



What Makes a Visualization Complex?

Exploring Design Features Related to Visual Complexity

Kylie Lin, Sean Ru, David Rapp, Hui Guan, Cindy Xiong Bearfield

School of Interactive Computing, Georgia Institute of Technology; Department of Psychology, Northwestern University; Department of Computer Science, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Overly complex visualizations overwhelm their audiences. However, the extent to which design choices impact people's perceptions of visual complexity (the “**amount of detail or intricacy**” in an image²) has not been systematically examined. We ask:

What design features contribute to perceptions of visual complexity?

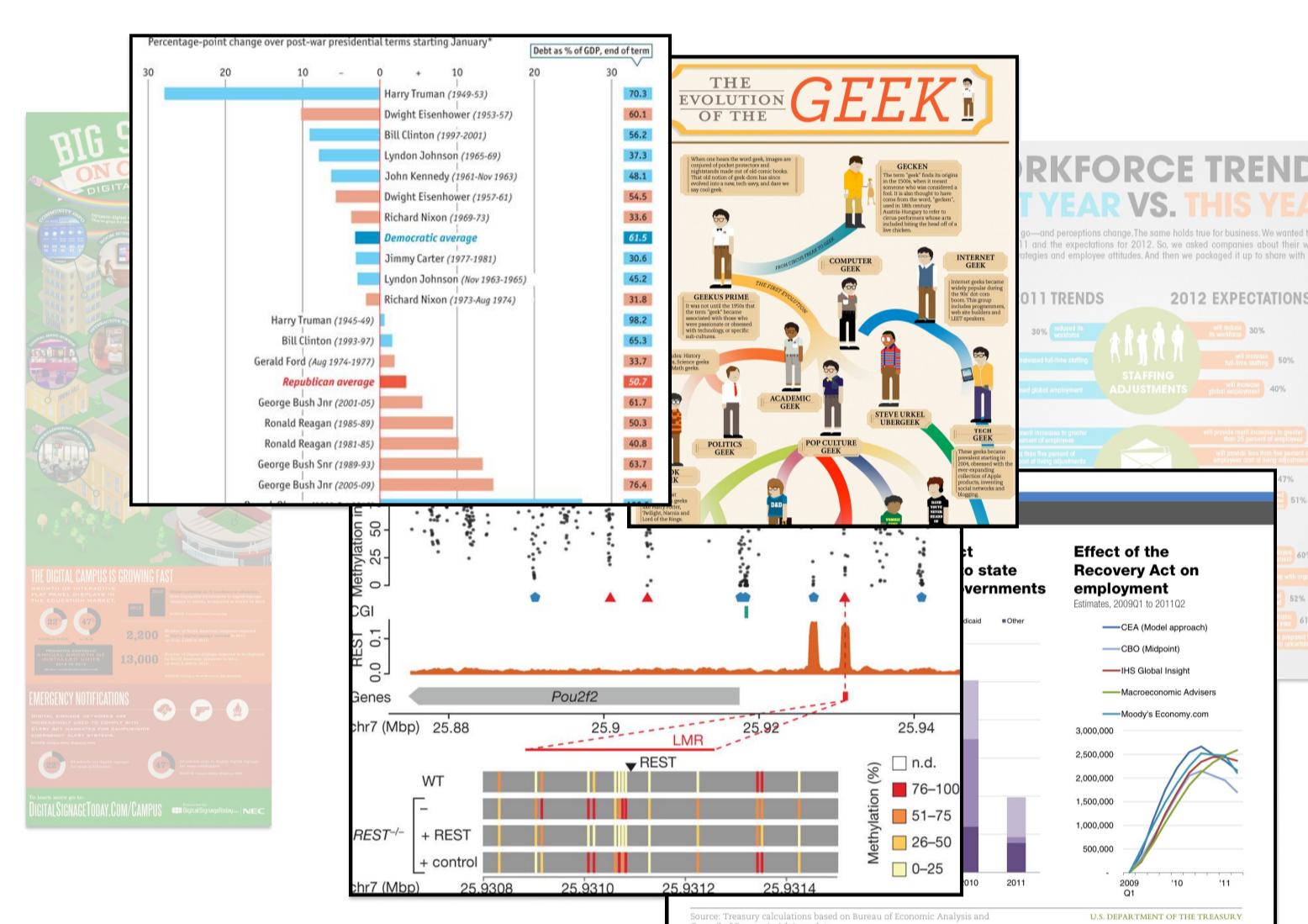
1

RELABEL THE MASSVIS DATASET

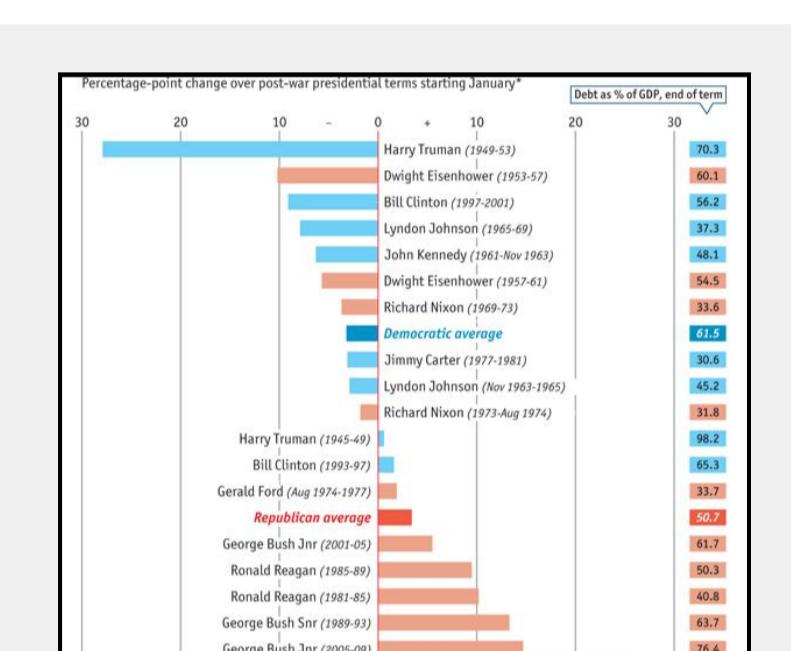
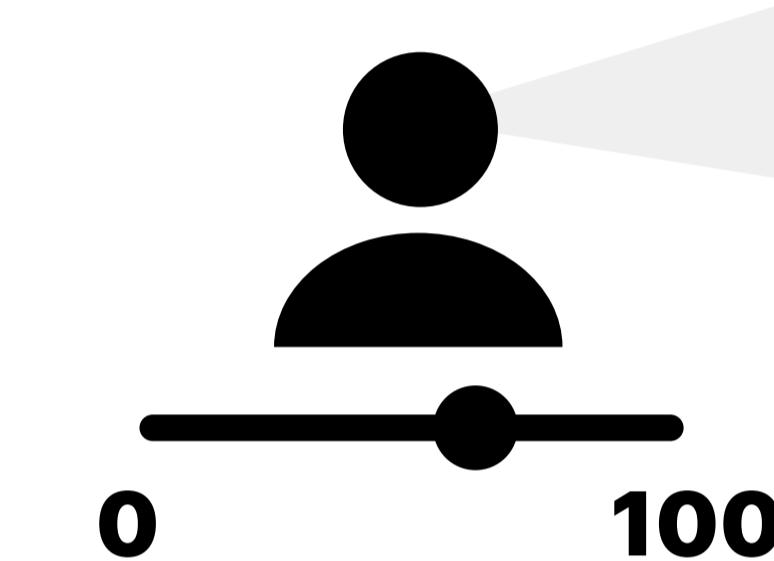
MASSVIS Dataset¹
(5800+ Visualizations)

Design Features
(Text, Color, Data, Design)

Visual Complexity Ratings
(1-100 Slider Response)



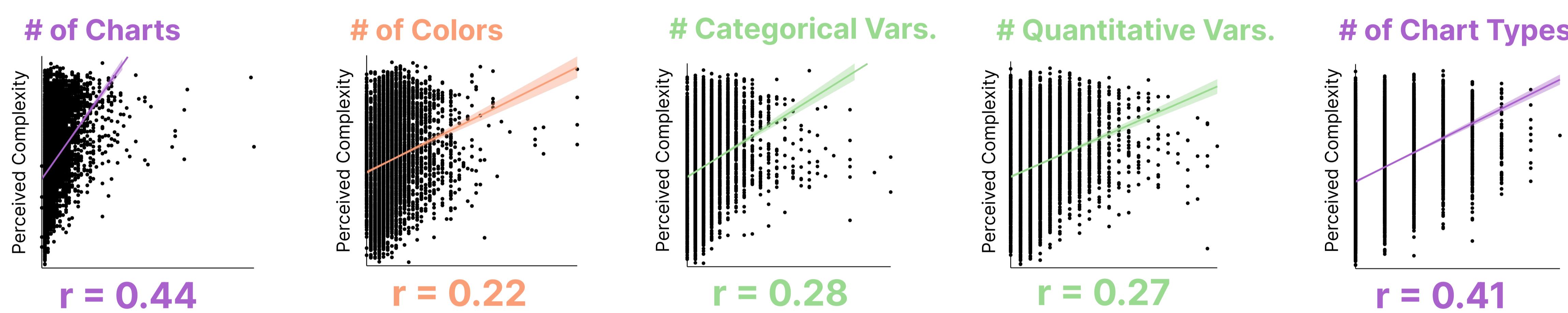
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Titles	Legend Titles	# of Charts	Area
Captions	Legend Text	# of Chart Types	Map
Annotations	Text Only	Bar	Distribution
Axes Labels	No Text	Circle	Line
Axes Text		Diagram	Text
Data		Trees & Networks	
		Table	Point
		Grid & Matrix	Grid & Matrix
		Area	Point
		Line	Area
		Text	Line
Color		Black & White	
		# of Colors	
		Background Color	



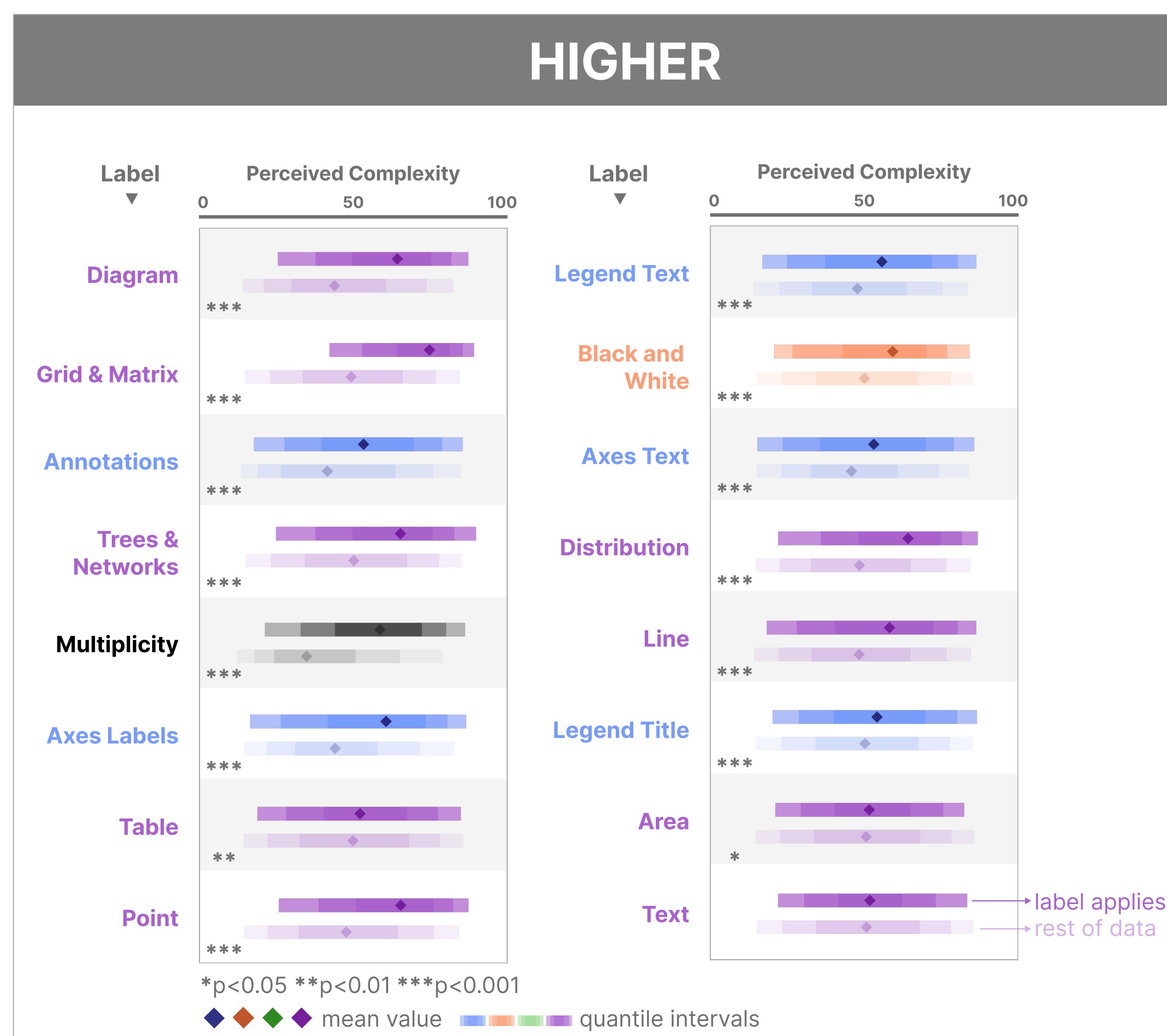
2

ASSOCIATIONS WITH COMPLEXITY

For all continuous labels, higher values correlate with higher complexity:



Mean perceived complexity was higher/lower when certain labels applied to a visualization:



Features ranked by importance, generated by Random Forest model

CONCLUSIONS

Intuitive Findings

- The feature with the **most influence** on complexity is the **Number of Charts** in a visualization.
- The **more visual elements** a visualization contains, the greater its perceived complexity.

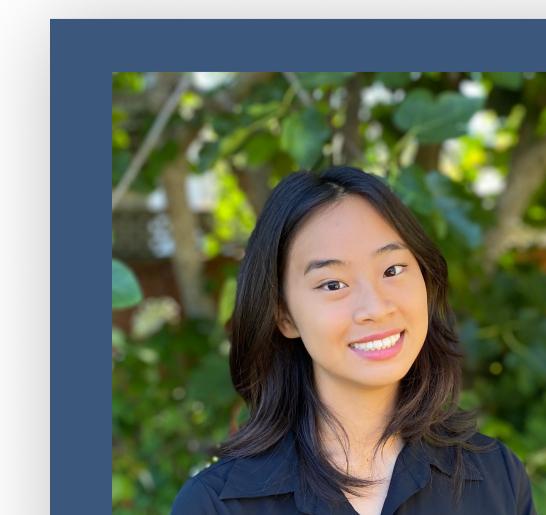
References

- [1] M. A. Borkin, A. A. Vo, Z. Bylinskii, P. Isola, S. Sunkavalli, A. Oliva, and H. Pfister. What makes a visualization memorable? IEEE transactions on visualization and computer graphics, 19(12):2306–2315, 2013. 1 [2] J. G. Snodgrass and M. Vanderwart. A standardized set of 260 pictures: norms for name agreement, image agreement, familiarity, and visual complexity. Journal of experimental psychology: Human learning and memory, 6(2):174, 1980. 1

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KYLIE R. LIN lead author
klin368@gatech.edu
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