

Tree Colors: color schemes for tree structured data

Martijn Tennekes and Edwin de Jonge

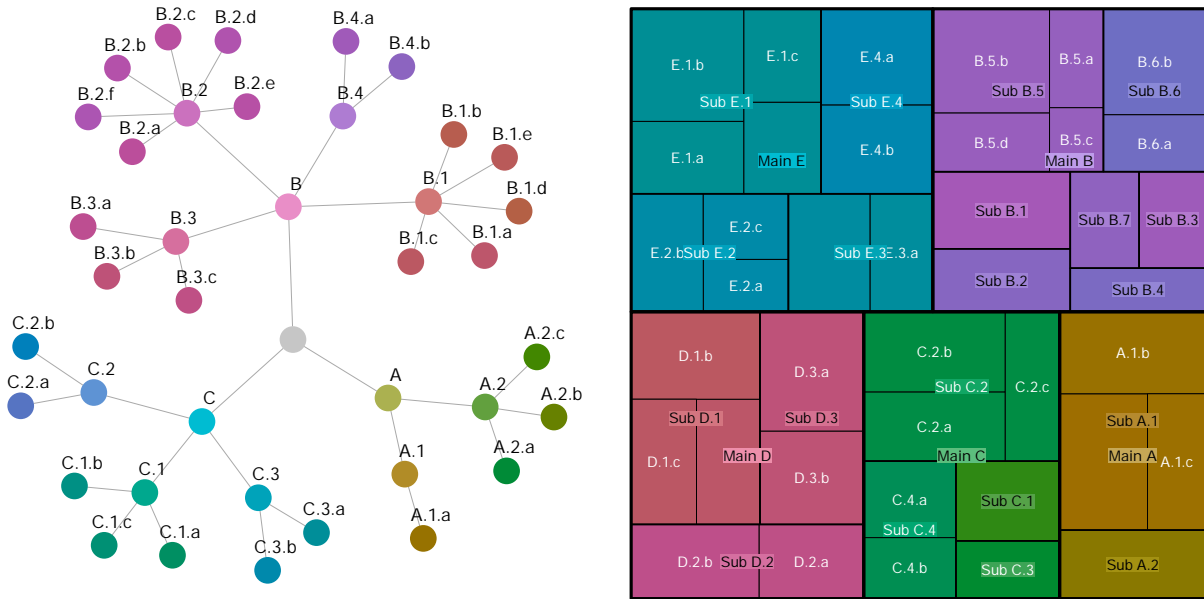


Fig. 1. Tree Colors applied to a directed graph (left) and a treemap (right).

Abstract— Color is an important means to display categorical data in statistical graphics. Categories are often hierarchically structured in a classification tree, but most color palettes do not take this hierarchy into account. We present a method to map tree structures to colors from the Hue-Chroma-Luminance (HCL) color model. The HCL color space is known for its well balanced perceptual properties. Our study suggest that hierarchical qualitative color palettes are very useful: not only for improving standard hierarchical visualizations such as trees and treemaps, but also for showing tree structure in non-hierarchical visualizations.

Index Terms—Color palettes, statistical graphics, hierarchical data.

1 INTRODUCTION

Data are often hierarchically structured in official statistics. Business data are typically broken down by economic activity and demographic data by geographic region. To produce statistics it is therefore important to expose rough input data without losing the underlying hierarchical structure. Several data visualization methods are useful for this task, for instance treemaps [9, 11]. Color palettes reflecting the hierarchical structure would be very useful in supporting visual analysis.

Assigning colors to categories is far from trivial. On the one hand, qualitative colors should be distinct, but on the other hand they should not suggest non-existent order or proximity and introduce perceptual bias. The selection of color palettes for categorical data first depends on the type of data. For nominal data, such as gender or nationality, qualitative color palettes are used, while for ordinal data, such as level of urbanization, sequential or diverging palettes are used [1, 13]. However, for hierarchical categories there are no specific guidelines for selecting color palettes, to the best of our knowledge.

Although many tree visualizations are proposed in literature [8],

most of them use color to a small extent. A visualization technique that uses color as a major attribute is the InterRing [12], a navigation tool with a radial layout. The leaf nodes are assigned to a different hue values. The color of a parent node is derived from averaging the colors of its children, where larger branches have more weight. An implicit effect is that colors of higher hierarchical levels are less saturated, except for one-child-per-parent branches. Hierarchical color schemes are also applied to the Hyperbolic Wheel [5], an exploration tool for hierarchical data. These color schemes are abstracted from the Hue-Saturation-Lightness (HSL) space, where brightness decreases proportional from root to leaf nodes, and where child nodes inherit the hue values from their parent nodes and add small hue values to distinct them from their siblings. However, hue values of nodes in the same hierarchical layer may be overlapping.

Our purpose is to map tree structures to color palettes with the following three properties. First, the hierarchical depth of a node should be perceived with color. The second property is that branches should be clearly distinguishable in all parts of the tree, or at least the main branches in large trees. Third and last, each node should have a unique color that is also perceived as unique as much as possible.

The color palettes that are obtained by our proposed method are called Tree Colors. As a starting point, we use the Hue-Chroma-Luminance (HCL) space, a transformation of the CIELUV color space, that is designed with the aim to control human color perception [4]. Colors with different hue values are perceptually uniform in colorfulness and brightness, which does not hold for the popular Hue-

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Saturation-Value (HSV) and HSL color spaces [13].

This paper is outlined as follows. In Section 2 we describe the proposed method. We provide several applications of statistical graphics that use Tree Colors in Section 4. The conducted user survey to evaluate the method is described in Section 5. We conclude with a discussion in Section 6.

2 METHOD

Our method maps a tree structure on colors in HCL space, such that it reflects the hierarchical properties of the tree. We use the hue parameter H , with range $[0, 360]$, for the tree structure, where the hue of each child node resembles the hue of its parent. The chroma and luminance parameters C and L , both with range $[0, 100]$, are used to discriminate the different hierarchical levels.

We illustrate Tree Colors with a radial tree graph that is depicted in Figure 2. Although other graph layouts may be more suitable to highlight the tree structure, for instance the Fruchterman-Reingold algorithm [3] applied in the graph in Figure 1, the applied radial Reingold-Tilford layout [7] preserves the original order of nodes in each hierarchical layer, which is in many cases, and also in this case, purely alphabetical. The Tree Colors in this graph can therefore be applied in the same order in any other visualization method with a radial layout, or a layer-wise linear layout.

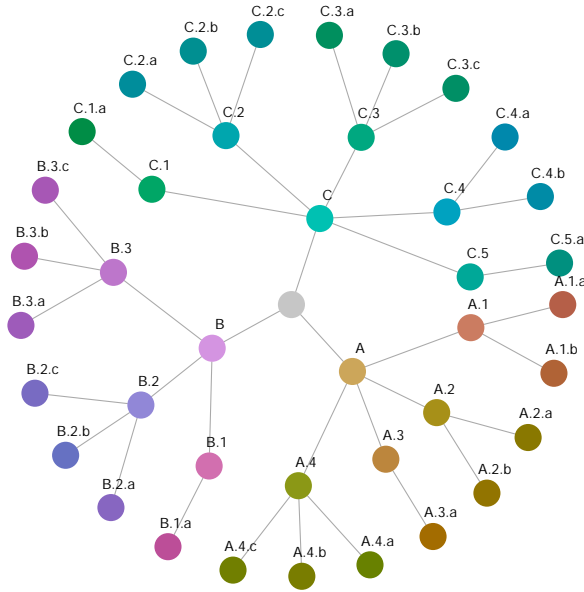


Fig. 2. Radial graph with Tree Colors.

2.1 Hue values

For selecting hue values we use the following recursive algorithm. It will assign to each node v of a tree structure a hue value H and a hue value range r . We start with the root node, which has by default hue range $[H_{start} = 0, H_{end} = 360]$:

AssignHue(v, r)

1. Assign the middle hue value in r to the hue value of node v , which is H_v^1 .
2. Let N be the number of child nodes of v . If $N > 0$:
 - i divide r in N equal parts r_i with $i = 1, \dots, N$;
 - ii if H_{perm} then permute the r_i 's;
 - iii if H_{rev} then reverse the even-numbered r_i 's;
 - iv reduce each r_i by keeping the middle fraction H_{frac} ;
 - v for each child node v_i DO AssignHue(v_i, r_i).

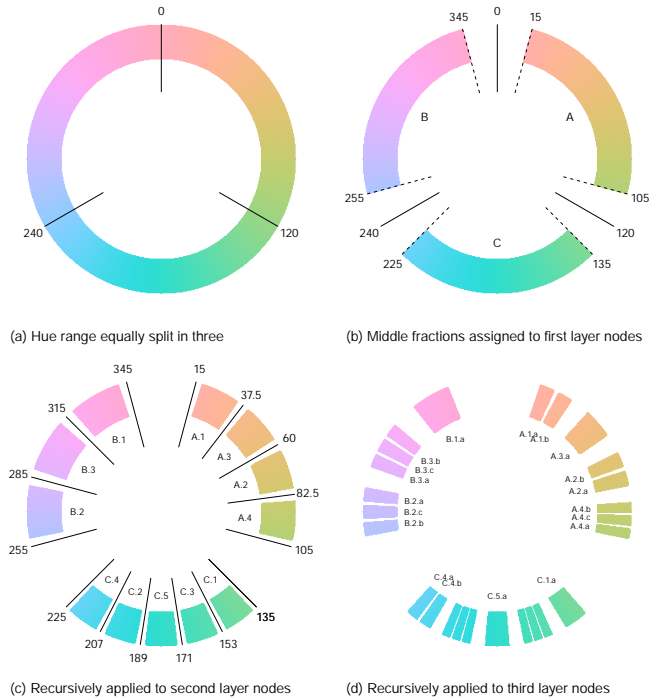


Fig. 3. Assignment of hue values.

This algorithm is illustrated in Figure 3. In (a) the full hue range (for a constant $C = 60$ and $L = 70$) is split in three equal parts, since the root node has three children. Of each part, only the middle fractions (with $H_{frac} = 0.75$ by default) are kept in (b). The ranges are assigned to A, B, and C. In (c) and (d) these steps are recursively taken for the deepest two hierarchical layers.

2.1.1 Hue permutations and reversals

In many hierarchical structures, there is no order between siblings. When the nodes in such structure are plotted in a linear or radial layout, the colors of the siblings should not introduce a perceptual order. Therefore, the assigned hue ranges are by default ($H_{perm} = \text{TRUE}$) permuted among the siblings. The used permutation order is based on the five-elements-permutation $[1, 3, 5, 2, 4]$. The way to determine the permuted order is to equally spread the siblings on a circle in the original order, and to pick the siblings at angles of 0 modulo 144 degrees. Notice that the difference of any two adjacent siblings in $[1, 3, 5, 2, 4]$ is exactly $2/5 * 360 = 144$ degrees, also between the last and the first sibling. For the cases with more than five siblings this picking angle is rounded down if needed. It may occur that a sibling is picked twice while others have not yet been picked, for instance when 360 is a multiple of the rounded picking angle. In these cases, the next sibling is picked and the process continues with the same picking angle. For the three and four siblings case we use the permutations $[1, 3, 2]$ and $[1, 3, 2, 4]$ respectively.

The permutations for three to twelve siblings for a hue range between 120 (green) and 240 (blue) are depicted in Figure 4. Note that the order of the five-siblings case, which is $[1, 3, 5, 2, 4]$, is the position of the siblings A, B, C, D, and E respectively. Therefore, the permutation of them is A, D, B, E, and C.

Furthermore, the permuted color ranges within even numbered branches are by default reversed ($H_{rev} = \text{TRUE}$) to differentiate between branches. This is needed because the first category is always mapped to the lowest hue value (in Figure 4, category A has the most greenish color in all shown cases), and the last category to a higher hue value. To reverse the hue ranges in an alternating way, so only the

¹The root node itself is colored grey, so its hue is irrelevant.

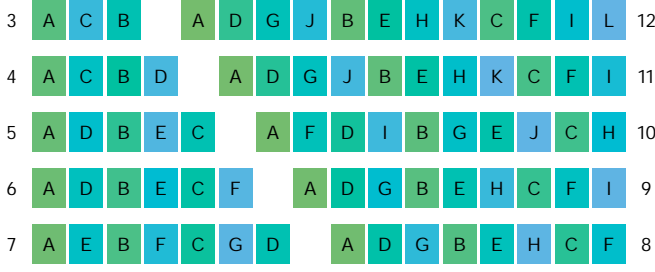


Fig. 4. Purmutations of siblings.

even-numbered, the hue distance between any two adjacent nodes with different parents will increase, and thus easier to tell apart.

Note that the labeling in Figure 3 shows that the assignment of colors is permuted and also reversed for even-numbered branches. The three top-layer hue ranges $[0, 120]$, $[120, 240]$, and $[240, 360]$ are assigned to A, C, and B respectively. Branches A and C are odd-numbered, so the hue ranges of the second layer are only permuted; the permutations for these branches are $[A.1, A.3, A.2, A.4]$, and $[C.1, C.3, C.5, C.2, C.4]$. Since branch B is odd-numbered, the hue ranges are not only permuted, but also reversed: $[B.2, B.3, B.1]$.

The result of these permutations is that siblings are discriminated in each hierarchical layer, which is illustrated in Figure 2. For comparison, the permutation is turned off in the graphs shown in Figure 5. In the left graph, the hue values form a gradual hue circle, where only the hue fraction H_{frac} creates small hue gaps between branches. The even-numbered branches are reversed in the right graph. The leaf nodes of branch B are now more distinct from the other leaf nodes. However, the distinction between branches of the second hierarchical layer is still less than with permutation enabled (Figure 2).

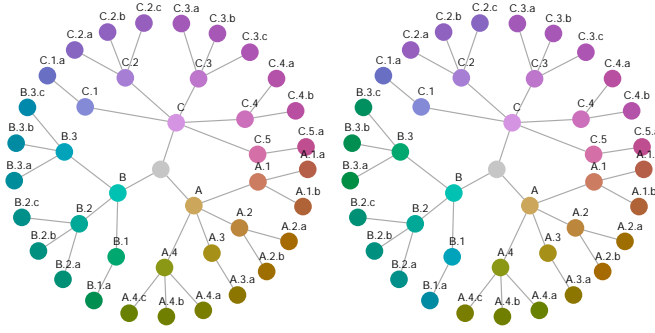


Fig. 5. Radial graphs with permutation disabled. Reversal of even-numbered branches is disabled on the left, and enabled on the right.

2.1.2 Hue fraction

The fraction H_{frac} is needed to introduce a ‘hue gap’ between nodes with a different parent. This choice is a trade-off between discriminating different main branches and discriminating different leaf nodes. If $H_{frac} = 0$, the hue ranges are diminished to single hue points, which implies that each main branch is assigned a constant hue. On the other end of the extreme, if $H_{frac} = 1$, the full hue range is available at each hierarchical layer, which makes leaf nodes easier to distinguish, but harder to take apart from leaf nodes of other branches.

The choice of f depends on several aspects, such as the application, the size and dimensions of the hierarchical data, and on the used visualization method. In Figures 6 a graph with a Fruchterman-Reingold layout [3] is shown with different values of H_{frac} . For such explicit tree visualizations, high values of H_{frac} can be chosen to discriminate the leaf nodes without losing touch of the global tree structure

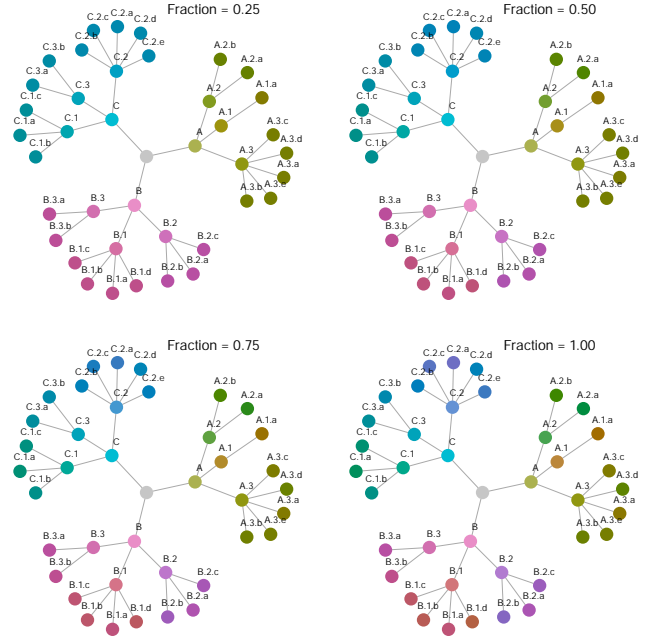


Fig. 6. Graphs with different fraction values.

which is clearly visible, also without Tree Colors. Even values of (or close to) 1.00 are appropriate here. To be on the safe side, we suggest $H_{frac} = 0.75$ for explicit tree visualizations as a guideline.

For implicit tree visualizations where the tree structure is not clearly visible without colors, lower values of H_{frac} are more suitable. To illustrate this, a treemap with different values of H_{frac} is depicted in Figure 7. For $H_{frac} = 0.75$ and especially $H_{frac} = 1.00$, it is difficult to grasp the global tree structure immediately; the main categories A and C are hard to take apart as well as the categories B and D. Therefore we suggest $H_{frac} = 0.50$ as a rule of thumb for implicit tree visualizations.

2.2 Chroma and luminance values

In order to show depth in the tree, we use bright colors for nodes high in the tree and dark colors for nodes lower in the tree. The intuition behind this approach is that dark colors are often associated by humans with high particle densities. In most tree representations, the density of nodes will increase with the depth of the tree. Therefore, we let luminance decrease linearly with depth. We set the default luminance value for the first (highest) layer below the root as $L_1 = 70$. For the other layers $i = 2, \dots, d$, where d is the depth of the tree, the luminance value is defined as

$$L_i = (i - 1)\beta^L + L_1, \quad (1)$$

where the default value for the slope parameter β^L is set to -10 . In case the root node is visualized, it is colored grey. Its luminance value of the root node is specified by $L_0 = L_1 - \beta^L$.

In Figure 8 a table of colors are depicted for various chroma and luminance values and a constant hue of $H = 300$. Brighter colors (with higher values of L) have the tendency to become too saturated in our opinion, for instance, the colors with $L = 70$ and $C \geq 70$. However, for dark colors, high values of C may help to discriminate them distinguish them from other dark colors with different hue values. The question therefore is, what values of C are needed for what values of L in order to distinguish the colors easily without using too much saturation.

For different pairs of C and L , color palettes with a fixed hue range from 120 and 360 are depicted in Figure 9. Among the bright color palettes (with $L = 70$) the saturation level of $C = 60$ is sufficient to discriminate the colors easily. For the dark color palettes (with $L = 30$), saturation values of $C = 80$ or higher are not superfluous, especially



Fig. 7. Treemaps with different fraction values.

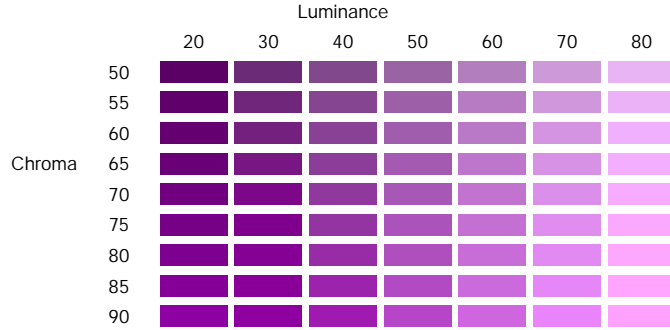


Fig. 8. Colors for different L and C values with a constant $H = 300$.

because the assigned hue range is often very narrow for nodes low in the tree.

Therefore, we propose to increase C with depth. Let $C_1 = 60$ be the chroma value for the first layer. For layer $i = 2, \dots, d$ the chroma value is defined as

$$C_i = (i - 1)\beta^C + C_1, \quad (2)$$

where the slope parameter is set to $\beta^C = 5$ by default. The chroma value for the root node is irrelevant, since it is colored grey.

So per hierarchical layer i , we have specified a fixed pair of L_i and C_i . For these pairs, we depicted color palettes with a fixed hue range between 120 and 360 in Figure 10.

2.3 Parameter overview

An overview of all parameters that are used in the described method is provided in Table 1. The luminance and chroma parameters are restricted to the following constraints:

$$0 \leq (d - 1)\beta^L + L_1 \leq 100 \quad (3)$$

and

$$0 \leq (d - 1)\beta^C + C_1 \leq 100. \quad (4)$$

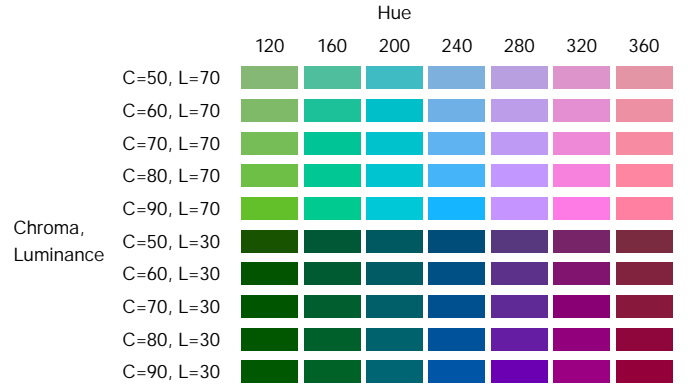


Fig. 9. Colors palettes for different pairs of L and C .

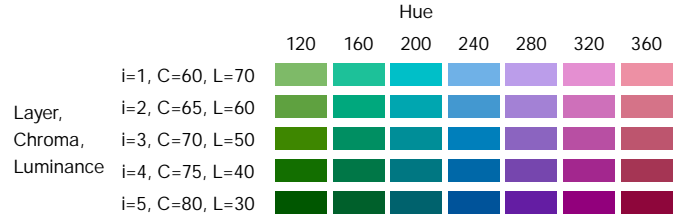


Fig. 10. Colors palettes for matched pairs of default L and C values for the top five hierarchical layers.

3 SOFTWARE

A free and open source software tool is available to experiment with the different parameter settings described above. This tool is contained in the software package treemap [10] of the statistical software environment R [6]. After installation R and the package treemap, only two lines of code are required to start the interactive tool:

```
library ( treemap )
treecolors ( )
```

A screenshot of the interactive tool is shown in Figure 11. On the leftside panel, the user can create random tree data, and experiment with the parameters. On the main panel, four visualizations are shown: two graphs (Reingold-Tilford and Fruchterman-Reingold), a treemap and a bar chart. Also a table of the data is provided included the color values, and HCL values of the different nodes.

4 APPLICATION

National statistics on business enterprises are often published per economic sector. Economic sectors are structured hierarchically. For instance, the class of bakeries may have a parent class food manufacturers, which in turn is a child of the class of manufacturers. All member countries of the European Union use same classification system of

Parameter		Range	Default value
Hue start	H_{start}	0 to 360	0
Hue end	H_{end}	0 to 360	360
Hue fraction	H_f	0 to 1	0.75 (explicit) 0.50 (implicit)
Hue permutations	H_{perm}	Boolean	TRUE
Hue reverse	H_{rev}	Boolean	TRUE
Luminance first level value	L_1	0 to 100	70
Luminance slope value	β^L		-10
Chroma first level value	C_1	0 to 100	60
Chroma slope value	β^C		5

Table 1. Parameters

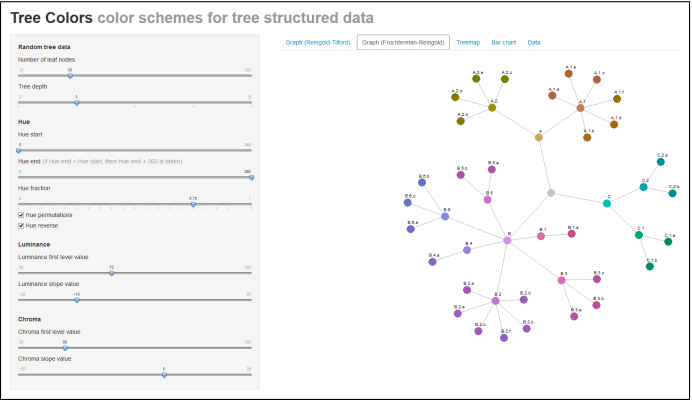


Fig. 11. Screenshot.

economic activity, namely the *Nomenclature statistique des activités économiques dans la Communauté européenne* (NACE) system [2]. This system has 21 main sectors and consists of four hierarchical layers.

One of the largest statistics that uses the NACE system are the Structural Business Statistics (SBS) that cover industry, construction, trade and services. In Figure 12, the net turnover of the Dutch wholesale and retail trade enterprises in 2011 is visualized by a treemap. The Tree Colors of the non-leaf nodes are used for the text label backgrounds. The number of digits in the category names represent the hierarchical layer. Each of the three main branches of this sector (45, 46 and 47) clearly has a distinct hue range. Furthermore, some leaf nodes, for instance the pink colored 466, are a brighter than others, because they represent the third rather than the fourth NACE layer.

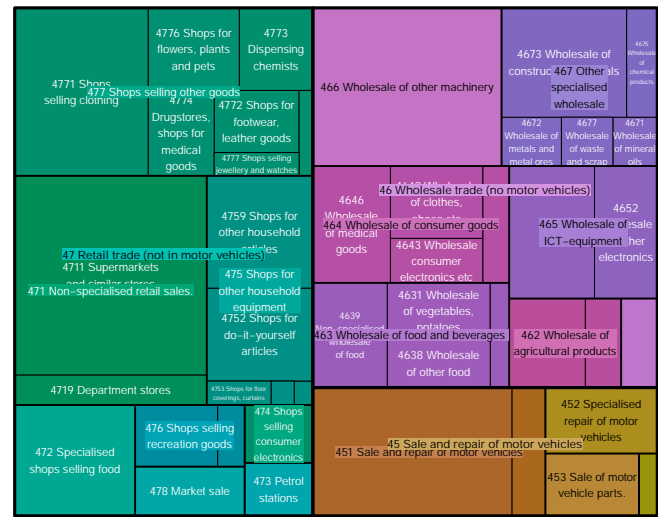


Fig. 12. Turnover among Dutch wholesale and retail trade enterprises in 2011

Hierarchical colors can also improve visualizations without explicit tree structure. The colors hint at the underlying tree structure. To illustrate this, a bar chart and a stacked area chart of fictive turnover data are depicted in Figure ?? . Such graphics could be useful when the hierarchical structure will not be the main focus in the conducted analyses. The bar chart can be used to compare turnover values of all leaf node sectors in Construction (NACE F), and the stacked area plot to analyse turnover values in time.

5 USER STUDY

6 DISCUSSION

In our opinion, the proposed method to create hierarchical color palettes improves statistical visualizations, both hierarchically and non-hierarchically structured. The pre-condition that colors in the same hierarchical layer should be similar in terms of colorfulness and brightness it satisfied. This property is especially important in statistical visualizations, since they aim to visualize data as objectively as possible. The downside of the proposed method is that some leaf node colors will still be hard to distinguish.

We recommend a user study to evaluate the obtained hierarchical color palettes when applied in various statistical visualizations. The main aim of this user study would be to find out whether hierarchical palettes are useful in statistical analysis.

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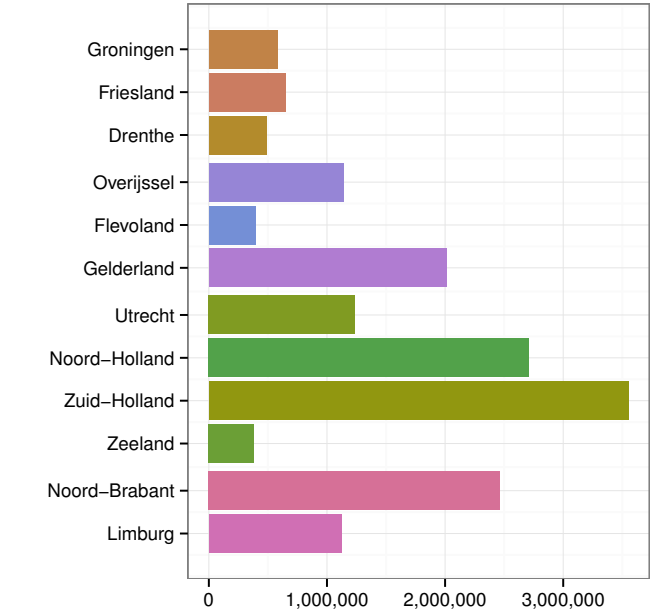


Fig. 13. Dutch population in 2012

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