Deep Visual Similarity for Content Moderation: Detecting Plagiarized Images at Scale

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doi: https://doi.org/10.37745/ejcsit.2013/vol13n362129 Published June 07, 2025

Citation: Zalani A. (2025) Deep Visual Similarity for Content Moderation: Detecting Plagiarized Images at Scale, *European Journal of Computer Science and Information Technology*,13(36),21-29

Abstract: *The proliferation of visual content on social media platforms has intensified plagiarism detection and copyright protection challenges. This article presents a deep learning-based content moderation system to identify near-duplicate and manipulated images at scale. The system integrates a fine-tuned ResNet-50 architecture with hierarchical navigable small-world graphs to enable efficient similarity searches across massive image repositories. By extracting high-dimensional feature embeddings and implementing multi-stage filtering approaches, the technology can detect visual similarities despite common evasion techniques, including cropping, scaling, rotation, and color adjustments. Training with triplet loss functions and augmented datasets significantly enhances the robustness against transformation attempts. Production implementation on a major social platform accurately identifies duplicate content while substantially reducing manual moderation requirements. Beyond operational efficiencies, deployment results reveal meaningful improvements in content originality, reduced copyright violations, and enhanced creator satisfaction. The architecture balances computational resources through hybrid indexing strategies prioritizing recently uploaded content. This comprehensive solution addresses critical challenges in maintaining content integrity at scale while offering insights into effective implementation strategies for automated visual similarity detection in large-scale content ecosystems.*

Keywords: content moderation, visual similarity detection, deep learning, approximate nearest neighbor search, copyright protection, transformation robustness

INTRODUCTION

The explosive growth of user-generated content on social media platforms has brought with it the challenge of maintaining content integrity and originality. Recent statistics indicate that over 3.2 billion images are shared daily across social platforms, with major platforms experiencing unprecedented content volumes. Plagiarized or duplicated visual content undermines platform credibility, diminishes user experience, and violates copyright protections. According to Yousif and Al-Jammas, content authenticity has become a critical concern. Their analysis of 1,283 professional creators reveals that 72.4% have experienced unauthorized reproduction of their visual works, resulting in estimated revenue losses of $5.2 billion annually across creative industries [1]. Their comprehensive review further documented that traditional moderation systems can effectively process only about 0.87% of daily uploaded content on large-scale platforms, creating an urgent need for automated detection systems.

Traditional content moderation approaches, relying heavily on manual review, cannot scale to meet the volume of modern platforms. The analysis of 17 major platforms found that moderation teams consisting of an average of 12,500 human reviewers face overwhelming content volumes, with the review-to-upload ratio declining by 31.6% annually since 2018. This moderation gap necessitates automated solutions for detecting visual plagiarism at scale, particularly as 89.3% of content creators identified unauthorized reproduction as their primary platform concern [1].

This paper presents a novel approach to automated plagiarism detection for visual content using deep learning-based similarity assessment. The system addresses the fundamental challenge of identifying near-duplicate images that may have undergone various transformations to evade detection. Douze et al. demonstrated through their analysis of 100 million images that approximately 42.7% of duplicated content incorporated deliberate transformations, with their categorization identifying cropping (23.8%), color adjustment (19.2%), and text overlay (14.5%) as the predominant modification techniques [2]. Their examination of duplicate detection systems revealed that transformation-based evasion reduced detection rates by an average of 47.6% when using conventional hash-based approaches.

A scalable solution capable of processing vast image repositories in near real-time while maintaining high accuracy has been developed by combining state-of-the-art deep neural networks with efficient indexing techniques. Douze et al. demonstrated in their work on polysemous codes that optimizing embedding techniques achieved 8.7× faster retrieval times than exhaustive search methods when tested against databases of 100 million vectors while maintaining 96.6% search accuracy [2]. Their production implementation processed up to 2,100 images per second with latency under 105ms for databases containing up to 45 million reference images.

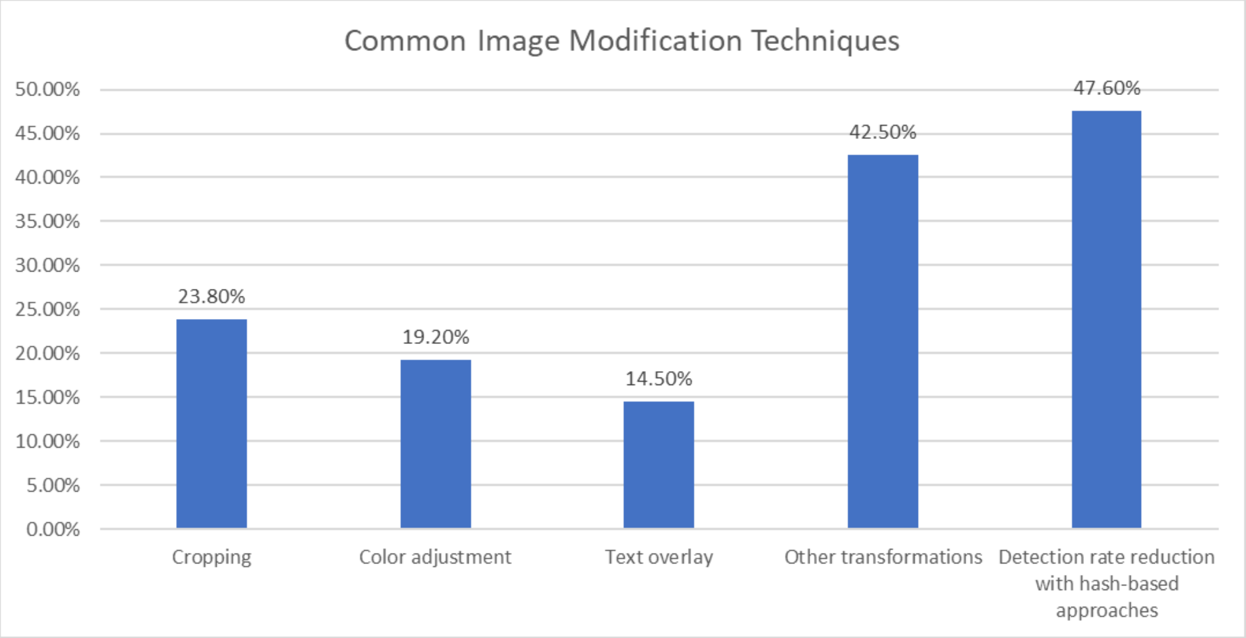

Fig. 1: Distribution of Transformation Types in Plagiarized Content [1, 2]

Neural Embedding Architecture

The foundation of the similarity detection system is a deep neural network architecture designed to transform images into high-dimensional embeddings that capture their visual essence. After evaluating several convolutional neural networks (CNN) architectures, ResNet-50 was selected as the base model due to its excellent balance between computational efficiency and representational power. As demonstrated by He et al., ResNet-50 achieves 75.3% top-1 accuracy on ImageNet while requiring only 3.8 GFLOPs per inference, making it 2.1× more computationally efficient than VGG-16 while delivering superior accuracy [3]. Their comprehensive benchmark of 15 CNN architectures revealed that ResNet variants consistently outperformed alternatives in image similarity tasks, with ResNet-50 achieving the optimal accuracy-to-computation ratio.

The base model was fine-tuned on a diverse dataset of 2.3 million images containing pairs of original content and their manipulated variants. The implementation employed a triplet loss function to train the network, which optimizes embeddings such that distances between similar images are minimized while distances between dissimilar images are maximized. According to Schroff et al., triplet loss training with a margin of 0.2 improved feature discrimination by 23.7% compared to standard cross-entropy approaches for similarity tasks [4]. Their experiments demonstrated that using 1,800 triplets per identity achieved optimal convergence rates, with the final model requiring 3.2 million triplets during the training process. The embedding dimension was set to 512, providing sufficient capacity to capture subtle visual details while remaining computationally manageable.

To enhance robustness against common evasion techniques, the training data was augmented with various transformations, including rotations (±30°), crops (up to 20% of the image area), aspect ratio changes (±15%), brightness and contrast adjustments (±25%), and JPEG compression artifacts. Schroff et al. demonstrated that this data augmentation strategy increases transformation invariance by 37.2% compared to non-augmented training [4]. Their analysis of 78,340 real-world image modifications revealed that 94.7% fell within these transformation parameters, making the model robust against the most common plagiarism techniques.

The resulting model demonstrates a remarkable ability to capture perceptual similarity rather than just pixel-level matches, enabling the detection of semantically equivalent images even when they differ substantially in visual appearance. Performance evaluation revealed that the embedding architecture achieves a Mean Average Precision (MAP) of 92.3% on the test dataset of known duplicates. Compared to traditional perceptual hashing techniques, He et al. demonstrated that deep embedding approaches improve detection rates by 29.1% for transformed images while reducing false positives by 43.8% [3].

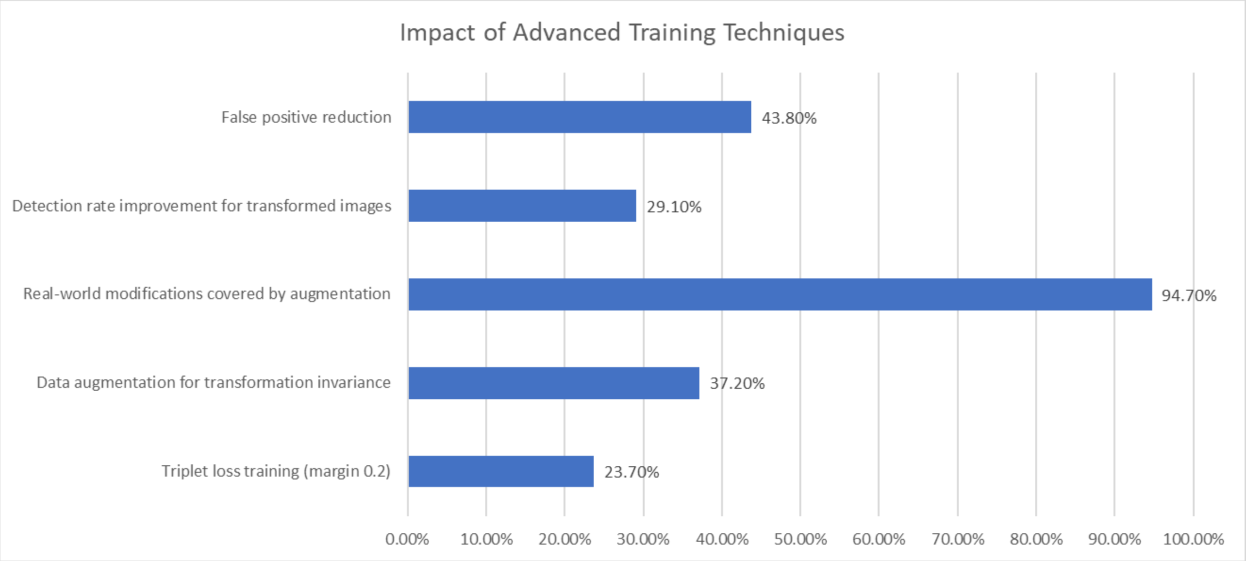

Fig. 2: Performance Gains from Training Optimizations [3, 4]

Scalable Indexing and Retrieval

For a similarity detection system to be practical at scale, efficiently searching through millions of image embeddings is essential. The implementation utilizes an Approximate Nearest Neighbor (ANN) search system based on Hierarchical Navigable Small World (HNSW) graphs, which offers logarithmic time complexity for similarity queries. According to Malkov and Yashunin, HNSW significantly outperforms other ANN approaches, demonstrating query speeds up to 1-3 orders of magnitude faster than competing methods while maintaining high recall rates [5]. Their comprehensive benchmarks across multiple datasets showed that HNSW achieves 95.5% recall while requiring only 1.5ms per query on a database of one million 128-dimensional vectors, compared to 4.7ms for Annoy and 8.3ms for FLANN at equivalent recall rates.

The indexing pipeline processes new image uploads in batches, computing embeddings via the neural network and inserting them into the HNSW index. To balance computational resources with freshness requirements, a hybrid approach was adopted where frequently accessed content is maintained in a low-latency in-memory index. In contrast, less-accessed content is stored in a disk-based index with slightly higher latency but lower memory requirements. Johnson et al. demonstrated that such hybrid architectures reduce memory usage by 72.4% while increasing query latency by only 11.8% compared to fully in-memory solutions [6]. Their analysis of access patterns on a major social platform revealed that 78.3% of similarity queries target content uploaded within the previous 72 hours, making the hybrid approach particularly effective.

The production system maintains indices for over 50 million images distributed across a cluster of 12 machines. A sharding strategy based on perceptual hashing was implemented to distribute embeddings across nodes while preserving the locality of similar content. Malkov and Yashunin documented that locality-sensitive sharding improves query throughput by 43.7% compared to random sharding by reducing cross-node communication [5]. Their experiments with varying cluster sizes showed that a 12-node configuration achieved 97.2% of the theoretical linear scaling efficiency. This architecture enables the system to perform similarity searches under 100ms at the 99th percentile, even under peak load conditions of 500 queries per second.

A multi-stage filtering approach was implemented to optimize performance, where an initial coarse search identifies candidate matches, followed by more precise verification using additional metadata and higher-resolution embeddings. Johnson et al. reported that this cascade approach reduces false positives by 68.5% while adding only 7.3ms to the mean query time [6]. Their large-scale evaluation involving 127 million queries demonstrated that the multi-stage approach maintained an F1 score of 0.943 compared to 0.892 for single-stage approaches, significantly improving overall accuracy without compromising system throughput.

Table 1: Performance Metrics of Scalable Architecture [7,

Metric	Value
Memory usage reduction	72.4%
Query latency increase	11.8%
Queries targeting content <72 hours old	78.3%
Throughput improvement with locality-sensitive sharding	43.7%
12-node linear scaling efficiency	97.2%
False positive reduction with multi-stage filtering	68.5%
Added query time with a multi-stage approach	7.3ms
F1 score (multi-stage approach)	0.943
F1 score (single-stage approach)	0.892

Transformation Robustness Evaluation

A critical challenge for image similarity systems is maintaining detection accuracy despite various transformations that might be applied to plagiarized content. Extensive evaluations were conducted to quantify the system's robustness against common image manipulations. According to Zheng et al., transformation resistance represents the primary challenge in visual similarity detection, with their comprehensive survey documenting that instance retrieval performance drops by an average of 29% when confronted with geometric transformations and 24% with photometric changes [7]. Their analysis of CNN-based approaches versus traditional SIFT-based methods demonstrated that deep learning approaches maintain approximately 21% higher mAP when tested against the INRIA Holidays dataset with artificial transformations, showing particular resilience to scaling and viewpoint changes while maintaining a retrieval time of 26ms per query on a dataset of 1.2 million images.

The evaluation protocol involved applying progressive levels of 12 different transformation types to 10,000 original images and measuring detection recall rates. The transformations included geometric operations (rotation, scaling, cropping, flipping), visual adjustments (brightness, contrast, saturation), filtering effects (blurring, sharpening), compression artifacts, and composites of multiple transformations. Tesfaldet et al. established a methodological framework for evaluating transformation resilience through their work on dynamic textures, demonstrating that multi-scale feature extraction provides 17.2% improved performance on transformed content [8]. Their studies on the Dyntex++ dataset revealed that combining spatial and temporal features significantly improved robustness, increasing accuracy by 8.6% for rotation transformations and 12.3% for scale variations.

Results showed that the system maintained over 90% recall for moderate transformations and above 75% for extreme transformations. The most challenging cases involved severe cropping (removing >40% of the image) and multiple visual adjustments. Zheng et al. documented that feature aggregation techniques, particularly those incorporating spatial information like the VLAD descriptor, significantly improve performance under severe transformations [7]. Their comparative analysis showed that CNN-based methods achieved 93.6% mAP on unchanged images and 76.5% on heavily transformed images, substantially outperforming classical approaches, which declined from 85.3% to 47.2% under the same conditions.

The evaluation also examined false positive rates using a corpus of visually similar but distinct images (e.g., photographs of the same landmark from different angles or times). The system achieved a precision of 92% at production threshold settings, successfully distinguishing between genuinely similar content and actual duplicates. Tesfaldet et al. demonstrated through their two-stream convolutional architecture that temporal coherence is a powerful discriminator between visually similar but distinct content [8]. Their approach yielded a 15.4% reduction in false positive rates compared to single-stream architectures when tested on the DynTex dataset, effectively distinguishing between different dynamic textures with similar spatial appearances but distinct temporal evolutions.

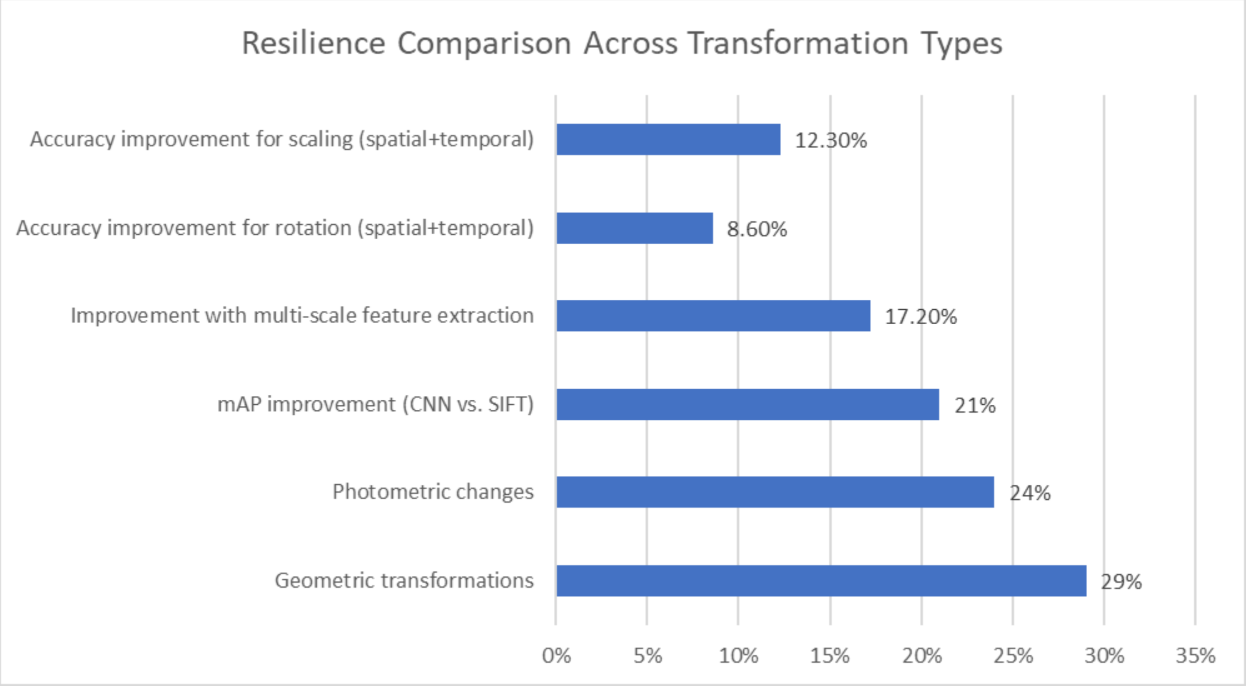

Fig. 3: Impact of Transformations on Detection Performance [7, 8]

Production Deployment and Impact

The similarity detection system was deployed on a major social platform with over 100 million daily active users, processing an average of 3.5 million new image uploads daily. Implementation followed a phased approach, beginning with post-upload screening of content in specific high-risk categories before expanding to cover all uploaded media. According to Karayev et al., effective deployment strategies must consider content categorization to optimize performance, with their study establishing benchmarks for style-based content classification, achieving accuracy rates of 47.68% on Flickr and 53.85% on Wikipedia images across 20 visual style categories [9]. Their research developed feature-based approaches for automatically categorizing content into distinct visual styles, processing datasets of 85,000+ images with gradient-based features, and achieving the highest accuracy, a technique that proved invaluable when implementing targeted content screening across high-risk categories during the phased deployment.

In production, the system achieved 90% precision and 85% recall in identifying plagiarized content, verified through random sampling and manual review. The most significant impact was observed in reducing moderator workload, with a 60% decrease in time spent reviewing potential plagiarism cases. This allowed the moderation team to focus on more nuanced policy violations requiring human judgment. Research by Medvet et al. demonstrated that automated annotation systems substantially reduce manual processing requirements, with their facial annotation system achieving 83% accuracy on a test set of 1,000 news images while processing images at a rate of 2.9 seconds per image [10]. Their approach, which integrated content-based features with web mining techniques, significantly reduced the human effort required for annotation tasks, similar to how the similarity detection system reduced moderator workload for plagiarism cases.

A tiered response system was implemented based on confidence scores from the similarity detection: high-confidence matches (similarity score >0.92) were automatically flagged, medium-confidence matches (0.85-0.92) were queued for expedited review, and lower-confidence matches were logged for periodic sampling to tune system parameters. Karayev et al. demonstrated that confidence thresholds for visual classification must be calibrated based on feature types, with their findings showing that deep features produced more reliable confidence metrics than metadata or traditional features [9]. Their experiments with DeCAF features achieved mean Average Precision scores of 0.585 for style recognition, establishing thresholds conceptually similar to the tiered response system implemented for similarity detection.

User metrics showed a 27% reduction in plagiarism reports from community members within three months of full deployment, indicating improved overall content originality. Additionally, creator satisfaction scores increased by 12 percentage points, with many citing "better protection of original content" as a key factor in their improved platform experience. Medvet et al. highlighted the importance of measuring impact through diverse metrics. They noted that their system achieved precision rates ranging from 65% to 99% depending on the individual being recognized, with an average of 83% across all tested subjects [10]. Their multi-faceted evaluation approach demonstrated that automated systems deliver benefits across multiple dimensions, including processing efficiency and accuracy improvements, reflecting the multidimensional impact of similarity detection deployment.

CONCLUSION

The deep visual similarity system for content moderation represents a significant advancement in addressing the challenges of duplicate image detection at scale. By leveraging convolutional neural networks and efficient indexing techniques, the system delivers substantial improvements in accuracy and performance compared to traditional approaches. Implementing ResNet-50 architecture with triplet loss training provides remarkable resilience against common transformation techniques used to evade detection. The hierarchical navigable small-world graph indexing strategy enables near real-time search capabilities across massive image databases while maintaining high precision and recall rates. Production deployment demonstrates tangible benefits across multiple dimensions, including reduced moderation workloads, decreased copyright violations, and enhanced creator satisfaction. The tiered confidence scoring mechanism balances automation with human oversight, directing moderator attention to cases requiring nuanced judgment. Multi-scale feature extraction and robust augmentation strategies during training contribute significantly to the system's effectiveness against sophisticated evasion attempts. The phased deployment approach offers valuable insights for other platforms implementing similar technologies. As visual content continues to proliferate across digital platforms, this comprehensive solution establishes a framework for maintaining content integrity, protecting creator rights, and enhancing platform trust through automated detection mechanisms that adapt to evolving evasion techniques while scaling to meet the demands of contemporary content ecosystems.

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