Visual Commonsense Representation Learning via Causal Inference

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Abstract

We present a novel unsupervised feature representation learning method, Visual Commonsense Region-based Convolutional Neural Network (VC R-CNN\(^1\)), to serve as an improved visual region encoder for high-level tasks such as captioning and VQA. Given a set of detected object regions in an image (e.g., using Faster R-CNN), like any other unsupervised feature learning methods (e.g., word2vec), the proxy training objective of VC R-CNN is to predict the contextual objects of a region. However, they are fundamentally different: the prediction of VC R-CNN is by using causal intervention: \(P(Y|do(X))\), while others are by using the conventional likelihood: \(P(Y|X)\). We extensively apply VC R-CNN features in prevailing models of two popular tasks: Image Captioning and VQA, and observe consistent performance boosts across all the methods, achieving many new state-of-the-arts\(^2\).

1. Introduction

Today’s computer vision systems are good at telling us “what” (e.g., classification \([5]\), segmentation \([4]\)) and “where” (e.g., detection \([9]\)), yet bad at knowing “why”, by asking for high-level commonsense. That is still elusive, even for our human philosophers \([3]\), not to mention for machines.

It is not hard to spot the “cognitive errors” committed by machines due to the lack of common sense. As shown in Figure 1, by using only the visual features, e.g., the prevailing Faster R-CNN\(^9\) based Up-Down\(^1\) machine usually fails to describe the exact visual relationships (the captioning example), or, even if the prediction is correct, the underlying visual attention is not reasonable (the VQA example). Previous works blame this for dataset bias without further justification \([6]\), e.g., the large concept co-occurrence gap in Figure 1; but here we take a closer look at it by appreciating the difference between the “visual” and “commonsense” features. As the “visual” only tells “what”/“where” about person or leg per se, it is just a more descriptive symbol than its correspondent English word; when there is bias, e.g., there are more person than leg regions co-occur with the word “ski”, the visual attention is thus more likely to focus on the person region.

We are certainly not the first to believe that visual features should include more commonsense knowledge. There is a trend in our community towards weakly-supervised learning features from large-scale vision-language corpus \([8]\). However, despite the challenge in trading off between annotation cost and noisy multimodal pairs, common sense is not always recorded in text due to the reporting bias \([10]\), e.g., most may say “people walking on road” but few will point out “people walking with legs”. In fact, we humans naturally learn common sense in an unsupervised fashion by exploring the physical world, and we wish that machines can also imitate in this way.

A successful example is the unsupervised learning of word vectors in our sister NLP community: a word representation \(X\) is learned by predicting its contextual word \(Y\), \(i.e., P(Y|X)\) in a neighborhood window. However, its counterpart in our own community, such as learning by predicting surrounding objects or parts \([2]\), is far from effec-

\(^1\)Please refer to the full version of this paper in \([11]\) for better clarity.
\(^2\)\texttt{https://github.com/Wangt-CN/VC-R-CNN}

Figure 1. Examples of “cognitive errors” in image captioning and VQA due to the dataset bias. The ratio \(J\) denotes the co-occurrence\% in captions and VQA questions. By comparing with the Faster R-CNN\(^9\) based features \([1]\), our VC R-CNN features can correct the errors, e.g., more accurate visual relationships and visual attentions, by being more commonsense awareness.
2. Sense-making by Intervention

2.1. Causal Intervention

As shown in Figure 3 (left), our visual world exists many confounders $z \in Z$ that affects (or causes) either $X$ or $Y$, leading to spurious correlations by only learning from the likelihood $P(Y|X)$. To see this, by using Bayes rule:

$$P(Y|X) = \sum_z P(Y|X, z) P(z|X),$$

where the confounder $Z$ introduces the observational bias via $P(z|X)$. As illustrated in Figure 3 (right), if we intervene $X$, e.g., $do(X)$, the causal link between $Z$ and $X$ is cut-off. By applying Bayes rule on the new graph, we have:

$$P(Y|do(X)) = \sum_z P(Y|X, z) P(z).$$

Compared to Eq. (1), $z$ is no longer affected by $X$, and thus the intervention deliberately forces $X$ to incorporate every $z$ fairly, subject to its prior $P(z)$, into the prediction of $Y$. Therefore, by using intervention $P(Y|do(X))$ as the feature learning objective, we can adjust between "common" and "sense-making", thus alleviate the observational bias.

2.2. The Proposed Implementation

To implement the theoretical and imaginative intervention in Eq. (2), we propose the proxy task of predicting the local context labels of $Y$’s RoI. For the confounder set $Z$, since we can hardly collect all confounders in real world, we approximate it to a fixed confounder dictionary $Z = [z_1, ..., z_N]$ in the shape of $N \times d$ matrix for practical use, where $N$ is the category size in dataset (e.g., 80 in MS-COCO) and $d$ is the feature dimension of RoI. Each entry $z_i$ is the averaged RoI feature of the $i$-th category samples in dataset. The feature is pre-trained by Faster R-CNN.

Specifically, given $X$’s RoI feature $x$ and its contextual $Y$’s RoI whose class label is $y^c$, Eq. (2) can be implemented as $\sum_z P(y^c|x, z) P(z)$. The last layer of the network for label prediction is the Softmax layer: $P(y^c|x, z) = \text{Softmax}(f_y(x, z))$, where $f_y(\cdot)$ calculates the logits for $N$ categories, and the subscript $y$ denotes that $f(\cdot)$ is parameterized by $Y$’s RoI feature $y$, motivated by the intuition that the prediction for $y^c$ should be characterized by $Y$. In summary, the implementation is defined as:

$$P(Y|do(X)) := \mathbb{E}_z[\text{Softmax}(f_y(x, z))].$$

Note that $\mathbb{E}_z$ requires expensive sampling.

Normalized Weighted Geometric Mean (NWGM). We apply NWGM [12] to approximate the above expectation. In a nutshell, NWGM efficiently moves the outer expectation into the Softmax as:

$$\mathbb{E}_z[\text{Softmax}(f_y(x, z))] \approx \text{Softmax}(\mathbb{E}_z[f_y(x, z)]).$$

In this paper, we use the linear model $f_y(x, z) = W_1 x + W_2 \cdot g_y(z)$, where $W_1, W_2 \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times d}$ denote the fully-connected layer. Then the Eq. (4) can be derived as:

$$\mathbb{E}_z[f_y(x, z)] = W_1 x + W_2 \cdot \mathbb{E}_z[g_y(z)].$$

Note that the above approximation is reasonable, because the effect on $Y$ comes from both $X$ and confounder $Z$ (cf. the right Figure 3). Next, the key is to compute $\mathbb{E}_z[g_y(z)]$. 

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3The detailed derivation about NWGM can be found in the Supp.
we can observe that our +VC with AoANet architecture.

The Context Predictor loss \( L_{\text{cxt}} \) is defined for each two sibling predictors: Self Predictor with a fully connected layer to estimate each object category, while Context Predictor with the approximated \( \sigma \) is the element-wise product, \( W_3 \) and \( W_4 \) are the embedding matrices that map each vector to the common subspace for similarity measure, \( \sigma \) denotes the first dimension of \( W_3 \), \( W_4 \) as a constant scaling factor.

2.3. VC R-CNN

Architecture. Figure 2 illustrates the VC R-CNN architecture. VC R-CNN takes an image as input and generates feature map from a CNN backbone (e.g., ResNet101) [5]. Then, unlike Faster R-CNN [9], we discard the Region Proposal Network (RPN). The ground-truth bounding boxes are directly utilized to extract the object level representation with the RoIAlign layer. Finally, each two RoI features \( x \) and \( y \) eventually branch into two sibling predictors: Self Predictor with a fully connected layer to estimate each object class, while Context Predictor with the approximated do-calculus in Eq. (3) to predict the context label.

Training Objectives. The Self-Predictor outputs a discrete probability distribution \( p = (p[1], ..., p[N]) \) over \( N \) categories. The loss can be defined as \( L_{\text{self}}(p, x^c) = -\log(p[x^c]) \), where \( x^c \) is the ground-truth class of RoI \( X \). The Context Predictor loss \( L_{\text{cxt}} \) is defined for each two RoI feature vectors. Considering \( X \) as the center object while \( Y_i \) is one of the \( K \) context objects with ground-truth label \( y_i^c \), the loss is \( L_{\text{cxt}}(p_i, y_i^c) = -\log(p_i[y_i^c]) \), where \( p_i \) is calculated by \( p_i = P(Y_i|do(X)) \) in Eq. (3) and \( p_i = (p_i[1], ..., p_i[N]) \) is the probability over \( N \) categories. Finally, the overall multi-task loss for each RoI \( X \) is:

\[
L(X) = L_{\text{self}}(p, x^c) + \frac{1}{K} \sum_i L_{\text{cxt}}(p_i, y_i^c). \tag{6}
\]

3. Experiments

3.1. Experimental Setup

Dataset: MS-COCO Detection. We apply our VC R-CNN on the MS-COCO dataset with 80 annotated classes.

Comparative Designs. To evaluate the effectiveness of our VC R-CNN feature (VC), we present two representative vision-and-language downstream tasks (i.e., Image Captioning and VQA) in our experiment. For each task, a classic model and a state-of-the-art model were both performed for comprehensive comparisons. For each method, we used the following five ablative feature settings: 1) Obj: the features based on Faster R-CNN, we adopt the popular used bottom-up feature [1]; 2) Only VC: pure VC features; 3) +Det: the features from training R-CNN with single self detection branch without Context Predictor. “+” denotes the extracted features are concatenated with the original feature; 4) +Cor: the features from training R-CNN by predicting all context labels (i.e., correlation) without the intervention; 5) +VC: our full feature with the proposed implemented intervention, concatenated to the original feature. For fair comparisons, we retained all the settings and random seeds in the downstream task models.

3.2. Results and Analysis

Results on Image Captioning. We compared our VC representation with ablative features on two representative approaches: Up-Down [1] and AoANet [7] in Table 1. For Up-Down model, we can observe that with our +VC trained on MS-COCO, the model can even outperform current SOTA method AoANet over most of the metrics. When comparing +VC with the +Det and +Cor without intervention, results also show absolute gains over all metrics, which demonstrates the effectiveness of our proposed causal intervention in representation learning. AoANet [7] proposed an “Attention on Attention” module on feature encoder and caption decoder with the self-attention mechanism. In our experiment, we discarded the AoA refining encoder (i.e., AoANet) rather than using full AoANet since the self-attentive operation on feature can be viewed as an indiscriminate correlation against our do-expression. From Table 1 we can observe that our +VC with AoANet achieves a new SOTA performance. We also evaluated our feature.
We present a novel unsupervised feature representation learning method called VC R-CNN that can be based on any R-CNN framework, supporting a variety of high-level tasks by using only feature concatenation. The key novelty of VC R-CNN is that the learning objective is based on causal intervention, which is fundamentally different from the conventional likelihood. Extensive experiments on benchmarks showed impressive performance boosts on almost all the strong baselines and metrics. In future, we intend to study the potential of our VC R-CNN applied in other modalities such as video and 3D point cloud.

References