Semiparametric robust mean estimations based on the orderliness of quantile averages

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As one of the most fundamental problems in statistics, robust location estimation has many prominent solutions, such as the trimmed mean, Winsorized mean, Hodges–Lehmann estimator, Huber M-estimator, and median of means. Recent research findings suggest that their biases concerning the mean can be quite different in asymmetric distributions, but the underlying mechanisms remain largely unclear. In this article, similar to the mean-median-mode inequality, it is proven that in the context of nearly all common unimodal distributions, there exists an orderliness of symmetric quantile averages with different breakdown points. Further deductions explain why the Winsorized mean and median of means generally have smaller biases compared to the trimmed mean. Building on the U-orderliness, the superiority of the median Hodges–Lehmann mean is discussed.

semiparametric | mean-median-mode inequality | asymptotic | unimodal | Hodges–Lehmann estimator

In 1823, Gauss (1) proved that for any unimodal distribution with a finite second moment, $|m-\mu| \leq \sqrt{\frac{3}{4}}\omega$, where μ is the population mean, m is the population median, and ω is the root mean square deviation from the mode, M. This pioneering work revealed that despite potential bias with respect to the mean in robust estimates, the deviation remains bounded in unit of a scale parameter under certain assumptions. Bernard, Kazzi, and Vanduffel (2020) (2) further derived asymptotic bias bounds of any quantile for unimodal distributions by reducing this optimization problem to a parametric one, which can be solved analytically. They showed that the population median, m, has the smallest maximum distance to the population mean, μ, among all symmetric quantile averages (SQA_ϵ). Daniell, in 1920, (3) analyzed a class of estimators, linear combinations of order statistics, and identified that ϵ-symmetric trimmed mean (STM_ϵ) belongs to this class. Another popular choice, the ϵ-symmetric Winsorized mean (SWM_ϵ), named after Winsor and introduced by Tukey (4) and Dixon (5) in 1960, is also an L-estimator. Bieniek (2016) derived exact bias upper bounds of the Winsorized mean based on Danielak and Rychlik's work (2003) on the trimmed mean for any distribution with a finite second moment and confirmed that the former is smaller than the latter (6, 7). In 1963, Hodges and Lehmann (8) proposed a class of nonparametric location estimators based on rank tests and, from the Wilcoxon signed-rank statistic (9), deduced the median of pairwise means as a robust location estimator for a symmetric population. Both L-statistics and R-statistics achieve robustness essentially by removing a certain proportion of extreme values. In 1964, Huber (10) generalized maximum likelihood estimation to the minimization of the sum of a specific loss function, which measures the residuals between the data points and the model's parameters. Some L-statistics are also M-statistics, e.g., the sample mean is an M-estimator with a squared error loss function, while the sample median is an M-estimator with an absolute error loss function (10). The Huber M-estimator is obtained by applying the Huber loss function that combines elements of both squared error and absolute error to achieve robustness against gross errors and high efficiency for contaminated Gaussian distributions (10). Sun, Zhou, and Fan (2020) examined the concentration bounds of Huber M-estimator (11). Mathieu (2022) (12) further derived the concentration bounds of M-statistics and demonstrated that, by selecting the tuning parameter which depends on the variance, Huber M-estimator can also be a sub-Gaussian estimator. The concept of median of means ($\mathrm{MoM}_{k,b=\frac{n}{k}}$, k is the number of size in each block, b is the number of blocks) was implicitly introduced several times in Nemirovsky and Yudin (1983) (13), Jerrum, Valiant, and Vazirani (1986), (14) and Alon, Matias and Szegedy (1996) (15)'s works. Given its good performance even for distributions with infinite second moments, MoM has received increasing attention over the past decade (16–23). Devroye, Lerasle, Lugosi, and Oliveira (2016) showed that MoM nears the optimum of sub-Gaussian mean estimation with regards to concentration bounds when the distribution has a heavy tail (21). For a comparison of concentration bounds of trimmed mean, Huber M-estimator, median of means and other relavent estimators, readers are directed to Gobet, Lerasle, and Métivier's paper (2022) (24). Laforgue, Clemencon, and Bertail (2019) proposed the median of randomized means ($\mathrm{MoRM}_{k,b}$) (23), wherein, rather than partitioning, an arbitrary number, b, of blocks are built independently from the sample, and showed that MoRM has better non-asymptotic sub-Gaussian property compared to MoM. In fact, asymptotically, the Hodges-Lehmann (H-L) estimator is equivalent to $\mathrm{MoM}_{k=2,b=\frac{n}{k}}$ and $\mathrm{MoRM}_{k=2,b}$, and they can be seen as the pairwise mean distribution is approximated by the sampling without replacement and bootstrap, respectively. For the asymptotic validity, readers are referred to the foundational works of Efron (1979) (25), Bickel and Freedman (1981, 1984) (26, 27), and Helmers, Janssen, and Veraverbeke (1990)

Significance Statement

In 1964, van Zwet introduced the convex transformation order for comparing the skewness of two distributions. This paradigm shift played a fundamental role in defining robust measures of distributions, from spread to kurtosis. Here, rather than the stochastic ordering between two distributions, the orderliness of quantile averages within a distribution is investigated. By classifying distributions through the signs of derivatives, a series of sophisticated robust mean estimators are deduced. Nearly all common nonparametric robust location estimators are found to be special cases thereof.

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(28).

Here, the ϵ,b-stratified mean is defined as

$$\mathrm{SM}_{\epsilon,b,n} \coloneqq \frac{b}{n}\left(\sum_{j=1}^{\frac{b-1}{2b\epsilon}} \sum_{i_j=\frac{(2bj-b-1)n\epsilon}{b-1}+1}^{\frac{(2bj-b+1)n\epsilon}{b-1}} X_{i_j}\right),$$

where $X_1 \leq ... \leq X_n$ denote the order statistics of a sample of n independent and identically distributed random variables $X_1, \ldots, X_n$. $b \in \mathbb{N}$, $b \geq 3$. The definition was further refined to guarantee the continuity of the breakdown point by incorporating an additional block in the center when $\lfloor \frac{b-1}{2b\epsilon} \rfloor \bmod 2 = 0$, or by adjusting the central block when $\lfloor \frac{b-1}{2b\epsilon} \rfloor \bmod 2 = 1$ (SI Text). If the subscript n is omitted, only the asymptotic behavior is considered. If b is omitted, $b = 3$ is assumed. $\mathrm{SM}_{\epsilon,b=3}$ is equal to STM_{ϵ}, when $\epsilon > \frac{1}{6}$. The basic idea of the stratified mean, when $\frac{b-1}{2\epsilon} \in \mathbb{N}$, $b \bmod 2 = 1$ is to distribute the data into $\frac{b-1}{2\epsilon}$ equal-sized non-overlapping blocks according to their order, then further sequentially group these blocks into b equal-sized strata and compute the mean of the middle stratum, which is the median of means of each stratum. In situations where $i \bmod 1 \neq 0$, a potential solution is to generate multiple smaller samples that satisfy the equality by sampling without replacement, and subsequently calculate the mean of all estimations, the details of determining the sample size and sampling times are included in the SI Text. Although the principle is similar to that of the median of means, without the random shift, the result is different from $\mathrm{MoM}_{k=\frac{n}{b},b}$. Additionally, the stratified mean differs from the mean of the sample obtained through stratified sampling methods, introduced by Neymean (1934) (29) or ranked set sampling (30), introduced by McIntyre in 1952, as these sampling methods are designed to obtain more representative samples or improve the efficiency of sample estimates, but the sample mean based on them are not robust. When $b \bmod 2 = 1$, the stratified mean can be regarded as replacing the other equal-sized strata with the middle stratum, which, in principle, is analogous to the Winsorized mean that replaces extreme values with less extreme percentiles. Furthermore, while the bounds confirm that the Winsorized mean and median of means outperform the trimmed mean (6, 7, 21, 24) in worst-case performance, the complexity of bound analysis makes it difficult to achieve a complete and intuitive understanding of these results. Also, a clear explanation for the average performance of them remains elusive. The aim of this paper is to define a series of semiparametric models using the signs of derivatives, reveal their elegant interrelations and connections to parametric models, and show that by exploiting these models, a set of sophisticated robust mean estimators can be deduced, which have strong robustness to departures from assumptions.

Quantile average and weighted average

The symmetric trimmed mean, symmetric Winsorized mean, and stratified mean are all L-statistics. More specifically, they are symmetric weighted averages, which are defined as

$$\mathrm{SWA}_{\epsilon,n} \coloneqq \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{\lceil \frac{n}{2} \rceil} \frac{X_i + X_{n-i+1}}{2} w_i}{\sum_{i=1}^{\frac{n}{2}} w_i},$$

where w_is are the weights applied to the symmetric quantile averages according to the definition of the corresponding L-statistic. For example, for the ϵ-symmetric trimmed mean, $w_i = \begin{cases} 0, & i < n\epsilon \\ 1, & i \geq n\epsilon \end{cases}$, provided that $n\epsilon \in \mathbb{N}$. The mean and median are indeed two special cases of the symmetric trimmed mean.

To extend the symmetric quantile average to the asymmetric case, there are two possible definitions for the ϵ,γ-quantile average ($\mathrm{QA}(\epsilon, \gamma, n)$), i.e.,

$$\frac{1}{2}(\hat{Q}_n(\gamma\epsilon) + \hat{Q}_n(1-\epsilon)), \qquad [1]$$

and

$$\frac{1}{2}(\hat{Q}_n(\epsilon) + \hat{Q}_n(1-\gamma\epsilon)), \qquad [2]$$

where $\gamma \geq 0$ and $0 \leq \epsilon \leq \frac{1}{1+\gamma}$, $\hat{Q}_n(p)$ is the empirical quantile function. For trimming from both sides, [1] and [2] are equivalent. [1] is assumed in this article unless otherwise specified, since many common asymmetric distributions are right skewed, and [1] allows trimming only from the right side by setting $\gamma = 0$.

Analogously, the weighted average can be defined as

$$\mathrm{WA}_{\epsilon,\gamma} \coloneqq \frac{\int_{\epsilon_0=0}^{\frac{1}{1+\gamma}} \mathrm{QA}(\epsilon_0, \gamma)\, w_{\epsilon_0}}{\int_{\epsilon_0=0}^{\frac{1}{1+\gamma}} w_{\epsilon_0}}.$$

For instance, the ϵ, γ-trimmed mean ($\mathrm{TM}_{\epsilon,\gamma}$) is a weighted average with a left trim size of $\gamma\epsilon n$ and a right trim size of ϵn, where $w_{\epsilon_0} = \begin{cases} 0, & \epsilon_0 < \epsilon \\ 1, & \epsilon_0 \geq \epsilon \end{cases}$.

Classifying distributions by the signs of derivatives

Let $\mathcal{P}_k$ denote the set of all distributions over $\mathbb{R}$ whose moments, from the first to the kth, are all finite. Without loss of generality, all classes discussed in the following are subclasses of the nonparametric class of distributions $\mathcal{P}_{\Upsilon}^{k} \coloneqq \{\text{All continuous distribution } P \in \mathcal{P}_k\}$. Besides fully and smoothly parameterizing by a Euclidean parameter or just assuming regularity conditions, there are many ways to classify distributions. In 1956, Stein initiated the problem of estimating parameters in the presence of an infinite dimensional nuisance shape parameter (31). A notable example discussed in his groundbreaking work was the estimation of the center of symmetry for an unknown symmetric distribution. In 1993, Bickel, Klaassen, Ritov, and Wellner published an influential semiparametrics textbook (32) and systematically classified many common models into three classes: parametric, nonparametric, and semiparametric. However, there is another old and commonly encountered class of distributions that receives little attention in semiparametric literature: the unimodal distribution. It is a very unique semiparametric model because its definition is based on the signs of derivatives, i.e., assuming P is continuous, $(f'(x) > 0 \text{ for } x \leq M) \wedge (f'(x) < 0 \text{ for } x \geq M)$. Let $\mathcal{P}_U$ denote the set of all unimodal distributions. Five parametric distributions in $\mathcal{P}_U$ are detailed as examples here: Weibull, gamma, Pareto, lognormal and generalized Gaussian.

Consider the sign of the derivative of the quantile average with respect to the breakdown point, a right-skewed distribution is called γ-ordered, if and only if

$$\forall 0 \leq \epsilon \leq \frac{1}{1+\gamma}, \frac{\partial \mathrm{QA}_{\epsilon,\gamma}}{\partial \epsilon} \leq 0.$$

The left-skewed case can be obtained by reversing the inequality $\frac{\partial \mathrm{QA}_{\epsilon,\gamma}}{\partial \epsilon} \leq 0$ to $\frac{\partial \mathrm{QA}_{\epsilon,\gamma}}{\partial \epsilon} \geq 0$ and employing the second definition of QA, as given in [2]; for simplicity, it will be omitted in the following discussion. If $\gamma = 1$, the γ-ordered distribution is referred to as ordered. Let $\mathcal{P}_O$ denote the set of all ordered distributions. The Pareto, lognormal, and generalized Gaussian distributions belong to $\mathcal{P}_U \cap \mathcal{P}_O$, as proven in the following discussion and SI Text. When the shape parameters of the Weibull and gamma distributions fall within a certain range, they also belong to $\mathcal{P}_U \cap \mathcal{P}_O$ (SI Text). The minor exceptions occur when the Weibull and gamma distributions are near-symmetric, as shown in the SI Text.

Furthermore, the γ-orderliness is essentially equivalent to the monotonicity of the QA function. If assuming convexity further, the second γ-orderliness can be defined as the following for a right-skewed distribution plus the γ-orderliness,

$$\forall 0 \leq \epsilon \leq \frac{1}{1+\gamma}, \frac{\partial^2 \mathrm{QA}_{\epsilon,\gamma}}{\partial \epsilon^2} \geq 0 \wedge \frac{\partial \mathrm{QA}_{\epsilon,\gamma}}{\partial \epsilon} \leq 0.$$

Analogously, the νth γ-orderliness can be defined as $(-1)^\nu \frac{\partial^\nu \mathrm{QA}_{\epsilon,\gamma}}{\partial \epsilon^\nu} \geq 0 \wedge \ldots \wedge -\frac{\partial \mathrm{QA}_{\epsilon,\gamma}}{\partial \epsilon} \geq 0$.

Data Availability. Data for Figure ?? are given in SI Dataset S1. All codes have been deposited in GitHub.

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