# Design Guidelines for Feature Model Construction: Exploring the Relationship between Feature Model Structure and Structural Complexity

#### Xin Zhao and Jeff Gray

Department of Computer Science, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL, U.S.A.

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Abstract: Software Product Lines (SPLs) play an important role in the context of large-scale production of software families. Feature models (FMs) are essential in SPLs by representing all the commonalities and variabilities in a product line. Currently, several tools support automated analysis of FMs, such as checking the consistency of FMs and counting the valid configurations of a product line. Although these tools greatly reduce the complexity of FM analysis, FM design is often performed manually, thus being prone to bad design choices in the domain analysis phase. This paper reports on our work to improve FM qualities from the exploration of the relationship between FM structure and structural complexity. By performing two common operations (i.e., consistency checking and counting valid configurations on FMs with different sizes and structures), we collected the time that an automated tool needs to finish these operations. Then, we applied data mining approaches to explore the relationship between FM structure and structure and structural complexity. In addition, we provide guidelines for designing FMs based on our observations.

# **1 INTRODUCTION**

Off-the-shelf software is often complex, hard to debug and burdensome to maintain because it tries to provide a one-size-fits-all solution. In order to deal with software generalization, Software Product Lines (SPLs) (Clements and Northrop, 2002) emerged in the late 1960s. SPLs focus software development on reusable parts to provide flexible product configurations based on individual needs. Instead of software development as a whole system from requirements analyses to testing, SPL divides software into several standardized parts that are easier to check and test compared with integrated systems. SPLs reduce development cost and time before they are released to the market because developers do not need to design and develop each product from scratch (Apel et al., 2016). Creating different products for different needs is simplified to the selection of options from common functional assets.

A feature model (FM) is a compact representation of all the software products in terms of features in an SPL. In this paper, we provide design guidelines for FM construction from the exploration of the relationship between FM structure and complexity. FM structure refers to the structure of a feature diagram - a graphical representation of a FM. FM structural complexity is the complexity of a FM representation across several operations. We use the execution time for FM analysis operations to measure the structural complexity of a model. By examining the relationship between a FM's structure and its structural complexity, we explore the internal association among these two factors, thus providing guidelines for FM construction to domain analysts. The core contributions of this paper include the following:

- Application of data mining approaches to explore the relationship between a FM's structure and structural complexity;
- A set of design guidelines for FM construction to domain analysts.

This paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we introduce background information about FMs and the evaluation of FM structural complexity. Section 3 presents a running example to explain the purpose of our work. In Section 4, we give an introduction to our experimental setup and in Section 5, we summarize and analyze the results of our experiment, and provide our guideliens for FM construction. Section 6

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discusses the threats to validity in our work. In Section 7, we identify related work in the literature. We conclude this paper and propose future work in Section 8.

## 2 BACKGROUND

In this section, we introduce concepts about feature model, one approach used to evaluate the feature model structural complexity and two data mining approaches applied in this paper.

### 2.1 Feature Model

In a feature model, features have different characteristics. If a feature is expected to appear in every product in a product line, this feature is mandatory. Otherwise is optional. If a feature acts as an interface, it is an abstract feature. Otherwise, it is a concrete feature. Figure 1 shows a feature model for a simple cellphone SPL.



Figure 1: A feature model for a cellphone SPL.

A feature model is usually organized as a tree structure. Similar to other tree structures, a feature diagram incorporates the concepts of parent and child nodes. If a feature is the child of another feature, the child feature can only be selected when its parent feature is chosen. When several children are selected from a single parent node at the same time, we define this relationship as OR. When only one child node is allowed to be selected among several children, we define this relationship as XOR (eXclusive OR). In Figure 1, feature Screen and feature White/Black, Color and Resolution consist of an XOR group. Features Media, Music and Photo form an OR group.

### 2.2 Complexity Evaluation

Stuikys and Damasevicius (2009) proposed Compound Complexity (CC) to assess the structural complexity of a feature model, shown as follows:

$$CC = NF + \frac{1}{9} * NM^{2} + \frac{2}{9} * NO^{2} + \frac{1}{3} * XOR^{2} + \frac{1}{3} * OR^{2} + \frac{1}{3} * NC^{2}$$
(1)

In the formula above, NF is the number of features; NM is the number of mandatory features; NO is the number of optional features; XOR is the number of exclusive OR groups; OR is the number of OR groups, and NC is the number of constraints. The calculation formula and the constants in Equation (1) are based on criticism of Metcalfe's law (Briscoe et al., 2006). Metcalfe's law (Shapiro et al., 1998) is a statement showing that the value of network communications is proportional to the square of the number of connected users in the system. However, whether the weight assigned to each metric is accurate needs further validation both from a theoretical and empirical perspective.

## 2.3 Data Mining

#### 2.3.1 Linear Regression

Regression is a data mining technique for predicting continuous values. It estimates the conditional expectation of a dependent variable given the independent variables. There are several types of regression, such as linear regression, logistic regression and non-linear regression. Multiple linear regression takes the form:

$$y = \beta_1 * x_1 + \beta_2 * x_2 + \beta_3 * x_3 + \dots + \beta_n * x_n + \varepsilon$$
(2)

Multiple linear regression tries to model the relationship between one dependent variable and two or more independent variables by making them fit into a linear equation to observe the pattern. For example, if we want to observe whether individual income has a relationship between one's education background, living place and working experience, we can apply multiple linear regression to the model, setting individual income as the dependent variable and other factors as independent variables. In this paper, we first apply multiple linear regression to explore the relationship between feature model structure and its structural complexity.

#### 2.3.2 Support Vector Machine

A Support Vector Machine (SVM) is a supervised learning model in machine learning and data mining

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for data classification and regression analyses, proposed by Vladimir Vapnik and his colleagues in 1992 (Boser et al., 1992). SVM is widely used in data classification and data regression. In this paper, we use SVM in regression analysis through Support Vector Regression (SVR).

Given a data set, SVR maps input examples into a high dimensional feature space and performs regression in that space. SVM regression performs linear regression proposed by Vapnik. By calculating the empirical risks of the loss function, the original problem could be solved through an optimization problem (Boser et al., 1992).

When we apply SVM for different regression problems, we need different kernel functions. The selection of a kernel function plays an important role in the accuracy of the results. However, constructing a kernel function for a specific problem is still a challenge (Su and Ding, 2006). The most frequently used kernel functions are polynomial kernel function, radial basis function kernel (RBF kernel function) and Sigmoid kernel function. In this paper, we apply a polynomial kernel function in our experiment.

# **3 MOTIVATING EXAMPLE**

Consider an automotive product line with two basic necessary functions – Transmission (either Automatic or Manual) and Engine (either Electric, Gasoline, or both). From Figure 2, we see that the solutions are different. Feature model 2.b applies feature group notation – OR, whereas feature model 2.a simply lists all the sub-features according to the requirements (Hybrid means the car could use both electric power and gasoline).

Among feature model 2.a and 2.b, which one is preferred? The answer to this simple question is not as easy as it seems, especially when the number of features in a feature model is large. There are many metrics proposed by researchers to evaluate a feature model. In Bezerra's work (Bezerra et al., 2015), although the authors summarized more than 40 metrics to evaluate a feature model in different characteristics, choosing the best metric is still challenging for developers. For these metrics, most are statistical descriptions of feature models, such as the number of features, and the number of constraints. However, there is not a clear understanding on how to analyze a combination of these metrics. Although Stuikys et al. (Štuikys and Damaševičius, 2009) try to solve this problem by providing three types of complexities (i.e., structural complexity, compound complexity and cognitive complexity), they did not

consider whether different metrics have different weights when calculating feature model complexity.



Figure 2: Two different feature model designs for the same problem description.

# 4 EXPERIMENTAL SETUP

In this section, we discuss our experimental setup. We start with defining our research questions, then we summarize the methodologies we used to answer the research questions. We also introduce the execution environment and tools used in this work. The results of our experimental data are available at the following URL: http://bit.ly/feature-data.

## 4.1 Research Questions

Motivated by the example introduced in Section 3, we define our research questions as follows:

- **Research Question 1 (RQ1):** What is the relationship between feature model structure and structural complexity?
- **Research Question 2 (RQ2):** What guidelines can be recommended for feature model construction based on observations from RQ1?

## 4.2 Experiment Design

Given a feature model, assuming that the model satisfies all the requirements, we are interested in whether the structure of the feature model affects its structural complexity. For example, the feature models shown in Figures 2.a and 2.b both represent the same software product line. Feature model 2.b uses fewer features, but adopts an OR group instead of a XOR group. What is the consequence of this modification? Will the increase of OR groups in a feature model also increase the structural complexity, even if the total number of features decrease?

In this paper, we chose seven independent variables:

- *x*<sub>1</sub>: The number of total features (TF);
- *x*<sub>2</sub>: The number of mandatory features (MF);
- *x*<sub>3</sub>: The number of optional features (OF);
- *x*<sub>4</sub>: The number of OR groups (OR);
- *x*<sub>5</sub>: The number of XOR groups (XOR);
- *x*<sub>6</sub>: The number of total features that are in either OR group or XOR group (NG) ;
- *x*<sub>7</sub>: The number of constraints (NC).

There are two reasons why we selected these seven metrics. First, as integer values, these metrics are the most basic structural measuring metrics; second, the calculation of these metrics are provided by an automated tool we used in our experiment (please see Section 4.4 for details). For a feature model, the value of  $x_1$  to  $x_7$  is easy to obtain by analyzing the FMs.

In order to obtain the value of y corresponding to each set of  $x_i$ , we adopted the approach proposed by Pohl et al., (2013). In their approach, they applied width measures from graph theory to identify the structural complexity of feature models. By setting a feature model to automated analysis, they collected the time consumed by their analysis tool to finish the operations. They used the time spent as an indicator for structural complexity of a feature model. In our approach, we chose three solvers to perform two operations. The three solvers are Choco (Jussien et al., 2008), sat4j (Le Berre and Parrain, 2010) and Javabdd (Whaley, 2007). The two operations check whether a feature model is valid and count the number of valid configurations.

After the collection of  $x_i$  and its corresponding feature model structural complexity y, we need to find the relationship (i.e., the value of coefficients for each  $x_i$ ) between feature model structure and its structural complexity. We apply two approaches: multiple linear regression and SVM. The process of our experiment is shown in Figure 3.

#### 4.3 Experiment Execution

Our experiment is executed on a desktop with an Intel Core i7 - 4790 CPU at 3.60 GHz and 8 GB RAM. The operating system is Windows 7 64-bit. Each operation on each task had a timeout of 3600s.

#### 4.4 Tool and Feature Model Repository

In order to obtain the FM structural complexity, we adopted the automated tool from Pohl's work. The automated tool provides automated analysis of FMs, such as valid checking, valid configuration counting, and listing all the valid configurations. The tool is available at (CoFFeMAP, 2018). In order to obtain the feature structure information, we applied SPLOT (Software Product Line Online Tool), which is an online system for SPL editing and analysis (Mendonca et al., 2009). We applied multiple linear regression to explore the relationship between FM structure and structural complexity. We used IBM SPSS Statistics (SPSS, 2018), a widely used program for statistical analysis in many areas. To apply SVM for regression, we adopted a data mining tool called



Figure 3: Overview of experimental process.

Weka (Weka, 2018), which contains several machine learning algorithms for data mining tasks. Both of these two tools provide a graphical user interface.

# **5 RESULTS AND GUIDELINES**

### 5.1 Experimental Results and Analyses

Table 1: LR for Choco performing valid checking.

Model	Standardized Coefficients	Sig.
TF	0.540	0.000
MF	0.062	0.304
OF	-0.130	0.054
OR	-0.025	0.628
XOR	-0.017	0.747
NG	Excluded Varial	ble
NC	0.322	0.000

Table 2: LR for Choco performing configuration counting.

Model	Standardized Coefficients	Sig.
TF	0.219	0.130
MF	-0.103	0.267
OF	0.141	0.054
OR	0.123	0.092
XOR	-0.119	0.166
NG	Excluded Varial	ble
NC	-0.037	0.581

Table 3: LR for sat4j performing valid checking.

Model	Standardized Coefficients	Sig.
TF	1.751	0.000
MF	-0.424	0.000
OF	-0.431	0.000
OR	-0.200	0.000
XOR	-0.418	0.000
NG	Excluded Varial	ble
NC	0.034	0.410

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Table 4: LR for	sat41	nerforming	configuration	counting
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Model	Standardized Coefficients	Sig.
TF	1.268	0.000
MF	-0.799	0.000
OF	-0.246	0.056
OR	-0.125	0.254
XOR	-0.589	0.009
NG	Excluded Varial	ble
NC	-0.202	0.006

Table 5: LR for Javabdd performing valid checking.

Model	Standardized Coefficients	Sig.	
TF	0.159	0.523	
MF	-0.097	0.479	
OF	0.006	0.956	
OR	0.065	0.440	
XOR	-0.192	0.708	
NG	Excluded Variable		
NC	0.027	0.739	

Table	6:	LR	for	Javabdd	performing	configuration
countin	ng.					

Model	Standardized Coefficients	Sig.
TF	0.351	0.070
MF	-0.113	0.279
OF	-0.122	0.171
OR	0.535	0.000
XOR	-0.023	0.806
NG	Excluded Variab	le
NC	-0.096	0.118

Tables 1 through 8 show our results for regression analyses of all the FMs in our experiment (timeout results are excluded). Tables 1 to 6 are the results from multiple linear regressions executed in IBM SPSS. Table 7 show the results from SVR performed in Weka (kernel function is polynomial kernel and the exponent is set to 1). Table 8 shows the results with the same experimental setting as Table 7. However, in Table 8, all FMs have only 10 features.

#### 5.1.1 Multiple Linear Regression

From Tables 1 to 6, we can see that most of the results we obtained from multiple linear regression have a significant value larger than 0.05. Therefore, most of the values are not statistically significant. One explanation for this may be for a given FM, its structure and structural complexity is not a linear relationship. The number of FM features and FM constraints always have a positive correlation with its structural complexity. Thus, the more features and the more constraints in an FM, the higher its structural complexity.

The more mandatory features in an FM, the less structural complexity it demonstrates, which seems intuitive. Suppose in a FM, if all the features are mandatory, then there will be only one possible valid configuration – a configuration simply adds up all the features without any variabilities. On the other hand, if a FM has many variations, it will increase its structural complexity.

From Tables 1 to 6, we can also observe that given the same data, different solvers produce different analysis results (compare with Table 1, Table 3 and Table 5; Table 2, Table 4 and Table 6). It also indicates that the structural complexity also relates to the solver used. Our experimental data shows that when performing the same tasks, Javabdd and sat4j run faster than Choco. This finding is not related to our analysis in this paper, but it may provide developers with insights into tool selection with regard to FM automated analysis.

	Choco		Sat4j		Javabdd	
	Valid Checking	Configuration Counting	Valid Checking	Configuration Counting	Valid Checking	Configuration Counting
TF	0.327	0.0067	0.2522	0.0044	0.0308	0.0577
MF	0.1224	-0.0026	-0.0371	-0.0022	-0.0142	0.0039
OF	0.0582	0.006	-0.0807	0.0041	-0.0071	-0.0091
OR	-0.1333	0.003	-0.0834	-0.0004	0.0096	0.046
XOR	0.0213	-0.0061	-0.0357	-0.0039	-0.0111	0.0485
NG	0.3597	0.0066	0.3786	0.0062	0.0607	0.0538
NC	0.268	-0.0063	0.0077	-0.0052	0.0016	-0.0007
MAE	0.0013	1.6306	0.0004	31.7262	0.0036	0
MSE	0.0021	12.402	0.0016	191.6283	0.0198	0.0001

Table 7: Regression results based on SVR (MAE: Mean Absolute Error; MSE: Mean Squared Error).

Table 8: Regression results based on SVR given feature models with 10 features.

	Choco		Sat4j		Javabdd	
	Valid Checking	Configuration Counting	Valid Checking	Configuration Counting	Valid Checking	Configuration Counting
MF	-0.0437	-0.1927	-0.012	-0.0489	-0.1114	-0.0039
OF	-0.0192	-0.1118	-0.2652	0.0178	-0.0765	0.0369
OR	-0.0629	-0.0868	-0.3307	-0.0405	0.0216	0.1715
XOR	-0.0973	-0.3744	-0.0364	-0.0246	-0.0569	-0.0485
NG	0.0628	0.3476	0.3119	0.035	0.2104	0.0833
NC	-0.0141	0.0148	0.0695	-0.0195	0.0486	0.0104
MAE	0.0019	0.0025	0.0004	0.0069	0	0.0003
MSE	0.0027	0.0032	0.0005	0.0279	0	0.0005

### 5.1.2 SVR

From the results of Tables 1 to 6, we can see that the relationship between a FM structure and structure complexity is more complex than a pure linear relationship. Based on this, we applied SVR for regression and chose a non-linear kernel function for regression. The results are shown in Table 7.

From Table 7, we can see that similar to the results shown in Tables 1 to 6, the number of total features and the number of grouped features (features either in OR group or XOR group) have a positive correlation with its structural complexity. Thus, the more features/grouped features, the higher its structural complexity. Although Mean Absolute Error (MAE) and Mean Squared Error (MSE) differs in each experiment, this positive correlation does not change.

Another interesting observation from Table 7 is that for the number of constraints in a FM, when the FM executes a valid checking operation, the number of constraints has a positive relationship with its structural complexity. When the FM executes the task of counting valid configurations, the number of constraints has a negative relationship with its structural complexity. One possible explanation for this is during the execution of counting valid configurations, the more constraints in an FM, the fewer valid configurations available in a SPL, thus making calculation time shorter than validation checking. Table 8 shows our experimental results when executing all the tasks with different solvers on FMs with 10 features. The purpose of this experiment is to explore the relationship between FM structure and its structural complexity when fixing the FM size. There are two reasons why we chose models with 10 features:

- In the FM repository provided by SPLOT, there are 83 FMs that have 10 features in the model. We randomly chose 31 samples among these 83 FMs.
- Compared with FMs in other sizes, the experiment results with 10 features are the most complete.

From Table 8, we can see that the number of mandatory features has a negative correlation with the structural complexity of a FM and the number of grouped features has a positive correlation with the structural complexity of a FM.

Compared with features in an OR group and in an XOR group, we can see that features in an OR group increase the structural complexity compared with features in a XOR group. Another interesting finding is that in different operations using different solvers, the number of constraints plays different roles related to the change of a FM's structural complexity.

## 5.2 Guidelines for FM Construction

Based on the experimental results and analyses of the previous section, we suggest the following guidelines for FM construction:

- Use fewer features when possible. Both linear regression and SVR support the conclusion that the number of features in a FM always increases the structural complexity when performing automated analysis.
- Place fewer features in group notations when possible. We also observe that when grouping features in a FM, structural complexity is always relatively higher.
- Choose an XOR group over an OR group when both are options. An XOR group is better than an OR group with regards to decreasing structural complexity of a FM.

Although the guidelines seem intuitive, we validated these guidelines from theoretical aspects. To our best knowledge, this is the first study to confirm these intuitive guidelines through experimentation.

# 6 THREATS TO VALIDITY

There exist several threats to validity in our study. In this section, we discuss these threats from two aspects: internal threats and external threats.

## 6.1 Internal Threats to Validity

Threats to internal validity compromise our confidence in saying whether the relationship between dependent variables and independent variable is accurate. In this study, we summarize our internal threats to validity as follows:

- Limited Dataset. One of the biggest challenges of our work is the limited dataset we used in our study. Although we adopted more than 300 FMs, additional data is needed to build a more accurate regression model. In our future work, we plan to use all the FMs provided by SPLOT.
- Limited Data Mining Approaches. In this paper, we only adopted two data mining approaches to explore the relationship. However, we may find different results if we apply other data mining approaches.
- **Tool Selection.** We used the automated analyses tool proposed by Pohl et al. in their work to obtain the value of dependent variables. However, there may exist better tools for our analyses. When exploring the structure and complexity relationships, we chose Weka. It is also possible that other regression tools could yield different results.

Possible approaches to improve our results include applying more data, using more data mining approaches and trying additional automated tools, across various combinations of techniques.

# 6.2 External Threats

In our study, external threats to validity refer to whether the results are generalizable and whether we provide empirical validation of results. Our results are built upon theoretical analyses only. The results will be more convincing if we observe that our empirical evaluations have similar results to theoretical results. In order to mitigate external threats, we plan to conduct a future empirical study. The study will consist of three steps. First, we will introduce participants with the necessary knowledge to complete the empirical study. Second, we will ask participants questions similar to the automated analysis performed with existing tools and collect the time needed to answer the questions. We will then compare the empirical and theoretical results.

# 7 RELATED WORK

In this section, we introduce literature related to the research areas discussed in this paper. We will start with FMs and FM evaluations with metrics. Then we introduce some guidelines to feature modeling practice proposed in other work.

## 7.1 Feature Model Representation

Several researchers have proposed different languages for feature modeling. All of these languages can be classified into two categories: diagrammatic languages and textual languages. Diagrammatic languages represent feature models in graphs with different visual notations. Kang et al., (1990) first grouped features into mandatory features, alternative features and optional features. Griss et al., (1998) adopted *OR* and *XOR* (exclusive or) to express the relationship between parent features and child features. In our work, we conform to Griss' notation.

Textual languages for FMs seek to represent FMs with formal semantics. Batory (2005) suggested applying propositional formulas (Mannion, 2012) as feature model formal semantics. Some works combined the concept of class modeling and feature modeling, such as Clafer (Bąk et al., 2016) and Forfamel (Asikainen et al., 2006). Although their grammars and usage are not the same, the concept is

similar – providing feature modeling with class support.

### 7.2 Feature Model Evaluation

Several measurements have been proposed to evaluate the quality of FMs. These measurements assess several quality characteristics, such as maintainability, usability, functionality and security. Most works related to maintainability analyses (such as (Bagheri and Gasevic, 2011); (Patzke et al., 2012) (Montagud et al., 2012); (Chen and Babar, 2011)) focus on maintainability analysis of models.

In Bagheri's work (Bagheri and Gasevic, 2011), the authors proposed several metrics for three characteristics of a FM: analysability, changeability, and understandability (Al-Kilidar et al., 2005). The authors conducted an experiment to validate whether the metrics selected in their work are accurate predictors for FMs in real scenarios. However, the measurements in their work relate to maintainability analysis only and do not consider influences from other attributes (such as usability and reliability). Patzke et al., (2012) focused on variability complexity management during the evolution of FMs. Their paper presented an approach to help developers identify improvement opportunities in product line infrastructure. The authors applied their approach to three industrial scenarios to validate their methodology. They also listed several symptoms of variability "code smells" of product lines. However, both of the evaluation metrics and the code smell symptoms are only for variability analysis and management in software product lines.

### 7.3 Guidelines for Feature Models

Lee et al., (2002) proposed a guideline for a feature modeling process based on their experience from industrial practice. The guideline consists of several parts, such as guidelines for domain planning, feature identification, organization and refactoring. Kang et al., (2003) conducted a similar work. Compared with (Lee et al., 2002), they added discussions about design principles for system architecture and components for Feature-Oriented Software Development.

# 8 CONCLUSION

We explored the relationship between FM structure and its structural complexity by applying data mining approaches to the feature model repository provided by SPLOT. Our experimental evaluation led to observations that suggested several FM construction guidelines for model designers. The contribution of this paper is an exploration of this relationship based on analysis from data mining approaches. To our best knowledge, this is the first work that applied data mining to explore patterns in a FM repository. Our goal is to help construct robust feature models that may improve the quality of software product lines.

In the future, we plan to include more data in our regression model to improve the accuracy of the result, adopt more data mining approaches (such as decision tree and graidient boosting) to analyze the dataset and perform empirical studies to validate our theoretical results. As noted in Section 4, all of our experimental data is available at: http://bit.ly/feature-data.

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