

# 1 Variable Selection

Let  $y$  be response variable and  $\mathbf{x}$  be explanatory variables or covariates. Given i.i.d. samples  $(x, y) \in \mathbb{R}^p \times \mathbb{R}$  from the joint distribution  $p_{\mathbf{x}, y}$ , we are interested in asking the question

*which of the many covariates  $x_1, \dots, x_p$  does the response  $y$  depend on?*

assuming that the response does depend on a sparse set of variables. In general, we want to find a subset  $\mathcal{S} \subset [p]$  such that  $\mathcal{S}$  retains the relevant information in  $\mathbf{x}$  for making inference about  $y$ ,

$$\begin{aligned} & \text{maximize}_{\hat{\mathcal{S}} \subset [p]} \quad \mathcal{Q}(\hat{\mathcal{S}}) \\ & \text{subject to} \quad |\hat{\mathcal{S}}| \leq t \end{aligned}$$

where  $\mathcal{Q}(\cdot)$  quantifies the relevance of a feature subset to response. The choice of  $\mathcal{Q}(\cdot)$  should be 1) capable of detecting the desired functional dependence between the covariates and the response and 2) concentrated with respect to the underlying measure (generalize well to test data) [1]. Example of criteria  $\mathcal{Q}(\cdot)$  include leave-one-out error bound of SVM, mutual information  $I(\mathbf{x}; y)$ , and Hilbert Space-based estimator like Hilbert-Schmidt Independence Criterion (HSIC) [2].

## 2 Variable Selection as Finding Markov Blanket

In reality, we are interested in the causal relationship. However, quantifying causal effects requires interventions and not possible from purely observational data. A natural relaxation is to find covariates dependent (in a statistical sense) on the response, conditioned on all other observed features [3]. Formally, we want to find smallest  $\mathcal{S} \subset [p]$  s.t.

$$y \perp\!\!\!\perp \mathbf{x}_{\setminus \mathcal{S}} \mid \mathbf{x}_{\mathcal{S}}$$

A natural interpretation is that the other variables  $\mathbf{x}_{\setminus \mathcal{S}}$  do not provide additional information about  $y$ . If we think of  $\mathcal{G}$  as graph representing the joint distribution  $p_{\mathbf{x}, y}$ , then  $\mathcal{S}$  is the markov blanket for node  $y$ . We can pose the problem of finding the Markov blanket of  $y$  as

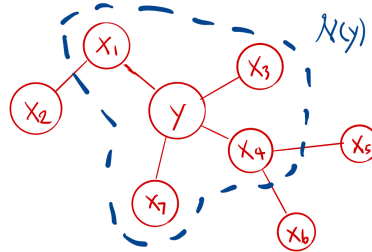


Figure 1:  $\mathcal{S} = \{x_1, x_3, x_4, x_7\}$

a multiple (independent) binary hypothesis test

$$H_0^{(j)} : y \perp\!\!\!\perp x_j \mid \mathbf{x}_{\setminus \{j\}} \quad \text{for } j = 1, \dots, p \quad (1)$$

Let  $\mathcal{H}_0 = \{j \mid H_0^{(j)} \text{ holds}\}$  be the set of truly irrelevant covariates. In general, we are interested in maximizing true positives while controlling the number of false positives. Sometimes, a global threshold for p-values of each tests is overly conservative for large  $p$ , an alternative approach is to maximize *power* while control *false discovery rate* (FDR) [4].

$$\begin{aligned} & \underset{\hat{\mathcal{S}} \subset [p]}{\text{maximize}} \quad \mathbb{E} \left[ \frac{|\hat{\mathcal{S}} \setminus \mathcal{H}_0|}{|\hat{\mathcal{S}}|} \right] & (\text{power}) \\ & \text{subject to} \quad \text{FDR} := \mathbb{E} \left[ \frac{|\hat{\mathcal{S}} \cap \mathcal{H}_0|}{\max\{|\hat{\mathcal{S}}|, 1\}} \right] \leq q \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

If  $p_{y|x}(\cdot|x)$  assumes a parametric generalized linear model form,

$$\mathbb{E}[y|x] = g^{-1}(\eta) \quad \eta = \beta_1 x_1 + \cdots + \beta_p x_p$$

Then by [5], testing for conditional independence (1) is equivalent to the following test,

$$H_0^{(j)} : \beta_j = 0 \quad \text{for } j = 1, \dots, p$$

### 3 Model-X Knockoff

Traditionally,  $p_{y|x}$  is chosen to be in some parametric family, e.g. GLM, and variable selection with FDR control is performed by computing & plugging p-values into the BHq procedure [4]. Recently, [6, 5] designed a *knockoff* framework for performing variable selection on high-dimensional nonparametric models with finite sample guarantees over the constraints in (2). The framework requires significant knowledge of  $p_x$  and assumes nothing about the  $p_{y|x}$ . This might give way to performing reproducible and robust variable selection where the  $p_{y|x}$  is parameterized by highly complex mappings, e.g. neural networks. In addition, modeling  $p_x$  might be a suitable task for problems where we have large amount of unsupervised data, or we know a priori some structure about  $p_x$ , which are often the case for large scale machine learning applications.

**Definition.**  $\tilde{x}$  is a model-X knockoff for  $x$  if

$$\tilde{x} \perp\!\!\!\perp y \mid x \quad (3)$$

$$(x, \tilde{x})_{\text{swap}(\mathcal{S})} \stackrel{d}{=} (x, \tilde{x}) \quad \text{for any } \mathcal{S} \subset [p] \quad (4)$$

where  $(\cdot)_{\text{swap}(\mathcal{S})}$  swaps coordinates for all  $j \in \mathcal{S}$  with coordinate  $j + p$  and leaves other coordinate unchanged. (3) is guaranteed if  $\tilde{x}$  is constructed without knowledge of  $y$ .

Intuitively, *knockoffs* mimics the dependence structure as the original covariates  $x$ , while being invariant to  $\text{swap}(\cdot)$  operation, and is independent of the response  $y$ . It serves as a control for evaluating how much of dependence on the response is due to dependence structure of other variables and how much of it is due to dependence with response  $y$ .

#### 3.1 Knockoff Procedure for LASSO

Consider a linear Gaussian model  $y = \beta^T x + \epsilon$  where  $x \sim \mathcal{N}(\mu, \Sigma)$  and  $\epsilon \sim \mathcal{N}(0, 1)$ . Let  $\mathbf{X} \in \mathbb{R}^{n \times p}$  be any design matrix with  $n > p$ . The knockoff filtering procedure for computing variable selection with controlled FDR is given by

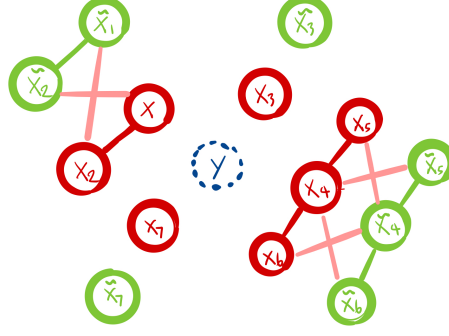


Figure 2:  $\mathcal{G}$  represents  $p_{\mathbf{x}, \tilde{\mathbf{x}}}$ . (3) implies  $\tilde{\mathbf{x}}$  is not in the Markov blanket of node  $\mathbf{y}$  for a graph representing joint distribution  $p_{\mathbf{x}, \tilde{\mathbf{x}}}$ . (4) implies that the  $\mathbf{x}, \tilde{\mathbf{x}}$  are pairwise exchangeable, i.e. taking any subset of (green) variables and swap them with their (red) knockoff creates an isomorphism of  $\mathcal{G}$ , i.e. edges preserved from the perspective of swapped variables. In practice, we want  $\mathbf{x}_j, \tilde{\mathbf{x}}_j$  be as independent as possible, i.e. no edge connecting  $\mathbf{x}_j, \tilde{\mathbf{x}}_j$  for all  $j \in [p]$

1. **(Generate Knockoffs)** To ensure exchangeability property (4), it must be

$$\begin{pmatrix} \mathbf{x} \\ \tilde{\mathbf{x}} \end{pmatrix} \sim \mathcal{N} \left( \begin{pmatrix} \boldsymbol{\mu} \\ \boldsymbol{\mu} \end{pmatrix}, \begin{bmatrix} \boldsymbol{\Sigma} & \boldsymbol{\Sigma} - \text{diag}\{\mathbf{s}\} \\ \boldsymbol{\Sigma} - \text{diag}\{\mathbf{s}\} & \boldsymbol{\Sigma} \end{bmatrix} \right)$$

One way to construct knockoff is to sample  $\tilde{x}$  from the conditional distribution [5, 3],

$$\begin{aligned} \tilde{\mathbf{x}} \mid (\mathbf{x} = x) &\sim \mathcal{N} \left( \boldsymbol{\mu}_{\tilde{\mathbf{x}}|\mathbf{x}}(x), \boldsymbol{\Sigma}_{\tilde{\mathbf{x}}|\mathbf{x}}(x) \right) \\ \boldsymbol{\mu}_{\tilde{\mathbf{x}}|\mathbf{x}}(x) &= (I - \text{diag}\{\mathbf{s}\} \boldsymbol{\Sigma}^{-1}) x + \text{diag}\{\mathbf{s}\} \boldsymbol{\Sigma}^{-1} \boldsymbol{\mu} \\ \boldsymbol{\Sigma}_{\tilde{\mathbf{x}}|\mathbf{x}}(x) &= 2 \text{diag}\{\mathbf{s}\} - \text{diag}\{\mathbf{s}\} \boldsymbol{\Sigma}^{-1} \text{diag}\{\mathbf{s}\} \end{aligned}$$

Alternatively, we can match empirical first and second moment [6] and construct design for knockoff as

$$\tilde{\mathbf{X}} = \mathbf{X}(\mathbf{I} - \boldsymbol{\Sigma}^{-1} \text{diag}\{\mathbf{s}\}) + \tilde{\mathbf{U}}\mathbf{C}$$

where  $\tilde{\mathbf{U}} \in \mathbb{R}^{n \times p}$  is orthonormal matrix whose column is orthogonal to  $\mathbf{X}$  and  $\mathbf{C}^T \mathbf{C} = 2 \text{diag}\{\mathbf{s}\} - \text{diag}\{\mathbf{s}\} \boldsymbol{\Sigma}^{-1} \text{diag}\{\mathbf{s}\}$  is a Cholesky decomposition.

2. **(Compute Pairwise Statistics)** Compute Lasso for the coefficients

$$\hat{\boldsymbol{\beta}} = \arg \min_{\boldsymbol{\beta} \in \mathbb{R}^{2p}} \frac{1}{2} \left\| \mathbf{y} - [\mathbf{X}, \tilde{\mathbf{X}}] \boldsymbol{\beta} \right\|_2^2 + \lambda \|\boldsymbol{\beta}\|_1$$

Now we compute statistics  $\mathbf{w}$  for each pair of original and knockoff variables

$$w_j := w_j(\mathbf{X}, \tilde{\mathbf{X}}, \mathbf{y}) = |\hat{\boldsymbol{\beta}}_j| - |\hat{\boldsymbol{\beta}}_{j+p}| \quad \text{for } j = 1, \dots, p$$

which satisfy the coin-flip property. One important consequence is that for any  $j \in \mathcal{H}_0$ ,  $w_j$  is a symmetric distribution about the origin [6, 5].

3. **(Compute Threshold for Statistics)** Given  $q > 0$  be target FDR, then let

$$\tau_+ = \min \left\{ t > 0 \mid \widehat{\text{FDP}}(t) \leq q \right\} \quad \text{where} \quad \widehat{\text{FDP}} = \frac{1 + \# \{j \mid w_j \leq -t\}}{\# \{j \mid w_j \geq t\}}$$

4. **(Perform Test)** with threshold  $\tau_+$ ,

$$\hat{\mathcal{S}} = \{j \mid w_j \geq \tau_+\}$$

ensures that  $\text{FDR} \leq q$

### 3.2 Current Problems

1. Generating knockoffs is a hard problem, there has been work to sample knockoffs using MCMC [7], with generative model [8], in particular with GAN [9] and with latent variable models [3].
2. There has been a few papers that tries to analyze power of the knockoff framework assuming Gaussian data [10]
3. There has been some preliminary work on adopting multiple hypothesis testing and FDR control when  $p_{y|x}$  is parameterized by neural networks, e.g. by MLP [11]. The challenge here seems that it is not easy to maintain power of tests.
4. It seems that currently, experimental datasets is either simulated or small in size of  $n, p$ . I have not found any attempts that tried this method on image datasets. Might be interesting to see how this fairs.

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