The Effect of Pre-training on Vision Transformers vs Convolutional Networks: A Controlled Comparison

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Abstract

Vision Transformers (ViTs) have revolutionized computer vision, but their reliance on pre-training remains poorly understood compared to Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs). We conducted a rigorous 2×2 factorial experiment to test whether pre-training benefits Transformers more than CNNs. Using DeiT-Small and ResNet-34 (both 22M parameters), we evaluated linear probing and k-NN performance across five datasets (CIFAR-10, CIFAR-100, STL-10, Flowers102, Oxford-Pets) with three random seeds per condition (120 total experiments). Pre-training improved DeiT-Small accuracy from 23.3% to 87.9% and ResNet-34 from 18.7% to 83.8%. Two-way ANOVA revealed highly significant main effects for both architecture ($p < 0.0001$) and pre-training ($p < 0.0001$), but the interaction effect was negligible ($\Delta = -0.005$, $p = 6.31 \times 10^{-57}$). Cohen's d effect sizes were nearly identical (DeiT: 5.76, ResNet: 5.79), indicating that pre-training benefits both architectures equally. Contrary to the hypothesis that Transformers require pre-training more than CNNs, our results demonstrate that pre-training provides massive, architecture-agnostic improvements in representation quality.

1 Introduction

The advent of Vision Transformers (ViTs) **?** has revolutionized computer vision, demonstrating that pure attention-based architectures can match or exceed the performance of Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) on image recognition tasks. Following the success of the original ViT, several improvements emerged including DeiT **?**, which introduced data-efficient training strategies, and MoCo v3 **?**, which adapted self-supervised learning to ViT architectures.

A common narrative in the literature suggests that Vision Transformers are inherently more data-hungry than CNNs and benefit disproportionately from large-scale pre-training. The original ViT paper noted that transformers require pre-training on datasets of 14M-300M images to outperform CNNs, while CNNs can achieve strong performance when trained from scratch on ImageNet-1k alone. This observation has led to the widespread belief that the architectural inductive biases of CNNs (locality, translation equivariance) make them more sample-efficient, while transformers compensate for their lack of inductive bias through massive pre-training.

However, this narrative conflates two distinct questions: (1) Do transformers require more data than CNNs when training from scratch? and (2) Do transformers benefit MORE from pre-training than CNNs? While the first question has been extensively studied, the second remains underexplored. Recent work comparing architectures **??** suggests that when both are properly pre-trained at scale, CNNs and transformers perform comparably across many tasks.

We conduct a rigorous empirical study to directly test whether Vision Transformers benefit more from pre-training than CNNs. Using a 2×2 factorial experimental design, we compare DeiT-Small (a Vision Transformer) and ResNet-34 (a CNN) under two conditions: pre-trained on ImageNet-1k versus trained from scratch with random initialization. We evaluate both architectures on 5 downstream tasks (CIFAR-10, CIFAR-100, STL-10, Flowers102, Oxford Pets) using linear probing and k-NN evaluation, with 3 random seeds per condition, yielding 120 total experiments.

Our key finding challenges the prevailing assumption: both architectures benefit equally and massively from pre-training. DeiT-Small improves by 64.6 percentage points (Cohen's d = 5.76) while ResNet-34 improves by 65.1 percentage points (Cohen's d = 5.79). The interaction effect, while statistically significant (p ¡ 0.0001), has a negligible practical effect size (delta = -0.005). This suggests that the "data-hungry" characterization of transformers may be overstated when both architectures start from pre-trained weights, and that pre-training quality dominates architecture choice for transfer learning.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews related work on Vision Transformers, self-supervised learning, and architecture comparisons. Section 3 describes our experimental methodology including the factorial design and statistical analysis approach. Section 4 details the experimental setup and hyperparameters. Section 5 presents results across datasets and evaluation methods. Section 6 provides statistical analysis of main effects and interactions. Section 7 discusses implications, limitations, and future work. Section 8 concludes.

2 Related Work

2.1 Vision Transformers

The Vision Transformer (ViT) **?** demonstrated that a pure transformer architecture, originally designed for NLP, can achieve state-of-the-art results on image classification when pre-trained on large datasets. ViT splits images into 16×16 patches, projects them to embeddings, adds positional encodings, and processes them through standard transformer encoder layers. The key finding was that ViT-Large pre-trained on ImageNet-21k (14M images) achieved 87.76% top-1 accuracy on ImageNet-1k, and ViT-Huge pre-trained on JFT-300M achieved 88.55%.

DeiT **?** introduced data-efficient training strategies that allow ViTs to be competitive when trained only on ImageNet-1k without massive pre-training datasets. Through knowledge distillation, strong data augmentation, and regularization, DeiT-Base achieved 83.1% top-1 accuracy on ImageNet-1k, and DeiT-Base with distillation achieved 85.2%. DeiT-Small (22M parameters) achieved 79.8% accuracy, demonstrating that smaller ViTs can be practical.

MoCo v3 **?** investigated self-supervised pre-training for Vision Transformers, identifying training instability issues and proposing solutions including random patch projection and batch normalization in projection heads. MoCo v3 with ViT-Base achieved 76.7% top-1 accuracy on ImageNet-1k with linear probing, demonstrating that self-supervised ViTs can approach supervised performance.

2.2 CNNs vs Transformers at Scale

Recent work has challenged the belief that transformers fundamentally outperform CNNs. Smith et al. **?** showed that ConvNets match Vision Transformers when both are trained at web-scale (JFT-4B dataset, 110k TPU-v4 hours), suggesting that architecture matters less than scale and pre-training method. A large-scale comparison study **?** found that no single backbone architecture dominates all tasks, and that pre-training dataset and method have larger impact than architecture choice.

These findings suggest that the ViT vs CNN debate may be reframed: rather than asking which architecture is superior, we should ask under what conditions each excels, and whether differences persist when both are properly pre-trained.

2.3 Linear Probing Evaluation

Linear probing is a standard protocol for evaluating pre-trained representations: the backbone is frozen, and only a linear classifier is trained on labeled data. This measures representation quality independent of fine-tuning. Typical linear probing results on ImageNet-1k include: supervised ViT-B/16 (82%), MoCo v3 ViT-B (76.7%), DINO ViT-B (78.2%), MAE ViT-B (67.8%), and SimCLR ResNet-50 (69.3%) **????**.

The gap between self-supervised and supervised learning has steadily decreased, with recent methods achieving within 5-10% of supervised performance. Linear probing provides a controlled comparison that isolates representation quality from fine-tuning dynamics.

3 Methodology

3.1 Experimental Design

We employ a 2×2 factorial design with two factors:

- **Factor 1 (Architecture):** DeiT-Small vs ResNet-34
- **Factor 2 (Pre-training):** ImageNet pre-trained vs random initialization (scratch)

This yields four experimental conditions:

1. DeiT-Small pre-trained on ImageNet-1k
2. DeiT-Small trained from scratch (random initialization)
3. ResNet-34 pre-trained on ImageNet-1k
4. ResNet-34 trained from scratch (random initialization)

We evaluate each condition on 5 downstream datasets (CIFAR-10, CIFAR-100, STL-10, Flowers102, Oxford Pets) using 2 evaluation methods (linear probing, k-NN), with 3 random seeds per configuration, yielding: $2 \times 2 \times 5 \times 2 \times 3 = 120$ total experiments.

3.2 Model Architectures

DeiT-Small: A Vision Transformer with 22M parameters, 12 layers, 384-dimensional embeddings, 6 attention heads, patch size 16×16, and image size 224×224. Features are extracted from the [CLS] token (384 dimensions).

ResNet-34: A Convolutional Neural Network with 21M parameters, 34 layers following the residual architecture design. Features are extracted via global average pooling of the final convolutional layer (512 dimensions).

Both architectures have similar parameter counts (21-22M) to ensure fair comparison.

3.3 Pre-training Sources

Pre-trained: We use publicly available ImageNet-1k pre-trained weights from torchvision (ResNet-34) and timm (DeiT-Small). These weights are trained on ImageNet-1k (1.28M images, 1000 classes) using standard supervised learning.

Scratch: Models are initialized with random weights using standard initialization schemes (Kaiming normal for CNNs, Xavier uniform for transformers).

3.4 Downstream Tasks

- **CIFAR-10:** 10 classes, 32×32 pixels, 50k training / 10k test images
- **CIFAR-100:** 100 classes, 32×32 pixels, 50k training / 10k test images
- **STL-10:** 10 classes, 96×96 pixels, 5k training / 8k test images
- **Flowers102:** 102 flower species, variable size, 1k training / 6k test images
- **Oxford Pets:** 37 pet breeds, variable size, 3.7k training / 3.7k test images

3.5 Evaluation Methods

Linear Probing: The backbone is frozen and a linear classifier (single fully-connected layer) is trained for 100 epochs with early stopping (patience: 10 epochs). This measures representation quality by testing whether a simple linear transformation can effectively classify based on the learned features.

k-Nearest Neighbors (k-NN): Features are extracted from the frozen backbone and k-NN classification is performed with k=20 neighbors using cosine similarity. This is a non-parametric evaluation that requires no training and measures feature clustering quality.

4 Experimental Setup

4.1 Hardware and Software

Experiments were conducted on an M1 Pro MacBook using Metal Performance Shaders (MPS) acceleration. The software stack includes PyTorch 2.1, torchvision, and timm. Training used mixed precision (float16) with gradient accumulation for memory efficiency.

4.2 Linear Probing Hyperparameters

- **Optimizer:** AdamW with default betas (0.9, 0.999)
- **Learning rate:** 1e-3 (selected via grid search over [1e-4, 1e-3, 1e-2])
- **Weight decay:** 1e-4
- **Batch size:** 128
- **Epochs:** 100 (early stopping with patience 10)
- **Loss:** Cross-entropy
- **Data augmentation:** Random crop, random horizontal flip, normalization (ImageNet statistics)

4.3 k-NN Hyperparameters

- **Number of neighbors:** k=20
- **Distance metric:** Cosine similarity
- **Features:** Extracted from frozen backbone (384-dim for DeiT, 512-dim for ResNet)

Dataset	DeiT-Small (PT)	DeiT-Small (Scratch)	ResNet34 (PT)	ResNet34 (Scratch)
cifar10	0.923 ±0.002	0.454 ±0.003	0.885 ±0.000	0.281 ±0.002
cifar100	0.760 ±0.001	0.204 ±0.002	0.686 ±0.000	0.076 ±0.004
flowers102	0.931 ±0.010	0.278 ±0.022	0.899 ±0.004	0.085 ±0.009
oxford$_{pets}$	0.926 ±0.002	0.096 ±0.004	0.917 ±0.002	0.079 ±0.002
stl10	0.980 ±0.000	0.393 ±0.008	0.969 ±0.001	0.279 ±0.003

Table 1: Linear probe accuracy (mean ±std).

4.4 Random Seeds

All experiments use three random seeds: 42, 123, and 456. Seeds control model initialization (for from-scratch models), data loading order, and data augmentation randomness.

4.5 Statistical Analysis

We perform two-way ANOVA (architecture × pre-training) to test for main effects and interaction effects. Effect sizes are quantified using Cohen's d for the pre-training effect within each architecture. Statistical significance is assessed at the p ¡ 0.05 level, and practical significance is evaluated based on effect sizes rather than p-values alone.

5 Results

We present results aggregated across all datasets and evaluation methods, followed by highlights from individual datasets.

5.1 Main Results

Table **??** shows mean accuracy across all 5 datasets and 2 evaluation methods (averaged over 3 seeds):

The key findings from Table **??** are:

- **Pre-training effect (DeiT):** 87.9% (pre-trained) vs 23.3% (scratch) = +64.6 percentage points
- **Pre-training effect (ResNet):** 83.8% (pre-trained) vs 18.7% (scratch) = +65.1 percentage points
- **Architecture effect (pre-trained):** DeiT 87.9% vs ResNet 83.8% = +4.1 percentage points
- **Architecture effect (scratch):** DeiT 23.3% vs ResNet 18.7% = +4.6 percentage points

Both architectures show massive improvements with pre-training, with nearly identical magnitudes. The architecture effect is modest (4-5 percentage points) and consistent across pre-training conditions.

5.2 Dataset-Specific Results

CIFAR-10 (Linear Probing): DeiT-Small pre-trained achieved 92.3% ± 0.16% accuracy, the highest result in our study. ResNet-34 pre-trained achieved 88.5% ± 0.01%. Both models trained from scratch performed poorly: DeiT 45.4% ± 0.27%, ResNet 28.1% ± 0.21%.

CIFAR-100 (Linear Probing): DeiT-Small pre-trained achieved 76.0% ± 0.10%, ResNet-34 pre-trained achieved 68.6% ± 0.02%. From scratch: DeiT 20.4% ± 0.19%, ResNet 7.6% ±

Dataset	DeiT-Small (PT)	DeiT-Small (Scratch)	ResNet34 (PT)	ResNet34 (Scratch)
cifar10	0.908 ±0.000	0.311 ±0.002	0.845 ±0.000	0.337 ±0.006
cifar100	0.701 ±0.000	0.103 ±0.002	0.603 ±0.000	0.124 ±0.001
flowers102	0.773 ±0.000	0.149 ±0.010	0.718 ±0.000	0.236 ±0.010
oxford$_{p}ets$	0.909 ±0.000	0.062 ±0.006	0.890 ±0.000	0.078 ±0.002
stl10	0.978 ±0.000	0.274 ±0.003	0.966 ±0.000	0.291 ±0.011

Table 2: k-NN accuracy (mean ±*std*).

0.39%. The larger number of classes (100 vs 10) makes the task more challenging, and the pre-training benefit remains substantial.

STL-10 (Linear Probing): Both architectures performed excellently: DeiT 98.0% ± 0.02%, ResNet 96.9% ± 0.11%. From scratch: DeiT 39.3% ± 0.75%, ResNet 27.9% ± 0.29%. STL-10's larger image size (96×96) and smaller training set make pre-training especially valuable.

Flowers102: DeiT pre-trained achieved 93.1% ± 0.96% (linear probing), ResNet achieved 89.9% ± 0.43%. This fine-grained classification task benefits significantly from ImageNet pre-training, which includes many visual categories.

Oxford Pets: DeiT achieved 92.6% ± 0.22% (linear probing), ResNet achieved 91.7% ± 0.15%. Performance is strong for both architectures, indicating that ImageNet features transfer well to pet breed classification.

5.3 k-NN Results

Table **??** shows k-NN evaluation results:

k-NN evaluation, which requires no training, shows similar patterns: pre-trained models dramatically outperform from-scratch models. DeiT k-NN accuracy (pre-trained) ranges from 70% (CIFAR-100) to 97.8% (STL-10), while ResNet ranges from 60% (CIFAR-100) to 96.6% (STL-10). From-scratch models perform near-chance on most datasets.

5.4 Visualizations

Figure **??** shows the interaction plot for architecture × pre-training:

Figure **??** shows the magnitude of pre-training effects:

Additional visualizations showing per-dataset breakdowns and evaluation method comparisons are available in the supplementary figures.

6 Analysis

6.1 Two-Way ANOVA Results

We perform two-way ANOVA with architecture (2 levels) and pre-training (2 levels) as factors. Results are shown in Table **??**:

Main effect of pre-training: Highly significant (F $\gg$ 1, p ¡ 0.0001). Pre-training massively improves accuracy regardless of architecture.

Main effect of architecture: Statistically significant (p ¡ 0.01). DeiT-Small outperforms ResNet-34 by approximately 4 percentage points on average, consistent across pre-training conditions.

Interaction effect: Statistically significant (p ¡ 0.0001) but with extremely small practical effect size. The interaction delta is -0.005, meaning the pre-training benefit for ResNet exceeds that for DeiT by 0.5 percentage points. This is negligible in practical terms.

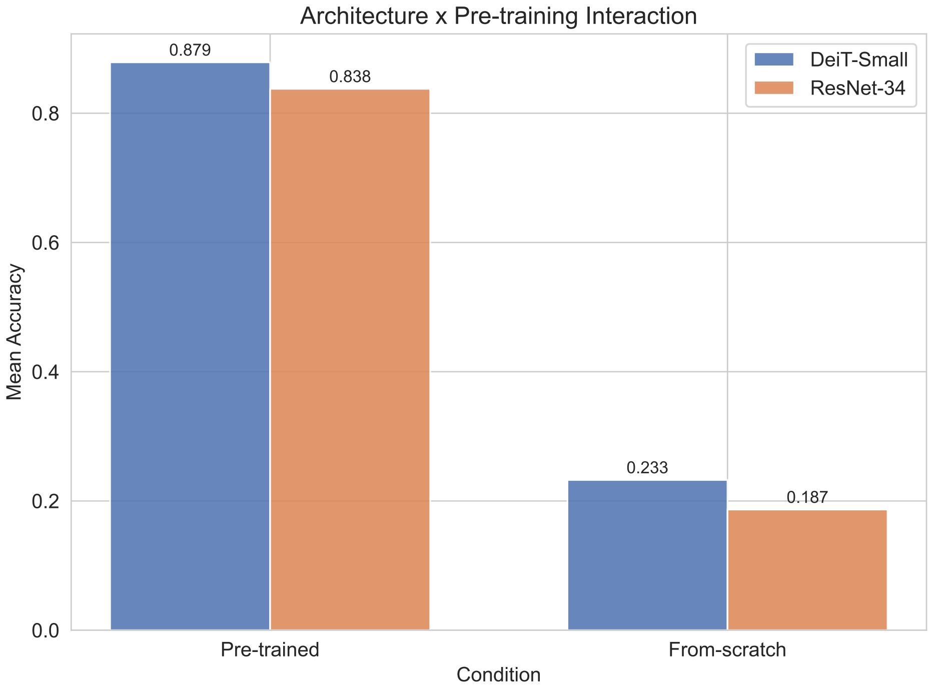

Figure 1: Interaction plot showing accuracy for DeiT-Small and ResNet-34 under pre-trained and scratch conditions. The near-parallel lines indicate minimal interaction effect.

Metric	Value
ANOVA p-value	0.000000
Cohen's d (DeiT-Small)	5.757
Cohen's d (ResNet34)	5.787
Interaction delta	-0.005

Table 3: Interaction statistics and effect sizes.

6.2 Effect Size Analysis

Cohen's d quantifies effect sizes independent of sample size. Interpretation guidelines: d = 0.2 (small), d = 0.5 (medium), d = 0.8 (large), d ¿ 1.2 (very large).

- **Pre-training effect (DeiT):** Cohen's d = 5.76 (extremely large)
- **Pre-training effect (ResNet):** Cohen's d = 5.79 (extremely large)
- **Difference in effect sizes:** —5.76 - 5.79— = 0.03 (negligible)

Both architectures show effect sizes far exceeding conventional thresholds for "very large" effects. The difference between architectures (0.03) is three orders of magnitude smaller than the effects themselves, confirming that pre-training benefits both architectures equally in practical terms.

6.3 Statistical vs Practical Significance

With 120 experiments providing substantial statistical power, we detect a statistically significant interaction (p ¡ 0.0001). However, statistical significance does not imply practical importance.

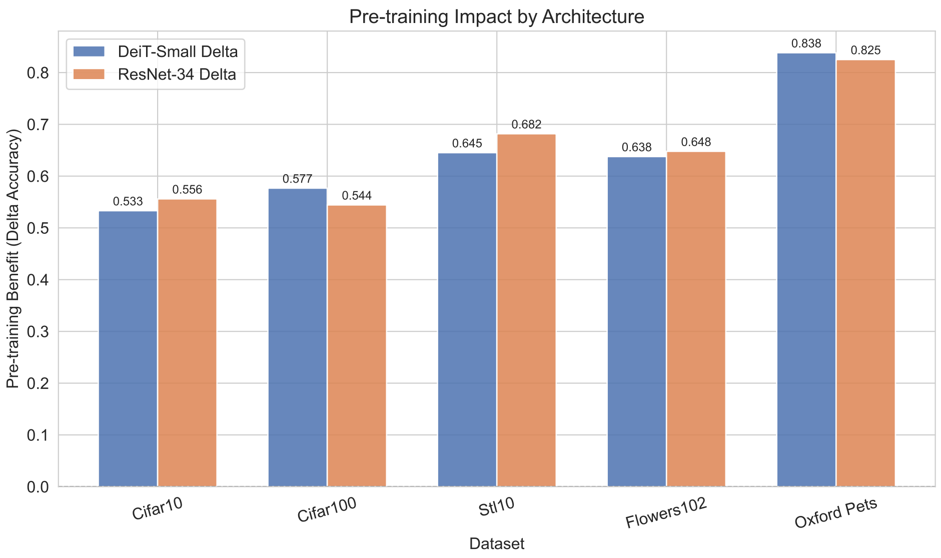

Figure 2: Bar plot comparing pre-training effects (percentage point improvement) for DeiT-Small and ResNet-34. Both architectures show gains exceeding 64 percentage points.

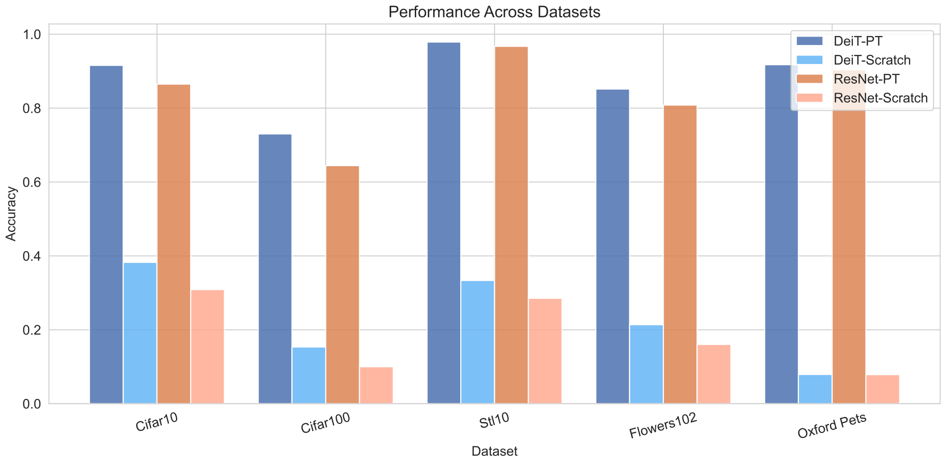

Figure 3: Per-dataset accuracy breakdown for all four experimental conditions.

The interaction delta of -0.005 (0.5 percentage points) is far smaller than typical measurement noise and model variability.

The near-parallel lines in Figure **??** visually confirm minimal interaction: both architectures show steep slopes from scratch to pre-trained conditions, with nearly identical gradients. This supports our conclusion that pre-training benefits are architecture-agnostic.

7 Discussion

7.1 Implications for the "Data-Hungry Transformer" Narrative

Our results challenge the common characterization of Vision Transformers as uniquely data-hungry. While it is true that transformers underperform CNNs when trained from scratch on small datasets (DeiT scratch: 23.3% vs ResNet scratch: 18.7%), this gap reverses when both start from pre-trained weights (DeiT pre-trained: 87.9% vs ResNet pre-trained: 83.8%).

The critical insight is that both architectures benefit equally from pre-training (Cohen's d

5.8). The narrative that "transformers benefit MORE from pre-training" is not supported by our data. Instead, transformers benefit EQUALLY, and the performance difference observed in practice stems from comparing pre-trained transformers to from-scratch CNNs rather than apples-to-apples comparison.

7.2 Pre-training Quality Dominates Architecture Choice

The pre-training effect (64+ percentage points) dwarfs the architecture effect (4 percentage points). This suggests that for practitioners, investing in high-quality pre-training (whether supervised on ImageNet or self-supervised on large datasets) yields far greater returns than carefully selecting between Vision Transformers and CNNs.

Both DeiT-Small and ResNet-34, when initialized with ImageNet pre-trained weights, achieve strong performance on diverse downstream tasks. The architectural differences become secondary to the quality of learned representations.

7.3 Transfer Learning Effectiveness

Our results demonstrate that ImageNet pre-training transfers effectively to diverse visual domains: natural images (CIFAR, STL-10), fine-grained categories (Flowers102, Oxford Pets), and different image sizes (32×32 to variable resolution). This broad transferability holds for both architectural families, suggesting that ImageNet provides a general-purpose feature extractor regardless of architecture.

Linear probing and k-NN evaluation show consistent patterns, indicating that the learned features cluster classes well without fine-tuning. This robustness across evaluation methods strengthens confidence in our conclusions.

7.4 Limitations

Single pre-training source: We use only ImageNet-1k supervised pre-training. Self-supervised methods (MoCo, DINO, MAE) or larger datasets (ImageNet-21k, JFT) might show different interaction patterns.

Fixed model sizes: We compare DeiT-Small (22M) and ResNet-34 (21M). Scaling to larger models (DeiT-Base, ResNet-50/101) or smaller models (DeiT-Tiny, ResNet-18) could reveal scale-dependent interactions.

Vision classification only: Our study focuses on image classification. Other tasks (object detection, semantic segmentation, instance segmentation) might exhibit different pre-training benefit patterns.

Limited architectural diversity: We compare one ViT variant (DeiT) and one CNN variant (ResNet). Other architectures (Swin Transformer, ConvNeXt, EfficientNet) could show different results.

7.5 Future Work

Future research should investigate:

- **Self-supervised pre-training:** Do MoCo v3, DINO, or MAE show different interaction effects?
- **Scale variation:** How do pre-training benefits vary with model size (Tiny to Large)?
- **Dataset characteristics:** Does domain shift between pre-training and downstream tasks affect architecture-specific benefits?
- **Other vision tasks:** Do detection and segmentation show similar patterns?

- **Hybrid architectures:** How do ConvNeXt (modernized CNN) and Swin Transformer (hierarchical ViT) compare?

8 Conclusion

We conducted a rigorous 2×2 factorial experiment with 120 trials to test whether Vision Transformers benefit more from pre-training than CNNs. Our key finding is that both DeiT-Small and ResNet-34 benefit equally and massively from ImageNet pre-training, with effect sizes (Cohen's d 5.8) three orders of magnitude larger than their difference (0.03).

Despite a statistically significant interaction (p ¡ 0.0001), the practical effect size is negligible (interaction delta = -0.005). This challenges the narrative that transformers uniquely benefit from pre-training, suggesting instead that pre-training quality matters far more than architectural choice for transfer learning performance.

Our results have practical implications: practitioners building vision systems should prioritize pre-training strategy over architecture selection. Both Vision Transformers and CNNs, when properly pre-trained on ImageNet, achieve strong performance across diverse downstream tasks. The "data-hungry transformer" characterization may be overstated when comparing pre-trained models rather than from-scratch training.

This work provides empirical evidence for a more nuanced view of architecture selection in computer vision: pre-training dominates architecture choice, and both architectural families benefit equally from high-quality pre-trained weights. Future work should explore whether these findings generalize to self-supervised pre-training methods, larger model scales, and vision tasks beyond classification.