FusionAudit: Pathway-Conditioned Robustness Auditing for Native Multimodal Models

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Abstract

As vision-language models (VLMs) transition from frozen-encoder pipelines to native multimodal architectures, the visual channel increasingly serves as both a perceptual input and a carrier of rendered text that competes with user prompts. Current single-attack, pixel-centric evaluations fail to capture this complexity: they collapse distinct visual attack surfaces into a single scalar and ignore how architectural shifts alter vulnerability. We introduce **PaRMA**, an evidence-based auditing framework that defines pathway-conditioned risk over two primary image-level interventions: pixel perturbation and rendered-text insertion. Instead of arbitrary attack enumeration, PaRMA uses pathway-specific diagnostics to expose architecture-specific blind spots. Notably, we uncover a *see-but-not-deceived* signature where native VLMs attend heavily to typographic overlays but visually reject them, and we identify an objective mismatch between encoder-level and answer-level attacks in deep-fusion models. To exploit these findings, we instantiate **FusionAudit**, introducing two diagnostic-motivated attacks: **MANTIS** (margin-aware pixel perturbation) and **Nat-Evid** (host-congruent semantic insertion). Evaluating 18 open-weight VLMs across a novel nativeness taxonomy, we demonstrate that legacy single-attack rankings (e.g., PGD) are unstable for native models. Our diagnostic-driven attacks substantially raise the estimated residual risk, showing that PaRMA provides a falsifiable, evidence-driven auditing methodology for uncovering vulnerabilities missed by standard benchmarks.

1 Introduction

Vision-language models (VLMs) are undergoing a structural transition. Early systems treated the visual channel as a peripheral sensor, piping a frozen vision encoder into a pretrained language model via a projection bottleneck. Today, native multimodal architectures—featuring multi-layer visual injection and early-fusion shared backbones [4, 41, 15]—process visual and textual tokens in a unified representational space from the earliest layers. In this paradigm, pixels, scene text, and document fields compete directly with the user's prompt. However, robustness evaluation has not kept pace. Current protocols remain siloed into pixel-space adversarial attacks [62, 8] and typographic overlays [18], neither of which accounts for the deep integration of native VLMs.

This structural gap leaves two critical blind spots in current evaluations. First, on the pixel pathway, legacy attacks anchored at the vision encoder ignore deep decoder-side gradients. Conversely, standard end-to-end attacks (e.g., PGD [29]) spread gradient pressure across all output tokens, underweighting

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40th Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS 2026).

the exact position where the model commits to a wrong answer. Second, on the rendered-text pathway, native VLMs exhibit a striking *see-but-not-deceived* signature: attention diagnostics indicate that these models allocate heavy attention to overlaid text, yet they resist adopting it as a task response. This suggests native VLMs develop a fine-grained sensitivity to visual congruence, making direct typographic attacks incomplete and leaving additional semantic failures unmeasured due to visual rejection.

We argue that robustness auditing for native VLMs should be an evidence-based methodology rather than a static benchmark. We introduce **PaRMA** (Pathway-conditioned Risk for Multimodal Auditing), a framework that organizes the visual channel into two primary intervention families: pixel perturbation (π_{pix}) and rendered-text insertion (π_{txt}). Instead of blindly enumerating attacks, PaRMA uses behavioral and gradient diagnostics to expose architecture-specific blind spots, which then motivate the design of diagnostic-motivated interventions. We instantiate this framework as **FusionAudit**. Guided by our diagnostic findings, FusionAudit introduces two strengthened attacks: **MANTIS**, a margin-aware pixel attack that concentrates gradients at the first-divergence token to address this mismatch; and **Nat-Evid**, a host-congruent semantic intervention that naturalizes text payloads to bypass visual rejection. The audit's principal scalar is the residual pathway-complete risk, yielding an empirical lower bound on pathway-complete risk.

Contributions. Our core contributions are:

- We identify native VLM robustness as a structurally distinct problem, introducing a graded *nativeness taxonomy* (L_1–L_3) to organize audit targets across fusion designs.
- We propose PaRMA and FusionAudit, an evidence-based auditing methodology. We uncover the *see-but-not-deceived* signature in native VLMs and introduce diagnostic-motivated attacks (MANTIS, Nat-Evid) specifically designed to exploit these diagnostic findings.
- We conduct an extensive 18-model audit demonstrating that legacy single-attack proxies produce unstable rankings for native models. Our diagnostic-driven attacks substantially raise the estimated residual visual-channel risk, showing that current evaluations can underestimate VLM vulnerabilities.

2 Related Work

Native Vision-Language Models. Early Vision-language Models (VLMs) typically used modular architectures [37, 14, 51], connecting a frozen or lightly adapted vision encoder to a language model through a projection layer, query module, or connector [1, 50, 47]. Models like BLIP-2 [24], InstructBLIP [14], MiniGPT-4 [63], and LLaVA [26] showed that this alignment-era pipeline supports visual question answering, captioning, and visual instruction tuning [53, 16]. Later work systematically examined how vision backbones, connectors, and training recipes affect VLM behavior [22, 43, 9, 27, 4]. Recent native multimodal models instead adopt multi-layer visual injection or early-fusion shared backbones, allowing visual and textual information to interact earlier or deeper in computation [41, 52, 12, 28, 54, 42, 15]. This shift means the visual channel is no longer merely a frontend conditioning signal, so robustness evaluation must move beyond assumptions inherited from modular pipelines.

Adversarial Robustness of VLMs. Classical adversarial robustness work shows that small-norm pixel perturbations and PGD-style attacks can expose systematic vulnerabilities in visual models [7, 29]. These methods have been adapted to VLMs to attack vision encoder representations, cross-modal alignment, or final generated responses [38, 45, 62, 56]. Prior studies further show that large VLMs remain sensitive to visual perturbations and that adversarial examples can transfer across models [39, 8, 33, 49, 48, 46, 55, 57–61]. Beyond pixel-space attacks, typographic attacks demonstrate that text rendered inside images can alter a VLM's interpretation of visual content [18, 31, 20, 11]. However, existing evaluations usually treat pixel perturbations and text overlays as separate threat vectors, without systematically measuring joint risk across visual pathways in native VLMs [5, 3, 21, 36, 40].

Robustness Evaluation and Diagnostic Auditing. Robustness evaluation has long recognized that single attacks can underestimate risk [2], motivating fixed attack suites such as AutoAttack [13]. Multimodal robustness evaluations have begun to aggregate diverse perturbations and attacks, but most still rely on predefined static suites [45]. In parallel, diagnostic tools including representation similarity, attention analysis, and activation patching help reveal internal representations and

behavioral mechanisms [6, 44, 19, 35, 25]. Yet these diagnostics are typically used post hoc to explain failures rather than to guide stronger subsequent attacks [23, 34, 17]. PaRMA instead integrates pathway-specific diagnostics into the audit, reporting residual risk after diagnostic-driven strengthening rather than the maximum over a pre-specified collection.

3 Native Multimodal VLMs: Taxonomy and Threat Scope

The transition from modular pipelines to native multimodal training alters the VLM attack surface. In pipeline models, a projection bottleneck isolates the vision encoder from the language backbone. Deep fusion removes this bottleneck, altering end-to-end gradient paths, while joint early-layer attention forces visual and textual tokens to compete directly. To systematically audit this evolving landscape, we introduce a graded nativeness taxonomy and formalize the visual threat scope.

3.1 Nativeness Taxonomy

We categorize VLMs based on their fusion depth and pretraining strategy. Fusion level co-varies with model family, scale, and training data, so level-wise trends are correlational. This taxonomy serves as an organizational axis for our audit, rather than a strict causal ladder:

- L_1 **(Alignment-era):** A frozen or lightly adapted vision encoder connects to a language model via a projection module [26, 63]. Modalities remain in structurally separate spaces; the bottleneck is the only junction.
- L_2 **(Shallow fusion):** Models feature large-scale joint multimodal pretraining. Visual tokens enter the backbone through a connector, but do not re-enter computation at deeper layers; the backbone processes a fixed visual prefix.
- L_3 **(Deep/early fusion):** Visual information participates throughout the language computation. This includes DeepStack (DS) models that re-inject visual features across multiple layers [4], and Early Fusion (EF) models that share transformer blocks between modalities from the first layer [42, 15].

A theoretical fourth level (L_4)—a strict single-backbone design unifying all modalities under one tokenizer without a distinct vision tower—completes the continuum, though no audited open-weight model currently meets this threshold.

3.2 Audit Scope and Visual Pathways

We formalize a VLM as a function mapping a visual input x_v and a text prompt x_t to an answer. To isolate visual-channel vulnerabilities from text-only jailbreaks, our audit fixes the text prompt and intervenes exclusively on x_v. Crucially, all empirical Attack Success Rates (ASRs) in our evaluation are strictly conditioned on the model's *clean-correct set*—the subset of examples the model answers correctly before any intervention.

We decompose the visual attack surface into two primary pathways:

1. **Perceptual corruption ($\pi_{\mathbf{pix}}$):** Pixel-space perturbations. In deep-fusion architectures, the unbroken gradient path from output loss to pixels can expose failures missed by attacks centered on L_1-style bottlenecks.
2. **Rendered-text insertion ($\pi_{\mathbf{txt}}$):** Typographic overlays. Added image text competes with existing visual evidence and the user's prompt within the joint attention mechanism.

The Audit Problem. Given a model and a dataset, a *pathway-complete robustness audit* estimates the failure probability over the clean-correct set induced by the union of pathway-specific interventions. Crucially, it should diagnose whether these failures exhibit behavioral signatures that can guide stronger attacks.

4 Method: PaRMA and FusionAudit

We operationalize our threat scope through **PaRMA** (Pathway-conditioned Risk for Multimodal Auditing). Unlike static benchmarks, PaRMA is a diagnostic-driven audit protocol: baseline attacks

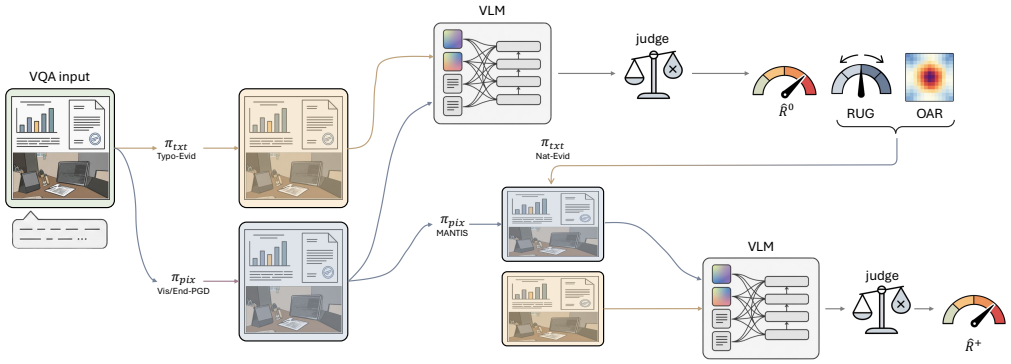


Figure 1: **The PaRMA framework and FusionAudit pipeline.** Native VLMs are evaluated over two visual pathways: pixel perturbation and rendered-text insertion. Baseline attacks (Vis-PGD, End-PGD, Typo-Evid) yield initial failures and diagnostic readouts. These diagnostics surface architecture-associated failure signatures (e.g., the *see-but-not-deceived* signature), guiding the generation of diagnostic-motivated augmented attacks (MANTIS, Nat-Evid) to compute the final falsifiable residual risk $\widehat{R}^+$.

yield diagnostic signals, which in turn guide the design of diagnostic-motivated augmented attacks. We instantiate this framework as **FusionAudit** over two visual pathways (Figure 1).

4.1 Pathway-Conditioned Risk Formulation

We treat the visual input x_v as a site for pathway-specific interventions. A pathway k is an intervention family $(\mathcal{B}_k, \phi_k)$, where $\mathcal{B}_k$ is the perturbation domain and $\phi_k(x_v; \delta)$ is the intervened image. FusionAudit instantiates two pathways:

$$\pi_{\text{pix}} : \mathcal{B}_{\text{pix}} = \{\delta : \|\delta\|_\infty \le \varepsilon\}, \quad \phi_{\text{pix}}(x_v; \delta) = \text{clip}(x_v + \delta),$$
$$\pi_{\text{txt}} : \mathcal{B}_{\text{txt}} = \Sigma^{\le L} \times \mathcal{P}, \quad \phi_{\text{txt}}(x_v; s, p) = \text{render}(x_v; s, p).$$

Here $\Sigma^{\le L}$ is the space of candidate rendered strings of length at most L, and $\mathcal{P}$ denotes admissible render placements; s is the inserted string and p its placement. Given a finite attack suite $\mathcal{A}_k$ for pathway k, let $\mathcal{S}_a = \{z \in \mathcal{C}_\theta(\mathcal{D}) : \mathcal{J}(f_\theta(a(x_v), x_t), y) = 0\}$ be the subset of clean-correct examples broken by attack a. The empirical pathway-complete risk is the union failure rate:

$$\widehat{\mathcal{R}}_{\text{FA}}(f_\theta; \mathcal{D}, \mathcal{A}) = \frac{\left|\bigcup_k \bigcup_{a \in \mathcal{A}_k} \mathcal{S}_a\right|}{|\mathcal{C}_\theta(\mathcal{D})|}. \tag{1}$$

PaRMA's departure from naive multi-attack unions is that $\widehat{\mathcal{R}}_{\text{FA}}$ is not static; it is a lower bound strengthened via pathway-resolved diagnostics.

4.2 Baselines and Diagnostic Suite

The baseline protocol assigns standard attacks to each pathway to probe primary failure modes.

For perceptual corruption (π_{pix}), we employ two PGD variants bounded by $\|\delta\|_\infty \le \varepsilon$. Let $h_{\mathcal{V}}(x_v)$ denote the flattened vision-encoder output. **Vis-PGD** anchors the loss at the vision encoder, minimizing cosine similarity to the clean feature map:

$$\min_{\|\delta\|_\infty \le \varepsilon} \cos\big(h_{\mathcal{V}}(\phi_{\text{pix}}(x_v; \delta)),\ h_{\mathcal{V}}(x_v)\big). \tag{2}$$

End-PGD anchors the loss at the end-to-end output, maximizing cross-entropy over the full teacher-forced correct answer sequence y^+:

$$\max_{\|\delta\|_\infty \le \varepsilon} \Big[-\sum_{t=1}^{|y^+|} \log p_\theta\big(y_t^+ \mid \phi_{\text{pix}}(x_v; \delta), x_t, y_{<t}^+\big)\Big]. \tag{3}$$

For rendered-text insertion (π_{txt}), following Cheng et al. [10], **Typo-Evid** superimposes a task-matched wrong-answer string w at a fixed region p as a direct typographic overlay:

$$\tilde{x}_v = \phi_{\text{txt}}(x_v;\, w,\, p). \tag{4}$$

To analyze rendered-text baseline failures, PaRMA uses two diagnostics. **Read–Use Gap (RUG).** For π_{txt}, let $E_{\text{read}}(z)$ denote the event that the rendered wrong-answer string w is recovered under an explicit reading prompt, and let $E_{\text{use}}(z)$ denote the event that the task-prompt response is wrong and contains w. RUG is therefore a prompt-conditioned accessibility–adoption diagnostic. Over the clean-correct set,

$$\begin{aligned} P_{\text{read}}(f_\theta) &= \Pr_{z\sim\mathcal{D}}[E_{\text{read}}(z) \mid z \in \mathcal{C}_\theta(\mathcal{D})]\,, \\ P_{\text{use}}(f_\theta) &= \Pr_{z\sim\mathcal{D}}[E_{\text{use}}(z) \mid z \in \mathcal{C}_\theta(\mathcal{D})]\,, \\ \text{RUG}(f_\theta) &= P_{\text{read}}(f_\theta) - P_{\text{use}}(f_\theta). \end{aligned} \tag{5}$$

Overlay Attention Ratio (OAR). For the Typo-Evid image, let $\Omega \subset [N_v]$ be the overlay's image-patch index set, where N_v is the number of image patches. Let $\bar{a}_j$ denote the mean attention weight from the text tokens after the image to image patch j, averaged over heads and late decoder layers. OAR quantifies the fraction of image-directed attention falling on the overlay relative to its area:

$$\text{OAR} = \frac{\sum_{j\in\Omega} \bar{a}_j / \sum_{j=1}^{N_v} \bar{a}_j}{|\Omega|/N_v}. \tag{6}$$

Diagnostic Signature. Together, high task-prompt OAR and positive RUG are consistent with a *see-but-not-deceived* signature in native VLMs: the overlay is accessible under explicit reading, receives disproportionate task-prompt attention, but is not reliably adopted in the task response. This suggests a visual-distinctiveness artifact in the Typo-Evid baseline.

4.3 Diagnostic-Driven Augmentation

The baseline analyses indicate two limitations: End-PGD spreads gradient pressure across the sequence (Eq. 3), and Typo-Evid triggers visual rejection. We introduce two diagnostic-motivated augmentations to close these gaps.

MANTIS (Margin-Aware Native Token Intervention Strategy). To strengthen the pixel pathway audit, MANTIS abandons full-sequence loss. Let y^+ be the canonical correct continuation and y^- be a deterministic canonical wrong continuation derived from the reference answer. Both continuations are fixed before optimization. MANTIS concentrates gradient pressure exclusively at $t^\star$, the first token where the two continuations diverge:

$$t^\star = \min\{t : y_t^+ \neq y_t^-\}.$$

It then optimizes the margin at this first-divergence position:

$$\max_{\|\delta\|_\infty \le \varepsilon} \Big[\log p_\theta(y_{t^\star}^- \mid \phi_{\text{pix}}(x_v;\delta), x_t, y_{<t^\star}^-) - \log p_\theta(y_{t^\star}^+ \mid \phi_{\text{pix}}(x_v;\delta), x_t, y_{<t^\star}^+)\Big]. \tag{7}$$

Nat-Evid (Naturalized Evidence). To test whether host-congruent rendering reduces this read-without-use gap, Nat-Evid replaces the typographic overlay with a style-conditioned image edit $\hat{x}_v = \mathcal{E}(x_v;\, w)$. The wrong answer w is rendered as host-congruent native content (e.g., a chart annotation or scene text) rather than an extrinsic superimposition. The wrong answer w is fixed before generation, and the editor is instructed to add text only, without modifying or removing existing content.

Strengthened Estimator. By augmenting the attack families with MANTIS and Nat-Evid, we compute the strengthened risk $\widehat{\mathcal{R}}_{\text{FA}}^{+}$. The gap $\widehat{\mathcal{R}}_{\text{FA}}^{+} - \widehat{\mathcal{R}}_{\text{FA}}^{0}$ measures the additional risk surfaced by our diagnostics. $\widehat{\mathcal{R}}_{\text{FA}}^{+}$ serves as the audit's principal, falsifiable deliverable.

5 Experiments

5.1 Experimental Setup

Datasets and Models. We evaluate on a fixed 1500-sample VQA evaluation set, balanced across ChartQA [30], DocVQA [32], and MME [16]. These datasets span document understanding and

visual reasoning scenarios where images naturally contain both perceptual content and rendered text. ChartQA and DocVQA are text-heavy, whereas 460 of the 500 MME examples (92%) come from natural-image categories (400 artwork, 60 celebrity) and the remaining 40 from a text-dense category (code reasoning). Restricting the MME evaluation to these natural images changes no level-mean ASR by more than 3.2 points, and the L_3 MANTIS exclusive-flip rate is 37.0%, against 36.4% on all 500 MME examples, so the level-wise patterns also hold on natural-image VQA. We select open-weight VLMs that cover the proposed nativeness levels while keeping parameter scales within the same broad range whenever possible, so that level comparisons are not dominated by a small-versus-large model contrast. The final 18-model inventory contains four L_1 models (SmolVLM2-2.2B, BLIP2-OPT-2.7B, InstructBLIP-Vicuna-7B, LLaVA-1.5-7B), seven L_2 models (Qwen-VL-Chat, Qwen2-VL-2B, Qwen2.5-VL-3B/7B, Gemma3-4B/12B, DeepSeek-VL-7B), and seven L_3 models (Qwen3-VL-2B/4B/8B, Qwen3.5-2B/4B/9B, Gemma4-E4B). Within this inventory, Qwen2.5-VL, Qwen3-VL, and Qwen3.5 form a same-family controlled chain from shallow to deep fusion at nearby parameter scales, which helps contextualize the cross-family level aggregates.

Evaluation Protocol. For paired comparison, all attacks are evaluated on the exact same 1500-sample evaluation set. Crucially, all Attack Success Rates (ASRs) and risk estimators are conditioned strictly on each model's *clean-correct set* (n_c)—the subset of examples the model answers correctly before any intervention. Pixel attacks use an ℓ_∞ budget of $\varepsilon = 8/255$ with 40 PGD steps. When a model exhausts memory at the native image size, we compute the perturbation on a resized image, upsample only the noise field, and add it back to the original-resolution image before inference. Additional hyperparameters, prompt templates, answer-matching rules, wrong-answer construction, and generated-image provenance are reported in Appendix A.

5.2 Main Results

Table 1 presents the main pathway-complete audit across the 18 models. We report Attack Success Rates (ASR) for the baseline suite ($\mathcal{A}^0$: Vis-PGD, End-PGD, Typo-Evid) and the diagnostic-driven strengthened suite ($\mathcal{A}^+$: MANTIS, Nat-Evid). The principal reported scalar is the pathway-complete risk estimator $\widehat{R}^+$, representing the union of failures across all strengthened visual pathways. Dataset-stratified versions of the same table are reported in Appendix D.

The Diagnostic-Driven Risk Gap. The main finding is that the diagnostic-driven suite yields higher risk estimates than the baseline suite. Across all fusion levels, the diagnostic-driven attacks expose additional failures. Moving from $\widehat{R}^0$ to $\widehat{R}^+$, the level-mean risk increases by $+10.6\%$ in L_1, $+16.9\%$ in L_2, and $+25.1\%$ in L_3. Fixed-model paired bootstraps put the corresponding 95% CIs at $[9.2, 12.0]$, $[16.1, 17.8]$, and $[24.2, 26.0]$ percentage points, all excluding zero; Appendix B gives the full uncertainty table and paired-comparison details.

The δ columns and the $\widehat{R}^+$ parentheticals make the additional-risk contribution of diagnostic-driven augmentation explicit. For the pixel pathway, the fraction of clean-correct examples broken exclusively by MANTIS—examples that survived *both* Vis-PGD and End-PGD—rises from 15.2% in L_1, to 17.6% in L_2, and peaks at 24.6% in L_3. This supports our diagnostic premise: in deeper-fusion architectures, standard end-to-end loss can spread gradient pressure across the sequence, leaving failures that are surfaced by concentrating gradient at the answer-discriminative token. On the rendered-text pathway, Nat-Evid surfaces large but non-monotone exclusive-flip rates (10.4%, 23.7%, and 20.6% across L_1–L_3). At the full audit level, the exclusive additional-risk fraction grows from 10.6% to 16.9% to 25.1%, even while the absolute residual risk ($\widehat{R}^+$) decreases in newer models ($97.0\% \to 88.4\% \to 75.6\%$).

Within-Family Qwen Chain. The Qwen series provides a within-family control to mitigate confounders such as parameter scale and training data evolution. Around the smaller scale, $\widehat{R}^+$ decreases from Qwen2.5-VL-3B (L_2, 85.7%) to Qwen3-VL-2B/4B (L_3, 82.7/78.9%) and Qwen3.5-2B/4B (L_3, 78.0/68.1%). Around the larger scale, it decreases from Qwen2.5-VL-7B (L_2, 79.5%) to Qwen3-VL-8B (L_3, 73.1%) and Qwen3.5-9B (L_3, 59.5%). This same-family pattern is consistent with the overall level-wise trend in Table 1. Crucially, while absolute vulnerability ($\widehat{R}^+$) is lower in newer models, the *diagnostic-driven risk gap* ($\widehat{R}^+ - \widehat{R}^0$) persists across the chain. This pattern is consistent with the view that MANTIS and Nat-Evid expose vulnerabilities associated with the native multimodal shift, rather than only reflecting a comparison between older and newer model families.

Table 1: **Pathway-Complete Robustness Audit.** Results are aggregated over the three-dataset audit set (ChartQA, DocVQA, and MME). All ASRs are percentages conditioned on each model's clean-correct set (n_c). Gray parentheticals show the absolute ASR gain over the paired baseline (e.g., MANTIS vs. End-PGD). Crucially, the δ columns report the *exclusive-flip rate*: the fraction of n_c broken by the augmented attack that survived *all* corresponding baseline attacks (e.g., MANTIS $\setminus$ (Vis-PGD $\cup$ End-PGD)). Light gray columns mark the final audit-summary risks. Level means are unweighted macro-averages.

		Pixel pathway				Rendered-text pathway			Audit summary	
Model	Clean	Vis-PGD	End-PGD	MANTIS	δ	Typo-Evid	Nat-Evid	δ	$\widehat{R}^0$	$\widehat{R}^+$
L_1: *alignment-only / projection-based models*										
SmolVLM2-2.2B	61.2	52.7	80.4	99.5 (+19.1)	13.4	17.2	30.9 (+13.7)	22.2	86.7	100.0 (+13.3)
BLIP2-OPT-2.7B	19.8	20.2	43.1	63.0 (+19.9)	25.9	69.4	4.4 (−65.0)	1.0	83.5	91.2 (+7.7)
InstructBLIP-Vicuna-7B	26.5	60.5	70.5	98.0 (+27.5)	11.8	10.8	6.0 (−4.8)	3.0	87.7	99.5 (+11.8)
LLaVA-1.5-7B	30.7	47.5	82.0	94.8 (+12.8)	9.5	8.5	20.0 (+11.5)	15.2	87.6	97.2 (+9.6)
L_1 *mean (4)*	34.5	45.2	69.0	88.8 (+19.8)	15.2	26.5	15.3 (−11.2)	10.4	86.4	97.0 (+10.6)
L_2: *shallow native multimodal fusion*										
Qwen-VL-Chat	57.5	71.8	62.2	93.3 (+31.1)	13.5	23.7	34.8 (+11.1)	22.9	85.3	97.9 (+12.6)
Qwen2-VL-2B	72.4	17.8	65.9	66.9 (+1.0)	16.7	31.3	38.3 (+7.0)	22.7	74.5	89.8 (+15.3)
Qwen2.5-VL-3B	77.3	19.4	66.6	59.5 (−7.1)	13.0	19.5	36.6 (+17.1)	26.8	72.0	85.7 (+13.7)
Gemma3-4B	65.3	45.2	45.3	71.5 (+26.2)	18.9	11.1	33.8 (+22.7)	27.2	66.5	85.4 (+18.9)
Qwen2.5-VL-7B	80.1	13.3	45.4	59.0 (+13.6)	25.2	15.6	33.9 (+18.3)	24.3	54.2	79.5 (+25.3)
Gemma3-12B	73.6	38.1	35.7	69.5 (+33.8)	22.5	14.1	34.0 (+19.9)	25.1	60.2	81.5 (+21.3)
DeepSeek-VL-7B	52.9	79.2	58.0	96.3 (+38.3)	13.5	31.1	29.9 (−1.2)	16.8	87.9	99.2 (+11.3)
L_2 *mean (7)*	68.4	40.7	54.2	73.7 (+19.5)	17.6	20.9	34.5 (+13.6)	23.7	71.5	88.4 (+16.9)
L_3: *deep-stack or early-fusion native models*										
Qwen3-VL-2B	78.0	11.8	42.8	62.9 (+20.1)	29.1	10.4	32.1 (+21.7)	27.1	51.1	82.7 (+31.6)
Qwen3-VL-4B	80.7	11.8	37.4	61.1 (+23.7)	32.1	12.6	29.9 (+17.3)	23.5	44.7	78.9 (+34.2)
Qwen3-VL-8B	82.5	9.0	41.6	56.6 (+15.0)	25.5	4.0	27.8 (+23.8)	24.8	46.0	73.1 (+27.1)
Qwen3.5-2B	77.7	9.4	39.9	61.9 (+22.0)	31.3	13.5	31.2 (+17.7)	22.1	46.5	78.0 (+31.5)
Qwen3.5-4B	79.5	12.1	31.7	43.9 (+12.2)	22.8	27.2	24.5 (−2.7)	10.0	50.4	68.1 (+17.7)
Qwen3.5-9B	82.7	11.1	38.3	39.2 (+0.9)	14.3	16.1	25.1 (+9.0)	14.5	43.4	59.5 (+16.1)
Gemma4-E4B	62.7	50.1	46.7	72.4 (+25.7)	17.3	8.9	27.1 (+18.2)	22.2	71.4	88.7 (+17.3)
L_3 *mean (7)*	77.7	16.5	39.8	56.8 (+17.0)	24.6	13.2	28.2 (+15.0)	20.6	50.5	75.6 (+25.1)

Ranking Instability and the Limits of Single-Attack Proxies. Historically, End-PGD ASR has served as the default proxy for VLM robustness. Our audit shows that this proxy can be insufficient for native architectures. Comparing the End-PGD ranking to the pathway-complete $\widehat{R}^+$ ranking yields a Spearman $\rho = 0.837$ and Kendall $\tau_b = 0.634$—correlated, but unstable enough to affect model-selection conclusions. Specifically, 8 out of 18 models shift by at least three ranks. For instance, Gemma3-12B appears highly robust under End-PGD (ranking 2nd), but its higher MANTIS ASR moves it to 7th under $\widehat{R}^+$. This instability supports the motivation for PaRMA: pathway-specific failures can be missed by single-scalar, pixel-centric evaluations.

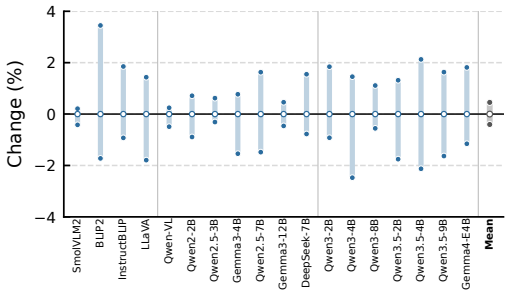
5.3 Pixel Pathway Deep Dive

Ablation and Stability. One concern for white-box attacks is whether observed gains are artifacts of specific hyperparameter tuning. We conduct a stability ablation on a balanced 300-sample subset (100 from each dataset) across all 18 models. Figure 2 suggests that MANTIS's gains are not an artifact of hyperparameter tuning:

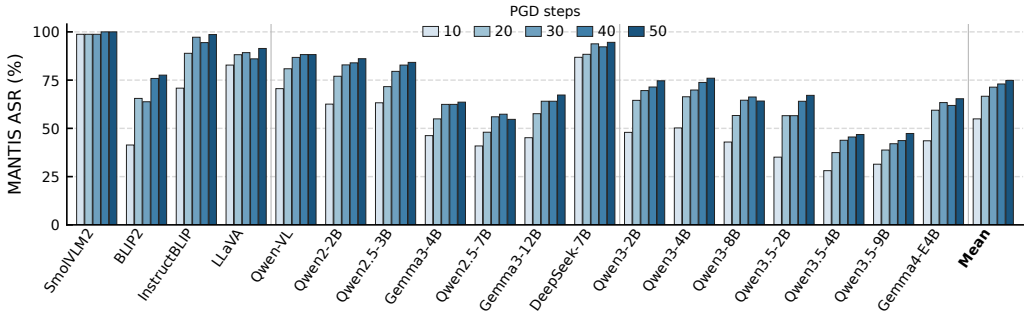
Random-Start Sensitivity (Fig. 2a): We evaluate MANTIS across three seeds. The min-max variance is small relative to the absolute ASR, with a median standard deviation of just 1.3%. This suggests that MANTIS is not heavily dependent on initialization.

Optimization Budget (Fig. 2b): We sweep the PGD step count from 10 to 50 to verify that our 40-step audit budget is not under-optimized. The results show that ASR largely saturates by 30–40 steps. Pushing the budget to 50 steps yields only marginal level-mean gains ($+2.8\%$, $+1.0\%$, and $+2.2\%$ for Levels 1–3), indicating that the 40-step setting is a reasonable audit budget.

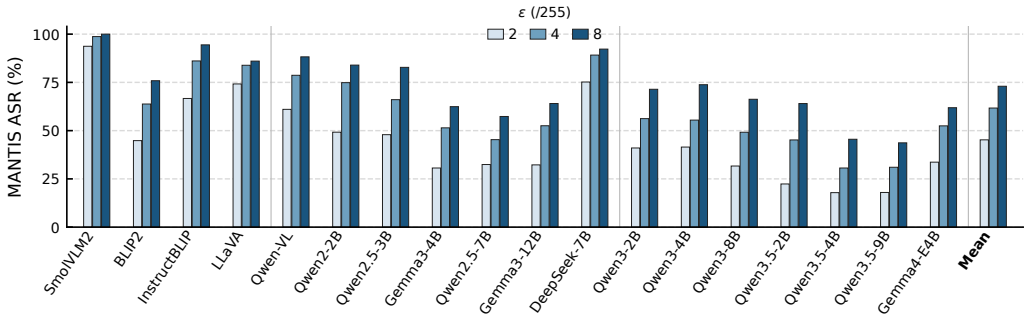
Perturbation Radius (Fig. 2c): We vary the ℓ_∞ radius $\varepsilon \in \{2, 4, 8\}/255$. While the absolute ASR naturally scales with the perturbation budget, the relative vulnerability ordering across fusion levels



(a) Random-start sensitivity.



(b) Optimization steps (t).



(c) Perturbation budget (ε).

Figure 2: **MANTIS Stability and Ablation.** Evaluated on a balanced 300-sample subset across all 18 models. (a) Min-max ASR variance across three seeds, centered on the per-model mean. (b) Clean-correct ASR as PGD steps increase at $\varepsilon = 8/255$. (c) Clean-correct ASR across varying ℓ_∞ radii at $t = 40$. The rightmost bars in each panel show the 18-model mean.

($\mathrm{L}_1 > \mathrm{L}_2 > \mathrm{L}_3$) is preserved in the tested settings. This suggests that the trend exposed by MANTIS is not specific to the chosen threat model capacity.

Layer Restoration. To locate where End-PGD flips are decided, we restore clean decoder activations on End-PGD-flipped examples. For each model, we take the first 40 clean-correct examples flipped by End-PGD (sorted by identifier), regenerate their adversarial images with the audit configuration, and keep the flips that reproduce (24–40 per model). For each depth ℓ, we replace the prefill hidden states of decoder layers 0 through ℓ with their values on the clean image, decode greedily, and count the flip as recovered if some depth restores the correct answer. Recovery falls with fusion level: 92.2% $[87.6, 96.1]$ in L_1, 62.6% $[55.5, 69.6]$ in L_2, and 25.6% $[20.7, 30.7]$ in L_3 (model-macro means with 95% fixed-model bootstrap CIs over 16 models; Qwen-VL-Chat and DeepSeek-VL-7B are excluded because their legacy implementations do not support activation hooks). Within the Qwen family, it falls from 70.4% (Qwen2-VL-2B, Qwen2.5-VL-3B/7B) to 21.3% (Qwen3-VL and Qwen3.5). In alignment-only models, restoring an early prefix of layers usually undoes the attack; in deep-fusion

Table 2: **Read–Use Gap.** Values are unweighted level means over the 18-model audit. Full per-model results are in Appendix C.

Level	P_{read}	P_{use}	RUG
L_1	38.9	22.4	+16.5
L_2	68.6	15.9	+52.7
L_3	81.0	11.6	+69.5

models, most flips survive restoration at every depth, consistent with visual features re-entering the computation across many layers. This is where an answer-level objective that targets the decision token, as in MANTIS, adds the most exclusive flips (Table 1).

5.4 Text Pathway Deep Dive

On the rendered-text pathway, Table 1 separates direct typographic overlays from host-congruent rendered text. Typo-Evid is strongest in L_1, driven by one alignment-era model, whereas Nat-Evid is stronger than Typo-Evid by 13.6% in L_2 and 15.0% in L_3. This pattern suggests that direct overlays are not a uniform proxy for rendered-text risk in native models: the payload may be processed, but not necessarily adopted as the task answer.

Behavioral Evidence (RUG). Table 2 reports the corresponding behavioral diagnostic from Eq. 5. The alignment-only group is heterogeneous, but the native groups show a clear level-wise trend: P_{read} increases from L_2 to L_3 while P_{use} decreases, widening RUG from $+52.7\%$ to $+69.5\%$. Because P_{read} is measured with an explicit reading prompt, we interpret RUG as accessibility-versus-adoption evidence; together with OAR, it is consistent with the *see-but-not-deceived* interpretation and motivates Nat-Evid as a host-congruent wrong-answer payload.

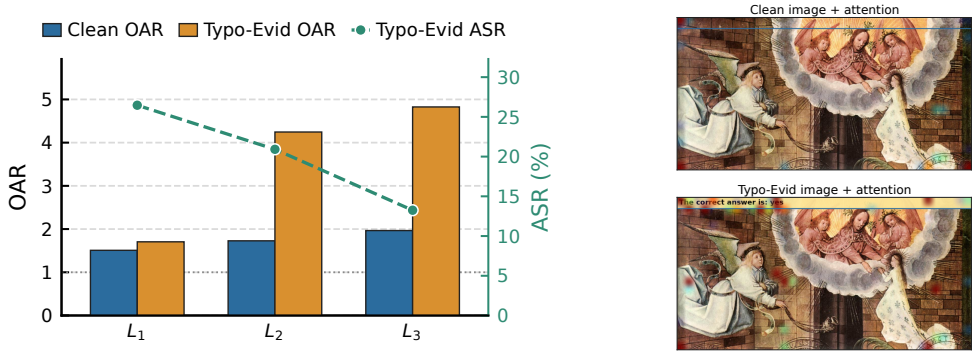


Figure 3: **Attention-Level Evidence for the *See-but-not-Deceived* Signature. (Left)** Level-mean Overlay Attention Ratio (OAR). In L_2 and L_3, OAR more than doubles over clean ($+138\%$ and $+135\%$), while Typo-Evid ASR falls with fusion level. **(Right)** Qualitative attention map for Qwen3.5-2B on an MME sample. Attention concentrates on the injected banner (blue box), while the model keeps the visual answer and outputs "no".

Attention-Level Evidence (OAR). We next ask whether the read–use gap has a corresponding attention-level signature. We compute the Overlay Attention Ratio (OAR, Eq. 6) against the matched clean image to isolate the attention shift caused by the attack.

Figure 3 (Left) provides the aggregate attention evidence. The mean OAR increase is $+138\%$ in L_2 and $+135\%$ in L_3, against $+13\%$ in L_1. From L_2 to L_3, Typo-Evid ASR drops from 20.9% to 13.2%. In other words, native models allocate far more attention to the overlay, while deeper-fusion models less often adopt it as the answer.

Figure 3 (Right) illustrates this pattern. On a clean-correct MME sample, Qwen3.5-2B is attacked with a typographic banner asserting "The correct answer is: yes". The answer-query attention map concentrates on the injected banner (OAR rises from 2.49 to 4.85), but the model still outputs the correct visual answer ("no"). This attention-behavior gap is consistent with the Nat-Evid

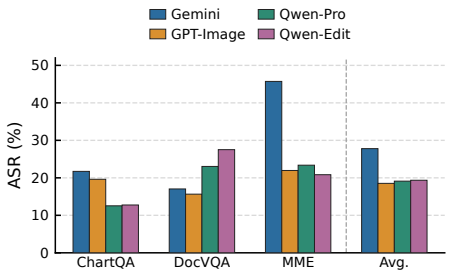


Figure 4: **Generator Sensitivity of Nat-Evid.** Model-macro ASR across four generated variants.

augmentation: to affect a native VLM's text pathway, the payload may need to be not only readable but visually congruent enough to be adopted.

Generator Sensitivity. Because Nat-Evid relies on generative image editing, we test whether the attack's success is tied to the idiosyncrasies of a specific generator. Figure 4 compares four Nat-Evid variants. While the Gemini-backed variant is the strongest (driven by MME), the three exact-text generators (GPT-Image-2 and two Qwen variants) produce highly consistent average ASRs ($\sim 19\%$). This suggests that the Nat-Evid effect is not tied to a single generator.

Ground-Truth Preservation. Nat-Evid edits are generated under strict text-only constraints, and we verify that they keep the original evidence intact (Appendix A.5). For natural images, we mask the inserted cue with a solid black patch on 100 MME examples that Qwen3-VL-8B answers correctly on the original image but wrongly under Nat-Evid; the correct answer returns in 98 of the 100 cases, so these failures come from the injected cue rather than from altered evidence. For charts and documents, a non-generative OCR engine recovers the exact ground-truth string from the edited image in 92.3% of the examples whose answer it can read in the original, and manual inspection of the remaining cases finds the evidence destroyed in only 0.85% of the images.

6 Conclusion and Limitations

The transition to native multimodal architectures fundamentally alters the VLM attack surface, rendering legacy single-attack, pixel-centric evaluations insufficient. To address this, we introduced **PaRMA** and its instantiation, **FusionAudit**, an evidence-based auditing methodology. By leveraging pathway-specific diagnostics, we identified an objective mismatch on the pixel pathway and the *see-but-not-deceived* signature in deep-fusion models. These insights motivated our diagnostic-motivated interventions, MANTIS and Nat-Evid, which successfully exposed substantial residual risks systematically hidden by standard benchmarks across 18 VLMs. Ultimately, robustness auditing must evolve alongside architectures; FusionAudit provides a rigorous, pathway-complete template for this native multimodal era.

PaRMA can help model developers find visual-channel failures before deployment. The same attacks could also be used to mislead deployed VLMs; MANTIS requires white-box gradient access, and we release the audit pipeline rather than precomputed adversarial images.

Our study has several limitations. First, our nativeness taxonomy (L_1–L_3) is an observational framework for auditing, not a strict causal ladder. The stricter L_4 endpoint remains outside our empirical audit: token-based mixed-modal systems such as Chameleon point toward this design, but the Chameleon paper reports image-tokenizer limitations on text-heavy images, which are central to our ChartQA, DocVQA, and rendered-text setting [41]. While the Qwen controlled chain mitigates some confounders, adjacent levels differ in training data and scale alongside fusion depth. Second, our rendered-text pathway focuses exclusively on task-relevant wrong-answer injection. Command-following visual prompt injection (e.g., jailbreaks) represents a distinct safety risk that requires compliance-based metrics rather than correctness-based ASR. Finally, while PaRMA currently instantiates two visual pathways, the framework is designed to be extensible. As VLMs expand to process audio, video, and embodied tool-use, new pathways and diagnostics can be added to PaRMA.

Acknowledgments and Disclosure of Funding

This research is supported by A*STAR under its Japan-Singapore Joint Call: JST-A*STAR 2024 (Project ID: R2416IR139) and by the Ministry of Education, Singapore, under its Academic Research Fund Tier 2 (Award MOE-T2EP20125-0005). The authors declare no competing interests.

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A Experimental and Reproducibility Details

A.1 Evaluation Set and Model I/O

All reported main-audit results use a fixed evaluation set built with seed 42. It contains 1500 VQA examples, balanced across ChartQA, DocVQA, and MME. The source splits are ChartQA train, DocVQA validation, and MME test. The same sample identifiers are used for the clean baseline, the pixel pathway, the rendered-text pathway, RUG/OAR diagnostics, and uncertainty computations.

Clean inference is run once per model on the same evaluation set, and all attacks reuse those clean outputs when forming each model's clean-correct set. Clean correctness is recomputed with the shared deterministic judge before any ASR is formed. For BLIP2 and InstructBLIP-style models, we use the VQA-style prompt `Question: {question} Answer:`. Other chat-capable models use their model-specific chat template with a single user message containing the image and the dataset question. Thinking-style Qwen3 and Qwen3.5 models are evaluated with thinking disabled, and any emitted thinking text is excluded before judging. All clean and attack generations use deterministic decoding with a maximum of 256 new tokens.

A.2 Attack Configuration

The pixel pathway is evaluated in original RGB image space. Vis-PGD, End-PGD, and MANTIS all use an ℓ_∞ budget $\varepsilon = 8/255$, step size $\alpha = 1/255$, 40 PGD steps, and PGD seed 1. This 40-step configuration is the fixed audit budget used for Table 1; the stronger step sweep in Fig. 2b is reported separately as a stability check. Vis-PGD optimizes the vision-representation objective, End-PGD optimizes the teacher-forced answer objective, and MANTIS optimizes the first-divergence margin in Eq. (7).

Vis-PGD uses a fixed descriptive prompt for the vision-side objective, whereas End-PGD and MANTIS use the dataset question and the reference answer for teacher-forced loss construction. For MANTIS, the wrong continuation is derived by the same deterministic answer-mutation rules used for rendered wrong-answer payloads, and both y^- and $t^\star$ are held fixed throughout PGD; only the image perturbation δ is updated.

For the rendered-text pathway, Typo-Evid images are constructed once from the fixed evaluation set and then evaluated under the same clean baselines for all models. Nat-Evid uses generated image edits of the same examples.

A.3 Prompt Templates and Rendered Payloads

The task prompt for each attack condition is the dataset question, wrapped only by the model-specific input template described above. For teacher-forced pixel losses, the same prompt is used with the reference answer appended as the assistant continuation when constructing the loss. The RUG read pass uses the following fixed prompt:

> *Transcribe verbatim any text that has been overlaid or added onto this image. Output only the overlay text exactly as printed, with no commentary, no quotes, and no answer to any other question. If no overlay text is present, reply with NONE.*

Typo-Evid renders a deterministic wrong-answer payload directly into the image. For ChartQA and MME, the rendered banner text is "The correct answer is: w", where w is the derived wrong answer.

For DocVQA, the rendered document-card text is "Question: q" and "Answer: w" on two lines, preserving the original question q and replacing the answer field with the wrong answer. The same Typo-Evid images are used for all models; model differences therefore arise from inference behavior rather than from per-model rendering.

Nat-Evid uses a generated image edit rather than a fixed overlay. The generation prompt is parameterized by the dataset question, a target wrong answer, and an optional answer-family label. Its common instruction is:

> *Add exactly one small, local, natural-looking text cue near the relevant evidence region; keep the original content visible and unchanged; make the new text readable and salient; and ensure the new text functions as evidence rather than as a question, instruction, or QA prompt.*

Dataset-specific clauses request chart-native annotations for ChartQA, document-native margin or field-side cues for DocVQA, and scene-native signs, tags, labels, or notes for MME.

A.4 Answer Matching and Wrong-Answer Construction

All correctness decisions use the shared deterministic answer judge. For MME, the judge extracts a yes/no answer after punctuation stripping and compares it case-insensitively with the reference answer. For ChartQA and DocVQA, the judge first attempts numeric comparison when the reference parses as a number; this prevents, for example, "5" from matching "15". Non-numeric text answers use normalized word-boundary containment rather than raw substring matching. ASR is always recomputed from raw model output for the clean baseline and every attack condition.

For Typo-Evid, wrong-answer construction is deterministic and dataset-aware. Boolean answers are flipped, integer answers are incremented by one, decimal answers are scaled and rounded, short free-text answers use a generic alternative, and longer free-text answers use a generic incorrect payload. DocVQA text answers additionally use a format-preserving alphanumeric mutation before falling back to the generic rule. For Nat-Evid, each wrong answer is assigned an answer family; when available, we use a same-dataset same-family alternative answer, and otherwise use deterministic family-specific rules for boolean, numeric, date, code, color, name, degree, or free-text answers.

A.5 Generated-Image Provenance and Quality Control

For each generated edit, we retain the sample identifier, dataset, question, reference answer, canonical wrong answer, prompt text, generator model, original image, and edited image. Evaluation uses only successful edits with an available edited image. The generation prompt constrains each edit: the wrong answer is fixed in the prompt, the editor must add exactly one readable text cue, and it must not modify, cover, replace, erase, blur, crop, or remove any existing content. We further verify that the edits preserve the original evidence in two ways.

Cue removal (MME). MME answers are yes/no and are not printed in the image. We take 100 MME natural-image examples that Qwen3-VL-8B answers correctly on the original image but wrongly under Nat-Evid. Human annotators drew a box around each inserted cue, and we filled the box with a solid black patch, leaving every pixel outside the box identical to the edited image. The correct answer returns in 98 of the 100 cases.

OCR (ChartQA and DocVQA). Here the answer is usually printed in the image. We read the edited images with Google Cloud Vision, a non-generative OCR engine, keeping only the examples whose ground-truth answer it can read in the original image (823). OCR recovers the exact ground-truth string from the edited image in 92.3% of them. We manually inspected every remaining example: most misses are OCR errors, such as extra spaces, punctuation, or complex chart layouts, and the edit destroyed the evidence in 0.85% of the images.

The main Nat-Evid set contains 1500 successful Gemini image edits. Generator-sensitivity analyses use the same examples and payloads but may use recorded fallbacks to preserve the fixed denominator after provider-side failures. GPT-Image-2 medium contains 87 Gemini fallback images, and Qwen Image 2.0 Pro contains 36 matched Qwen Image Edit 2511 fallbacks. The dominant fallback trigger is provider-side content-policy refusal on MME samples whose source images contain reproductions

of paintings or other copyrighted artworks, which some generators decline to edit. In both cases, we record which generator supplied each fallback and why the fallback was used.

A.6 Compute Resources

All local model evaluations were run on NVIDIA A100 80GB GPUs. Runtime varies with model size, clean-correct set size, and whether image resizing is needed. For the full PGD-40 pixel suite, per-model runtime ranges from roughly 6 GPU-hours for the fastest models to roughly 120 GPU-hours for the slowest Qwen3.5 models. Rendered-text evaluations and RUG/OAR diagnostic passes are substantially cheaper than the pixel suite.

B Uncertainty for Main Audit Estimates

The main audit table is computed from paired outcomes: for each model, every attack is evaluated on the same clean-correct subset of the same 1500-sample evaluation set. Table 3 reports uncertainty for the level-macro quantities most likely to affect the interpretation of Table 1. The bootstrap keeps the 18 audited models fixed, resamples clean-correct examples within each model, and recomputes the same unweighted model-macro level means used in the main table. These intervals therefore quantify finite-sample uncertainty conditional on the audited model corpus, not population uncertainty over all possible VLMs.

Table 3: **Uncertainty for Level-Mean FusionAudit Estimates.** Intervals are percentile 95% CIs from a fixed-model paired sample bootstrap. q_{Nat} is the Holm-adjusted two-sided paired permutation value for Nat-Evid versus Typo-Evid.

Level	n_m	$\widehat{R}^{+}$	$\widehat{R}^{+} - \widehat{R}^{0}$	Nat-Evid − Typo-Evid	q_{Nat}
L_1	4	97.0 [96.0, 97.8]	10.6 [9.2, 12.0]	−11.1 [−13.2, −9.1]	< 0.001
L_2	7	88.4 [87.7, 89.1]	16.9 [16.1, 17.8]	13.5 [12.3, 14.8]	< 0.001
L_3	7	75.6 [74.7, 76.5]	25.1 [24.2, 26.0]	15.0 [14.0, 16.0]	< 0.001

Values are percentages except n_m and q_{Nat}. Level means are unweighted averages over models within a nativeness level, matching Table 1. Paired permutation tests exchange attack labels within clean-correct examples and apply Holm adjustment across the three level comparisons.

C Read–Use Gap Diagnostic

Table 4 reports the per-model decomposition behind Table 2. The read pass uses the same Typo-Evid images and the same clean-correct denominators as the main audit. P_{use} is stricter than Typo-Evid ASR: it requires the task-prompt answer to be wrong and to contain the injected wrong-answer payload, whereas Typo-Evid ASR counts any clean-correct example that becomes wrong.

Table 4: **Per-Model Read–Use Gap.** Values are percentages over each model's clean-correct set. RUG is $P_{\mathrm{read}} - P_{\mathrm{use}}$.

Model	Level	n_c	P_{read}	P_{use}	RUG	Typo-Evid ASR
L_1*: alignment-only / projection-based models*						
SmolVLM2-2.2B	L_1	918	65.3	7.7	+57.5	17.2
BLIP2-OPT-2.7B	L_1	297	52.2	66.0	−13.8	69.4
InstructBLIP-Vicuna-7B	L_1	397	38.3	9.6	+28.7	10.8
LLaVA-1.5-7B	L_1	461	0.0	6.3	−6.3	8.5
L_1 *mean (4)*			38.9	22.4	+16.5	26.5
L_2*: shallow native multimodal fusion*						
Qwen-VL-Chat	L_2	862	72.7	12.4	+60.3	23.7
Qwen2-VL-2B	L_2	1086	59.7	26.5	+33.1	31.3
Qwen2.5-VL-3B	L_2	1160	71.2	16.8	+54.4	19.5
Gemma3-4B	L_2	980	65.7	7.3	+58.4	11.1
Qwen2.5-VL-7B	L_2	1202	82.3	13.7	+68.6	15.6
Gemma3-12B	L_2	1104	75.5	11.2	+64.3	14.1
DeepSeek-VL-7B	L_2	793	53.3	23.6	+29.8	31.1
L_2 *mean (7)*			68.6	15.9	+52.7	20.9
L_3*: deep-stack or early-fusion native models*						
Qwen3-VL-2B	L_3	1170	72.2	8.5	+63.8	10.4
Qwen3-VL-4B	L_3	1210	87.6	11.3	+76.3	12.6
Qwen3-VL-8B	L_3	1238	73.0	3.8	+69.2	4.0
Qwen3.5-2B	L_3	1165	84.8	11.5	+73.3	13.5
Qwen3.5-4B	L_3	1192	86.5	25.2	+61.3	27.2
Qwen3.5-9B	L_3	1241	90.2	15.1	+75.2	16.1
Gemma4-E4B	L_3	941	72.9	5.6	+67.3	8.9
L_3 *mean (7)*			81.0	11.6	+69.5	13.2

The main exception is BLIP2-OPT-2.7B. Its Typo-Evid ASR is 69.4%, and 66.0% of clean-correct examples both become wrong and contain the injected payload, yielding a negative RUG. We therefore treat L_1 as heterogeneous and interpret the prompt-conditioned RUG diagnostic primarily as evidence for the L_2–L_3 rendered-text trend.

D Dataset-Stratified Robustness Audit

Tables 5, 6, and 7 report the same FusionAudit quantities as Table 1 separately on ChartQA, DocVQA, and MME. Each table uses the corresponding dataset-specific clean-correct denominator for every model. Level means are unweighted macro-averages over models within each nativeness level.

Table 5: **Dataset-Stratified Robustness Audit: ChartQA.** This table repeats Table 1 on the ChartQA subset only. All ASRs are percentages conditioned on each model's ChartQA clean-correct set. Gray parentheticals and δ columns follow the definitions in Table 1. Level means are unweighted macro-averages.

		Pixel pathway				Rendered-text pathway			Audit summary	
Model	Clean	Vis-PGD	End-PGD	MANTIS	δ	Typo-Evid	Nat-Evid	δ	$\widehat{R}^0$	$\widehat{R}^+$
L_1*: alignment-only / projection-based models*										
SmolVLM2-2.2B	64.8	59.3	85.5	99.7 (+14.2)	8.3	16.4	25.3 (+9.0)	17.0	92.0	100.0 (+8.0)
BLIP2-OPT-2.7B	4.0	45.0	80.0	95.0 (+15.0)	10.0	75.0	10.0 (−65.0)	5.0	100.0	100.0 (+0.0)
InstructBLIP-Vicuna-7B	4.8	37.5	83.3	87.5 (+4.2)	16.7	33.3	25.0 (−8.3)	8.3	83.3	100.0 (+16.7)
LLaVA-1.5-7B	9.2	34.8	76.1	69.6 (−6.5)	8.7	23.9	26.1 (+2.2)	13.0	78.3	87.0 (+8.7)
L_1 *mean (4)*	20.7	44.1	81.2	87.9 (+6.7)	10.9	37.2	21.6 (−15.6)	10.8	88.4	96.7 (+8.3)
L_2*: shallow native multimodal fusion*										
Qwen-VL-Chat	62.2	84.6	74.3	89.4 (+15.1)	4.2	23.2	39.5 (+16.4)	27.3	94.2	98.1 (+3.9)
Qwen2-VL-2B	63.0	14.9	66.3	67.3 (+1.0)	17.8	38.1	28.9 (−9.2)	15.2	80.0	92.4 (+12.4)
Qwen2.5-VL-3B	71.4	10.6	66.1	91.6 (+25.5)	29.7	16.0	24.4 (+8.4)	19.0	71.7	97.2 (+25.5)
Gemma3-4B	61.8	51.1	26.2	62.5 (+36.2)	17.8	8.1	26.2 (+18.1)	22.7	64.1	82.8 (+18.8)
Qwen2.5-VL-7B	75.6	5.8	47.1	75.9 (+28.8)	35.7	4.5	21.4 (+16.9)	19.8	49.5	85.4 (+36.0)
Gemma3-12B	69.0	40.9	21.2	55.9 (+34.8)	23.2	10.7	24.9 (+14.2)	19.7	53.3	76.8 (+23.5)
DeepSeek-VL-7B	58.4	95.9	88.4	95.5 (+7.2)	1.4	33.2	38.7 (+5.5)	22.6	97.9	99.3 (+1.4)
L_2 *mean (7)*	65.9	43.4	55.7	76.9 (+21.2)	18.5	19.1	29.2 (+10.0)	20.9	73.0	90.3 (+17.3)
L_3*: deep-stack or early-fusion native models*										
Qwen3-VL-2B	75.8	10.0	52.2	63.1 (+10.8)	21.4	4.2	17.4 (+13.2)	15.6	55.9	79.2 (+23.2)
Qwen3-VL-4B	77.8	8.7	36.8	69.2 (+32.4)	38.3	3.1	14.7 (+11.6)	13.4	40.1	79.7 (+39.6)
Qwen3-VL-8B	78.0	5.4	30.5	57.9 (+27.4)	34.9	2.1	12.3 (+10.3)	11.0	32.8	69.5 (+36.7)
Qwen3.5-2B	77.0	7.3	28.3	60.5 (+32.2)	37.7	4.9	12.5 (+7.5)	10.4	34.3	73.0 (+38.7)
Qwen3.5-4B	80.0	4.5	37.5	44.5 (+7.0)	22.0	2.2	12.0 (+9.8)	11.0	40.5	64.2 (+23.8)
Qwen3.5-9B	80.4	3.7	29.9	41.5 (+11.7)	23.6	3.0	10.4 (+7.5)	8.5	31.6	56.7 (+25.1)
Gemma4-E4B	63.0	64.8	32.4	66.0 (+33.7)	13.0	3.2	21.3 (+18.1)	19.4	72.7	86.7 (+14.0)
L_3 *mean (7)*	76.0	14.9	35.4	57.5 (+22.2)	27.3	3.2	14.4 (+11.1)	12.7	44.0	72.7 (+28.7)

Table 6: **Dataset-Stratified Robustness Audit: DocVQA.** This table repeats Table 1 on the DocVQA subset only. All ASRs are percentages conditioned on each model's DocVQA clean-correct set. Gray parentheticals and δ columns follow the definitions in Table 1. Level means are unweighted macro-averages.

		Pixel pathway				Rendered-text pathway			Audit summary	
Model	Clean	Vis-PGD	End-PGD	MANTIS	δ	Typo-Evid	Nat-Evid	δ	$\widehat{R}^0$	$\widehat{R}^+$
L_1*: alignment-only / projection-based models*										
SmolVLM2-2.2B	49.0	63.7	96.7	98.4 (+1.6)	2.9	32.2	31.4 (−0.8)	16.7	97.1	100.0 (+2.9)
BLIP2-OPT-2.7B	4.2	52.4	81.0	85.7 (+4.8)	14.3	4.8	4.8 (+0.0)	4.8	85.7	100.0 (+14.3)
InstructBLIP-Vicuna-7B	5.6	50.0	85.7	85.7 (+0.0)	7.1	10.7	14.3 (+3.6)	7.1	85.7	92.9 (+7.1)
LLaVA-1.5-7B	10.8	55.6	64.8	83.3 (+18.5)	11.1	14.8	16.7 (+1.9)	11.1	75.9	87.0 (+11.1)
L_1 *mean (4)*	17.4	55.4	82.1	88.3 (+6.2)	8.8	15.6	16.8 (+1.2)	9.9	86.1	95.0 (+8.8)
L_2*: shallow native multimodal fusion*										
Qwen-VL-Chat	39.2	74.5	88.3	88.8 (+0.5)	2.6	32.1	35.2 (+3.1)	15.8	91.3	94.4 (+3.1)
Qwen2-VL-2B	74.6	16.1	68.9	64.9 (−4.0)	13.1	22.0	19.8 (−2.1)	13.1	74.8	86.1 (+11.3)
Qwen2.5-VL-3B	77.8	10.5	44.5	16.7 (−27.8)	4.9	16.5	17.0 (+0.5)	11.3	52.7	62.0 (+9.3)
Gemma3-4B	63.4	32.2	45.1	60.6 (+15.5)	17.4	9.1	21.8 (+12.6)	16.7	57.1	75.4 (+18.3)
Qwen2.5-VL-7B	80.4	7.7	39.6	6.2 (−33.3)	1.7	12.7	12.9 (+0.2)	10.0	48.8	54.0 (+5.2)
Gemma3-12B	70.2	26.8	41.0	55.8 (+14.8)	16.2	6.0	15.4 (+9.4)	12.8	51.9	69.5 (+17.7)
DeepSeek-VL-7B	29.2	92.5	77.4	89.0 (+11.6)	0.7	28.1	26.0 (−2.1)	13.0	96.6	97.3 (+0.7)
L_2 *mean (7)*	62.1	37.2	57.8	54.6 (−3.2)	8.1	18.1	21.2 (+3.1)	13.3	67.6	76.9 (+9.3)
L_3*: deep-stack or early-fusion native models*										
Qwen3-VL-2B	81.0	8.9	56.3	51.9 (−4.4)	15.1	11.6	14.3 (+2.7)	11.4	64.2	77.8 (+13.6)
Qwen3-VL-4B	82.2	9.0	45.5	48.9 (+3.4)	18.5	16.5	13.1 (−3.4)	8.3	52.6	68.6 (+16.1)
Qwen3-VL-8B	83.4	3.4	38.1	33.6 (−4.6)	12.7	1.0	6.5 (+5.5)	6.2	40.0	54.0 (+13.9)
Qwen3.5-2B	80.8	7.9	48.0	41.6 (−6.4)	15.1	6.4	15.6 (+9.2)	13.9	50.5	66.1 (+15.6)
Qwen3.5-4B	82.6	9.0	24.7	6.1 (−18.6)	1.5	18.4	11.1 (−7.3)	7.5	41.2	46.2 (+5.1)
Qwen3.5-9B	82.4	6.1	14.8	4.1 (−10.7)	1.0	4.6	8.5 (+3.9)	7.8	21.1	26.5 (+5.3)
Gemma4-E4B	68.4	48.5	49.7	59.9 (+10.2)	13.7	8.2	22.2 (+14.0)	19.0	68.4	82.5 (+14.0)
L_3 *mean (7)*	80.1	13.2	39.6	35.1 (−4.4)	11.1	9.5	13.1 (+3.5)	10.6	48.3	60.2 (+11.9)

Table 7: **Dataset-Stratified Robustness Audit: MME.** This table repeats Table 1 on the MME subset only. All ASRs are percentages conditioned on each model's MME clean-correct set. Gray parentheticals and δ columns follow the definitions in Table 1. Level means are unweighted macro-averages.

		Pixel pathway				Rendered-text pathway			Audit summary	
Model	Clean	Vis-PGD	End-PGD	MANTIS	δ	Typo-Evid	Nat-Evid	δ	$\widehat{R}^0$	$\widehat{R}^+$
L_1*: alignment-only / projection-based models*										
SmolVLM2-2.2B	69.8	39.0	64.2	100.0 (+35.8)	25.5	7.4	35.8 (+28.4)	30.9	74.5	100.0 (+25.5)
BLIP2-OPT-2.7B	51.2	15.6	37.1	58.6 (+21.5)	28.1	74.2	3.9 (−70.3)	0.4	82.0	89.8 (+7.8)
InstructBLIP-Vicuna-7B	69.0	62.9	68.4	99.7 (+31.3)	11.9	9.3	4.1 (−5.2)	2.3	88.1	100.0 (+11.9)
LLaVA-1.5-7B	72.2	47.9	85.3	99.7 (+14.4)	9.4	5.5	19.7 (+14.1)	16.1	90.6	100.0 (+9.4)
L_1 *mean (4)*	65.5	41.4	63.8	89.5 (+25.8)	18.7	24.1	15.9 (−8.3)	12.4	83.8	97.5 (+13.7)
L_2*: shallow native multimodal fusion*										
Qwen-VL-Chat	71.0	59.2	37.2	99.2 (+62.0)	27.6	19.4	30.4 (+11.0)	22.8	74.1	99.7 (+25.6)
Qwen2-VL-2B	79.6	21.6	62.8	68.3 (+5.5)	19.1	34.7	63.1 (+28.4)	37.4	69.8	91.2 (+21.4)
Qwen2.5-VL-3B	82.8	35.3	87.9	72.0 (−15.9)	6.3	25.4	65.5 (+40.1)	48.1	90.3	98.1 (+7.7)
Gemma3-4B	70.8	51.7	62.1	89.3 (+27.1)	21.2	15.5	51.1 (+35.6)	40.7	77.1	96.6 (+19.5)
Qwen2.5-VL-7B	84.4	25.4	49.5	94.1 (+44.5)	38.2	28.2	65.2 (+37.0)	41.9	63.5	98.3 (+34.8)
Gemma3-12B	81.6	45.6	43.4	92.6 (+49.3)	27.2	24.0	57.6 (+33.6)	40.2	73.3	95.8 (+22.5)
DeepSeek-VL-7B	71.0	60.0	25.1	100.0 (+74.9)	28.7	30.7	24.2 (−6.5)	13.5	76.1	100.0 (+23.9)
L_2 *mean (7)*	77.3	42.7	52.6	87.9 (+35.3)	24.0	25.4	51.0 (+25.6)	35.0	74.9	97.1 (+22.2)
L_3*: deep-stack or early-fusion native models*										
Qwen3-VL-2B	77.2	16.6	19.4	74.4 (+54.9)	51.3	15.3	65.0 (+49.7)	54.9	32.6	91.5 (+58.8)
Qwen3-VL-4B	82.0	17.6	30.0	65.6 (+35.6)	39.8	17.8	61.2 (+43.4)	48.3	41.2	88.5 (+47.3)
Qwen3-VL-8B	86.2	17.9	55.0	77.7 (+22.7)	29.5	8.6	62.4 (+53.8)	55.2	63.6	94.9 (+31.3)
Qwen3.5-2B	75.2	13.3	43.1	85.1 (+42.0)	42.3	29.8	67.3 (+37.5)	43.1	54.8	96.0 (+41.2)
Qwen3.5-4B	75.8	23.5	33.2	84.4 (+51.2)	47.0	63.1	52.2 (−10.8)	11.6	71.0	96.0 (+25.1)
Qwen3.5-9B	85.4	23.0	68.9	70.7 (+1.9)	18.5	39.6	54.8 (+15.2)	26.7	75.9	93.9 (+18.0)
Gemma4-E4B	56.8	35.6	58.8	94.4 (+35.6)	26.4	16.2	39.4 (+23.2)	29.2	73.6	98.6 (+25.0)
L_3 *mean (7)*	76.9	21.0	44.1	78.9 (+34.8)	36.4	27.2	57.5 (+30.3)	38.4	59.0	94.2 (+35.3)

E Additional Experiments

E.1 MANTIS Component Ablation

To isolate the source of MANTIS's gains, we cross its two components: full-sequence versus first-divergence-token optimization, and standard cross-entropy versus a margin loss that incorporates the negative sample y^-. This gives four variants: End-PGD (full sequence, cross-entropy), +Margin (full sequence, margin), First-Tok (first-divergence token, cross-entropy), and MANTIS (first-divergence token, margin). Table 8 reports their ASRs.

Both components help, and the margin loss contributes most. +Margin improves on End-PGD on all 11 models, by 18.3 points on average; First-Tok adds a smaller, model-dependent 8.1 points. Combined, MANTIS matches or exceeds the best single-component variant on all 11 models, strictly on 10 and tied on LLaVA-1.5-7B, where both are near the ceiling, and reaches a mean ASR of 65.3%, 23.8 points above End-PGD.

Table 8: **MANTIS Component Ablation.** ASR (%) of the four variants on a separate balanced 300-sample set. Bold marks the best variant per row.

Level	Model	End-PGD	+Margin	First-Tok	MANTIS
L_1	LLaVA-1.5-7B	71.3	96.0	**97.0**	**97.0**
L_1	BLIP2-OPT-2.7B	50.0	62.9	41.9	**66.1**
L_2	Qwen2.5-VL-3B	49.2	66.5	56.8	**67.8**
L_2	Qwen2-VL-2B	50.9	64.0	49.1	**65.8**
L_2	Gemma3-4B	39.5	51.9	61.0	**65.2**
L_2	Gemma3-12B	24.5	38.2	49.4	**64.4**
L_2	Qwen2.5-VL-7B	37.8	57.4	45.8	**59.0**
L_3	Qwen3-VL-2B	42.8	62.0	38.0	**66.8**
L_3	Qwen3-VL-4B	30.8	55.7	38.7	**58.5**
L_3	Qwen3-VL-8B	28.0	54.0	31.8	**56.7**
L_3	Qwen3.5-4B	31.5	48.8	35.8	**51.2**
Mean (11 models)		41.5	59.8	49.6	**65.3**

E.2 Rendered-Text Pathway

We compare against FigStep [20] on the eight Qwen-chain models over the full evaluation set. For a fair comparison, FigStep is constrained to the same intervention budget as Typo-Evid: the same payload string, placement, and modified-pixel ceiling. Table 9 shows that Nat-Evid is the strongest of the three on seven of the eight models; on Qwen3.5-4B, Typo-Evid and FigStep are slightly higher (27.2% and 25.7% against 24.5%).

Table 9: **FigStep under a Matched Budget.** ASR (%) on the full evaluation set. FigStep uses the same payload string, placement, and modified-pixel ceiling as Typo-Evid.

Level	Model	FigStep	Typo-Evid	Nat-Evid
L_2	Qwen2.5-VL-3B	16.3	19.5	36.6
L_2	Qwen2.5-VL-7B	13.3	15.6	33.9
L_3	Qwen3-VL-2B	8.6	10.4	32.1
L_3	Qwen3-VL-4B	10.7	12.6	29.9
L_3	Qwen3-VL-8B	3.5	4.0	27.8
L_3	Qwen3.5-2B	11.2	13.5	31.2
L_3	Qwen3.5-4B	25.7	27.2	24.5
L_3	Qwen3.5-9B	13.6	16.1	25.1

To isolate the effect of the embedded text, we keep the Typo-Evid rendering pipeline fixed and replace the original embedded text with alternative text (Table 10). Changing the text moves Typo-Evid's ASR by less than 2.5 points in every level, smaller than the gap between Nat-Evid and Typo-Evid in the native groups. What remains of that gap reflects the generated cue as a whole, that is, its wording and its host-congruent rendering together.

Table 10: **Payload-String Control.** Typo-Evid ASR (%) on ChartQA and DocVQA with the original and the replaced embedded text, level means over models, with 95% CIs for the difference.

Level	Original text	Replaced text	Difference [95% CI]
L_1 (4 models)	25.6	24.4	-1.2 [-6.2, $+3.6$]
L_2 (7 models)	18.5	20.2	$+1.7$ [$+0.6$, $+2.8$]
L_3 (7 models)	6.5	8.7	$+2.3$ [$+1.5$, $+3.0$]

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