TRUST-VL: An Explainable News Assistant for General Multimodal Misinformation Detection

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https://yanzehong.github.io/trust-vl

Abstract

Multimodal misinformation, encompassing textual, visual, and cross-modal distortions, poses an increasing societal threat that is amplified by generative AI. Existing methods typically focus on a single type of distortion and struggle to generalize to unseen scenarios. In this work, we observe that different distortion types share common reasoning capabilities while also requiring task-specific skills. We hypothesize that joint training across distortion types facilitates knowledge sharing and enhances the model's ability to generalize. To this end, we introduce TRUST-VL, a unified and explainable vision-language model for general multimodal misinformation detection. TRUST-VL incorporates a novel Question-Aware Visual Amplifier module, designed to extract task-specific visual features. To support training, we also construct TRUST-Instruct, a large-scale instruction dataset containing 198K samples featuring structured reasoning chains aligned with human fact-checking workflows. Extensive experiments on both in-domain and zero-shot benchmarks demonstrate that TRUST-VL achieves state-of-the-art performance, while also offering strong generalization and interpretability.

1 Introduction

Multimodal misinformation has become a fast-growing threat to society and has attracted wide attention in recent years. The rise of generative AI tools, while providing powerful capabilities for content creation, has also made it easier to produce misleading content and spread it at scale. For example, during the 2024 U.S. presidential election, foreign actors used AI-generated deepfakes and manipulated media to spread false narratives and influence voter perception, prompting official sanctions (Federspiel et al., 2023). Therefore, it is urgent to develop automated methods to detect multimodal misinformation (Akhtar et al., 2023; Chen and Shu, 2024; Abdali et al., 2025).

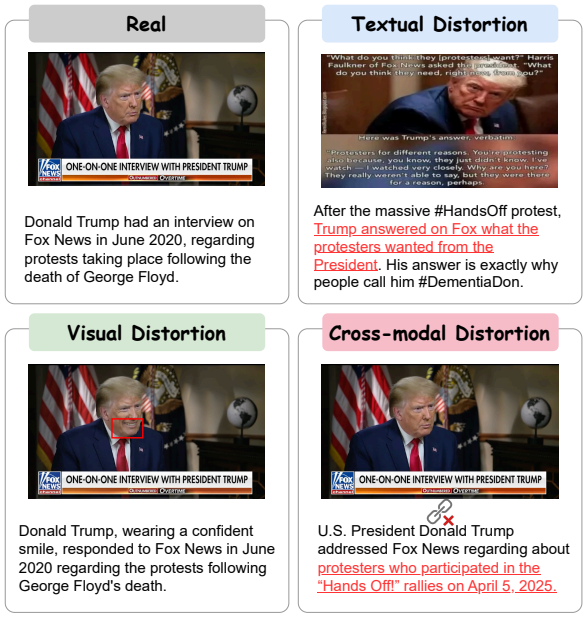

Figure 1: Examples of different distortion types in multimodal misinformation.

Multimodal misinformation is inherently a composite task, involving multiple sub-problems such as textual distortion, visual distortion, and cross-modal distortion. As illustrated in Figure 1, *textual distortion* refers to discrepancies between the textual claim and the underlying facts, which can often be identified through linguistic patterns or textual entailment between the claim and retrieved evidence. *Visual distortion* involves tampered or AI-generated images, and can be detected by identifying subtle visual artifacts or inconsistencies. *Cross-modal distortion* (also known as out-of-context misinformation) arises when the image and text originate from different real-world events, which can be detected by assessing semantic consistency across modalities (Alam et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2025).

Vision-language models (VLMs) have achieved impressive performance across a wide range of multimodal tasks (Liu et al., 2023; Dai et al., 2023; OpenAI, 2024a; Xue et al., 2024; Wang et al.,

Proceedings of the 2025 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing, pages 5589–5605
November 4-9, 2025

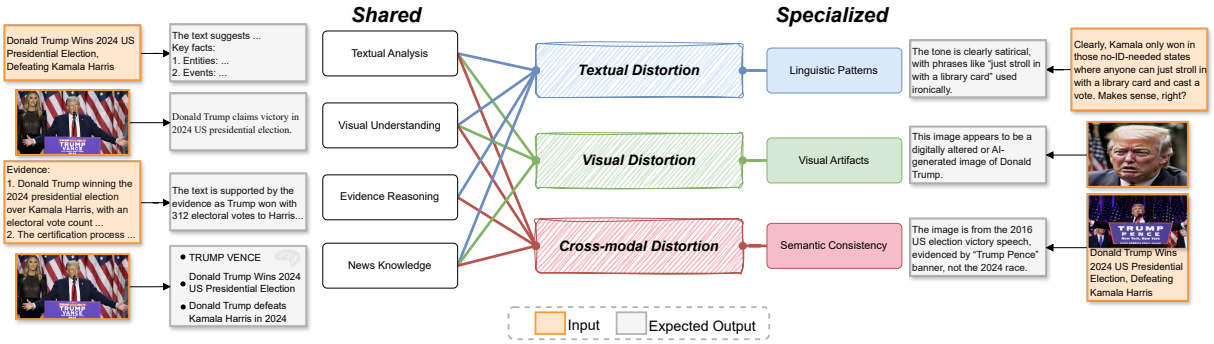

Figure 2: Overview of shared and specialized reasoning involved across misinformation detection tasks.

2024). Motivated by this, prior works have applied VLMs to specific misinformation tasks such as fact checking (Yao et al., 2023; Tahmasebi et al., 2024), face manipulations (Liu et al., 2024b; Huang et al., 2024), and out-of-context detection (Qi et al., 2024). However, these models typically focus on a specific type of misinformation, and we empirically found that such single-task models often overfit and generalize poorly to unseen distortion types.

We observe that although detecting different distortion types requires *specialized reasoning* (e.g., linguistic pattern recognition, visual artifact detection, and semantic consistency checks), they also rely on *shared reasoning* (e.g., textual analysis, visual understanding, evidence-based reasoning, and familiarity with news knowledge) (see Figure 2). For instance, multimodal content analysis is fundamental for in-depth reasoning, while evidence-based reasoning is crucial for tasks ranging from textual fact-checking to cross-modal inconsistency detection. Motivated by this, we aim to build a unified framework that integrates both shared and specialized reasoning to effectively handle misinformation detection across diverse distortion types.

Developing a unified misinformation detection framework has several challenges: (1) Existing VLMs, pretrained on general vision-language tasks, often lack sensitivity to subtle visual artifacts and cross-modal semantic inconsistency; (2) annotation standards vary widely across existing datasets, complicating unified learning (Thorne et al., 2018; Suryavardan et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024b; Luo et al., 2021a); and (3) most datasets lack explicit reasoning annotations, and provide only binary or categorical labels without detailing the intermediate reasoning steps behind the veracity judgment, thus limiting a model's ability to generate interpretable and persuasive explanations for real-world fact-checking applications (Thibault et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2023; Akhtar et al., 2023). These challenges highlight the need for new training paradigms with structured misinformation-specific reasoning annotations, along with comprehensive evaluation benchmarks to assess generalization across various misinformation tasks.

In this work, we observe that joint training across distortion types facilitates knowledge sharing and enhances the model's reasoning capabilities to generalize. Therefore, we introduce TRUST-Instruct, a large-scale dataset comprising reasoning-rich samples across diverse distortion types. Building upon this dataset, we propose TRUST-VL, a unified misinformation detection framework that enhances fine-grained visual understanding by conditioning perception on task-specific instructions. Our main contributions can be summarized as follows:

- We propose TRUST-VL, a unified and explainable vision-language model for general multimodal misinformation detection. It integrates a novel Question-Aware Visual Amplifier (QAVA) module to extract task-specific visual features and support reasoning across misinformation detection tasks.
- We construct TRUST-Instruct, a large-scale instruction dataset of 198K samples with structured reasoning chains aligned with human fact-checking workflows, enabling effective joint training across diverse distortion types.
- Extensive experiments on both in-domain and zero-shot benchmarks demonstrate that TRUST-VL achieves state-of-the-art performance, with superior generalization and interpretability compared to existing detectors and general VLMs.

2 Related Work

Multimodal misinformation detection covers different sub-tasks that focus on different manipulation cues. Works on *textual distortion detection* use language models to fact check based on text only and often ignore the visual elements crucial for verifying many claims (Thorne et al., 2018;

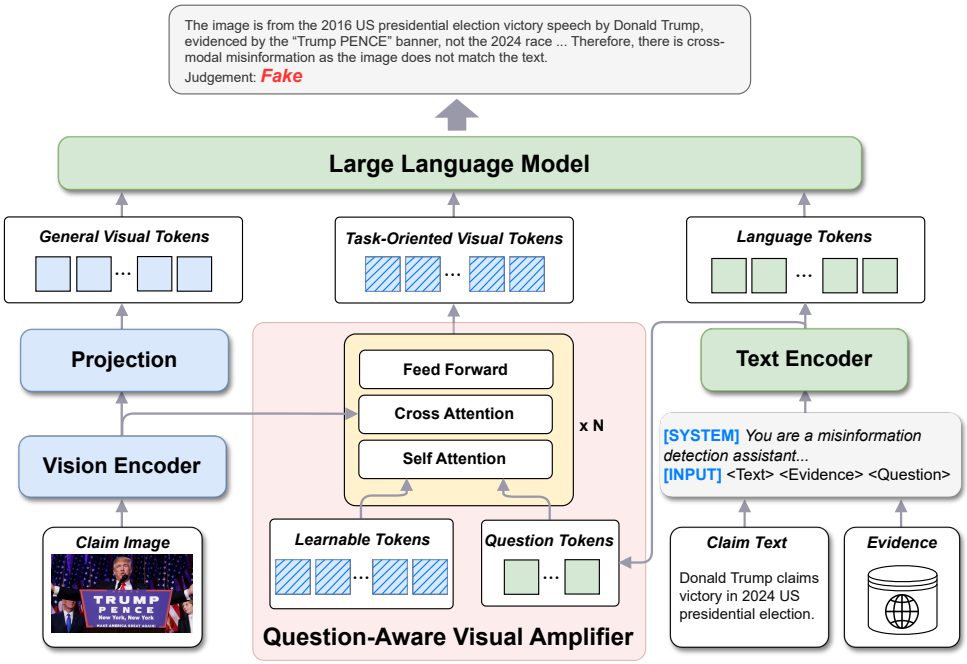

Figure 3: Architecture of TRUST-VL. Given an image-text pair and associated evidence, TRUST-VL first encodes multimodal inputs through vision and text encoders. Other than projecting the visual features into general visual tokens, we also leverage the Question-Aware Visual Amplifier module, which utilizes a set of randomly initialized learnable tokens conditioned on task-oriented questions to generate task-oriented visual tokens. Finally, TRUST-VL outputs a structured and explainable detection judgment.

Augenstein et al., 2019; Kotonya and Toni, 2020; Pan et al., 2023). For *visual distortion detection*, recent efforts enhance VLMs with forgery-aware reasoning and visual artifact localization by soft prompt tuning (Liu et al., 2024b) and instruction tuning (Li et al., 2024b; Huang et al., 2024). For *cross-modal distortion detection*, (Tahmasebi et al., 2024; Qi et al., 2024; Xuan et al., 2024) enhance VLM reasoning by introducing external evidence sources. Notably, SNIFFER (Qi et al., 2024) improves image-text consistency detection through a two-stage instruction tuning process. However, these models are trained on narrowly scoped misinformation types such as face swaps or hallucinated claims, and struggle to generalize to unseen types.

Recent studies have started exploring complex scenarios in which false information spans across modalities. LRQ-FACT (Beigi et al., 2024) generates image- and text-focused questions using LLMs and VLMs, and synthesizes a final judgment through rule-based aggregation. (Liu et al., 2025) introduces MMD-Agent, a multi-agent framework that sequentially decomposes detection into textual, visual, and cross-modal subtasks, using step-wise prompting and retrieved evidence for improved reasoning. These multi-agent frameworks consist of loosely connected modules that are not jointly optimized for misinformation detection. In contrast, our proposed unified framework formulates misinformation tasks through a structured taxonomy of shared and specialized reasoning steps, and integrates them within a single VLM for end-to-end optimization and more effective detection.

3 Proposed Framework

Our goal is to develop an explainable VLM for detecting multimodal misinformation with various types of distortions. As illustrated in Figure 3, the proposed TRUST-VL framework first retrieves relevant external evidence for the input image-text pair. The input text, evidence, and a task-specific question are encoded by a textual encoder, while the image is processed through a visual encoder equipped with a general projector and the Question-Aware Visual Amplifier. The resulting language and visual tokens are then jointly fed into an LLM to produce a final judgment with an explanation.

3.1 TRUST-VL Model Architecture

Model Input. Given a multimodal claim consisting of an image C_I and associated text C_T, TRUST-VL first retrieves external evidence from the open-domain web through the cross-modal retrieval (Abdelnabi et al., 2022). Specifically, we retrieve the top-m most relevant direct evidence ($E^{dir}_{1:m}$) using

Capabilities	Definitions
	Shared Reasoning
Textual Analysis	Extracts key factual elements (e.g., entities, dates, events) from text and lists statements to be verified.
Visual Understanding	Interprets salient visual content (e.g., entities, scenes, actions) and identifies visual cues of manipulation, such as unnatural lighting, texture inconsistencies, distorted facial features, duplicated patterns, or incoherent backgrounds.
Evidence Reasoning	Cross-checks the claim against retrieved or user-provided evidence to identify factual support or contradiction. This capability is essential for verifying non-factual claims and detecting out-of-context image–text pairings.
News Knowledge	Recalls factual world knowledge about people, places, or events to contextualize the claim, even without using external information.
	Specialized Reasoning
Linguistic Patterns	Identifies rhetorical cues (e.g., bias, satire, sentiment) that may signal misleading or manipulative intent in the text.
Visual Artifacts	Detects pixel-level or visual artifacts (e.g., lighting issues, texture mismatches) indicating image manipulation or generation.
Semantic Consistency	Assesses the semantic matching between textual and visual modalities to detect out-of-context misinformation. Discrepancies can indicate that authentic images are being misused to support misleading narratives.

Table 1: Taxonomy of reasoning capabilities required for multimodal misinformation detection.

an image retriever guided by C_T, which is converted into captions via image-to-text generation. At the same time, we retrieve the top-n most relevant inverse evidence ($E^{inv}_{1:n}$) using a text retriever queried by C_I. Additionally, TRUST-VL incorporates context evidence ($E^{ctx}_{1:k}$), such as Wikipedia articles or expert annotations, provided either by users or downstream benchmarks.

Base VLM. We follow the architecture of LLaVA (Liu et al., 2023) to build our own explainable VLM for multimodal misinformation detection. Besides the pretrained LLM and visual encoder, we use lightweight MLP projectors (Liu et al., 2023, 2024a) to connect image features to the word embedding space of the language model and then finetune the model on instruction-formatted datasets to improve generalization and controllability.

Question-Aware Vision Amplifier. Existing VLMs typically rely on high-level semantic cues (scene, context, or objects) to detect visual distortions such as face manipulation. However, they often struggle with subtle manipulations that modify facial expressions while preserving identity. Directly incorporating such visual distortions (Luo et al., 2021b; Li et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024b) may degrade the model's performance on other types of distortions, due to potential overfitting to specific visual artifacts or a shift in representation focus.

To overcome this limitation, we introduce the Question-Aware Vision Amplifier (QAVA), a novel module inspired by the Q-Former (Li et al., 2023; Dai et al., 2023). Unlike previous methods that rely solely on textual instructions, which often introduce irrelevant cues, QAVA employs learnable tokens conditioned specifically on explicit, task-specific question templates corresponding to different distortion types. Within QAVA, these tokens first utilize self-attention to capture the question context and then apply cross-attention to the image features to extract precise, task-relevant visual cues. The resulting enhanced visual representations serve as soft visual prompts for the LLM, guiding its reasoning process and thus improving the detection accuracy, especially for subtle visual distortions.

3.2 Construction of TRUST-Instruct

We construct an instruction dataset to enhance reasoning capabilities of TRUST-VL. These capabilities can be grouped into *shared* and *specialized* reasoning as shown in Table 1. These capabilities guide the construction of our TRUST-Instruct dataset, each addressing characteristic misinformation patterns spanning text, vision, and cross-modal reasoning steps (see Figure 4).

Structured Reasoning Template. We mimic the human fact-checking process (Vlachos and Riedel, 2014; Warren et al., 2025) and regard misinformation detection as a sequence of reasoning steps tailored to different categories of distortions. We design specific sub-queries that guide the model through a structured, step-by-step verification process for each distortion type.

This verification process consists of common shared reasoning steps for analyzing the text and describing the image across all distortion types, before branching into task-specific reasoning. For textual distortion reasoning, we evaluate the tone,

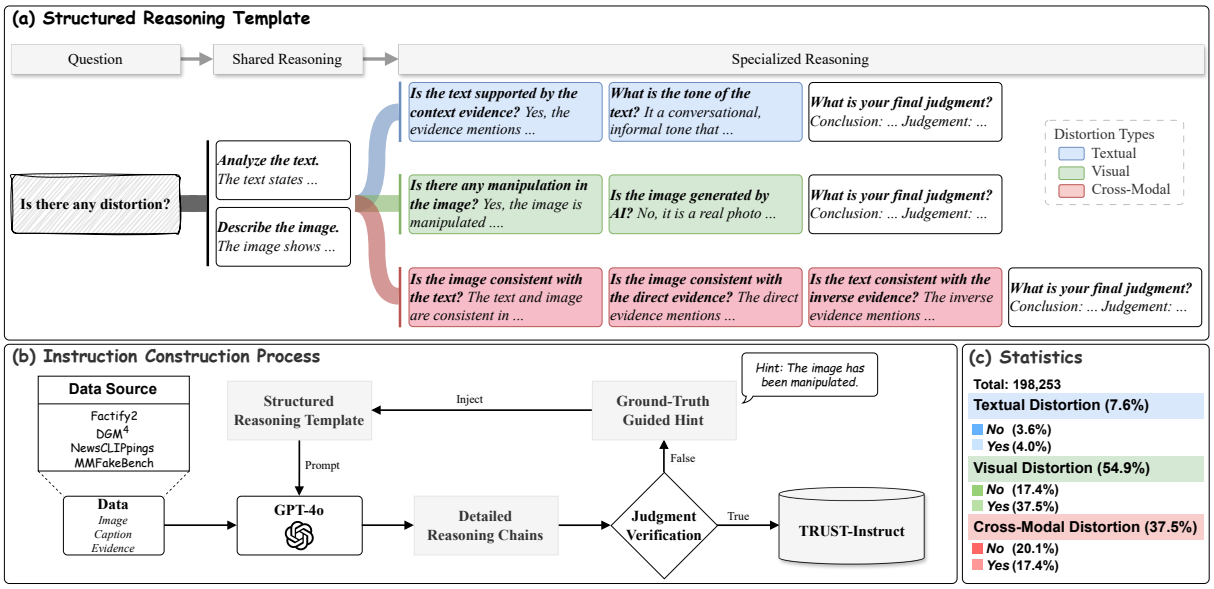

Figure 4: Construction of TRUST-Instruct using structured reasoning template. TRUST-Instruct comprises 198K diverse samples spanning various distortion types, each annotated with rich, step-by-step reasoning chains.

stance, and evidence support. For visual distortion reasoning, we focus on manipulated artifacts or AI-generated patterns. For cross-modal distortion reasoning, we verify the semantic consistency between image, caption, and retrieved evidence. This structured reasoning approach mirrors real-world fact-checking workflows and provides an interpretable, robust detection judgment.

Instruction Generation. Motivated by the success of generative models in automated instruction generation (Zhang et al., 2024), we propose a structured pipeline to construct reasoning instructions (see Figure 4(b)). To create a comprehensive dataset covering multiple distortion types, we curate a collection of <text, image, ground-truth label> triplets from several established datasets: Factify2 (Suryavardan et al., 2023) for textual claims with and without distortion; DGM^4 (Shao et al., 2023) for visual manipulations (e.g., face swaps and face-attribute editing) alongside their authentic counterparts; MMFakeBench (Liu et al., 2024c) for visual forgeries that are AI-generated or Photoshop-edited; and NewsCLIPpings (Luo et al., 2021a) for out-of-context image–text mismatches.

Based on this collection, we generate the instruction data by providing the multimodal input claims and their associated evidence to GPT-4o (OpenAI, 2024a), which is prompted with a carefully designed reasoning template to produce detailed reasoning chains for misinformation detection. Each generated chain undergoes a rigorous verification stage to ensure consistency with the ground-truth labels. When inconsistencies are detected, the prompts are iteratively refined with data-driven hints based on the ground truth to guide GPT-4o toward accurate reasoning outputs.

To ensure the quality of TRUST-Instruct, we manually inspect a subset of the generated instructions to verify that: (1) the generated instructions and reasoning chains are coherent and align with the distortion type; (2) the task-specific reasoning steps are carried out only after the shared reasoning steps have been completed; (3) the task-specific (specialized) reasoning steps are correct; and (4) the final veracity labels match the ground truth. 98.5% of the generated instructions pass our inspection and we filter out the remaining ones that fail to meet these criteria. The final TRUST-Instruct dataset comprises 198,253 high-quality instructions spanning three distortions (see Figure 4(c)).

3.3 Training of TRUST-VL Model

Figure 5 shows the three-stage training process that progressively enhance the capabilities of our TRUST-VL model.

Stage 1. We begin by training the projection module for one epoch on 1.2 million image–text pairs (653K news samples from VisualNews (Liu et al., 2020) and 558K samples from the LLaVA training corpus (Liu et al., 2024a)). This stage aligns the visual features with the language model.

Stage 2. Next, we jointly train the LLM and the projection module for one epoch using 665K synthetic conversation samples from the LLaVA training corpus (Liu et al., 2024a) to improve the

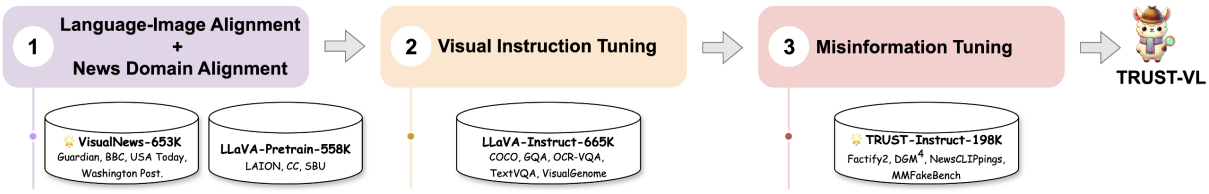

Figure 5: Progressive training strategy.

Dataset	In-Domain				Out-of-Domain		
	MMFakeBench	Factify2	DGM^4-Face	NewsCLIPpings	MOCHEG	Fakeddit-M	VERITE
Distortion Types	Mixed	Textual	Visual	Cross-modal	Textual	Visual	Cross-modal
# Label: *No*	300	1500	467	3632	200	200	200
# Label: *Yes*	700	1500	433	3632	200	200	200

Table 2: Evaluation Dataset Distribution.

model's ability to follow complex instructions.

Stage 3. Finally, we fine-tune the full model on 198K reasoning samples from TRUST-Instruct for three epochs to further enhance its misinformation-specific reasoning capabilities.

4 Performance Study

Datasets. To demonstrate the generalization capability of TRUST-VL, we evaluate the model on a diverse collection of in-domain and out-of-domain datasets covering textual, visual, and cross-modal distortions (see Table 2). *In-domain datasets* include MMFakeBench (Liu et al., 2025) which has mixed distortion types; Factify2 (Suryavardan et al., 2023), a fact-checking benchmark for multimodal claim verification; DGM^4-Face (Shao et al., 2023), focused on detecting deepfake-powered facial manipulations such as face swaps; and NewsCLIPpings (Luo et al., 2021a), the largest synthetic benchmark for out-of-context (OOC) misinformation detection, created by replacing the images in original claims with semantically related but event-mismatched images. *Out-of-domain datasets* include MOCHEG (Yao et al., 2023), a textual misinformation dataset with journalist-verified claims; Fakeddit-M (Nakamura et al., 2020), a Reddit-sourced visual distortion dataset under the Manipulated Content category (e.g., digitally edited images); and VERITE (Papadopoulos et al., 2024), a real-world OOC benchmark with modality-balanced image-text pairs.

Baselines. We compare TRUST-VL with both general-purpose VLMs and specialized misinformation detectors. For *general-purpose VLMs*, we include BLIP-2 (Li et al., 2023), InstructBLIP (Dai et al., 2023), LLaVA (Liu et al., 2023), LLaVA-NeXT (Li et al., 2024a), xGen-MM (Xue et al., 2024), and Qwen2-VL (Wang et al., 2024), which are all open-source VLMs primarily designed for multimodal understanding and reasoning tasks. We also include GPT-4o (OpenAI, 2024a) and o1 (OpenAI, 2024b), two advanced closed-source VLMs. For *specialized misinformation detectors*, we consider SNIFFER (Qi et al., 2024), an explainable VLM-based detector for OOC misinformation through a two-stage instruction; MMD-Agent (Liu et al., 2025), a multi-agent framework that utilizes VLMs for three sequential stages of veracity checking, and LRQ-FACT (Beigi et al., 2024), a fact-checking system based on a multi-LLM architecture that improves context reasoning.

Implementation Details. We use LLaVA-1.5 (Liu et al., 2024a) with `vicuna-13b-v1.5` as the LLM and CLIP (`ViT-L/14`) as the image encoder. The learning rates are set to 2e-5 for the LLM and 2e-6 for the vision encoder, with a batch size of 128. All models are trained on 8 Nvidia H100 (80G) GPUs. We evaluate model performance using accuracy (Acc.) and macro-F1.

4.1 Performance Comparison

Table 3 shows the results. We see that:

- Our proposed TRUST-VL significantly outperforms all baselines on both in-domain and out-of-domain datasets, achieving more than 8 percentage points improvement in average accuracy. This demonstrates that our proposed TRUST-VL effectively captures the key detection cues across different distortion types and generalizes well to unseen news claims.
- General-purpose VLMs, particularly OpenAI-o1, exhibit competitive performance on textual and cross-modal distortions, but struggle with subtle visual manipulations. Specifically, o1

Methods	Avg. Acc.	In-Domain								Out-of-Domain					
		MMFakeBench		Factify2		DGM^4-Face		NewsCLIPpings		MOCHEG		Fakeddit-M		VERITE	
		Acc.	F1	Acc.	F1	Acc.	F1	Acc.	F1	Acc.	F1	Acc.	F1	Acc.	F1
General-purpose VLMs															
BLIP2	53.36	37.40	34.45	54.30	42.38	47.70	34.35	50.14	34.28	62.50	57.16	70.75	70.19	50.75	37.35
InstructBLIP	58.41	57.30	56.38	66.83	66.48	50.40	48.66	53.85	50.71	63.25	60.85	64.75	62.83	52.50	49.60
LLaVA	60.25	62.60	61.72	79.59	79.10	46.41	38.14	45.87	48.54	66.50	64.71	68.00	66.67	52.75	49.80
xGen-MM	62.20	65.40	62.77	86.03	86.04	50.10	49.68	59.87	59.18	59.50	56.32	60.00	53.45	54.50	54.41
LLaVA-NeXT	62.35	71.60	65.99	79.60	79.09	53.40	52.21	59.86	59.37	58.25	52.52	59.00	52.36	54.75	54.57
Qwen2-VL	69.85	67.00	66.28	89.40	89.37	48.10	41.63	70.94	69.91	66.25	64.57	77.25	76.96	70.00	68.94
GPT-4o	76.16	83.10	80.88	88.37	88.21	57.14	49.24	86.51	86.51	77.00	76.81	73.50	73.12	67.50	67.57
o1	77.74	83.90	82.41	96.90	96.90	50.06	38.06	86.80	86.54	81.50	81.38	73.25	73.07	71.75	71.66
Misinformation Detectors															
MMD-Agent	56.11	69.10	48.68	71.03	69.35	48.30	48.29	53.06	41.12	54.25	43.72	42.25	42.24	54.75	47.00
SNIFFER	61.17	51.40	51.33	61.00	55.97	47.20	37.96	88.85	88.85	53.75	50.73	53.50	51.13	72.50	72.02
LRQ-FACT	66.60	71.30	74.00	86.63	89.79	41.80	44.14	68.19	73.45	66.25	69.25	67.25	71.77	64.75	68.32
TRUST-VL	**86.16**	**87.30**	**85.42**	**99.50**	**99.50**	**88.50**	**88.39**	**90.35**	**90.35**	**82.75**	**82.58**	**82.50**	**82.20**	**73.75**	**73.61**
Δ	↑8.42	↑3.40	↑3.01	↑2.60	↑2.60	↑31.36	↑36.18	↑1.50	↑1.50	↑1.25	↑1.20	↑5.25	↑5.24	↑1.25	↑1.59

Table 3: Performance (%) comparison between TRUST-VL and other baseline VLMs across in-domain and out-of-domain datasets. The best score is highlighted in blue, and the second-best score is underlined. The absolute improvement over the second-best model is highlighted in green.

Dataset	Model	Acc.
Factify2	LVLM4FV (Tahmasebi et al., 2024)	80.13
	TRUST-VL	99.50
DGM^4-All	HAMMER (Shao et al., 2023)	86.39
	TRUST-VL	87.26
NewsCLIPpings	SNIFFER (Qi et al., 2024)	88.85
	TRUST-VL	90.35

Table 4: Performance (%) comparison with task-specific baselines across representative datasets.

achieves an overall accuracy of 77.74%, but its performance drops significantly on DGM^4-Face (50.06%), indicating challenges in detecting manipulated facial content. Besides, o1 also outperforms GPT-4o, especially on textual distortions, suggesting that the enhanced reasoning capabilities can benefit misinformation detection.

- Existing multimodal misinformation detectors that rely on multiple independent LLMs for step-by-step reasoning perform worse than general-purpose VLMs. MMD-Agent and LRQ-FACT achieve average accuracies of 56.11% and 66.60%, respectively. This may be due to conflicting reasoning paths across modules, which undermine the overall decision-making process.

Comparison with Task-Specific Models. To further demonstrate the effectiveness of our unified framework, we compare TRUST-VL against strong task-specific baselines on representative benchmarks. Table 4 shows that our unified approach not only generalizes across diverse distortion types but also achieves superior performance compared to specialized models. For Factify2, the primary challenges stem from its long textual context and the need for evidence reasoning. We attribute the strong performance of TRUST-VL to the advanced capabilities of the underlying large language model in handling complex reasoning in text modality.

4.2 Ablation Study

We conduct ablation studies to evaluate the effect of different components in TRUST-VL, joint training across distortions and QAVA token count.

Effect of Model Components. We implement the following variants of TRUST-VL: (a) *w/o Reasoning* where the model is trained only for binary classification (*i.e.*, real vs. fake), without generating structured reasoning chains; (b) *w/o Common Reasoning* where the shared reasoning steps (text analysis and visual understanding) are removed during instruction data construction; (c) *w/o QAVA* where QAVA module is removed from the model. Table 5 shows the results. We observe that:

- TRUST-VL *w/o Reasoning* leads to substantial performance degradation (4–12 percentage points across datasets), highlighting the importance of structured reasoning supervision for accurate judgment.

- TRUST-VL *w/o Common Reasoning* results in a noticeable performance decline, particularly on datasets involving fine-grained visual manipulations. This suggests that textual and visual descriptions provide crucial semantic grounding for subtle distortion detection.

- TRUST-VL *w/o QAVA* results in a performance drop across all datasets, with the largest degradation of 15.71% on visual distortion tasks. This confirms the effectiveness of QAVA in learning task-specific visual representations.

Effect of Backbone Model Size. We replace the

Variants	MMFakeBench		Factify2		DGM^2-Face		NewsCLIPpings	
	Acc.	F1	Acc.	F1	Acc.	F1	Acc.	F1
TRUST-VL-13B	**87.30**	**85.42**	**99.50**	**99.50**	**88.50**	**88.39**	**90.35**	**90.35**
w/o Reasoning	83.60	81.25	87.31	87.30	80.00	79.91	85.99	85.98
w/o Common Reasoning	84.60	81.42	99.20	99.20	70.90	70.68	89.00	89.00
w/o QAVA	84.60	82.16	89.17	89.17	72.79	72.59	87.31	87.30
LLM Size: 7B	85.90	83.65	99.33	99.33	80.90	80.64	88.79	88.79

Table 5: Ablation study of different components in TRUST-VL.

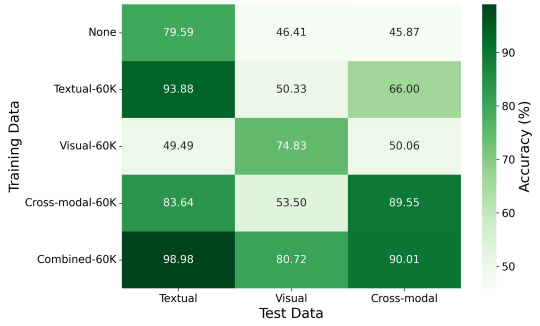

Figure 6: Accuracy heatmap of LLaVA across different training and testing distortion types. The first row ("None") refers to the performance of the original LLaVA baseline without any training.

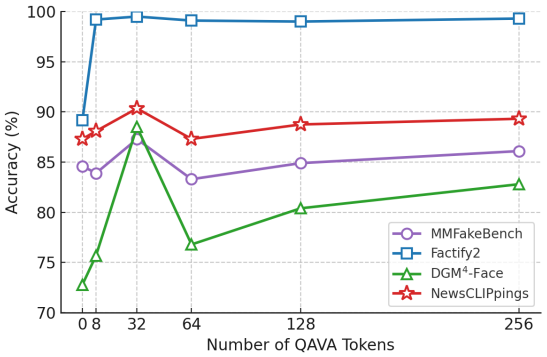

Figure 7: The impact of different numbers of learnable QAVA tokens across datasets.

13B backbone LLM with a smaller 7B version. Table 5 shows that while using a 7B LLM leads to a moderate performance decline, it still outperforms the second-best baseline reported in Table 3. This highlights the robustness and efficiency of our proposed framework and instruction data, even when smaller backbone models are used.

Effect of Joint Training. To examine whether different distortion types benefit from joint training, we conduct a small-scale experiment based on the original LLaVA model. We separately train the model using instruction data from each individual distortion type (textual, visual, or cross-modal), and compare the results with a jointly trained model using a balanced mix of all three types. For fair comparison, all models are trained on 60K samples. As shown in Figure 6, models trained on a single distortion type generally perform well on in-domain evaluation but struggle to generalize to unseen distortions. In contrast, the jointly trained model achieves consistently better performance across all distortion types, confirming that shared reasoning capabilities can be enhanced through joint training and transferred across tasks.

Effect of QAVA Token Count. We also examine how the number of learnable visual tokens in the QAVA module influences the performance of TRUST-VL. Figure 7 shows that the QAVA module consistently improves accuracy across all datasets, with notable gains on DGM^4-Face (accuracy increases from 72.79% to 88.50%), showing its critical role in detecting visual distortions. Increasing the QAVA token count initially leads to performance gains, but beyond a certain point, further increases yield diminishing or even negative returns. Specifically, 32 tokens achieve the best performance across all datasets, suggesting they provide an optimal balance—sufficient to capture task-specific visual differences while avoiding excessive computational overhead and the risk of overfitting.

4.3 Case Study

Figure 8 shows three cases that both general-purpose VLMs and specialized detectors fail to handle. In contrast, TRUST-VL correctly identifies all cases with a structured sequence of reasoning steps. The first case involves the textual claim "Ayesha Curry can't cook," which contradicts well-documented facts and is presented in a satirical tone likely to mislead users. The second features manipulated photos of actors Olivia Colman and David Tennant, where subtle alterations to their facial expressions convey deceptive emotions. The third pairs an authentic image of politician Michael Gove with an incorrect caption, producing a cross-modal mismatch. These cases highlight the need for robust detection capable of addressing multiple,

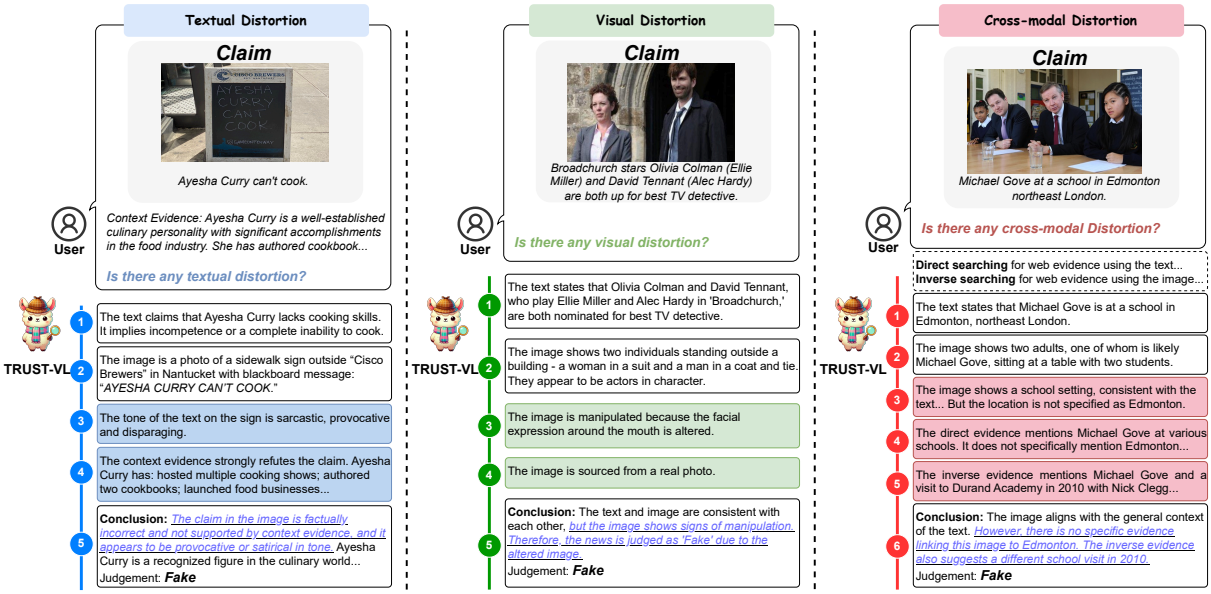

Figure 8: Example multimodal distortion spanning textual, visual, and cross-modal scenarios.

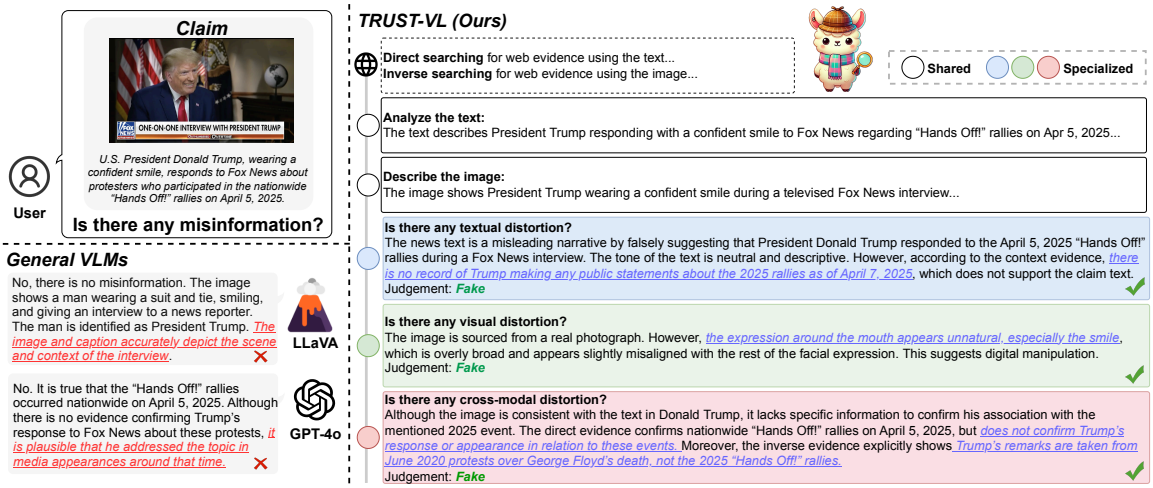

Figure 9: Comparison between TRUST-VL and general large vision-language models on a complex case where false information spans across multiple modalities at the same time.

simultaneous distortions across text and images.

Figure 9 shows a case where general VLMs fail to detect visual distortions on the person's face, as well as cross-modal distortion (*i.e.,* event mismatch between the text and image). General-purpose models like GPT-4o and LLaVA overlook these subtle manipulations and accept the content as factual. In contrast, TRUST-VL accurately identifies the misinformation by conducting multi-step reasoning, cross-referencing temporal and contextual evidence, and pinpointing inconsistencies across modalities. This demonstrates TRUST-VL's superior ability to handle nuanced, real-world misinformation scenarios that require both shared and task-specific reasoning capabilities.

5 Conclusion

In this work, we tackle the challenge of multimodal misinformation detection involving textual, visual, and cross-modal distortions. Recognizing that these tasks share common reasoning capabilities while also requiring specialized skills for each distortion type, we propose joint training across distortion types to enhance model performance. We introduce TRUST-VL, a unified, explainable VLM with a novel Question-Aware Visual Amplifier module. We also construct the TRUST-Instruct dataset with structured reasoning chains that mimic human fact-checking. Extensive experiments show that TRUST-VL achieves state-of-the-art results on both in-domain and out-of-domain benchmarks.

Acknowledgments

This work is supported by the Ministry of Education, Singapore, under its MOE AcRF Tier 3 Grant (MOE-MOET32022-0001).

Limitations

Although TRUST-VL achieves strong performance, it has several limitations. First, the structured reasoning chains are guided by manually designed task queries, rather than being learned or evolved by the model. Incorporating reinforcement learning could further enhance the adaptability of the reasoning process. Second, while visual evidence is retrieved, it is converted to text for reasoning. The more direct comparison in the visual space could offer richer signals. Lastly, our focus on visual distortion is limited to face-related manipulations, leaving other forms such as object-based or video misinformation for future exploration.

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A Model Details

As illustrated in Table 6 and Figure 5, we progressively fine-tune our model with three stages, including language-image alignment and news domain alignment, visual instruction tuning, and misinformation tuning.

To capture detailed visual information for subtle artifact detection, TRUST-VL adopts a dynamic, high-resolution image encoding strategy proven effective in recent VLMs (Li et al., 2024a; Xue et al., 2024). This approach employs patch-wise image encoding, where the original high-resolution image is partitioned into multiple smaller patches, each individually encoded. These patch-level encodings are then concatenated with a downsized version of the original image that provides global contextual information. We utilize the pre-trained CLIP encoder (Radford et al., 2021) to obtain visual representations. To align pretrained LLMs with visual encoders, we use lightweight MLP projectors (Liu et al., 2023, 2024a) to connect image features into the word embedding space of the language model and then fine-tune the model on instruction-formatted datasets to improve generalization and controllability. The language tokens consist of a system message, task-specific instruction, input text, retrieved evidence, and targeted questions.

In our experiments, we use the following model checkpoints as baselines: blip2-flan-t5-xl, instructblip-vicuna-13b, llava-v1.5-13b, llava-v1.6-mistral-13b-hf, xgen-mm-phi3-mini-instruct-r-v1, and Qwen2-VL-7B-Instruct. For detectors such as MMD-Agent and LRQ-FACT, we utilize llava-v1.5-13b as the VLM for fair comparison.

Configurations	Details
Architecture	**Image Encoder**: CLIP-Large (336×336) **Projector**: 2-Layer MLP **QAVA**: 6 Transformer Layers with 32 Learnable Tokens **LLM**: Vicuna-1.5 13B
# Total Parameters	13B
Stage-1	**Training Data**: 1211K **Trainable Module**: Projector
Stage-2	**Training Data**: 665K **Trainable Module**: LLM, Projector
Stage-3	**Training Data**: 198K **Trainable Module**: Full model
Training Data (#Samples)	2074K = 1211K + 665K + 198K
Training Schedule	**Learning Rate**: - LLM: 2e-5 - Vision Encoder: 2e-6 **Training Epochs**: - Stage-1: 1 epoch - Stage-2: 1 epoch - Stage-3: 3 epochs **Batch Size**: 128

Table 6: Model Architecture and Training Details

B Datasets

To evaluate the effectiveness of multimodal misinformation detection models, we leverage a diverse set of in-domain and out-of-domain datasets covering textual, visual, and cross-modal misinformation. These datasets enable a comprehensive assessment of misinformation detection across different modalities and manipulation techniques.

- **MMFakeBench** (Liu et al., 2025) is a multimodal misinformation detection benchmark designed to evaluate robustness against various manipulation techniques. It contains 1,000 instances with a distribution of real samples and manipulated cases, including textual veracity distortions, visual veracity distortions, and cross-modal consistency distortions. The dataset introduces 12 forgery types, making it a comprehensive benchmark for evaluating multimodal misinformation detection.

- **Factify2** (Suryavardan et al., 2023) is a multimodal fact-checking dataset comprising 50,000 instances of supporting and refuting claims sourced from fact-checking platforms such as PolitiFact. This dataset extends the original Factify dataset by incorporating a wider range of real and manipulated news content, including satirical articles.

- **DGM^4-Face** (Shao et al., 2023) is a large-scale dataset generated by two image manipulation and two text manipulation approaches, with the objective of detecting and grounding manipulations in image-text pairs of human-centric news. The original dataset consists of a total of 230K news samples, including 77,426 pristine image-text pairs and 152,574 manipulated pairs. We randomly sample 467 real images and 433 manipulated instances, including face swaps and face attribute modifications.

- **NewsCLIPpings** (Luo et al., 2021a) is the largest synthetic benchmark for detecting out-of-context (OOC) misinformation. It generates OOC samples by replacing images in original image-caption pairs with real and semantically related images from different news events. (Abdelnabi et al., 2022) further extends this dataset by incorporating textual and visual evidence retrieved via Google Search APIs to improve detection performance.

- **MOCHEG** (Yao et al., 2023) is a large-scale dataset for fact-checking, comprising 15,601 claims, each annotated with a truthfulness label and a ruling statement. It includes 33,880 paragraphs and 12,112 images as evidence. It is sourced from fact-checking platforms and serves as a benchmark for evaluating the ability of models to verify textual claims. For fair evaluation, we sample 400 news instances with a balanced distribution of real and fake samples.

- **Fakeddit** (Nakamura et al., 2020) is a large-scale multimodal fake news dataset collected from Reddit. It contains over 1 million instances across multiple categories of misinformation, providing fine-grained 2-way, 3-way, and 6-way classification of fake news. Similarly, we sample 400 news instances with an equal number of real

and fake claims.

- **VERITE** (Papadopoulos et al., 2024) is a real-world dataset designed for detecting out-of-context misinformation, which effectively mitigates the problem of unimodal bias and provides a more robust and reliable evaluation framework. A balanced subset of 400 samples is used to ensure fair evaluation.

C Baselines

- **BLIP-2** (Li et al., 2023) is a vision-language model that bridges the modality gap between vision and language models without requiring training from scratch. It employs a Querying Transformer to effectively align visual features with language models.
- **InstructBLIP** (Dai et al., 2023) is an instruction-tuned version of BLIP-2, designed to handle a wide range of vision-language tasks through instruction tuning. By integrating visual instruction tuning, InstructBLIP achieves improved performance across various tasks, including image captioning and visual question answering.
- **LLaVA** (Liu et al., 2023) is one of the pioneering works in visual instruction tuning. It improves the vision-language connector's representation power with a two-layer MLP to enhance multimodal capabilities.
- **LLaVA-NeXT** (Li et al., 2024a) is an enhanced version of LLaVA with improved vision-language alignment and reasoning. It builds upon the original LLaVA framework to offer more accurate and contextually relevant responses in multimodal interactions.
- **xGen-MM** (Xue et al., 2024) also known as BLIP-3, is a large multimodal model framework which replaces the complex Q-Former module used in BLIP-2 with a scalable vision token sampler, specifically a perceiver resampler, to process visual inputs. Additionally, xGen-MM is able to handle free-form interleaved sequences of images and text by adopting a single auto-regressive loss function.
- **Qwen2-VL** (Wang et al., 2024) is a VLM that integrates visual understanding with language processing capabilities. It introduces two key innovations: Naive Dynamic Resolution, allowing the model to process images of varying resolutions by dynamically adjusting the number of visual tokens, and Multimodal Rotary Position Embedding (M-RoPE), which facilitates the effective fusion of positional information across text, images, and videos.
- **GPT-4o** (OpenAI, 2024a). This is currently one of the most powerful multimodal large language models. We utilize GPT-4o in a zero-shot manner with step-by-step instructions for multimodal misinformation detection.
- **o1** (OpenAI, 2024b) is the latest multimodal VLM with advanced reasoning capabilities via large-scale reinforcement learning. For fair comparison, we adopt o1 using the same evaluation protocol as GPT-4o.
- **SNIFFER** (Qi et al., 2024). This is the state-of-the-art large VLM designed for OOC misinformation detection. It employs a two-stage instruction tuning on InstructBLIP (Dai et al., 2023) for the cross-modal consistency checks.
- **MMD-Agent** (Liu et al., 2025) is a multimodal agent framework that integrates the reasoning, action, and tool-use capabilities of LVLM agents. It decomposes misinformation detection into three sequential stages: textual veracity check, visual veracity check, and cross-modal consistency reasoning. This structured approach enables systematic and thorough analysis. At each stage, MMD-Agent prompts LVLMs to generate multi-perspective reasoning traces and coordinates their outputs to obtain a final decision.
- **LRQ-FACT** (Beigi et al., 2024) is a fact-checking system that utilizes a multi-agent framework to leverage VLMs and LLMs to generate comprehensive questions and answers for understanding multimodal content. Then, a decision-maker LLM assesses the veracity based on all generated context.

D Model Prompts

Our structured reasoning template is designed to reflect widely adopted human fact-checking workflows, which typically involve decomposed, step-by-step verification processes (Nakov et al., 2021; Vlachos and Riedel, 2014; Warren et al., 2025). Prior studies have formalized fact-checking as a pipeline involving claim analysis, evidence retrieval, consistency assessment, and final verdict prediction. For example, (Warren et al., 2025) highlights that professional fact-checkers require trans-

```
# system message
Task description: some rumormongers intentionally write fake news, manipulate images, or
use images from other news events to make multimodal misinformation. Given a news text and
a news image, you are responsible for judging whether the given text and image are both
credible and faithfully represent the news event. You will be presented with a text and an
image. You should use the following step-by-step instructions to derive your judgment:
# shared steps
Step 1 - Analyze the text: Carefully review the provided text, summarize its key facts,
events, and entities. Pay attention to any misleading, false, or fabricated contents.
Step 2 - Provide a detailed description of the news image: Identify the main subjects, such
 as people, groups, or specific elements related to the news event.
# specialized steps
Step 3 -...
# conclusion
Step 6 - What is your final judgment? According to the previous steps, you will first think
 out loud about your eventual conclusion, enumerating reasons why the news does or does not
 contain false information. After thinking out loud, you should output either 'Real' or '
Fake' depending on whether you think the given text and accompanying image are both
truthful and consistent: 'Real' if the news is factually correct and the image faithfully
represent the news text, or 'Fake' if the news is misleading, manipulated or the image is
used out of context.

# input
<image>
Claim Text: <text>
Direct Evidence: <direct evidence>
Inverse Evidence: <inverse evidence>
Context Evidence: <context evidence>
Your judgment:
```

Figure 10: Prompt used to ask GPT-4o to generate the instruction data.

```
# system message
You are a misinformation detection assistant. Task description: some rumormongers
intentionally write fake news, manipulate images, or use images from other news events to
make multimodal misinformation. Given a news text and a news image, you are responsible for
 judging whether the given text and image are both credible and faithfully represent the
news event. You will be presented with a text, an image, direct evidence, and inverse
evidence. For final judgment, you should output either 'Real' or 'Fake' depending on
whether you think the given text and accompanying image are both truthful and consistent: '
Real' if the news is factually correct and the image faithfully represent the news text, or
 'Fake' if the news is misleading, manipulated or the image is wrongly used in the news
text.

A few rules:
- If a specific type of evidence (i.e., direct, or inverse) is not provided, state clearly:
 'There is no {type} evidence.'
- Do not nitpick over the direct and inverse evidence as it may contain some noise.
- Your judgment must always end with either 'Real' or 'Fake'.

# input
<image>
Claim Text: <text>
Direct Evidence: <direct evidence>
Inverse Evidence: <inverse evidence>
Context Evidence: <context evidence>
Your judgment:
```

Figure 11: TRUST-VL language input.

parent, explainable systems that mirror their multi-stage decision-making processes.

Figure 10 illustrates the prompt utilized for asking GPT-4o to generate instruction data. For each claim, we retrieve textual and visual evidence (converted to text via image captioning) separately and then pass them to GPT-4o to process. We also consider context evidence provided by users or downstream tasks. For specialized steps, we carefully design critical steps required for addressing differ-

Model	MMFakeBench	Factify2	DGM^4-Face	NewsCLIPpings
TRUST-VL-7B (Backbone: LLaVA)	85.90	99.33	80.90	88.79
TRUST-VL-7B (Backbone: Mistral)	85.70	99.30	82.12	88.53

Table 7: Performance (%) of TRUST-VL with different backbone models.

Proportion	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%
Acc.	90.35	89.09	88.54	84.10	81.96

Table 8: TRUST-VL's performance (%) across varying proportion of incorrect evidence on NewsCLIPpings.

Dataset	MMD-Agent (LLaVA)	MMD-Agent (GPT-4o)
MMFakeBench	69.10	76.56
Factify2	71.03	84.00
DGM^4-Face	48.30	55.96
NewsCLIPpings	53.06	77.34

Table 9: Performance (%) comparison of MMD-Agent with different backbones.

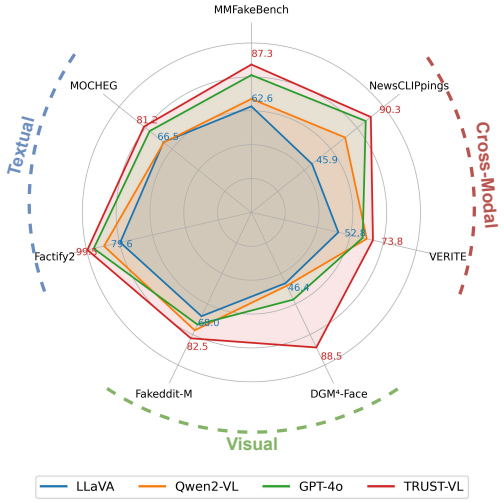

Figure 12: Performance (%) comparison between TRUST-VL and general VLMs.

ent distortion types. Finally, GPT-4o outputs a final judgment along with detailed explanations, guided by carefully designed step-by-step reasoning instructions. Figure 11 shows language input for the TRUST-VL framework. Together, these prompt designs ensure high-quality reasoning supervision during training and robust, explainable predictions.

Although the input formats and reasoning templates vary across tasks, our proposed unified model can handle them all. The reasoning template is carefully designed to reflect the inherent characteristics of each distortion type. For instance, tasks involving visual distortion primarily require the model to detect fine-grained visual artifacts in the image modality, where evidence-based reasoning paths are not beneficial to the final judgment. Our unified framework reformulates all tasks into a consistent structure comprising a chain of question-answering steps followed by a final veracity judgment that integrates multiple reasoning paths.

E Additional Experiments

Impact of Backbone Choice. To demonstrate the generalizability of our proposed framework and instruction data, we further evaluate TRUST-VL using an alternative backbone (Mistral-7B (Jiang et al., 2023)), as shown in Table 7. The results demonstrate that TRUST-VL achieves highly consistent performance across datasets, with comparable accuracy under both LLaVA and Mistral backbones. These findings confirm that the improvements are not tied to any specific backbone.

Effect of Incorrect Evidence. To examine whether TRUST-VL can still make correct inferences when provided with misleading or incorrect evidence, we randomly sample irrelevant evidence into the input and systematically evaluate the robustness of our proposed model under varying proportions of incorrect evidence (0, 25%, 50%, 75%, 100%) on NewsCLIPpings, as shown in Table 8. Notably, even under a large amount of incorrect evidence (75%), TRUST-VL maintains strong performance and makes reliable predictions despite noisy evidence (e.g., a 6.25-point drop).

MMD-Agent Variants We used llava-v1.5-13b as the vision-language model backbone for MMD-Agent to ensure a fair comparison among open-source baselines. As shown in Table 9, using GPT-4o as the base backbone significantly improves MMD-Agent's performance but still performs substantially worse than the proposed TRUST-VL. This discrepancy reveals the sensitivity of MMD-Agent to the capabilities of its base models. As illustrated in Figure 12, existing vision-language models, including GPT-4o, struggle with subtle visual manipulations, particularly in tasks like DGM^4-Face. Additionally, we observed that MMD-Agent frequently suffers from incorrect grounding in its sequential reasoning process. This often leads to an early stop and incomplete verification, which degrade its detection performance.

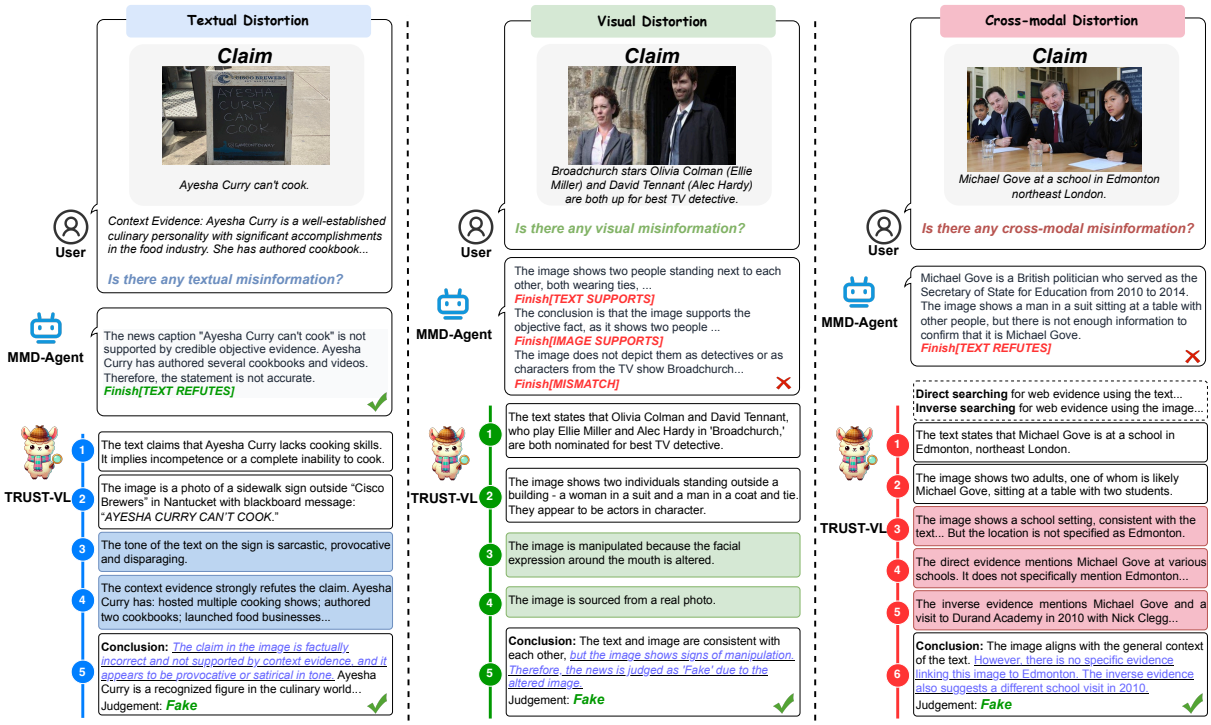

Figure 13: Comparison between the proposed TRUST-VL and specialized detectors.

F Additional Case Study

Figure 13 showcases three real-world misinformation cases, each demonstrating a distinct distortion type: textual, visual, and cross-modal. Specialized misinformation detectors such as MMD-Agent tend to produce shallow or incomplete assessments. For instance, in the Ayesha Curry case, it offers a brief factual correction without recognizing the satirical tone; in the Olivia Colman case, it fails to detect the subtle visual manipulation; and in the third case, it misidentifies the setting despite contradictory evidence. These limitations highlight MMD-Agent's lack of in-depth reasoning and explainability, especially when dealing with subtle visual manipulations or cross-modal distortions, which TRUST-VL addresses more effectively.