Semantic Code Search using Hypergraph Neural Networks

B. Tech. Project Report

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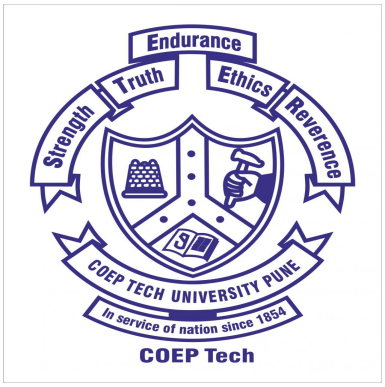

DEPARTMENT OF COMPUTER SCIENCE & ENGINEERING

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May 2025

DEPARTMENT OF COMPUTER SCIENCE & ENGINEERING,

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CERTIFICATE

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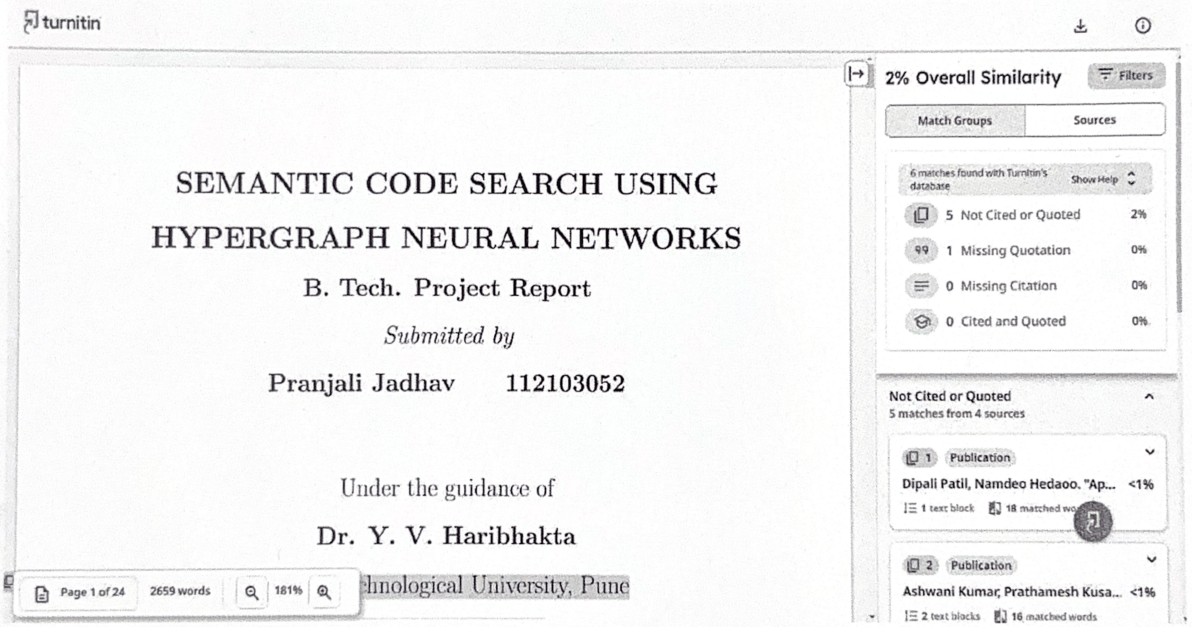

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Abstract

In this project, we explore a novel approach to semantic code search using Hypergraph Neural Networks (HGNNs), specifically the AllSet Transformer architecture. The primary objective is to improve the contextual understanding and accuracy of code search by modeling the higher-order relationships between code functions and conceptual keywords as a hypergraph. Our model differs from conventional graph-based systems by representing these complex multi-way associations through hyperedges that connect multiple related nodes.

We construct a hypergraph from the Python split of CodeSearchNet dataset, where hyperedges link function nodes with shared conceptual keywords. Node embeddings are initialized with E5-small encodings and trained using a hyperpath-based contrastive loss that aligns concept-driven semantic paths with relevant functions.

At inference, a natural language query is used to select top concept nodes and form query-specific hyperpaths. These are aggregated into semantic representations and matched against function embeddings to retrieve top-k most semantically relevant code snippets.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of software development, developers frequently depend on code search engines to retrieve relevant snippets that align with their programming goals. Ideally, these systems should be capable of interpreting natural language queries and returning results based on semantic understanding rather than surface-level keyword matches. However, many existing search systems remain constrained by shallow representations that emphasize token-level or syntactic similarity. Such approaches often struggle to handle paraphrased queries or those that express the same intent through different terminology.

Recent advances in deep learning have given rise to transformer-based code retrieval models such as CodeBERT and GraphCodeBERT. These models embed code and queries into a shared vector space to facilitate semantic matching. While effective to some extent, their architectures typically focus on pairwise relationships—either between code and documentation or between a query and a snippet—which limits their ability to represent broader conceptual associations in code.

To address this, we propose a semantic code search framework that leverages hypergraphs to model higher-order relationships between code functions and conceptual keywords. In our system, a hypergraph is constructed

from the CodeSearchNet dataset, where hyperedges connect multiple function nodes based on shared concepts extracted from natural language annotations. At the core is the AllSet Transformer, a neural network designed for message passing over hypergraphs, enabling rich aggregation of conceptual context.

This approach holds promise for practical applications such as improving documentation navigation and supporting developers—especially newcomers—in exploring unfamiliar codebases. By aligning natural language queries with semantically structured representations of code, our system enhances the relevance and interpretability of retrieved snippets.

This project explores the design, motivation, and evaluation of hypergraph-based code retrieval, positioning it as a step toward more context-aware and intelligent code search systems.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Recent progress in semantic code search has centered on transformer-based models like CodeBERT (Feng et al., 2020), GraphCodeBERT, and UniXcoder, which jointly embed code and natural language. CodeBERT's bimodal pretraining improved tasks like code search and summarization, while GraphCodeBERT extended this by incorporating data-flow graphs. However, these models mainly rely on pairwise code-query relationships, limiting their ability to capture complex multi-way dependencies.

As code reuse becomes central to development, semantic code search has emerged to bridge the gap between developer intent and code structure, outperforming traditional keyword-based systems. Early neural models like CoNCRA (Martins Gerosa, 2020) used CNNs to jointly embed queries and code, effectively capturing local syntax and semantics.

While deep learning dominates, traditional IR techniques like BM25 and RM3, when paired with code-aware tokenization (Zhang et al., 2021), still show competitive performance, reminding us of their contextual value. More recent models like UniXcoder integrate ASTs and comments through contrastive learning to bridge code understanding and generation (Guo et al., 2021).

Other innovations include CSRS (Cheng Kuang, 2022), which combines

n-gram embeddings with co-attention for balanced semantic and lexical relevance. Structural insights have also driven advancements, from DeepCS (Gu et al., 2018) to AST-path-based models like PSCS (Sun et al., 2020), which consider both terminal and non-terminal nodes. Multi-perspective frameworks like MP-CAT (Haldar et al., 2020) further enhance retrieval by capturing both global and local features.

In summary, semantic code search has advanced from syntax-based models to architectures leveraging structure, semantics, and deep learning. While traditional methods retain value in specific contexts, emerging approaches like HGNNs provide a promising path to capture richer, multi-way code-text relationships.

Chapter 3

Research Gaps and Problem Statement

3.1 Research Gaps

Despite significant advancements in semantic code search, current models predominantly rely on pairwise relationships between queries and code snippets, limiting their ability to capture the intricate, multi-way dependencies inherent in complex codebases. These models often rely on static embeddings, which measure similarity between queries and code elements, without incorporating dynamic reasoning over structured representations. As a result, they struggle to model the full spectrum of semantic associations that span multiple concepts, such as functions, classes, and methods, which are essential for a comprehensive understanding of code.

Additionally, while transformer-based models like CodeBERT, GraphCodeBERT, and UniXcoder have shown remarkable success in aligning code and natural language, they still fail to fully exploit the structural relationships among code elements. The representation of code semantics as a set of isolated entities, without considering their higher-order interdependencies, leads to incomplete or imprecise search results, particularly when dealing with

large, complex codebases.

Notably, the potential of Hypergraph Neural Networks (HGNNs) to capture multi-way relationships has been demonstrated in domains such as recommendation systems and multi-label classification. However, their application to code search remains underexplored, despite their suitability for representing shared conceptual relationships across multiple code elements.

3.2 Problem statement

Exploring Semantic Code Search using Hypergraph Neural Networks to capture higher-order multi-way relationships between functions and concepts.

Chapter 4

Proposed Methodology

4.1 Hypergraph Construction

The core idea of our approach lies in constructing a hypergraph that captures the relationships between functions and concepts derived from function documentation. This hypergraph is built by extracting concept-like keywords from function documentation using Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques, with TF-IDF being used to identify the most salient terms.

4.1.1 Keyword Extraction

Keywords are extracted from function documentation strings using TF-IDF, a popular method for weighting terms in a document. This helps identify significant words or phrases that best represent the function's purpose or operations. Since functions can share similar documentation, TF-IDF aids in selecting the most relevant and distinct keywords for each function, which are then used to link function nodes to concept nodes in the hypergraph. The extracted keywords are treated as concepts, which could be broader programming concepts, operations, or high-level descriptions of the function's intent. This many-to-many relationship structure allows for richer semantic understanding, as multiple functions can relate to the same concept, and vice

versa.

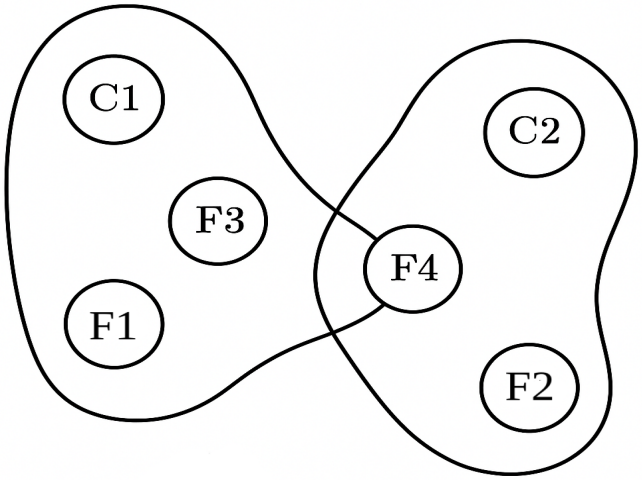

Figure 4.1: Hypergraph Construction Example

4.1.2 Many-to-Many Relationships

By using this many-to-many approach, we capture more complex associations than traditional binary relationships. A concept may relate to multiple functions performing similar operations, and functions may correspond to several concepts depending on the context of the documentation. This helps model deeper, nuanced relationships that go beyond simple one-to-one mappings, enhancing the semantic search capability.

4.2 Node Feature Encoding

For node feature encoding, we employ pre-trained embeddings from the E5-small model to initialize the features of the nodes in the hypergraph. The node types are considered during training, distinguishing between function nodes and concept nodes.

4.2.1 E5-small Embeddings

The E5-small embeddings are used to initialize the function and concept node features, providing a rich, semantically meaningful representation. This pre-trained model was selected due to its robust performance in understanding text semantics, which is essential for both function documentation and conceptual keywords.

4.2.2 Node Type Distinction

To handle different types of nodes (i.e., function and concept nodes), we use learnable embeddings for each node type. This ensures that the model can distinguish between these two categories of nodes, enabling more effective learning by recognizing their different semantic roles. The concept node represents higher-level abstractions, while the function node corresponds to specific implementations, thus requiring different treatment during the encoding process.

4.3 HGNN Architecture

Our architecture leverages the AllSet Transformer, which consists of multiple Hypergraph Attention Layers. This model builds on multi-head self-attention to process hypergraph-structured data, allowing information to propagate across function and concept nodes based on their interconnections.

4.3.1 Hypergraph Attention Layer

The Hypergraph Attention Layer processes nodes using multi-head attention, both for node-to-node and node-to-edge interactions. The key feature here is the ability to attend to all neighboring nodes in the hypergraph, which

enables the model to aggregate information from multiple concept nodes for each function node. This is especially important when capturing the shared semantics between functions and their associated concepts.

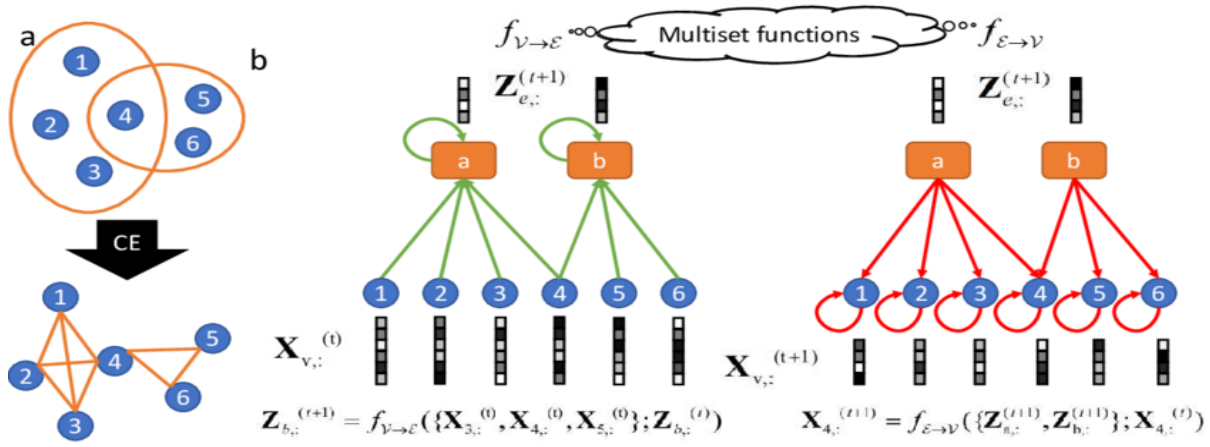

Figure 4.2: AllSet Transformer

4.3.2 Self-Attention on Hyperedges

The self-attention mechanism applied to the hyperedges aggregates information from all nodes connected to a particular concept. This approach ensures that the model comprehensively learns the interdependencies between functions and concepts, allowing it to better understand the complex relationships that may exist between them.

4.3.3 Type-Aware Processing

Each node is processed differently based on its type. The model uses layer normalization and feed-forward networks to refine the node embeddings at each layer, helping the model learn more accurate and meaningful representations.

4.4 Training Strategy

To learn effective representations, we use a contrastive learning strategy centered on hyperpaths—semantic groupings of concept nodes related to each function. The goal is to align the embedding of a hyperpath with its associated function embedding, while distancing it from unrelated functions.

4.4.1 Hyperpath-Based Constrastive Loss

The contrastive loss is computed using the embeddings of dynamically formed hyperpaths (aggregated from relevant concept nodes), along with embeddings of corresponding positive and negative function nodes. For each training instance, the model is encouraged to bring the hyperpath embedding closer to the embedding of a related function while pushing it away from unrelated functions.

Definitions. Let:

- $C_i \in R^{n \times d}$: Concept embeddings for sample i
- $P_i \in R^{p \times d}$: Positive function embeddings
- $N_i \in R^{q \times d}$: Negative function embeddings
- $M_i \in \{0, 1\}^n$: Binary mask indicating selected hyperpath concepts
- τ: Temperature scalar for scaling similarities

Step 1: Hyperpath Embedding. For each sample i, the hyperpath embedding $h_H^{(i)}$ is computed as the mean of selected concept embeddings:

$$h_H^{(i)} = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{n} M_i^{(j)} C_i^{(j)}}{\sum_{j=1}^{n} M_i^{(j)} + \epsilon}$$

Step 2: Scaled Cosine Similarity. Compute cosine similarities between the hyperpath and both positive and negative function embeddings:

$$s_i^+ = \sum_{k=1}^{p} \exp\left(\frac{\cos(h_H^{(i)}, P_i^{(k)})}{\tau}\right), \quad s_i^- = \sum_{l=1}^{q} \exp\left(\frac{\cos(h_H^{(i)}, N_i^{(l)})}{\tau}\right)$$

Step 3: Contrastive Loss. The final loss encourages similarity with positive functions and dissimilarity with negatives:

$$\mathcal{L} = -\frac{1}{B}\sum_{i=1}^{B} \log\left(\frac{s_i^+}{s_i^+ + s_i^- + \epsilon}\right)$$

4.4.2 Hyperpath Aggregation

Each hyperpath is constructed by aggregating the embeddings of concept nodes associated with a particular function. These aggregated embeddings serve as semantic anchors for training. Cosine similarity is used to compute distances between the hyperpath and function embeddings, which are then passed into a softmax-based contrastive loss.

4.4.3 Advantages of Hyperpath Loss

This strategy ensures that functions sharing similar conceptual semantics are pulled closer in the embedding space, while those that differ are pushed apart. Unlike traditional pairwise contrastive loss, this formulation incorporates group-level context through hyperpaths, allowing the model to learn more coherent and context-aware representations.

4.5 Inference Procedure

4.5.1 Query Concept Retrieval

The query is embedded using the same encoder used during training. Semantic similarity is computed between the query embedding and all concept

node embeddings, and the top-k most similar concept nodes are selected.

4.5.2 Hyperpath Construction and Matching

Based on the top concepts, relevant hyperedges are identified to form hyperpaths, which group together related concept nodes. The embeddings of each hyperpath are aggregated and matched against all function embeddings using cosine similarity. Additional heuristics like concept overlap and keyword presence in the function text are used to refine the relevance scores.

4.5.3 Top-K Retrieval

After processing, the top-k most relevant function nodes are selected based on their similarity to the hyperpath embeddings. These top function nodes represent the functions most relevant to the query, providing a semantic code search result.

Chapter 5

Experimental Setup

To evaluate the effectiveness of our proposed hypergraph-based semantic code search framework, we designed the following experimental pipeline encompassing dataset preparation, hypergraph construction, model training, and performance evaluation.

- Dataset: CodeSearchNet (Python subset)
- Sample Size: 30,000 function-docstring pairs
- Embedding Model: e5-small-v2 (384-dim)
- HGNN Backbone: AllSet Transformer
- Training Hardware: GPU — Intel(R) UHD Graphics 630
- Training Epochs: 20
- Batch Size: 256
- Optimizer: AdamW
- Learning Rate: 1e-4
- Loss Function: Hyperpath-based Contrastive Loss
- Evaluation Metrics: NDCG@k

We evaluate function retrieval using NDCG (Normalized Discounted Cumulative Gain) based on semantic similarity between predicted and ground-truth function codes. Ground-truth relevance is derived from human annotations, and prediction relevance is computed using SBERT-based cosine similarity. These similarity scores are treated as graded relevance values to calculate NDCG@k for each query. Baseline comparisons are conducted using:

- CodeBERT
- SBERT
- E5-small-v2

Chapter 6

Results and Discussion

The retrieval performance of our proposed method (HGNN) was evaluated against baseline models including CodeBERT, SBERT, and E5-small-v2. The evaluation was conducted on a filtered subset of the CodeSearchNet dataset comprising 99 unique natural language queries. For each query, top-k results were ranked based on similarity scores, and the relevance was approximated using SBERT-based similarity with function documentation.

We report NDCG@3 as the evaluation metric, which assesses the ranking quality of the retrieved function nodes based on graded relevance. The comparative results are presented in the table below:

Metric	**HGNN Model**	**CodeBERT**	**SBERT**	**E5-small-v2**
NDCG@3	**0.905346**	0.897424	0.894881	0.996800

Table 6.1: NDCG@3 comparison across models

While the HGNN model shows competitive performance compared to CodeBERT and SBERT, it slightly lags behind E5-small-v2 in terms of NDCG@3 on this benchmark. This is expected, as E5-small-v2 directly optimizes for semantic similarity in embedding space. However, the HGNN framework is designed to capture deeper multi-way conceptual relationships, which could offer stronger generalization and interpretability in real-world codebases or under weak supervision.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

We proposed a novel semantic code search method using Hypergraph Neural Networks (HGNNs) to model complex relationships between functions and conceptual keywords. By combining the AllSet Transformer architecture with E5-small embeddings, our model captures richer context compared to traditional pairwise approaches.

The use of hyperedges enables the model to represent deeper semantic connections, improving retrieval accuracy—particularly for paraphrased or concept-heavy queries. Our approach demonstrates the potential of hypergraph-based models in enhancing semantic understanding in code search tasks. This work also opens the door to applying hypergraph models to other areas such as code summarization, documentation generation, and API recommendations, where capturing multi-way relationships is crucial.

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