

# Worst of Both Worlds: Biases Compound in Pre-trained Vision-and-Language Models

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## Abstract

Numerous works have analyzed biases in vision and pre-trained language models individually - however, less attention has been paid to how these biases interact in multimodal settings. This work extends text-based bias analysis methods to investigate multimodal language models, and analyzes intra- and inter-modality associations and biases learned by these models. Specifically, we demonstrate that VL-BERT (Su et al., 2020) exhibits gender biases, often preferring to reinforce a stereotype over faithfully describing the visual scene. We demonstrate these findings on a controlled case-study and extend them for a larger set of stereotypically gendered entities.

## 1 Introduction

Pre-trained contextualized word representations (Peters et al., 2018; Devlin et al., 2019; Radford et al., 2018; Lan et al., 2020; Raffel et al., 2020) have been known to amplify unwanted (e.g. stereotypical) correlations from their training data (Zhao et al., 2019; Kurita et al., 2019; Webster et al., 2020; Vig et al., 2020). By learning these correlations from the data, models may perpetuate harmful racial and gender stereotypes.

The success and generality of pre-trained Transformers has led to several multimodal representation models (Su et al., 2020; Tan and Bansal, 2019; Chen et al., 2019) which utilize visual-linguistic pre-training. These models also condition on the visual modality, and have shown strong performance on downstream visual-linguistic tasks. This additional input modality allows the model to learn both intra- and inter-modality associations from the training data - and in turn, gives rise to unexplored new sources of knowledge and bias. For instance, we find (see Figure 1) the word *purse*'s female association can override the visual evidence. While there are entire bodies of work surrounding bias in vision (Buolamwini and Gebru, 2018) and language (Blodgett et al., 2020),

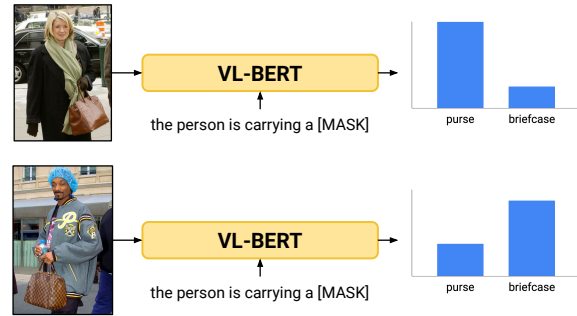


Figure 1: Visual-linguistic models (like VL-BERT) encode gender biases, which (as is the case above) may lead the model to ignore the visual signal in favor of gendered stereotypes.

there are relatively few works at the intersection of the two. As we build models that include multiple input modalities, each containing their own biases and artefacts, we must be cognizant about how each of them are influencing model decisions.

In this work, we extend existing work for measuring gender biases in text-only language models to the multimodal setting. Specifically, we study how within- and cross-modality biases are expressed for stereotypically gendered entities in VL-BERT (Su et al., 2020), a popular visual-linguistic transformer. Through a controlled case study (§4), we find that visual-linguistic pre-training leads to VL-BERT viewing the majority of entities as “more masculine” than BERT (Devlin et al., 2019) does. Additionally, we observe that model predictions rely heavily on the gender of the agent in both the language and visual contexts. These findings are corroborated by an analysis over a larger set of gendered entities (§5).

## 2 Bias Statement

We define gender bias as undesirable variations in how the model associates an entity with different genders, particularly when they reinforce harm-



Source $X$	To compute $P(E g)$		To compute $P(E g_N)$		Association Score $S(E, g)$
	Visual Input	Language Input	Modified Component	New Value	
Visual-Linguistic Pre-training	$\times$	The man is drinking beer	Model	Text-only LM	$\ln \frac{P_{VL}(E g)}{P_L(E g)}$
Language Context		The man is drinking beer	Language Input	man $\rightarrow$ person	$\ln \frac{P_{VL}(E g, I)}{P_{VL}(E p, I)}$
Visual Context		The person is drinking beer	Visual Input	$\times$	$\ln \frac{\hat{P}_{VL}(E I_g)}{P_{VL}(E)}$

Table 1: Our methodology being used to compute association scores  $S(E, g)$  between beer ( $E$ ) and man ( $g$ ) in each of the three bias sources. We show the inputs used to compute  $P(E|g)$ , and the modifications made for the normalizing term,  $P(E|g_N)$ . The entity beer is [MASK]-ed before being passed into the model.

ful stereotypes.<sup>1</sup> Relying on stereotypical cues (learned from biased pre-training data) can cause the model to override visual and linguistic evidence when making predictions. This can result in representational harms (Blodgett et al., 2020) by perpetuating negative gender stereotypes - e.g. men are not likely to hold purses (Figure 1), or women are more likely to wear aprons than suits. In this work, we seek to answer two questions: a) to what extent does visual-linguistic pre-training shift the model’s association of entities with different genders? b) do gendered cues in the visual and linguistic inputs<sup>2</sup> influence model predictions?

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Sources of Gender Bias

We identify three sources of learned bias when visual-linguistic models are making masked word predictions - **visual-linguistic pre-training**, the **visual context**, and the **language context**. The former refers to biases learned from image-text pairs during pre-training, whereas the latter two are biases expressed during inference.

#### 3.2 Measuring Gender Bias

We measure associations between entities and gender in visual-linguistic models using template-based masked language modeling, inspired by methodology from Kurita et al. (2019). We provide template captions involving the entity  $E$  as language inputs to the model, and extract the probability of the [MASK]-ed entity. We denote ex-

<sup>1</sup>In this work, we use “male” and “female” to refer to historical definitions of gender presentation. We welcome recommendations on how to generalize our analysis to a more valid characterization of gender and expression.

<sup>2</sup>We note that this work studies biases expressed by models for English language inputs.

tracted probabilities as:

$$P_{L/VL}(E|g) = P([\text{MASK}] = E|g \text{ in input})$$

where  $g$  is a gendered agent in one of the input modalities.  $L$  and  $VL$  are the text-only BERT (Devlin et al., 2019) and VL-BERT (Su et al., 2020) models respectively. Our method for computing association scores is simply:

$$S(E, g) = \ln \frac{P(E|g)}{P(E|g_N)}$$

where the probability terms vary depending on the bias source we want to analyze. We generate the normalizing term by replacing the gendered agent  $g$  with a gender-neutral term  $g_N$ . We summarize how we vary our normalizing term and compute association scores for each bias source in Table 1.

- Visual-Linguistic Pre-Training ( $S_{PT}$ ):** We compute the association *shift* due to VL pre-training, by comparing the extracted probability  $P_{VL}$  from VL-BERT with the text-only BERT - thus  $P_L$  is the normalizing term.
- Language Context ( $S_L$ ):** For an image  $I$ , we replace the gendered agent  $g$  with the gender-neutral term person ( $p$ ) in the caption, and compute the average association score over a set of images  $I_E$  which contain the entity  $E$ .

$$S_L(E, g) = \mathbb{E}_{I \sim I_E} [S_L(E, g|I)]$$

- Visual Context ( $S_V$ ):** We collect a set of images  $I_g$  which contain the entity  $E$  and gendered agent  $g$ , and compute the average extracted probability by providing language input with gender-neutral agent:

$$\hat{P}_{VL}(E|I_g) = \mathbb{E}_{I \sim I_g} [P_{VL}(E|I)]$$

Template Caption	Entities
The [AGENT] is carrying a $E$ .	<i>purse</i> <i>briefcase</i>
The [AGENT] is wearing a $E$ .	<i>apron</i> <i>suit</i>
The [AGENT] is drinking $E$ .	<i>wine</i> <i>beer</i>

Table 2: Template captions for each entity pair. The [AGENT] is either *man*, *woman*, or *person*.

We normalize by comparing to the output when no image is provided ( $P_{VL}(E)$ ).

For each bias source, we can compute the bias score for that entity by taking the difference of its female and male association scores:

$$B(E) = S(E, f) - S(E, m)$$

The sign of  $B(E)$  indicates the direction of gender bias - positive for “female,” negative for “male.”

## 4 Case Study

In this section, we present a case study of our methodology by examining how gender bias is expressed in each bias source for several entities. The case study serves as an initial demonstration of our methodology over a small set of gendered entities, whose findings we expand upon in Section 5.

### 4.1 Entities

We perform an in-depth analysis of three pairs of entities, each representing a different type of entity: clothes (*apron*, *suit*), bags (*briefcase*, *purse*), and drinks (*wine*, *beer*). The entities are selected to show how unequal gender associations perpetuate undesirable gender stereotypes - e.g. aprons are for women, while suits are for men (Appendix B).

For each entity, we collect a balanced set  $I_E = I_f \cup I_m$  of 12 images - 6 images each with men ( $I_m$ ) and women ( $I_f$ ) (images in Appendix A).<sup>3</sup> We also create a different template caption for each entity pair (Table 2), which are used to compute association scores  $S(E, m/f)$  when the gendered agent  $g$  in the caption is *man* or *woman*.

In the following sections, we analyze how VL-BERT exhibits gender bias for these entities, for each of the bias sources identified in Section 3.1.

<sup>3</sup>Note, throughout our discussion we use the words *man* and *woman* as input to the model to denote *male* and *female* to the model. However, when images are included, we only use images of self-identified (*fe*)*male* presenting individuals.

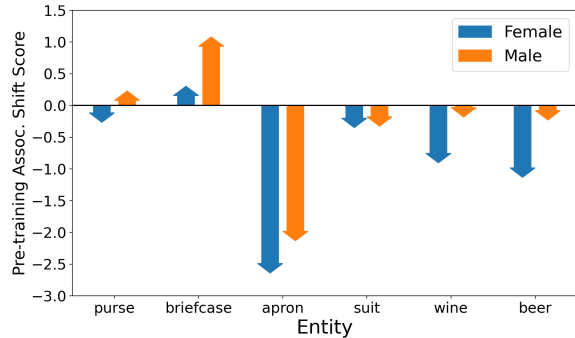


Figure 2: Pre-training association shift scores  $S_{PT}(E, m/f)$ . Positive shift scores indicate that VL-BERT has higher associations between the entity and the agent’s gender than BERT, and vice versa

### 4.2 Visual-Linguistic Pre-Training Bias

Figure 2 plots each entity’s pre-training association shift score,  $S_{PT}(E, m/f)$ , where positive scores indicate that visual-linguistic pre-training amplified the gender association, and vice versa.

Visual-linguistic pre-training affects all objects differently. Some objects have increased association scores for both genders (*briefcase*), while others have decreased associations (*suit* and *apron*). However, even when the associations shift in the same direction for both genders, they rarely move together - for *briefcase*, the association increase is much larger for male, whereas for *apron*, *wine* and *beer*, the association decrease is more pronounced for female. For *purse*, the association shifts positively for male but negatively for female. For the entities in the case study, we conclude that pre-training shifts entities’ association towards men.

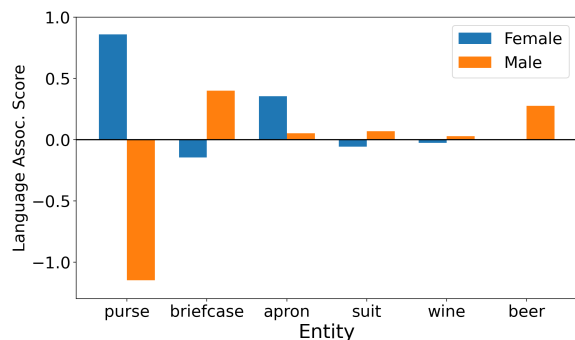


Figure 3: Language association scores  $S_L(E, m/f)$ . Positive association scores indicate that the agent’s gender increases the model’s confidence in the entity.

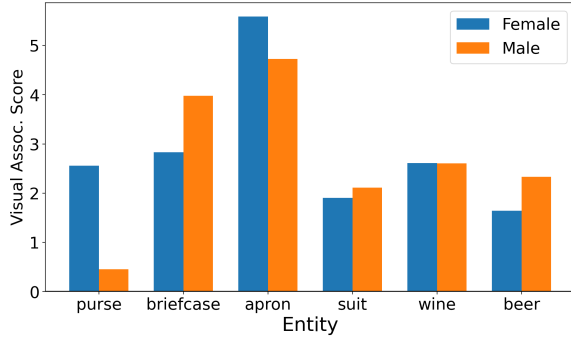


Figure 4: Visual association scores  $S_V(E, m/f)$ . Positive association scores indicate that the model becomes more confident in the presence of a visual context.

### 4.3 Language Context Bias

Figure 3 plots language association scores, which look at the masked probability of  $E$  when the agent in the caption is *man/woman*, compared to the gender-neutral *person*.

For the entity *purse*, we see that when the agent in the language context is female the model is much more likely to predict that the masked word is *purse*, but when the agent is male the probability becomes much lower. We similarly observe that some of the entities show considerably higher confidence when the agent is either male or female (*briefcase*, *apron*, *beer*), indicating that the model has a language gender bias for these entities. For *suit* and *wine*, association scores with both genders are similar.

### 4.4 Visual Context Bias

For each of our entities, we also plot the visual association score  $S_V(E, u)$  with *male* and *female* in Figure 4. We again observe that the degree of association varies depending on whether the image contains a man or woman. For *purse* and *apron*, the model becomes considerably more confident in its belief of the correct entity when the agent is female rather than male. Similarly, if the agent is male, the model becomes more confident about the entity in the case of *briefcase* and *beer*. For *suit* and *wine*, the differences are not as pronounced. In Table 3, we can see some examples of the model’s probability outputs not aligning with the object in the image. In both cases, the model’s gender bias overrides the visual evidence (the entity).

Visual Context, $I$	Image	
$P_{VL}(\text{purse} I)$	0.0018 ✓	0.084 ✗
$P_{VL}(\text{briefcase} I)$	0.4944 ✗	0.067 ✓

Table 3: Examples of images where the probability outputs do not align with the visual information.

## 5 Comparing Model Bias with Human Annotations of Stereotypes

To test if the trends in the case study match human intuitions, we curate a list of 40 entities, which are considered to be stereotypically masculine or feminine in society.<sup>4</sup> We analyze how the gendered-ness of these entities is mirrored in their VL-BERT language bias scores. To evaluate the effect of multimodal training on the underlying language model, we remove the visual input when extracting language model probabilities and compare how the language bias varies between text-only VL-BERT and the text-only BERT model.

For the language input, we create template captions similar to those described in Table 2. For every entity  $E$ , we compute the language bias score  $B_L(E)$  by extracting probabilities from the visual-linguistic model,  $P_{VL}(E|m/p)$ .

$$S_L(E, m/f) = \ln \frac{P_{VL}(E|m/f)}{P_{VL}(E|p)}$$

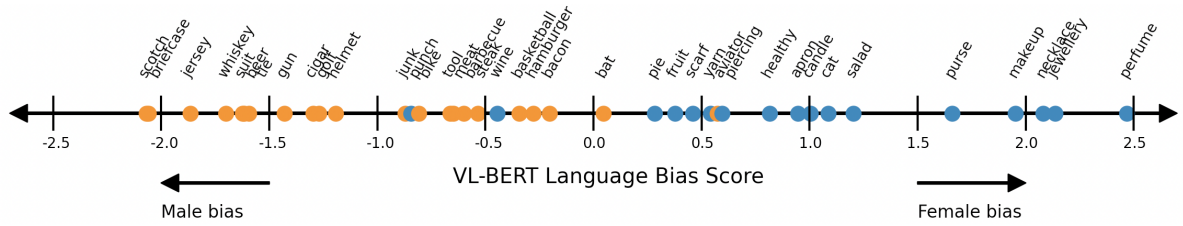
$$B_L^{VLBert}(E) = S_L(E, f) - S_L(E, m)$$

$$= \ln \frac{P_{VL}(E|f)}{P_{VL}(E|m)}$$

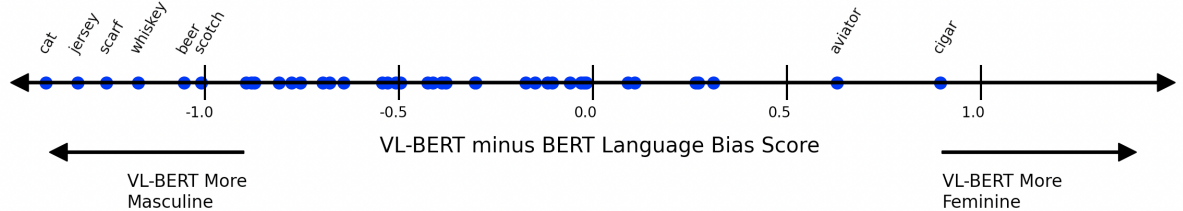
Positive values of  $B_{VL}(E)$  correspond to a female bias for the entity, while negative values correspond to a male bias. We plot the bias scores in Table 5a. We see that the language bias scores in VL-BERT largely reflect the stereotypical genders of these entities - indicating that the results of Section 4.3 generalize to a larger group of entities.

We can also investigate the effect of visual-linguistic pretraining by comparing these entities’ VL-BERT gender bias scores with their gender bias scores under BERT. We compute the language bias score for BERT,  $B_L^{Bert}(E)$ , by using the text-only language model probability  $P_L(E|g)$  instead.

<sup>4</sup>We surveyed 10 people and retained 40/50 entities where majority of surveyors agreed with a stereotyped label.



(a)  $B_L^{VLBERT}$  for 40 entities which are stereotypically considered masculine or feminine. For the majority of entities, the direction of the gender bias score aligns with the stereotypical gender label, indicating that VL-BERT reflects these gender stereotypes.



(b)  $B_L^{VLBERT}(E) - B_L^{BERT}(E)$  for the 40 gendered entities. The distribution of entities is skewed towards increased masculine/decreased feminine association for VL-BERT, indicating VL pre-training shifts the association distribution for most entities towards men. Note that VL-BERT still associates *cat* with women and *cigar* with men (see 5a), but less strongly than BERT.

Figure 5

We plot the difference between entities’ VL-BERT and BERT bias scores in Table 5b. Similar to trends observed in Section 4.2, we see that the majority of objects have increased masculine association after pre-training ( $B_L^{VLBERT} < B_L^{BERT}$ ).

## 6 Related Work

**Vision-and-Language Pre-Training** Similar to BERT (Devlin et al., 2019), vision-and-language transformers (Su et al., 2020; Tan and Bansal, 2019; Chen et al., 2019) are trained with masked language modeling and region modeling with multiple input modalities. These models yield state-of-the-art results on many multimodal tasks: e.g. VQA (Antol et al., 2015), Visual Dialog (Das et al., 2017), and VCR (Zellers et al., 2019).

**Bias Measurement in Language Models** Bolukbasi et al. (2016) and Caliskan et al. (2017) showed that static word embeddings like Word2Vec and GloVe encode biases about gender roles. Biases negatively effect downstream tasks (e.g. coreference (Zhao et al., 2018; Rudinger et al., 2018)) and exist in large pretrained models (Zhao et al., 2019; Kurita et al., 2019; Webster et al., 2020). Our methodology is inspired by Kurita et al. (2019), who utilized templates and the Masked Language Modeling head of BERT to show how different probabilities are extracted for different genders. We extend their text-only methodology to vision-and-language models.

**Bias in Language + Vision** Several papers have investigated how dataset biases can override visual evidence in model decisions. Zhao et al. (2017) showed that multimodal models can amplify gender biases in training data. In VQA, models make decisions by exploiting language priors rather than utilizing the visual context (Goyal et al., 2017; Ramakrishnan et al., 2018). Visual biases can also affect language, where gendered artefacts in the visual context influence generated captions (Hendricks et al., 2018; Bhargava and Forsyth, 2019).

## 7 Future Work and Ethical Considerations

This work extends the bias measuring methodology of Kurita et al. (2019) to multimodal language models. Our case study shows that these language models are influenced by gender information from both language and visual contexts - often ignoring visual evidence in favor of stereotypes.

Gender is not binary, but this work performs bias analysis for the terms “male” and “female” – which are traditionally proxies for cis-male and cis-female. In particular, when images are used of male and female presenting individuals we use images that self-identify as male and female. We avoid guessing at gender presentation and note that the biases studied here in this unrealistically simplistic treatment of gender pose even more serious concerns for gender non-conforming, non-binary, and trans-sexual individuals. A critical

next step is designing more inclusive probes, and training (multi-modal) language models on more inclusive data. We welcome criticism and guidance on how to expand this research. Our image based data suffers from a second, similar, limitation on the dimension of race. All individuals self-identified as “white” or “black”, but a larger scale inclusive data-collection should be performed across cultural boundaries and skin-tones with the self-identification and *if* appropriate prompts can be constructed for LLMs.

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Entity	Gender of Agent	Images Used ( $I_{m/f}$ )					
Purse	Male						
	Female						
Briefcase	Male						
	Female						
Apron	Male						
	Female						
Suit	Male						
	Female						
Wine	Male						
	Female						
Beer	Male						
	Female						

Table 4: Images collected for case study in Section 4

## A Images Collected for Case Study

In Table 4, we show the different images collected for our Case Study in Section 4.

## B Rationale Behind Selection of Case Study Entities

For the purpose of the case study, we chose three pairs of entities, each containing entities with opposite gender polarities (verified using the same survey we used in Section 5). The entities were chosen to demonstrate how unequal gender associations perpetuate undesirable gender stereotypes.

**Apron vs Suit** This pair was chosen to investigate how clothing biases can reinforce stereotypes about traditional gender roles. Aprons are associated with cooking, which has long been consid-

ered a traditional job for women as homemakers. Meanwhile, suits are associated with business, and men are typically considered to be the breadwinners for their family. However, in the 21st century, as we make progress in breaking the breadmaker-homemaker dichotomy, these gender roles do not necessarily apply (Cunningham, 2008; Zuo and Tang, 2000), and reinforcing them is harmful - particularly to women, since they have struggled (and continue to struggle) for their right to join the workforce and not be confined by their gender roles.

**Purse vs Briefcase** Bags present another class of traditional gender norms that are frequently violated in this day and age. Purses are traditionally associated with women, whereas briefcases (sim-



ilar to suits above) are associated with business, which we noted is customarily a male occupation. If a model tends to associate purses with women, in the presence of contrary visual evidence, it could reinforce heteronormative gender associations. Similarly, associating briefcases with primarily men undermines the efforts of women to enter the workforce.

**Wine vs Beer** Alcoholic drinks also contain gendered stereotypes that could be perpetuated by visual-linguistic models. Beer is typically considered to be a masculine drink (Fugitt and Ham, 2018; Darwin, 2018), whereas wine is associated with feminine traits (Landrine et al., 1988).