

1   **An LLM-based pipeline for understanding decision choices in data analysis from  
2   published literature**

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4   Decision choices, such as those made when building regression models, and their rationale are essential for interpreting results and  
5   understanding uncertainty in an analysis. However, these decisions are rarely studied because tracing every alternatives considered  
6   by authors is often impractical, and reworking a completed analysis is generally of limited interest. Consequently, researchers must  
7   manually review large bodies of published analyses to identify common choices and understand how choices are made. In this work,  
8   we propose a workflow to automatically extract analytic decisions and their reasons from published literature using Large Language  
9   Models. Our method also introduces a paper similarity measure based on decision similarity and visualization methods using clustering  
10   algorithms. As an example, this workflow is applied to analyses studying the effect of particulate matter on mortality. This approach  
11   enables scalable and automated studies of decision choices in applied data analysis, providing an alternative to existing qualitative and  
12   interview-based studies.

13   **CCS Concepts:** • Human-centered computing → Human computer interaction (HCI); • Information systems → Information  
14   retrieval.

15   Additional Key Words and Phrases: large language models, analytic decision making in data analysis, document similarity

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19   **1 Introduction**

20   TODO: need references

21   Decisions are made at every stage of data analysis, from initial data collection, pre-processing to modeling. One  
22   might expect well-trained researchers to make similar choices when faced with the same analytical task, yet evidence  
23   suggests otherwise. Many-analyst experiments show that independent analysts often arrive at markedly different  
24   conclusions, even when analyzing the same dataset to answer the same research question [8, 21, 68]. This variation in  
25   analytical decision-making, described by Gelman and Loken [20] as the “garden of forking paths,” can undermine the  
26   quality and credibility of reported results and hinder comparability across studies. For junior researchers who lack  
27   guidance, this variability may lead to over reliance on default statistical software settings or arbitrary choices made  
28   without clear justification.

29   A common approach to investigate uncertainty in analytical decisions is sensitivity analysis, where researchers  
30   systematically vary key decisions in their analysis to assess the robustness of their findings. Multiverse analysis extends  
31   this idea by evaluating *all* plausible combinations of decision choices to examine how results vary across the full  
32   decision space [7, 63]. However, what an analyst consider reasonable may not reflect the full range of options used in

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practice. Even when a reasonable set of alternatives is tested, the sensitivity analysis may be of limited interest to other researchers facing a similar problem, who are seeking evidence to inform comparable decision. Ideally, decision-making in applied research would be studied by following experienced analysts throughout the entire analysis process to capture their reasoning. In reality, this is rarely feasible and not scalable. While individual studies may not capture the full range of decision choices used in practice, crowdsourcing decisions from a collection of studies on a shared theme creates a “many-analyst” setting that reveals how analysts make choices and justify them in practice. Classic research training typically involves reading through the literature to learn the common choices and to understand how decisions are made. This process now has the possibility to be automated at scale given recent advance in information extraction with Large Language Models’ (LLMs) [4, 19, 22, 24, 26, 28, 42, 47, 61, 65, 67].

In this work, we propose a new approach for studying data analysis decisions by automatically extracting decisions from scientific literature using LLMs. We develop a tabular schema to record decisions, automate the extraction process with LLMs, and introduce a new paper similarity measure based on decision similarity. This similarity measure can serve as a distance metric in dimension reduction methods to visualize papers according to their decisions. We apply this workflow to a set of 56 air pollution modeling studies that estimate the effect of particulate matter (PM2.5 or PM10) on mortality and hospital admissions. This type of studies is typically analyzed using Poisson generalized linear models (GLMs) or generalized additive models (GAMs). Analysis of the extracted decisions reveals common choices in this class of studies, such as the number of knots or degree of freedom for smoothing methods and the temporal lags for time and weather variables. Multi-dimensional scaling on the paper similarity distance finds three distinct clusters corresponding to different smoothing methods: LOESS, natural spline, and smoothing spline. These findings align with the APHENA project [41], which synthesizes research from multiple studies in Europe and North America led by expert investigators.

In this workflow, we also provide detailed documentation on the validation and standardization of LLM outputs. We outline the validation and standardization process, including the use of a developed Shiny application in R for reviewing decisions and the types of edits made through validation. We also use a secondary LLM to standardize reported choices of temporal lag decisions. Additionally, we conduct sensitivity analysis on reproducibility across runs and model providers. future studies for information extraction task with LLMs.

In summary, the contribution of this work includes:

- A scalable and automated approach to study data analysis decisions through extracting of decisions from published scientific literature using LLMs,
- A new method to construct paper similarities based on decision choices and the semantic similarity of their rationales,
- Practices for validating and standardizing LLM outputs, including a shiny GUI tool for editing outputs, the use of secondary LLM for standardizing unstructured response, and sensitivity analysis on reproducibility across runs and model providers,
- A data schema for recording decisions in data analysis in a tidy format, and
- A dataset of decisions, along with metadata, compiled from 56 studies in air pollution mortality modeling literature.

## 105 2 Related work

### 106 107 2.1 Analytic decision making in data analysis

108 Data analysis is a complex and iterative process [32–34] that involves multiple stages, including data collection, data  
109 cleaning, visualization, modeling, and communication. At each stage, analysts make decisions informed by domain  
110 practices, statistical knowledge, and the data. These decisions, such as which variables to include in a model, how  
111 to handle missing data, and how hyper-parameters are chosen, act as branching points in the analysis workflow.  
112 [TODO]The full set of possible paths through these branching points form what Gelman and Loken [20] describe as  
113 the “garden of forking paths”. While one might expect well-trained researchers to make similar choices when facing  
114 similar decisions, empirical evidence suggests otherwise. “Many analyst experiments” show that independent research  
115 groups analyzing the same dataset to address the same research questions can arrive at widely different conclusions.  
116 For example, Silberzahn et al. [68] asks 29 groups of analysts to conduct an analysis to address the same research  
117 questions *whether soccer players with dark skin tone are more likely than those with light skin tone to receive red cards*  
118 *from referees*. Researchers reported an estimated effect size from 0.89 to 2.93 in odds ratio with 21 unique combinations  
119 of covariates are used among all 29 analyses. 70% of the teams found a statistically significant positive effect while  
120 others don’t. This great discrepancy among researchers when performing data analysis task is also observed in other  
121 domains, for example, structural equation modeling [64], applied microeconomics [29], neuroimaging [8], and ecology  
122 and evolutionary biology [21].

123 Examples like the above illustrate how analytical decisions introduce uncertainty into data analysis. These uncer-  
124 tainties have been widely discussed in the literature given their impact for policy recommendation [41] and [TODO]  
125 applications in health, finance, fairness machine learning [70]. Through experiments, research has shown that analysts’  
126 decisions can lead to p-hacking and inflated effect size, when not properly used [69, 74]. Hence, guidelines and check-  
127 lists have been developed to recommend the best practice to guide statistical analysis. In medicine and biostatistics,  
128 pre-registration is a common practice to regulate analysts making decisions after seeing the data [? ]. Given the nuanced  
129 nature of data analysis, more work have examined how analysts make decisions in practice through interviews in both  
130 academia and industry. These studies include qualitative analysis of the decisions made [35, 49], interviews with data  
131 analysts about exploratory data analysis practice in industry [2, 38] and about how they consider alternatives in data  
132 analysis [48].

133 In addition to qualitative studies, software tools have developed to help researchers account for alternatives and  
134 uncertainties and make informed decisions in data analysis. Examples include Tea [32], which support general statistical  
135 analysis; Tisane [34], which guides choices in generalized linear mixed-effects models (GLMMs); and MetaExplore  
136 [36], which account for epistemic uncertainty (decision uncertainty) in meta-analysis. The DeclareDesign package  
137 [7] proposes the MIDA framework for researchers to declare, diagnose, and redesign their analyses with account for  
138 uncertainties of reporting the statistic of interest. Multiverse analysis proposes a different method to allow researchers  
139 to evaluate *all* plausible combinations of decision choices to examine how results vary in the full decision space. Work  
140 has been done on the software tools to support multiverse analysis [25, 63] and visualization of multiverse results [50],  
141 and debugging tools [23].

## 157      **2.2 Automatic information extraction with LLMs**

158  
 159 In natural language processing, information extraction is a task focus on extracting structured information from  
 160 unstructured text. Earlier approaches in information extraction tasks relied on rule-based systems and regular expres-  
 161 sions. More recent advances, including conditional random fields [45], word embeddings such as word2vec [54], and  
 162 transformer-based architectures like BERT [16], have led to the current use of LLM to extract information with prompts.  
 163 Using LLMs to extract unstructured text offers the advantage of automating the process at scale. Applications have  
 164 been seen in epidemiology data [26], scientific literature [42], clinical data [19, 22, 28, 67], chemistry knowledge [65],  
 165 and polymer science [24], climate extreme impact [47], phenotypes [4], and material properties [61]. An easier task in  
 166 information extraction is called Named Entity Recognition (NER) to identify short span information (1-4 tokens) like  
 167 person names and locations from unstructured text [57]. An example of this is extracting patient’s information and  
 168 vitals in clinical data. Extracting decisions from published literature is a more general task than NER, since justification  
 169 of a decision typically spans more than just a few words. Our task also requires linking information across sentences,  
 170 sometimes sections, to correctly identify the variables a decision refers to.  
 171

## 174      **2.3 Visualization on scientific literature**

175 With the growing volume of scientific publications and the difficulty of navigating the literature, there is an increasing  
 176 interest in developing systems to visualize and recommend scientific papers. These systems link papers based on  
 177 their similarity and relevance, typically determined by keywords [30], citation information [14], e.g. citation list and  
 178 co-citation, or combinations with other relevant paper metadata [6, 15, 18, 27], e.g. author and title. Recent approaches  
 179 incorporate text-based information using topic modeling [1], argumentation-based information retrieval [71], and  
 180 text embedding [58]. While metadata and high-level text-based information are useful for finding relevant papers,  
 181 researchers also need tools that help them *make sense* of the literature rather than simply *locating* it. In applied data  
 182 analysis, one interest is to understand how studies differ or align in their decision choices. Capturing the decision  
 183 choices and reasons that justify the choices from analyses enables the calculation of similarity among papers and can  
 184 pipe into dimension reduction methods and visualization for a global view of analysis practice in the field or recommend  
 185 similar papers based on decision similarities.  
 186

## 187      **3 Methods**

188 In this section, we present the workflow for extracting decisions from published literature using LLMs. We first describe  
 189 the data structure for recording decisions, followed by the four main steps in the workflow: 1) automatic extraction of  
 190 decisions from literature with LLMs, 2) validation and standardization of LLM outputs, 3) calculation of paper similarity,  
 191 and 4) visualization paper similarity using clustering or dimension reduction methods. The section concludes with an  
 192 illustration summarizing the workflow.

### 200      **3.1 Record decisions in data analysis**

201 In the study of the health effects of outdoor air pollution, one area of interest is the association between short-term,  
 202 day-to-day changes in particulate matter air pollution and daily mortality counts. This question has been studied  
 203 extensively by researchers across the globe and it serves to provide scientific evidence in the US to guide public policy  
 204 on setting the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) for air pollutants. While individual modeling choices  
 205 vary, these studies often share a common structure: they adjust for meteorological covariates, such as temperature and  
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209 humidity, include lagged variables to account for temporal correlations, and estimate the effect size by city or region  
 210 before pooling the results with random effect. This naturally forms a “many-analyst” experiment setting to analyze  
 211 decisions in air pollution mortality modelling.  
 212

213 Consider the following excerpt from Ostro et al. [59] modeling the association between daily counts of mortality and  
 214 ambient particulate matter (PM10):  
 215

216 Based on previous findings reported in the literature (e.g., Samet et al. 2000), the basic model included a  
 217 smoothing spline for time with 7 degrees of freedom (df) per year of data. This number of degrees of  
 218 freedom controls well for seasonal patterns in mortality and reduces and often eliminates autocorrelation.  
 219

This sentence encode the following components of a decision:

- 220 • **variable**: time
- 221 • **method**: smoothing spline
- 222 • **parameter**: degree of freedom (df)
- 223 • **reason**: Based on previous findings reported in the literature (e.g., Samet et al. 2000); This number of degrees of  
 224 freedom controls well for seasonal patterns in mortality and reduces and often eliminates autocorrelation.
- 225 • **decision**: 7 degrees of freedom (df) per year of data

226 This decision can be recorded in a tabular format following the tidy data principle [75], which states that each  
 227 variable forms a column and each observation forms in a row. For our purpose, each row represents a decision made in  
 228 a paper and an analysis often include multiple decisions. We extract the original text in the paper, without paraphrase  
 229 or summarization. The decision above is a parameter choice of a statistical method applied to the variable *time*. A data  
 230 analysis may also include other types of decisions, such as temporal or spatial ones, for example, the choice of lagged  
 231 exposure for certain variables or whether the model is estimated collectively or separated for individual locations. These  
 232 decisions don’t have a specific method or parameter fields, but should still include variable, type (spatial or temporal),  
 233 reason, and decision fields.  
 234

235 Given the writing style of authors, multiple decisions may be combined in one sentence and certain fields may be  
 236 omitted. Consider a different excerpt from Ostro et al. [59]:  
 237

238 Other covariates, such as day of the week and smoothing splines of 1-day lags of average temperature  
 239 and humidity (each with 3 df), were also included in the model because they may be associated with  
 240 daily mortality and are likely to vary over time in concert with air pollution levels.  
 241

242 This sentence contains four decisions: two for temperature (the temporal lag and the smoothing spline parameter)  
 243 and two for humidity, and should be structured as separate entries:  
 244

Paper	ID	variable	method	parameter	type	reason	decision
ostro	1	temperature	smoothing spline	degree of freedom	parameter	3 degree of freedom	NA
ostro	2	relative humidity	smoothing spline	degree of freedom	parameter	3 degree of freedom	NA
ostro	3	temperature	NA	NA	temporal	1-day lags	NA
ostro	4	relative humidity	NA	NA	temporal	1-day lags	NA

Notice in the example above, the reason field is recorded as NA. This is because the stated reason (“and are likely to vary over time in concert with air pollution levels”) only supports the general inclusion of temporal lags but does not justify the specific choice of 1-day lag over other alternatives, e.g. 2-day average of lags 0 and 1 or single-day lag of 2 days. Similar scenario can happen when a direct decision choice is missing but a reason is provided, as in Katsouyanni et al. [40]:

The inclusion of lagged weather variables and the choice of smoothing parameters for all of the weather variables were done by minimizing Akaike’s information criterion.

### 3.2 Extract decisions automatically from literature with LLMs

Manually extracting decisions from published papers is labor-intensive and time-consuming. With LLMs, it is now possible to automatically extract this type of information by supplying a set of PDF documents and a prompt for instruction. Text recognition from PDF document relies on Optical Character Recognition (OCR) to convert scanned images into machine-readable text – a capability currently offered by Anthropic Claude and Google Gemini. In the prompt, we assign the LLM a role as an applied statistician and instruct it extract decisions from the PDF in the format, described in Section 3.1 and write the output in a JSON block in a markdown file. We also provide a set of instructions and examples on the possibility of missing of reason and decision fields as discussed in Section 3.1. Prompt engineering techniques [13, 78] are used to optimize the prompt and the full prompt used in this work is provided in the Appendix. We use the `chat_PROVIDER()` functions from the `ellmer` package [77] in R to obtain the output.

### 3.3 Validate and standardize LLM outputs

The LLM outputs need to be validated and standardized before further analysis. Validation focuses on ensuring the extracted decisions are correct, while standardization ensure different expressions of the same variable are standardized into the same expression. For example, the expression *mean temperature*, *average temperature*, and *temperature* all refer to the same variable and are standardized to *temperature*. To help with the validation and standardization process, we developed a Shiny application, which provides an interactive interface for users to review and edit the LLM outputs. The Shiny application takes an input of a CSV file that contains the extracted decisions and allows users to perform three types of edits: 1) *overwrite* – modify the content of a particular cell, 2) *delete* – remove an irrelevant decision, and 3) *add* – manually enter a missing decision. Figure 1 illustrates the *overwrite* action for standardizing the variable *NCtot* (number concentration of particles <100 nm in diameter) to *pollution*. The user enters a predicate function in the filter condition box on the left panel, and the filtered data will appear interactively on the right panel. The user can then specify the variable to overwrite and the new value. The corresponding cells on the right panel will be updated. This change need to be confirmed by pressing the “Apply changes” button to update to the full dataset. The corresponding `tidyverse` [76] code will then be generated on the left panel to be included in an R script, and the edited table can be downloaded for future analysis.

### 3.4 Calculate paper similarity and visualization

Once the output has been extracted and validated, these decisions can be treated as data for further analysis. Apart from exploratory data analysis, we propose a paper similarity measure to compare how similar decisions are between paper pairs. A decision is considered comparable between a paper pair if the two papers share the same variable and decision type, e.g. a parameter decision on temperature. Three factors are considered in calculating the similarity between two matched decisions: 1) whether the two decisions are similar, 2) whether the reasons for the decisions are similar, and 3)

**Edit decision table output**

Upload CSV  
Browse... gemini\_raw.csv  
Upload complete  
Overwrite Delete Add

Filter condition (e.g., variable == 'PM10')  
The variable to overwrite  
The value modified to  
Apply changes Confirm  
Download CSV

Generated tidyverse code  
df %>%  
#> #> mutate(variable = ifelse(paper == "andersen2008size" & id %in% "pollutant", "variable"))

**Initial view**

paper	id	model	variable	method	parameter	type	reason	decision
andersen2008size	generalized additive Poisson time series regression model	temperature	smoothing spline	degrees of freedom	parameter NA	NA	4 or 5 df	
andersen2008size	generalized additive Poisson time series regression model	dew-point temperature	smoothing spline	degrees of freedom	parameter NA	NA	4 or 5 df	
andersen2008size	generalized additive Poisson time series regression model	calendar time	smoothing spline	degrees of freedom	parameter	to control for long-term trend and seasonality	3, 4, or 5 df/year	
andersen2008size	generalized additive Poisson time series regression model	NCtot	NA	NA	temporal	to include days with the strongest lag effects	4-day pollutant average (lag 0-3)	NA
andersen2008size	generalized additive Poisson time series regression model	NCtot	NA	NA	temporal	to include days with the strongest lag effects	5-day average (lag 0-4)	NA
andersen2008size	generalized additive Poisson time series regression model	NCtot	NA	NA	temporal	to include days with the strongest lag effects	6-day average (lag 0-5)	NA

Upon pressing the "Apply changes" button, the data panel will update to reflect the edit

paper	id	model	variable	method	parameter	type	reason	decision	reference
andersen2008size	4	generalized additive Poisson time series regression model	pollutant	NA	NA	temporal	to include days with the strongest lag effects	4-day pollutant average (lag 0-3)	NA
andersen2008size	5	generalized additive Poisson time series regression model	pollutant	NA	NA	temporal	to include days with the strongest lag effects	5-day average (lag 0-4)	NA
andersen2008size	6	generalized additive Poisson time series regression model	pollutant	NA	NA	temporal	to include days with the strongest lag effects	6-day average (lag 0-5)	NA

**Edit decision table output**

Upload CSV  
Browse... gemini\_raw.csv  
Upload complete  
Overwrite Delete Add

Filter condition (e.g., variable == 'PM10')  
paper == "andersen2008size" & id %in% 4:6  
The variable to overwrite  
variable  
The value modified to  
pollutant  
Apply changes Confirm  
Download CSV

Generated tidyverse code  
df %>%  
#> #> mutate(variable = ifelse(paper == "andersen2008size" & id %in% "pollutant", "variable"))

**Upon confirmation, the changes will be applied to the full dataset**

paper	id	model	variable	method	parameter	type	reason	decision
andersen2008size	generalized additive Poisson time series regression model	temperature	smoothing spline	degrees of freedom	parameter NA	NA	4 or 5 df	
andersen2008size	generalized additive Poisson time series regression model	dew-point temperature	smoothing spline	degrees of freedom	parameter NA	NA	4 or 5 df	
andersen2008size	generalized additive Poisson time series regression model	calendar time	smoothing spline	degrees of freedom	parameter	to control for long-term trend and seasonality	3, 4, or 5 df/year	
andersen2008size	generalized additive Poisson time series regression model	pollutant	NA	NA	temporal	to include days with the strongest lag effects	4-day pollutant average (lag 0-3)	
andersen2008size	generalized additive Poisson time series regression model	pollutant	NA	NA	temporal	to include days with the strongest lag effects	5-day average (lag 0-4)	
andersen2008size	generalized additive Poisson time series regression model	pollutant	NA	NA	temporal	to include days with the strongest lag effects	6-day average (lag 0-5)	

Fig. 1. The Shiny application interface to validate and standardize Large Language Model (LLM)-generated output. (1) The interface after loading the input CSV file. (2) The table view will update interactively to reflect the edit: for paper "andersen2008size" and id in 4, 5, 6, modify the variable name NCtot to pollutant. (3) After clicking the Confirm button, the tidyverse code for the modification is generated, and the table view returns to its original unfiltered view with the edited data can be downloaded by clicking the Download CSV button.

Fig. 1. The Shiny application interface to validate and standardize Large Language Model (LLM)-generated output. (1) The default interface after loading the input CSV file. (2) The table view will update interactively to reflect the edit: for paper with handle “andersen2008size” and id in 4, 5, 6, modify the variable name *NCtot* to *pollutant*. (3) After clicking the Confirm button, the corresponding tidyverse code for the modification is generated, and the table view returns to its original unfiltered view with the edit applied. The edited data can be downloaded by clicking the Download CSV button.

for parameter type decisions, whether the statistical methods used are the same. Method and choice similarity indicate the same decision being made in the analysis, whereas a similar reason reflects a shared principle for making the choice, even when the choices themselves may differ due to differences in the underlying data. For reasons and choices, we first obtain the text embedding for all the choices and reasons, and calculate the cosine similarity between the matched reason and decisions from the language model BERT using the text package [43] in R. For methods, we encode them as a binary variable: 1 if the two papers used the same method, and 0 otherwise because semantic similarity cannot fully capture the difference between statistical methods, e.g., the difference between smoothing spline and natural spline is not well represented by the textual difference of “smoothing” and “natural”. The paper similarity is then computed as the average decision similarities across all the matched methods, decisions, and reasons.

Although paper similarity can be calculated based on all available matched decisions, care should be taken for pairs with only a small number of matches. This can happen because two papers focus on different variables or some decisions have missing choices or reasons (discussed in Section 3.1). In practice, users may decide to focus on a set of decisions shared among papers or on papers that report a minimal number of shared decisions when calculating paper similarity.

### 3.5 Summary

Figure 2 summarises the whole workflow proposed for extracting and analyzing decisions from published literature using LLMs. Once researchers have identified a set of literature of interest, a prompt is needed to instruct LLMs to extract decisions from these literature. The outputs from LLM need to be validated and standardized before further analysis, due to authors’ varied writing styles. The validated data can then be used for exploratory data analysis of decisions and one analysis we propose is to calculate paper similarity. This paper similarity metric can be seen as a distance metric among papers, which can be used for clustering and dimension reduction to visualize the decision patterns among papers.

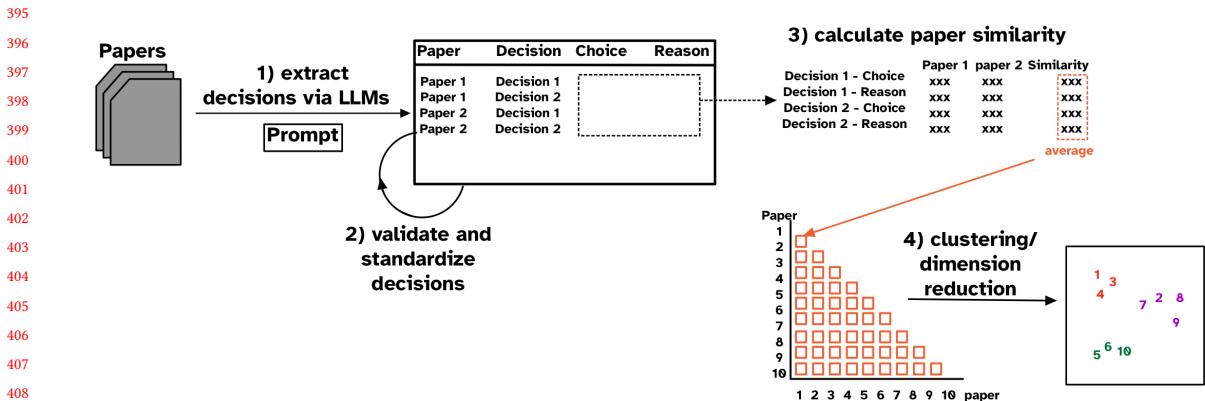


Fig. 2. The workflow for extracting decisions from published literature using Large Language Models (LLMs) and analyzing the extracted decisions. The workflow consists of four main steps: (1) Extract decisions automatically from literature with LLMs, (2) Validate and standardize LLM outputs, (3) Calculate paper similarity and visualization, and (4) visualization with clustering or dimension reduction methods.

417 **4 Results**

418 We apply the workflow to extract the decisions in 56 studies that estimate the effect of particulate matters (PM<sub>10</sub> and  
 419 PM<sub>2.5</sub>) on mortality and hospital admission using Gemini (gemini-2.0-flash). We focus on the baseline model reported  
 420 in each paper, excluding secondary models (e.g. lag-distributed models), multi-pollutant models, and alternatives tested  
 421 in the sensitivity analysis, which are discussed in ?@sec-discussions. This yields 242 decisions extracted, averaging 4  
 422 decisions per paper.

425 **4.1 Validation and standardization of LLM outputs**

428 Table 2. Summary of validation and standardization edits made during the review process.  
 429

430 Reason	431 Count
432 Remove decisions out of scope: other pollutants and sensitivity analysis	50
433 Edit made to recode smoothing parameter unit to per year	45
434 Duplicates	9
435 Fix incorrect capture	9
436 Edit made due to decisions are too general, e.g. minimum of 1 df per year was required	6
437 Remove decisions related to definition of variables, e.g. season	5
438 Total	124

443 Table 2 summarizes the number of edits made during the review process using the Shiny application. Validation  
 444 includes fixing incorrect captures, removing non-decision (e.g. definition of variables), removing duplication, excluding  
 445 irrelevant decisions (e.g. sensitivity analyses), and excluding decisions whose stated reasons reflect general guidelines  
 446 rather than actual choices (e.g. “minimum of 1 degree of freedom per year is required”).

447 Standardization is performed on the variable name of decisions and choices. The variable name in the decisions are  
 448 standardized into four main categories:

- 451 • **temperature**: “mean temperature”, “average temperature”, “temperature”, “air temperature”, “ambient tempera-  
 452 ture”
- 453 • **humidity**: “dewpoint temperature” and its hyphenated variants, relative humidity”, “humidity”
- 454 • **PM**: “pollutant”, “pollution”, “particulate matter”, “particulate”, “PM10”, “PM2.5”
- 455 • **time**: “date”, “time”, “trends”, “trend”

457 Notice that “dewpoint temperature” is standardized under humidity because it serves as a proxy for temperature in  
 458 achieving a 100% relative humidity.

459 Decisions themselves also require standardization. For example, the smoothing parameter (number of knots and  
 460 degree of freedom) may be expressed as *per year* or *in total*, and temporal lag decision may be expressed in different  
 461 formats (e.g. “6-day average”, “mean of lags 0+1”, “lagged exposure up to 6 days”). Decision choices on the smoothing  
 462 parameter are manually recoded to a *per year* basis, as in Table 2. Temporal decisions show a wider variety, which  
 463 makes manual standardization impractical. However, we observe that they generally fall into two categories:  
 464

- 466 • **multi-day average lags**: “6-day average”, “3-d moving average”, “mean of lags 0+1”, “cumulative lags, mean  
 467 0+1+2”, etc and

469 Table 3. Missingness of decision and reason fields in the Gemini-extracted decisions. Most decisions report the choice (35.5 + 57.1 =  
 470 92%), but 57.1% lacks a stated reason.

Reason	Decision	
	Non-missing	Missing
Non-missing	90 (37.2%)	14 (5.8%)
Missing	134 (55.4%)	4 (1.7%)

- **single-day lags:** “lagged exposure up to 6 days”, “lag days from 0 to 5”, etc

Hence we apply a secondary LLM (claude-3-7-sonnet-latest) to convert temporal decisions into a consistent format: multi-day: lag [start]-[end] and single-day: lag [start], . . . , lag [end]. This converts “6-day average” into “multi-day: lag 0-5” and “lagged exposure up to 6 days” into “single-day: lag 0, lag 1, lag 2, lag 3, lag 4, lag 5”.

## 4.2 Exploratory analysis of decision choices

As raised in Section 3.1, not all decisions reported in the literature include both the decision choice and the rationale. Some decisions may only report the choice without a stated reason, while others may provide a reason without specifying the exact choice made. Table 3 summarizes the missingness of the decisions and reason. While 37% of decisions are complete in both decision choices and reasons, 55% of decisions lack a stated rationale for the choice. This reflects a common reporting practice in the field, where authors often report the decision choice used without an explicit reason.

Table 4. Count of variable-type decisions in the Gemini-extracted decisions. The most commonly reported decision are the parameter choices and temporal lags for time, PM, temperature, and humidity.

Variable	Type	Count
time	parameter	44
PM	temporal	39
temperature	parameter	35
humidity	parameter	25
temperature	temporal	23
humidity	temporal	19
PM	parameter	9
time	temporal	3

Table 4 lists the eight most frequently reported decision: parameter and temporal choice for time, PM, temperature, and humidity. While a wider list of variables have been used in the analysis, these four variables are most commonly included in baseline models. Parameter choices for time, temperature, and humidity are typically made on the use of smoothing parameter for the smoothing method (natural spline and smoothing spline), whereas temporal choices are commonly reported for PM, temperature, and humidity for the number of lag to consider in the model.

521 Table 5. Options captured for parameter choices for time, humidity, and temperature variables in the Gemini-extracted decisions.  
 522 The choices for natural spline knots are generally less varied than the degree of freedom choices for smoothing spline. Choices for  
 523 temperature and humidity tend to be close, given they are both weather related variables, while the choices for time are more varied  
 524 inherently.

Method	Variable	Decision
natural spline	humidity	3, 4
natural spline	temperature	3, 4, 6
natural spline	time	1, 1.5, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 12, 15, 30
smoothing spline	humidity	2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 50% of the data
smoothing spline	temperature	2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 50% of the data
smoothing spline	time	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 7.7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 30, 100, 5% of the data

536  
 537 Table 5 presents the number of knots or degree of freedom used in two spline methods (natural and smoothing  
 538 spline) applied to variable time, humidity and temperature, with all values standardized to a *per year* scale. The  
 539 choices of knot for natural spline has less variation than the degree of freedom choices for smoothing spline. Choices  
 540 for temperature and humidity are generally similar, given they are both weather related variables, whereas choices for  
 541 time are more varied. This tabulation provides a reference set for common parameter choices for future studies and  
 542 help to identify anomalies and special treatment in practice. For example, the choice of 7.7 degree of freedom reported  
 543 in Castillejos et al. [12] may prompt analysts to seek further justification for its use. By cross-comparing with other  
 544 reporting, some decisions appear ambiguous. For example, in Moolgavkar [55] and Moolgavkar [56], the reported value  
 545 of 30 and 100 degrees of freedom for time may be understandable for experienced domain researchers, it could be  
 546 unclear for junior analysts as to whether they refer to the parameter used for the full study period or on a per-year  
 547 basis, which is often clear in other paper. We also observe a different report style from Schwartz [66], where smoothing  
 548 spline parameters are expressed as a proportion of the data (“5% of the data” and “5% of the data”), rather than fixed  
 549 numerical value.  
 550

554 Table 6. Options captured for temporal lag choices for PM, temperature, and humidity variables in the Gemini-extracted decisions.  
 555 Both single-day lags and multi-day average lags are commonly used, generally considering up to five days prior (lag 5).

Lag type	Variable	Decision
multi-day average	PM	lag 0-1, 0-2, 0-3, 0-4, 0-5, 0-6
multi-day average	humidity	lag 0-1, 0-2, 0-3, 0-5, 1-5, 2-4
multi-day average	temperature	lag 0-1, 0-2, 0-3, 0-5, 2-4
single-day lag	PM	lag 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13
single-day lag	humidity	lag 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13
single-day lag	temperature	lag 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13

567  
 568 Similarly, Table 6 summarizes the temporal lag choices for PM, temperature, and humidity. For single-day lags, the  
 569 lags are considered up to 13 days (approximately two weeks) while for multi-day averages, 3-day and 5-day averages  
 570 are the most common, although other choices such as 2-4 day average are also observed [52].  
 571

### 4.3 Paper similarity calculation, clustering analysis, and visualization

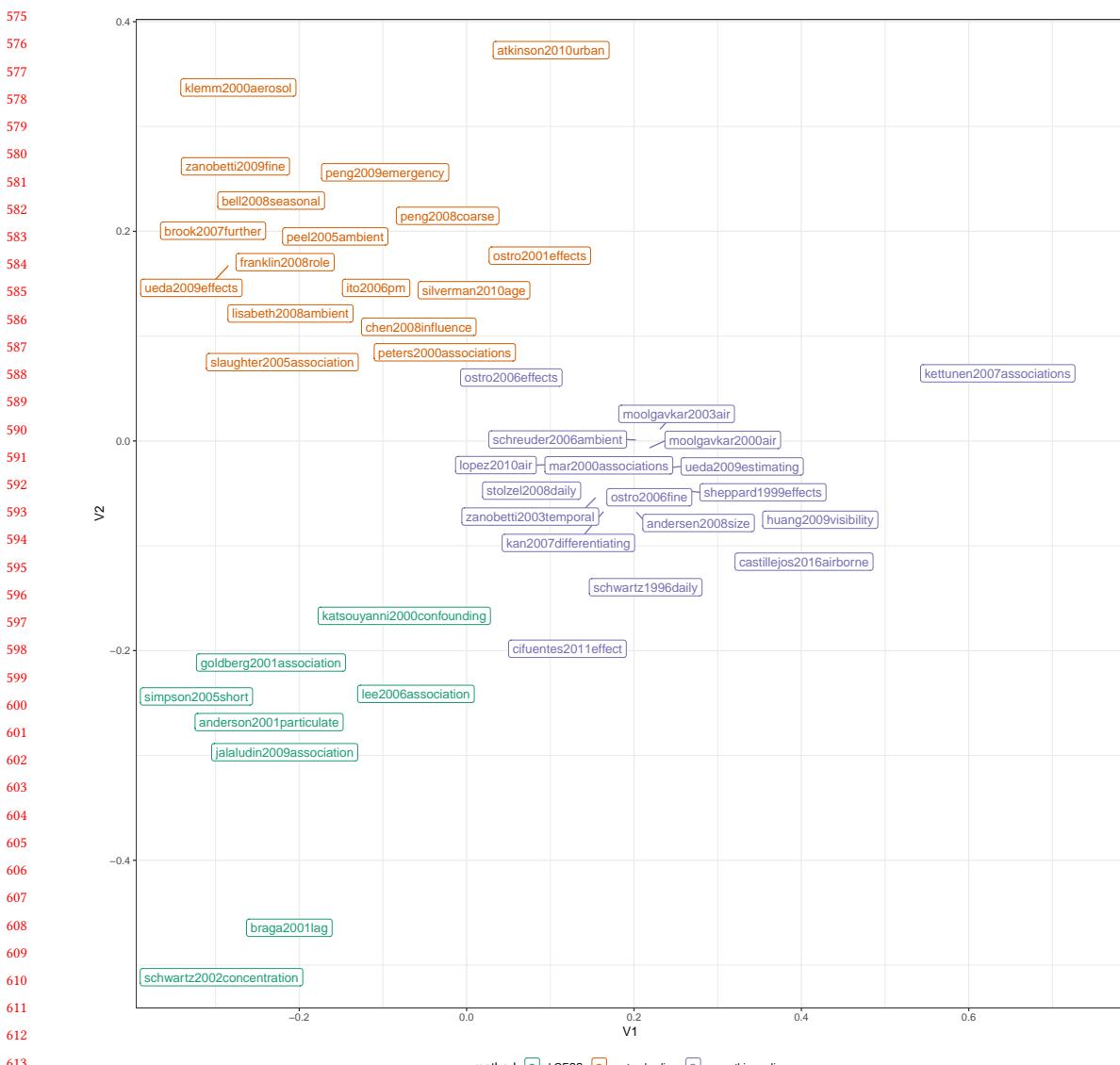


Fig. 3. The multi-dimensional scaling (MDS) based on paper similarity distance for `length(good_pp)` air pollution mortality modeling papers, colored by the smoothing method used. The MDS reveals the three distinct groups of papers, corresponds to LOESS, natural spline, and smoothing spline. These groups corresponds to the different modeling strategies debated in the European and U.S. studies, as documented in the APHENa project [41].

Given the number of decisions reported in Table 4, we focus on the six most common variable-type decisions for calculating paper similarity: parameter choices for time, temperature, and humidity, and temporal lag choices for PM, temperature, and humidity. We also restrict our analysis to papers that report at least three of these six decisions, Manuscript submitted to ACM

resulting in 48 papers for the paper similarity calculation. This ensures that the paper similarity metric is based on a sufficient number of comparable decisions. We use the default text embedding model (BERT) in the text package and cosine similarity to compute the similarity score. Sensitivity analysis on different text embedding model is checked in Section 4.4.3. Paper similarity is then calculated as the average of decision similarity for each paper pair. The resulting similarity score is then used as the distance matrix in multi-dimensional scaling (MDS) and plotted in Figure 3. The two MDS dimension axes reveal three clusters correspond to the three smoothing methods used in these analyses: LOESS, natural spline, and smoothing spline, where natural spline is commonly used in U.S. based studies suggested in the NMMAPS study [62], while LOESS and smoothing spline are more often used in the European studies, as suggested in the APHEA [39] and APHEA2 [40] project.

#### 4.4 Sensitivity analysis

A series of sensitivity analysis have been conducted to explore the reproducibility across runs (Section 4.4.1), model providers (Section 4.4.2), and the sensitivity of text model for computing the semantic decision similarity (Section 4.4.3).

##### 4.4.1 LLM reproducibility.

Table 7. Example comparing Gemini’s text extraction for Andersen et al. [3] across two runs. The extracted decisions are identical in both runs.

Variable	Run1	Run2
NCTot	6day average (lag 05)	6day average (lag 05)
calendar time	3 4 or 5 dfyear	3 4 or 5 dfyear
dew-point temperature	4 or 5 df	4 or 5 df
temperature	4 or 5 df	4 or 5 df

Table 8. Number of differences in the reason and decision fields across Gemini runs for papers with consistent number of decisions across runs.

Num. of difference	Count	Proportion (%)
0	358	79.73
1	12	2.67
2	8	1.78
3	0	0.00
4	24	5.35
5	12	2.67
6	3	0.67
7	0	0.00
8	10	2.23
9	6	1.34
10	10	2.23
11	6	1.34

677 Table 8. Number of differences in the reason and decision fields across Gemini runs for papers with consistent number of decisions  
 678 across runs.

Num. of difference	Count	Proportion (%)
Total	449	100.00

687 We assess the reproducibility across runs of Gemini (gemini-2.0-flash) by repeating the text extract task five  
 688 times for each of the 62 papers and perform pairwise comparison between runs. This generates  $5 \times 4/2 \times 62 = 620$   
 689 possible comparisons for both “reason” and “decisions” fields. Comparisons are excluded when two runs produced a  
 690 different number of decisions since this would require manual alignment. This leaves 449 out of 620 (72%) extractions  
 691 to compare. Table 7 prints an comparison of decisions in Andersen et al. [3] across two runs and all the four decisions  
 692 are identical with no difference. Table 8 summarizes the number of differences observed in each pairwise comparison.  
 693 Among all comparisons, 80% produce the identical text in reason and decision. The discrepancies mainly come from the  
 694 following two reasons:

- 695 1) Gemini extracted the same decision in different length. For example, in Kan et al. [37], some runs may extract  
 696 “singleday lag models underestimate the cumulative effect of pollutants on mortality 2day moving average **of**  
 697 **current and previous day concentrations** (lag=01)”, while others extract “singleday lag models underestimate  
 698 the cumulative effect of pollutants on mortality 2day moving average (lag=01).  
 699
- 700 2) Gemini fails to extract reasons in some runs but not others. For example, in Burnett et al. [10], the first run  
 701 generates NA in the reason, but the remaining four runs are identical with the reason populated. In Ueda et al.  
 702 [73] and Castillejos et al. [12], runs 1 and 5 fail to extract the reason and produce the same incomplete version,  
 703 whereas runs 2, 3, and 4 produce accurate versions with reason populated.  
 704

705 **4.4.2 LLM models.** Reading text from PDF document requires Optical Character Recognition (OCR) to convert images  
 706 into machine-readable text, which currently is only supported by Anthropic Claude and Google Gemini. We compare  
 707 the number of decisions extracted by Gemini (gemini-2.0-flash) and Claude (claude-3-7-sonnet-latest) across  
 708 all 62 papers. In Figure 4, each point represents a paper, with the x- and y-axis showing the number of decisions  
 709 extracted by Claude and Gemini, respectively. The dashed 1:1 line marks where both models extract the same number  
 710 of decisions. In general the two models produce similar number of decision. However, more points fall below this line,  
 711 suggesting Claude extracts more decisions, often including noise from data pre-processing or secondary data analysis  
 712 steps. Examples of papers with large discrepancies include Mar et al. [53] (Claude: 10 vs. Gemini: 28), Ito et al. [31]  
 713 (Claude: 25 vs. Gemini: 19), Ko et al. [44] (Claude: 8 vs. Gemini: 16), among others. For both Claude and Gemini, we find  
 714 they sometimes fail to link the general term “weather variables” to the specific weather variables (e.g. Dockery et al.  
 715 [17] and Burnett et al. [11] for Gemini and Dockery et al. [17] and Katsouyanni et al. [40] for Claude). Although our  
 716 prompt specified that some decisions may require linking information across sentences and paragraphs to identify the  
 717 correct variable, this instruction doesn’t appear to be applied consistently.  
 718

719 **4.4.3 Text model.** We have conducted sensitivity analysis on the text model for calculating decision similarity score  
 720 from the Gemini outputs. The tested language models tested include 1) BERT [16] by Google, 2) RoBERTa [51] by  
 721

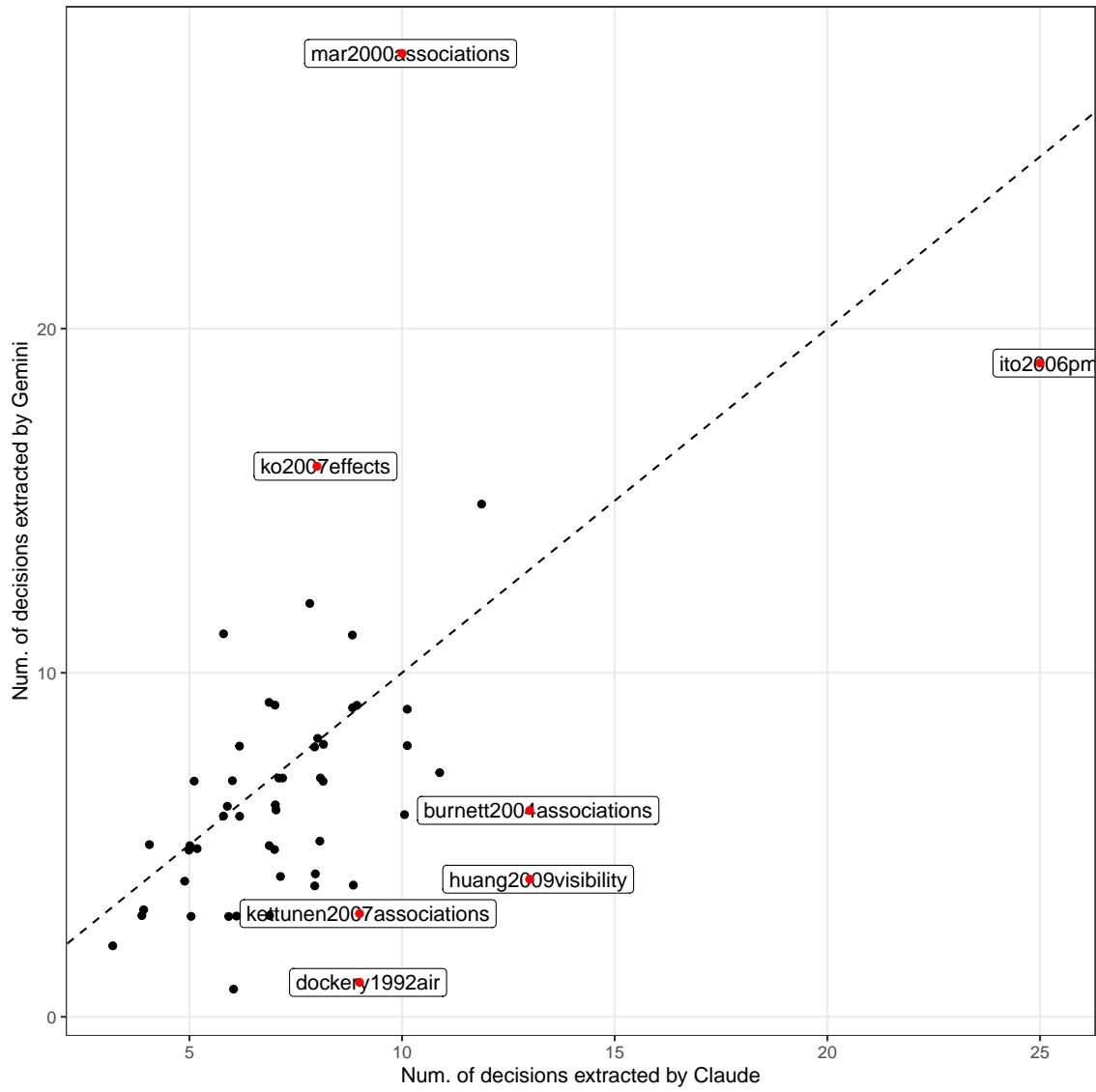


Fig. 4. Comparison of decisions extracted by Claude and Gemini. Each point represents a paper, with the x- and y-axis showing the number of decisions extracted by Claude and Gemini, respectively. The dashed 1:1 line marks where both models extract the same number of decisions. More points fall below this line, suggesting Claude extracts more decisions – often including noise from data pre-processing or secondary data analysis steps – which requires additional manual validation.

Facebook AI, trained on a larger dataset (160GB v.s. BERT's 15GB), 3) XLNet [79] by Google Brain, and two domain-trained BERT models: 4) SciBERT [5], trained on scientific literature, and 5) BioBERT [46], trained on PubMed and PMC data.

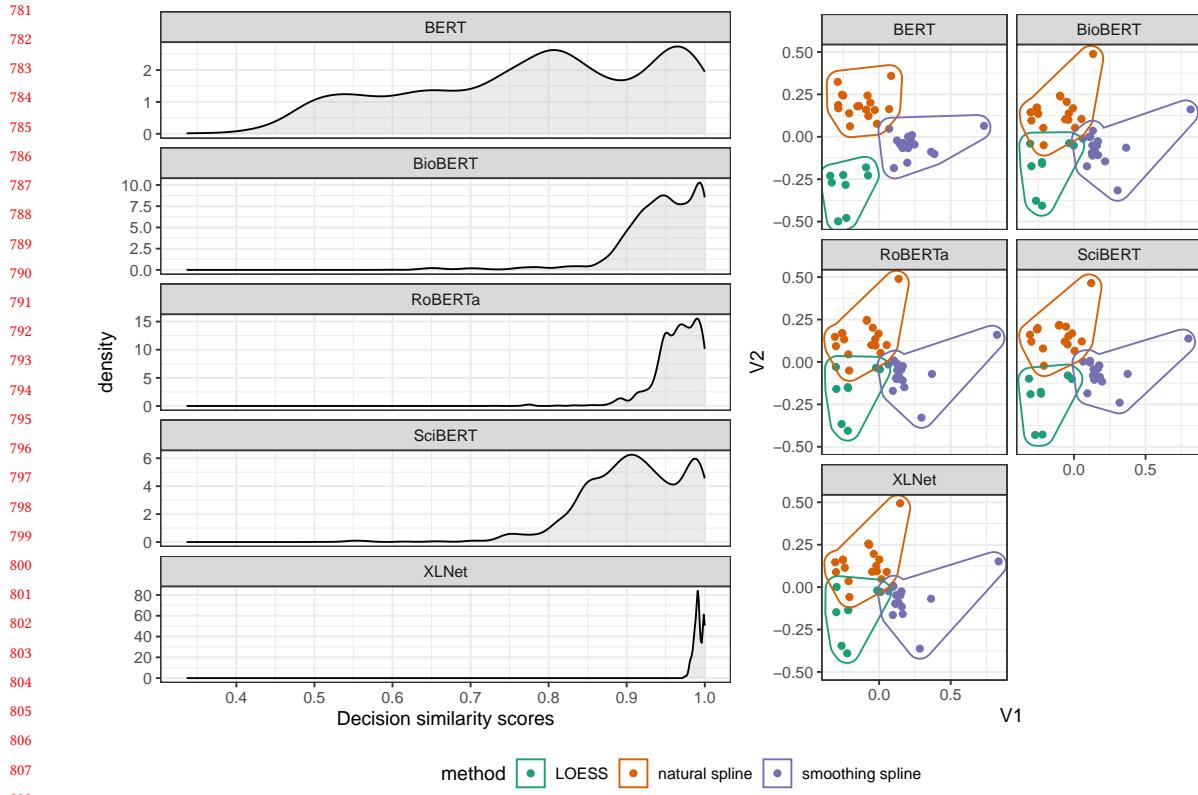


Fig. 5. Distribution of decision similarity (left) and multi-dimensional scaling (MDS) of the paper similarity scores (right) computed for five different text models (BERT, BioBERT, RoBERTa, SciBERT, and XLNet). The default language model, BERT, produces the widest variation across the five models, while the similarity scores form XLNet are all close to 1. The model BioBERT, RoBERTa, and SciBERT yield decision similar scores mostly between 0.7 to 1. All the text models shows a similar clustering structure based on the three main smoothing methods (LOESS, natural spline and smoothing spline).

Figure 5 shows the distribution of the decision similarity and the corresponding multi-dimensional scaling visualization, where distance are calculated from the paper similarity for each text model. At decision level, the BERT model produces the widest variation across all five models, while the raw scores are not directly comparable across models due to the difference in the underlying transformer architecture, the visualizations from multi-dimensional scaling (MDS) based on paper similarity scores all show a similar clustering pattern corresponding to the three main smoothing methods (LOESS, natural spline, and smoothing spline).

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Large-language models for information extraction

Numerous studies [4, 19, 22, 24, 26, 28, 42, 47, 61, 65, 67] have demonstrated the capability of LLMs for information extraction task. Our work applies the LLMs to extract analytic decisions in scientific literature, providing further evidence of their effectiveness for information extraction task. Our task requires capturing more complex analytical

833 decisions and their justifications, which typically span more than just a few tokens like in named entity recognition.  
834 Our task also requires linking information across sentences and sometimes sections to correctly identify the variables  
835 of a decision (e.g., linking “weather” to “temperature” and “humidity”). While LLM has performed well on extracting  
836 decisions from the literature, manual validations are still required to ensure the quality of the extracted decisions  
837 for downstream analysis. Most existing applications evaluate LLMs by comparing their outputs to human-annotated  
838 datasets, reporting metrics such as precision, recall, and F1 score. Because this approach depends on labeled data and it  
839 is not yet clear how these outputs should be validated for downstream analysis in practice. In our work, we automate  
840 some of the manual validation with a secondary LLM (Claude) to standardize the temporal lag choices in different  
841 expression into two categories.

842 With a default temperature of one and the prompt to instruct the model to extract the original text rather than  
843 paraphrase, we find that hallucination is not a major issue with Claude and Gemini in this application. Since LLM  
844 outputs are inherently probabilistic, we also conduct sensitivity analyses on reproducibility across runs and model  
845 providers. The output is generally stable: repeated runs with the Gemini produce consistent results, and different models  
846 extracted a similar number of decisions.

847 While we optimize the prompt for decision extraction in this work, an alternative approach is to fine-tune a local  
848 model to enhance LLM performance. A catered local model could be useful for extraction decisions for a comprehensive  
849 literature reviews on a larger scale, but it would require greater model training efforts with labeled data.

## 850 5.2 Extracting other types of decisions

851 In this work, we focus on modeling decisions for the baseline model in the air pollution epidemiology literature. Analyses  
852 in this field often fit multiple models for different health outcomes and use secondary models, such as distributed lag  
853 models and multi-pollutant models, to estimate relative risks and multi-pollutants interactions. These increase the  
854 complexity of decision extraction with LLMs because authors often only describe the differences from the baseline  
855 specification, implicitly assuming other decisions remain unchanged. Hence, LLMs will need to link the decisions across  
856 different models and reconstruct the complete set of decisions for each model.

857 Beyond modeling choices, decisions in data pre-processing are also interesting to compare. For example, Braga  
858 et al. [9] aggregated air pollution measures from multiple PM10 monitors within the same location into a single  
859 value. Pre-processing choices such as data source, aggregation method, imputation, also have impact on uncertainty  
860 of the estimated effect size of particulate matters. However, these decisions are often not properly and adequately  
861 described in the manuscript, making it impossible to extract by LLMs. Proper documentation and reporting standard of  
862 in pre-processing decisions are needed before our workflow could be applied to pre-processing decisions.

863 With growing advocacy for reproducibility, papers nowadays are expected to share code and data, if applicable. Code  
864 availability provides a useful supplementary source for identifying decision choices and cross-checking them against  
865 descriptions in the manuscript. However, while script may reveal what choices were made, the rationale behind these  
866 choices are often not documented under the current practice.

## 867 5.3 Generalizability of the workflow

868 In principle, our workflow is scalable and generalizable to a random set of applied papers. However, insights about  
869 the data analysis practices are more likely to be revealed when papers share certain similarities. For example literature  
870 on the same topic but different authors allows for understanding common practices within a field, literature using

885 the same methodology across different disciplines allow comparisons of the same statistical method across fields; and  
 886 literature that considers the same variables can show how those variables are used in different domains.  
 887

888 Our LLM prompt for extracting decisions will need to be customized for each application of the workflow. The  
 889 general prompt structure and the data schema for recording decisions can be reused, while examples within the prompt  
 890 may be adapted to suit the specific application. The shiny application for interactively validating and standardizing  
 891 decisions can be reused across applications. Calculating paper similarity requires comparing decisions on the same  
 892 variable and type across paper pairs. For papers with limited similarities, the number of comparable decisions may  
 893 be limited. Diagnostic functions are available to display decisions side by side or provide summary statistics on the  
 894 number of comparable decisions. Uncertainty visualization on the paper similarity score can be used to highlight the  
 895 confidence with respect to the number of comparable decisions.  
 896

897 As a new method for collecting analytic decision data from literature, our workflow can be connected to meta-analysis  
 898 to assess how different decisions influence results. More broadly, it can also be integrated into literature search and  
 899 recommender systems to suggest similar papers based on the analytic decisions they employ.  
 900

## 902 6 Conclusion

903 In this paper, we developed a scalable and generalizable pipeline for automatically extracting analytical decisions using  
 904 LLMs from scientific literature to study how analysts make decisions in data analysis. We also introduced a method for  
 905 calculating paper similarity through comparing the similarities among decision choices and the similarity metric can be  
 906 used as a distance to cluster papers by their decision choices and visualization with dimension reduction algorithms,  
 907 such as multidimensional scaling. We applied this pipeline to a set of air pollution modeling literature that associates  
 908 daily particulate matter and daily mortality and hospital admission. From the extracted modeling decisions, we identify  
 909 the most common decision choices in this type of analysis and the paper similarity score calculation revealed the three  
 910 clusters of paper corresponding to different smoothing methods.  
 911

912 Many work on studying decision-making in data analysis conduct qualitative interviews with a small number of  
 913 analysts to understand their decision-making process. “many-analysts” studies gather together analysts in a controlled  
 914 experiment to observe analysts conduct the analysis. Our approach is also observational in nature, but we “observe”  
 915 analysts in real world problems with real data that have policy implication, while being scalable and cost-effective to a  
 916 broader exploration of decision-making practices in different contexts and disciplines. Compared to sensitivity analysis  
 917 or multiverse analysis, our approach offers a different perspective by pooling together decisions made in analyses across  
 918 the field to reveal the options considered to highlight uncertainty in decisions that require further sensitivity analyses  
 919 to assess their impact [60, 72].  
 920

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