1 - D(G(z)))], \quad (4)$$

where G and D are the generator and discriminator, respectively. x and z denotes the original raw data and the learned latent embedding. On the application level, GANs are first widely applied in image generations [23], [114], later studies also explore the GAN-based models for audio synthesis [127], [132] or cross-modality areas [302], [316], [317].

DPM-Based Models. Compare to VAEs and GANs, the diffusion probabilistic models (DPMs) [217] are another type of generative backbones that have been very popular in more recent years. In principal, the DPMs include a Markov chain of a finite steps in two opposite directions. The forward direction, also known as “diffusion” process seeks to gradually add noises to a given data at each diffusion step, while the inverse denoising process aims to remove the noises added in the forward steps and recover the actual data from a non-informative noisy distribution. There are two variants of conventional DPMs that differ in the state space formulations of the Markov chain. Classic DPMs suppose the state space to be continuous, and parameterize the diffusion process with Gaussian noises [68], [101], [125], [128], [175], [219], [220], [221], while another variant of DPMs consider the discrete state space and formulate the diffusion process with state transition matrix [12], [89], [320]. The variational lower bound [101] is the classic loss function used for effective DPMs learning, other practical losses such as the auxiliary loss [12], [89], classifier-free guidance [103] and contrastive diffusion losses [320] are also proposed to further improve the generation performance. Vanilla DPMs are trained on a variational lower bound defined as follows:

$$\mathcal{L}_{vb} = \mathbb{E}_q[\underbrace{D_{KL}(q(x_T|x_0)||p(x_T))}_{\mathcal{L}_T} + \sum_{t>1} \underbrace{D_{KL}(q(x_{t-1}|x_t, x_0)||p_\theta(x_{t-1}|x_t))}_{\mathcal{L}_{t-1}} - \underbrace{\log p_\theta(x_0|x_1)}_{\mathcal{L}_0}], \quad (5)$$

where q and p represent the diffusion and denoising processes, respectively. x_i denotes the data at diffusion step t . DPMs have received much research attention due to the

competitive performance in generative tasks for images [68], [101], [102], [109], [175], audio [128], [134], [171], as well as in the cross-modality scenarios such as text-to-image [89], [174], [320] and dance-to-music generations [320].

The evaluations for the generative tasks have always been an important aspect to consider. Typically, the assessment of synthesized data in multimodal setting considers both unimodal and multimodal criteria. The unimodal metrics are utilized not only for multimodal scenarios but also for generative tasks in general, such as the fidelity in image generation. In addition to the general quality, the multimodal generations also take the cross-modality correspondence into account, such as the beat correspondence between video and music. We summarize the common evaluation metrics for various synthesized data in generative tasks in Appendix B.

5.2 Vision+Audio

Music Generation from Vision. Recent studies that seek to generate music from visual data (usually from videos) can be categorized by their adopted music representations. One branch of the music generation works [2], [69], [79], [227] rely on the symbolic audio representations such as 1D piano-roll and 2D midi and as we have introduced in Section 2.2. The symbolic musical representations can be decoded back to the raw audio waveform by pre-defined synthesizers that introduces no additional noises, thus enduring the high-quality of the generated music. This is especially true when compared to the learning-based musical representations and decoders [67], [317], [320], where the synthesized music usually has relatively high noise levels. Secondly, the computational cost of symbolic representation based works is generally lower than the pure learning-based methods, since the symbolic musical representations are very sparse and low dimensional, which facilitate the learning and inference process. However, such symbolic based music generation methods are also restricted in terms of the music diversity and flexibility. Especially in current research works, the generated music are usually limited to a certain specific pre-defined instrumental sound [2], [69], [79]. It is worth noting that most symbolic based music generation works, despite the fact that the framework output is raw music, do not directly use the generative backbones as we have introduced in Sec. 5.1. Technically, most of them are trained based on the ground truth MIDI annotations in form of cross-entropy loss. In contrast, another branch of research works deploy the learning-based musical representations either in form of continuous or discrete. However, despite the continuous music representations have been exploited in the music synthesis field [132], most recent cross-modal music generations adopt the discrete form of learned musical feature - vector quantization (VQ) - as the intermediate representations [317], [320], leveraging the large-scale pretrained music synthesis model JukeBox [67]. For example, D2M-GAN [317] proposes a GAN-based framework that takes the human body motion data and dance video frames as input, and generates musical VQ representation. CDCD [320] builds upon the diffusion probabilistic model with a discrete state space represented by the VQ, and incorporates a contrastive diffusion loss to train the network to improve the input-output correspondence for cross-modality applications.

Speech Generation from Videos. In addition to the music audio, another specific generation task seeks to synthesize speech audio from videos of human speaking [75], [76], [124], [166], [169], [187], [203], [248], [286]. One unique aspect about this audio generation task is that the speech largely relies on the movement of lips while speaking. Based on this characteristic, many works on this direction focus on reading and interpreting visual lip movement from video input and then convert it to audio waveform, which also explains the reason why this “video-to-speech” synthesis task is also known as “lip-to-speech” generation. Therefore, despite the topic of audio generation from videos, large percentage of the works in this area rather focus on the “motions in the videos”, instead of the raw videos. To enhance the correlations between lip movement and speech audio, the audio-visual cross-modal attention mechanisms are further adopted to improve the generation quality. Kim *et al.* [124] propose an attentional GAN with visual context to read lips for speech synthesis. Yadav *et al.* [286] use the VAE generative backbone with the stochastic modelling approach. At the same time, more refined variant of this problem with disentangled speech features such as the individual speaking styles have also been studied [187].

Ambient Sound Generation from Videos. Research works that seek to generate sound from natural videos [36], [42], [314] put special emphasis on the alignment between the generated sound and the visual context, which consists of both the semantic and temporal alignments. Chen *et al.* [36] address the semantic alignment problem by adopting a perceptual loss and considering the sound categories in the optimization process. Zhou *et al.* [314] follows a rather classic encoder-decoder framework for video input and audio decoder, propose three methods including the frame-to-frame, sequence-to-sequence, and flow-based variants. In [42], the authors tackle both semantic and temporal alignment with the proposed *REGNET* framework, whose core technical design includes a visual encoder and an audio forwarding regularizer. Generally speaking, compared to speech and music, the ambient sound has relatively fewer unique attributes other than its correspondence with certain activity. Summarizing the above works, we notice the high-level technical ideas are rather general and resemble to the standard pipeline designs.

Visual Generation from Sound. As the inverse direction of the sound generation from vision, to directly generate the pixel-wise natural images or videos solely from the audio modality is a challenging problem. However, as a specific type of visual generation from sound tasks, synthesizing talking faces from speech audio [38], [222], [306], [312] is a relatively well-studied sub-field. Similar to the “video-to-speech” task, the visual information in this reverse direction rather emphasizes the motions of lips in a video clip. In most cases, the input for the talking faces generation task includes a reference image and a driving audio track. Early works [37], [222], [249] adopt a general pipeline with two separate encoders for the input and a decoder for synthesizing the talking videos mostly via the GANs-based generative backbones. More recent works seeks to refine and improve the synthesis results by splitting the previous architecture into hierarchical structures [38], [58]. In addition to the raw videos, more specific motion data such as the flow is also used to

further enable high-resolution generations [306]. Some works also seek to generate natural videos by reformulating the video generation problem into an motion generation task in the form of optical flow [33], [64].

5.3 Vision+Text

Caption Generation from Vision. One of the classic vision and language generative tasks is the image and video captioning [35], [40], [159], [254], [259], [270], [282], [294], which aims to generate a language textual description of the given visual data. In the early stage of deep learning based visual captioning [162], [247], the general pipeline usually consists of encoder-decoder framework with the CNNs and RNNs as the backbone architectures for the image encoder and text decoder. Later on, the attention mechanism becomes a popular technique [159], [272], [282] to enhance the correlations between the sentence descriptions and the corresponding visual concept. A large amount of research works follows the updated general encoder-decoder pipeline with an additional attention modules. Other than the general encoder-decoder framework, there are some other works that tackle the captioning task using techniques such as adversarial learning [53], or reinforcement learning [150].

In addition to the technical progress, there are also some works that bring novel insights on the task setting of caption generations. For example, [6], [107], [208] incorporates ambient audio from the video as an additional input data modalities to further assist the video captioning. Following the above works, [321], [322] propose a new setting where part of the visual data becomes inaccessible as input, they further propose a dialog process between two agents as a supplement to the missing visual input, whose final goal remains to be generating a precise and complete textual description for the video.

Dialog Generation from Vision. In addition to the captioning tasks, another form of text generation from visual input focus on the dialog texts instead of plain descriptions. We can further classify the dialog generation from vision into visual question answering (VQA) [1], [9], [39], [56], [213], [277], [280] and visual dialog [57], [60], [116], [189], [211], [268], [321], [322]. As described in Sec. 2 the main difference between the two subcategories lies within the fact that the former VQA task aims to answer a single question related to the visual input, while the latter expect to maintain the question-answer interactions for multiple rounds with internal logic.

VQA task was first introduced in [9], whose task objective is to answer a language question related to the visual content. Similarly to the captioning task, the mainstream frameworks also follow the encoder-decoder pipeline, usually equipped with separate encoders for the visual and textual data, and a decoder for generating the words in language. Attention mechanisms have also been widely used in literature for the similar purpose to enhance the correlations between corresponding features from visual and language domains. One uniqueness of the VQA task compared to the previous visual captioning is the potential bias problem in the task setting. Specifically, one (models) may not truly rely on the visual context to answer the raised questions. For example, given a question such as “what is the color of the sky?”, the answer is likely to be “blue” in most cases, or given a question that the answer is expected to be “yes” or “no”, one

(models) can simply guess between two options. Therefore, to address such spurious pattern and bias problem, recent works have been seeking to migrate the issue by analyzing the causal relations [39], [176].

As another popular vision and language task, visual dialog follows a similar development path after being proposed in [57], where the general encoder-decoder framework is further extended to include an additional encoder for the dialog history data. From a high-level point of view, the challenge of visual dialog compared to the captioning and VQA is that the multiple rounds of question-answer interactions may refer to different parts of visual context with an image or video as the dialog goes on, leading to a higher requirement for precisely referencing the key information between two visual and textual data. In the meanwhile, the bias issue for VQA remains in the visual dialog.

Image Synthesis from Text. The inverse direction that seeks to generate image data from given text conditioning has also been a very active research topic in multimodal learning field within recent years since 2016 [89], [139], [149], [199], [284], [303], [304], [320]. It is a more challenging task compared to the text generation from visions, due to the reason that the visual data usually are richer in context, with demanding requirement for pixel-level synthesis.

Following the preliminary exploitation in the text-to-image task from [199], the recent literature in the area can be divided into different stages following the chronological order. Before the year of 2020, the mainstream approaches use the GAN based architectures to tackle the problem [284], [293], [304]. Later with the development of multimodal learning, researchers start to get inspiration from the NLP society by adapting techniques originated from language processing, one concrete example is the Auto-Regressive models for image generation [71], [195]. Starting from recent several years since 2020, DPMs have gradually become one of the most active methods for vision generation tasks [89], [101], [102], [194], [220], [320], due to its impressive performance and better tractability compared to GANs.

On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that several large-scale models have been recently introduced in the text-to-image field such as DALL-E [195] and DALL-E 2 [194]. DALL-E model includes two separate stages to train for the raw image generation objective. In the first stage, DALL-E learns the visual concept from images via the discrete VAE [195], and then fuse the learned discrete image embedding with the textual tokens to train the transformer [245] in the second stage. In inference, DALL-E first obtains the fused text-image embedding for the given text description and potential image candidates, and then use the pre-trained CLIP to do image re-ranking to get the generated images with higher similarities. DALL-E 2, as an improved text-to-image generator, uses the Diffusion Probabilistic Models (DPMs) (see details in Section 5.1) on the image embedding space from CLIP to do the image synthesis.

Text-Guided Image Editing. As a step further from the image synthesis from text, another popular generative task that combines the vision and text is to perform editing based on text prompt for the given raw images [3], [13], [123], [133], [174], [318]. Compared to the text to image generation, the setup of text-guided image editing using the generative models takes not only the text prompt, but also raw real

images as part of the input. The task objectives are usually two-fold: achieve the target editing effect, and preserve the remaining features of the given images.

Similar to the text-to-image (T2I) literature, as a refined task with additional raw image data as input, the community has explored several mainstream generative approaches using different architectures such as GANs [181], [315] and DPMs [13], [123], [174], [318]. As the state-of-the-art approaches, one way to categorize the DPM-based image editing methods is to see whether the proposed methods require additional learning given a pre-trained generative model. In most intuitive and straightforward cases, image editing via text prompt requires fine-tuning the parameters of given pre-trained models [123], or learning extra neural network modules [133] to achieve the target editing effect. Another category of image editing methods propose to solve the editing objective in a learning-free manner [318], by explicitly leveraging the intrinsic abilities of DPMs in exhibiting semantics along the generation trajectories.

Video Synthesis from Text. There are also works tackling the more challenging vision generation from text that focus on the videos [104], [111], [141]. Compared to the images, videos often consist of multiple consecutive frames that are temporally and spatially correlated, in addition to the pixel-level computational extensive synthesis for a single visual frame. Existing works usually deploy VAE or GAN-based generative backbones to tackle the task [141] with language priors. Alternatively, Hu *et al.* [111] modifies the task formulation by providing a reference image and a textual description, and synthesize videos based on the given input. More recent work [104] introduces a video diffusion model for the task via modified 3D U-Net architecture equipped with an extra temporal dimension. *Make-A-Video* is one of the first large-scale video generation models. It leverages the recent advances in text-to-image field to learn the visual information, and then proposes to learn the temporal motions from unlabelled large-scale video data. In inference, the model composes the visual content with learned motions to synthesize a realistic video.

6 FURTHER DISCUSSION

6.1 Insights from Data and Methodology Design

Our paper aims to provide a novel perspective to understand the multimodal learning in the light of data, we revisit and discuss the correlation between the data nature and the methodology design as part of discussion from two aspects: the semantics of data modalities, and their specific formats.

For data semantics, as explained in Sec. 2, visual data and several types of audio data, such as the ambient sound, can be considered as raw information sources. These modalities include sensory information directly captured from the environment that is usually high-dimensional and can be further processed and analyzed with information redundancy. In contrast to raw information sources, text data and certain types of audio signals, such as speech, have undergone extensive processing throughout the evolution of human civilization. These data modalities already possess meaningful semantics and are more information compact with a unified representation in the form of tokens. Additionally, most NLP tasks have a rather unified problem formation under the notion of "next word token prediction". This

distinction in data nature, particularly in terms of semantics, has played a significant role in shaping the methodological and technical advancements in their respective research domains. In the field of NLP, the highly processed nature of text data and its consistent problem formulation have paved the way for the development of large-scale foundational models. These models, such as GPT-3, have demonstrated remarkable performance across a wide range of NLP tasks. The unified nature of text data allows for the application of these models to various tasks without significant modifications, leveraging the semantic richness and the consistent problem formulation. On the other hand, the CV community faces different challenges. Visual data, being raw information sources, require extensive representation learning and specific downstream application stages to obtain effective and processed visual representations. The complexity of visual data and the diversity of visual tasks make it more challenging to develop a unified foundational model that can be applied across the board. As a result, researchers in the CV domain are constantly exploring novel representation learning techniques and task-specific approaches to address the intricacies of visual data and achieve state-of-the-art performance in complex visual tasks. As for audio data, researchers are following either community based on the specific audio types as well as the specific task requirements.

Another aspect to understand the logic between data nature and the methodology design focuses on the data format. The format, whether continuous or discrete, plays a crucial role in determining the suitable model architecture for effective processing. For continuous data, such as images and ambient sound, the continuity in the spatial or temporal dimensions usually benefit from model architectures like CNNs that are specifically designed to handle spatial and temporal dependencies and to capture the local and global correlations within the data. As for data with discrete formats, such as MIDI musical representations or textual word tokens, models like Transformers are more appropriate to model the dependencies among discrete elements.

6.2 Future Directions and Challenge

As we have extensively discussed in this survey paper, the research in multimodal machine learning is diversely spread from general representation learning to detailed downstream tasks within a specific field.

After having introduced various discriminative and generative multimodal applications that involve the vision and data of other modalities, we revisit and summarize the existing works from the perspective of their technique designs and the connections with respect to the data attributes.

For the discriminative tasks that involve the visual and audio data, we can observe from the introduced existing works that majority of them follow the general pipeline that contains separate data encoders, cross-modality attention feature fusions, as well as a decoder module designed for various task objectives. It is worth noting that all of the existing works process the ambient audio data as an entirety without specifically looking into the acoustic features of the audio signals. For example, certain type of ambient audio signals may include higher pitch and frequency than others, which can be used as a strong supplementary indicator for purely vision based recognition. In contrast, existing

audio-involved generative works have explored more the disentangled features such as rhythms, pitches, and genres for either both synthesis and editing purposes. As for the vision and text (natural language) combination, representative early classic methods often use the LSTM model to deal with the textual language data with word orderings. Later, the success of Transformer model has encouraged the fast technical transition from LSTM to Transformers for the text processing branch in the multimodal learning context.

Return to current multimodal studies, while great success has been achieved within recent years, the challenges for the future research remain. From the technical perspective, we believe that we can summarize the future research directions into two direction with regard to the connections with the data modalities. On the one hand, the research community is seeking to establish a unified and general model that efficiently learns the representation of all the modalities of interest. Such a unified model, similar to the large-scale pre-training models we have introduced in Section 3.3, should greatly help with various downstream applications such as specific cross-modality generations, interactive editing, and evaluations. On the other hand, with increasing demand of more fine-grained and detailed applications in our daily life, we also expect to develop and achieve better performance for more specific and crafted tasks.

Another possible future direction for the multimodal learning could be the human intervention for ultimate multimodal perception AI systems. As our ultimate objective for multimodal learning is to bring intelligence to machines as real humans, human intervention could be a critical part to guide the general research direction in this fast developing area. A concrete example could be involving the human to provide more controls on the cross-modality generations and several downstream tasking such as editing [164], [165].

7 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we present a survey on the multimodal learning domain from an unique perspective of data characteristics. We start by mainly analyzing the intrinsic natures of different data modalities for the vision, audio, and text. We proceed to introduce the multimodal representation learning, in which we mainly categorize the current literature by their learning settings. Following the general representation learning in the multimodal field, we then introduce the concrete task applications from both discriminative and generative natures, each structured into sub-classes with specific data combinations in the form of "Vision + X". For the discriminative tasks, we also include a revisit in light of data after presenting the task-specific works, where we provide our analysis to bridge the existing technique designs and their connections to the data nature from different modalities. For the generative tasks, we include an introduction to the popular generative backbone models before diving into the detailed task explanations. Finally, we provide our discussions in terms of the challenges and future directions for the multimodal learning domain.

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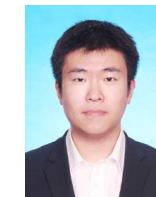
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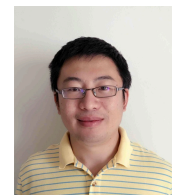
Ye Zhu is currently a postdoctoral researcher in Computer Science at Princeton University, USA. She holds the Ph.D. degree in Computer Science from Illinois Institute of Technology, USA, in 2023. She received her B.S. and M.S. degrees from Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China. Her research interests mainly include multimodal learning and generation.



Yu Wu is professor with the School of Computer Science at Wuhan University, China. His research interests are multi-modal perception and video understanding. He was the recipient of Google PhD Fellowship 2020. He was the Workshop Chair of CVPR 2023, and also served as Area Chair for CVPR 2023, NeurIPS 2023.



Nicu Sebe is professor with the University of Trento, Italy. His research covers the areas of multimedia information retrieval and human behavior understanding. He was the Program Chair of the International Conference on Image and Video Retrieval in 2007 and 2010, ACM Multimedia 2007 and 2011. He was the Program Chair of ICCV 2017 and ECCV 2016, and a General Chair of ACM ICMR 2017.



Yan Yan is currently Gladwin Development Chair Assistant Professor with the Department of Computer Science, Illinois Institute of Technology. He received the Ph.D. degree in computer science from the University of Trento. His research interests include computer vision, machine learning, and multimedia.