



ICML
International Conference
On Machine Learning

Heterogeneity-Aware Knowledge Sharing for Graph Federated Learning

Wentao Yu

joint work with Sheng Wan, Shuo Chen, Bo Han, Chen Gong

TLDR: We address heterogeneity by aligning semantic knowledge and structural knowledge across clients.

paper: <https://arxiv.org/abs/2601.21589>

code: <https://github.com/blgpb/FedSSA>

1 Motivation

2 Methodology

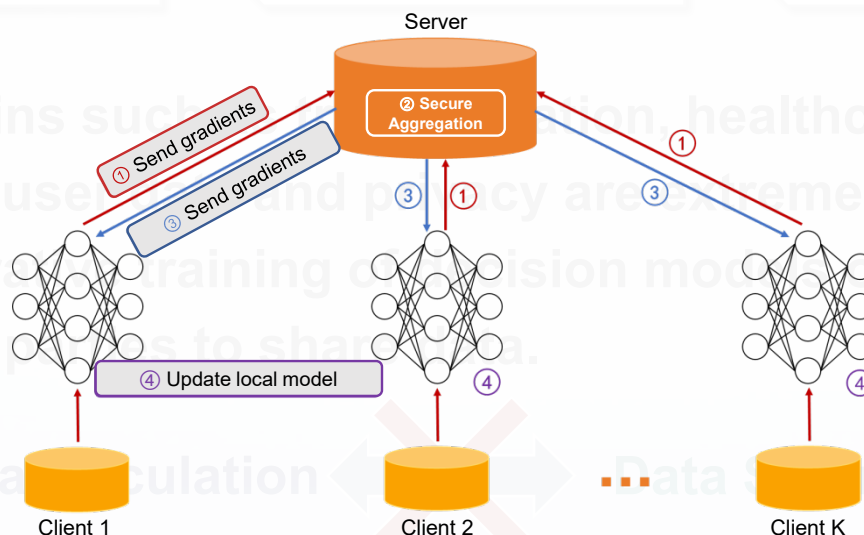
3 Experimental Results

4 Conclusion

Federated Learning

Goal : Data remains strictly local on each client, fully respecting ensuring **data security** and **user privacy** while enabling synergistic modeling across decentralized clients.

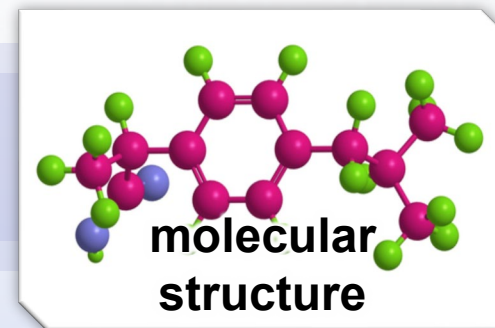
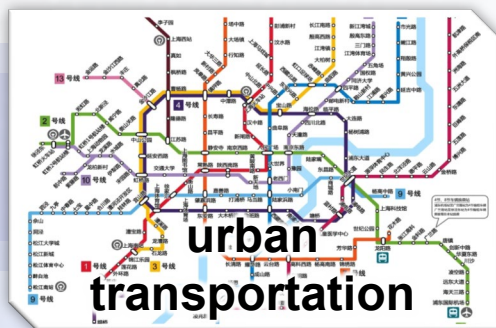
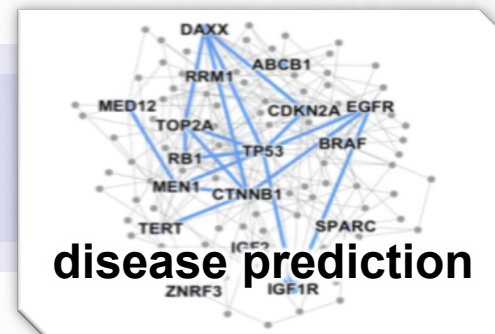
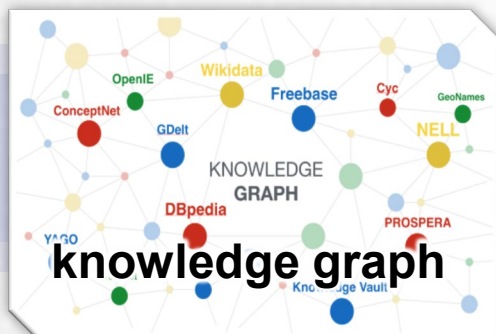
Insight : Data Stays Local, Models Move: Usable yet Invisible



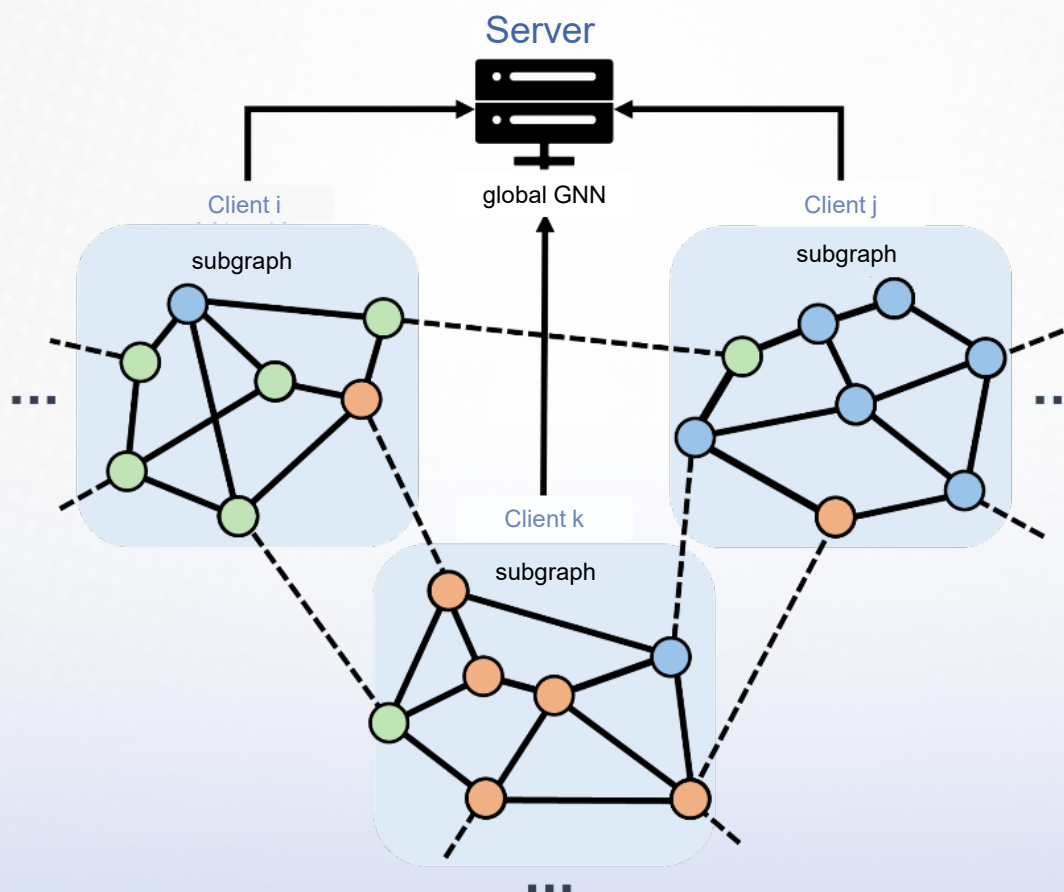
Motivation

Graph Data

Most existing federated learning methods focus on **unstructured data**, while research on **structured graph data** remains very limited.

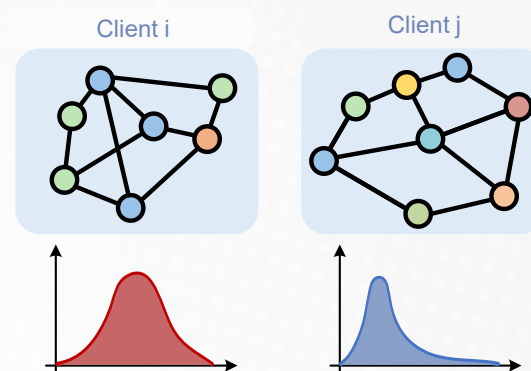


Challenges in Graph Federated Learning: **Heterogeneity Caused by Inconsistent Graph Data Distributions Across Clients**



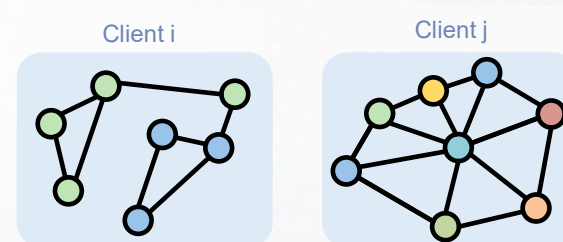
■ Node Feature Heterogeneity

Inconsistent Node Feature Distributions
Across Graphs from Different Clients



■ Structural Heterogeneity

Inconsistent Node Connection Patterns
Across Graphs from Different Clients



How can we explicitly address node feature heterogeneity and structural heterogeneity in graph federated learning?

1 Motivation

2 Methodology

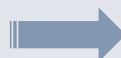
3 Experimental Results

4 Conclusion

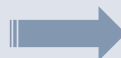
Research Question: How to address node feature heterogeneity and structural heterogeneity?

Problems:

**Node Feature
Heterogeneity**



**Structural
Heterogeneity**



Solutions:

semantic knowledge sharing

We infer class-wise node distributions, so that we can cluster clients based on inferred distributions and construct cluster-level representative distributions. We then **minimize the divergence** between local and cluster-level distributions to facilitate semantic knowledge sharing.

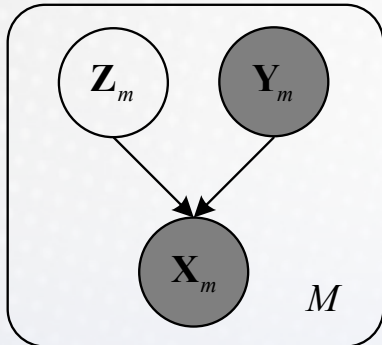
structural knowledge sharing

We propose a spectral energy measure to characterize structural information, so that we can cluster clients based on spectral energy and build cluster-level spectral GNNs. We then **align** the spectral characteristics of local spectral GNNs with those of cluster-level spectral GNNs to enable structural knowledge sharing.

For Node Feature Heterogeneity

■ Key Innovations : inferring class-wise node distributions

- ① On the client side, we use latent variables to characterize the graph data distribution of each class-wise node feature.



log marginal likelihood:

$$\begin{aligned} \log p(\mathbf{X}_m, \mathbf{Y}_m) \\ \geq \mathbb{E}_{\mathbf{Z}_m \sim q(\mathbf{Z}_m | \mathbf{X}_m, \mathbf{Y}_m)} \log \frac{p(\mathbf{X}_m | \mathbf{Z}_m, \mathbf{Y}_m) p(\mathbf{Z}_m) p(\mathbf{Y}_m)}{q(\mathbf{Z}_m | \mathbf{X}_m, \mathbf{Y}_m)} \end{aligned}$$

ELBO:

$$\begin{aligned} \mathcal{L}_{\text{ELBO}}(\mathbf{X}_m, \mathbf{Y}_m) = \\ \mathbb{E}_{\mathbf{Z}_m \sim q(\mathbf{Z}_m | \mathbf{X}_m, \mathbf{Y}_m)} \log p(\mathbf{X}_m | \mathbf{Z}_m, \mathbf{Y}_m) + \log p(\mathbf{Y}_m) - \\ D_{\text{KL}}(q(\mathbf{Z}_m | \mathbf{X}_m, \mathbf{Y}_m) || p(\mathbf{Z}_m)) \end{aligned}$$

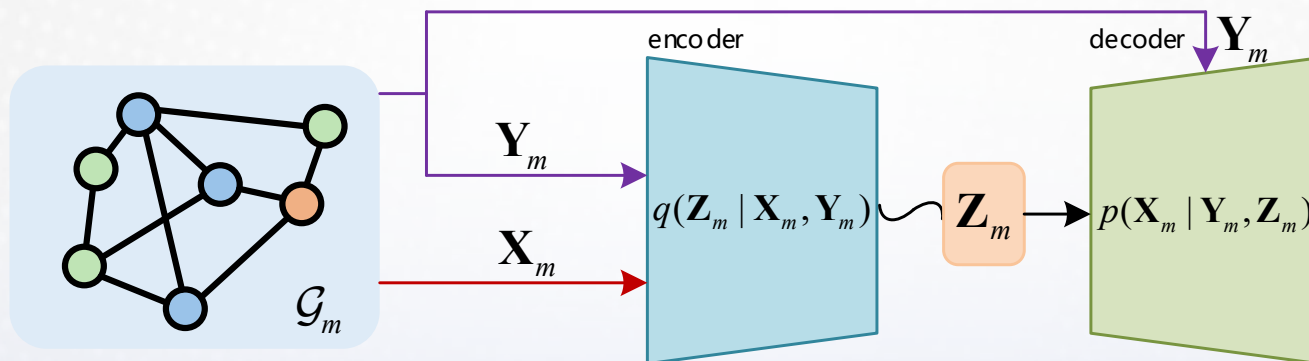
The graphical model of our proposed variational model, where $\mathbf{Z}_m$ is a latent variable, $\mathbf{X}_m$ and $\mathbf{Y}_m$ are observed variables.

For Node Feature Heterogeneity

■ Key Innovations : inferring class-wise node distributions

- ① On the client side, we use latent variables to characterize the graph data distribution of each class-wise node feature.

the architecture of VGAE:



the latent distribution $q(\mathbf{Z}_m^c)$ of nodes with class label c on the m -th client:

$$\mathcal{I}_m^c \triangleq \{i \in \{1, 2, \dots, n_m\} \mid (\mathbf{Y}_m)_{[i, 1]} = c\},$$

$$q(\mathbf{Z}_m^c) \triangleq q((\mathbf{Z}_m)_{[\mathcal{I}_m^c, :]}, (\mathbf{X}_m)_{[\mathcal{I}_m^c, :]}, (\mathbf{Y}_m)_{[\mathcal{I}_m^c, :]})$$

For Node Feature Heterogeneity

■ Key Innovations : clustering via inferred distributions

② Cluster based on node feature distribution uploaded by the client.

client upload:

$$q(\mathbf{Z}_m^c) = \mathcal{N}(\boldsymbol{\mu}_m^c, \boldsymbol{\Sigma}_m^c) \text{ for } c = 1, 2, \dots, C$$

reparameterization sampling:

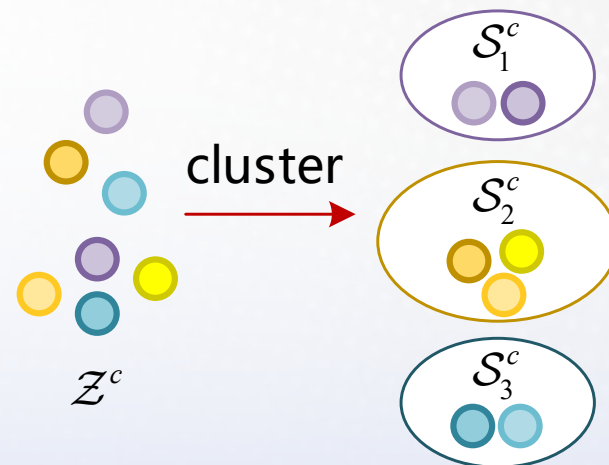
$$\tilde{\mathbf{Z}}_m^c = \boldsymbol{\mu}_m^c + (\boldsymbol{\Sigma}_m^c)^{\frac{1}{2}} \boldsymbol{\epsilon}_m^c, \boldsymbol{\epsilon}_m^c \sim \mathcal{N}(\mathbf{0}, \mathbf{I})$$

the collection of clients with class c :

$$\mathcal{Z}^c = \{\tilde{\mathbf{Z}}_m^c | m \in \mathcal{M}\}$$

cluster into K_{node} clusters:

$$\text{Cluster: } \mathcal{Z}^c \rightarrow \{\mathcal{S}_1^c, \mathcal{S}_2^c, \dots, \mathcal{S}_{K_{\text{node}}}^c\}$$



For Node Feature Heterogeneity

■ Key Innovations : cluster-based node feature distribution alignment

- ③ Approximate the node feature distributions of all nodes within a cluster into a single Gaussian distribution.

mixed Gaussian distributions in cluster $\mathcal{S}_i^c$:

$$p(\mathbf{S}_i^c) = \sum_{m \in \mathcal{S}_i^c} w_m^c \cdot \mathcal{N}(\boldsymbol{\mu}_m^c, \boldsymbol{\Sigma}_m^c),$$

To reduce the computational complexity of mixed Gaussian distributions, we approximate them as a representative Gaussian distribution using moment matching:

$$q(\mathbf{S}_i^c) = \mathcal{N}(\boldsymbol{\mu}_i^c, \boldsymbol{\Sigma}_i^c)$$

the first moment:

$$\boldsymbol{\mu}_i^c = \sum_{m \in \mathcal{S}_i^c} w_m^c \boldsymbol{\mu}_m^c,$$

the second moment:

$$\boldsymbol{\Sigma}_i^c = \left(\sum_{m \in \mathcal{S}_i^c} \omega_m^c (\boldsymbol{\Sigma}_m^c + \boldsymbol{\mu}_m^c (\boldsymbol{\mu}_m^c)^\top) \right) - \boldsymbol{\mu}_i^c (\boldsymbol{\mu}_i^c)^\top$$

minimize KL divergence to facilitate semantic knowledge sharing:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{node}} = \sum_{c=1}^C \sum_{i=1}^{K_{\text{node}}} \sum_{m \in \mathcal{S}_i^c} D_{\text{KL}}(q(\mathbf{Z}_m^c) \parallel q(\mathcal{S}_i^c))$$

For Structural Heterogeneity

■ Key Innovations : construct spectral energy measure

- ① Construct the spectral energy measure and characterize graph structural information on each client.

K-order polynomial graph filters:

$$\mathbf{P}_m = \sum_{k=0}^K \underset{\text{coefficients}}{w_m^k} \underset{\text{polynomial}}{\mathbf{H}_m^k}$$

The Laplacian matrix describes the structural information of graph and is reflected in the energy distribution along the spectral bands.

where $\mathbf{H}_m^k = (\mathbf{L}_m)^k \mathbf{X}_m \in \mathbb{R}^{n_m \times d}$

Since $\mathbf{L}_m = \mathbf{U}_m \Lambda_m \mathbf{U}_m^T$, $\tilde{\mathbf{X}}_m = \mathbf{U}_m^T \mathbf{X}_m$

Therefore, $\mathbf{H}_m^k = \mathbf{U}_m \Lambda_m^k \tilde{\mathbf{X}}_m$. Its physical meaning represents the signal of the k -th spectral band. $w_m^k \in \mathbb{R}$ represents learnable coefficients of the k -th spectral band.

compute the average response vector for each band:

$$\mathbf{F}_m^k = w_m^k \mathbf{H}_m^k \in \mathbb{R}^{n_m \times d},$$

$$\mathbf{E}_m^k = \frac{1}{n_m} \sum_{i=1}^{n_m} (\mathbf{F}_m^k)_{[i,:]} \in \mathbb{R}^d$$

define the spectral energy measure:

$$\mathbf{S}_m = [\mathbf{E}_m^0, \mathbf{E}_m^1, \dots, \mathbf{E}_m^K] \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times (K+1)}$$

This measure essentially acts as a **spectral fingerprint**, which reflects the energy distribution of structural topologies as learned by spectral GNN.

For Structural Heterogeneity

■ Key Innovations : clustering via spectral energies

- ② Clustering clients based on the subspace distance spanned by the spectral energy measure.

QR decomposition:

$$\mathbf{S}_m = \mathbf{Q}_m \mathbf{R}_m$$

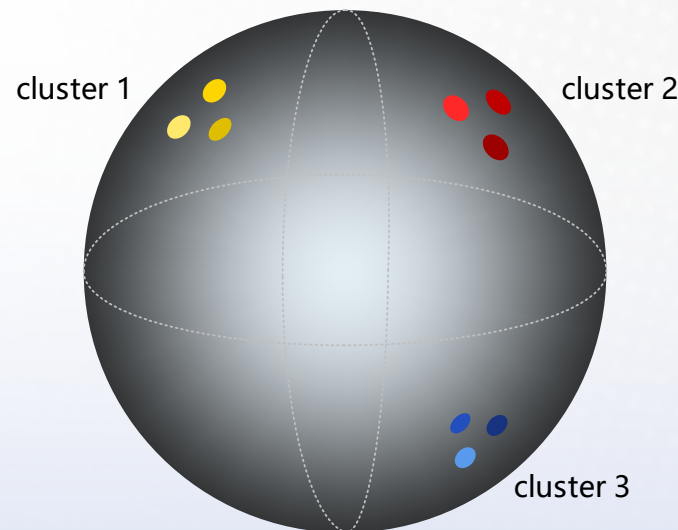
$$\mathbf{Q}_m^\top \mathbf{Q}_m = \mathbf{I}_{K+1}$$

Chordal distance between two spectral energy measures:

$$d_{\text{Chordal}}(\mathbf{Q}_m, \mathbf{Q}_n) = (K + 1 - \|\mathbf{Q}_m^\top \mathbf{Q}_n\|_F^2)^{\frac{1}{2}}$$

cluster into K_{struct} clusters:

$$\text{Cluster: } \{\mathbf{S}_m\}_{m=1}^M \rightarrow \{\mathcal{T}_1^c, \mathcal{T}_2^c, \dots, \mathcal{T}_{K_{\text{struct}}}^c\}$$



For Structural Heterogeneity

■ Key Innovations : structural knowledge alignment

- ③ Align the spectral characteristics of local spectral GNNs with those of cluster-level spectral GNNs.

compute the mean of learnable coefficients:

$$\bar{w}_j^k \leftarrow \frac{1}{|\mathcal{T}_j|} \sum_{m \in \mathcal{T}_j} w_m^k$$

minimize the discrepancy between the coefficients of local spectral GNNs and those of cluster-level spectral GNNs:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{align}} = \sum_{k=0}^K \sum_{j=1}^{K_{\text{struct}}} \sum_{m \in \mathcal{T}_j} |w_m^k - \bar{w}_j^k|$$

add a regularization term:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{reg}} = \sum_{m=1}^M \sum_{k=0}^K \left(\lambda_1 |w_m^k| + \frac{\lambda_2}{2} (w_m^k)^2 \right)$$

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{struct}} = \mathcal{L}_{\text{align}} + \mathcal{L}_{\text{reg}}$$

1 Motivation

2 Methodology

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Experimental Results

■ Main Results: node classification performance on **homophilic** graph datasets

Methods	Cora			CiteSeer			PubMed			-
	5 Clients	10 Clients	20 Clients	5 Clients	10 Clients	20 Clients	5 Clients	10 Clients	20 Clients	-
Local	81.30±0.21	79.94±0.24	80.30±0.25	69.02±0.05	67.82±0.13	65.98±0.17	84.04±0.18	82.81±0.39	82.65±0.03	-
FedAvg (McMahan et al., 2017)	74.45±5.64	69.19±0.67	69.50±3.58	71.06±0.60	63.61±3.59	64.68±1.83	79.40±0.11	82.71±0.29	80.97±0.26	-
FedProx (Li et al., 2020)	72.03±4.56	60.18±7.04	48.22±6.18	71.73±1.11	63.33±3.25	64.85±1.35	79.45±0.25	82.55±0.24	80.50±0.25	-
FedPer (Arivazhagan et al., 2019)	81.68±0.40	79.35±0.04	78.01±0.32	70.41±0.32	70.53±0.28	66.64±0.27	85.80±0.21	84.20±0.28	84.72±0.31	-
GCFL (Xie et al., 2021)	81.47±0.65	78.66±0.27	79.21±0.70	70.34±0.57	69.01±0.12	66.33±0.05	85.14±0.33	84.18±0.19	83.94±0.36	-
FedGNN (Wu et al., 2021)	81.51±0.68	70.12±0.99	70.10±3.52	69.06±0.92	55.52±3.17	52.23±6.00	79.52±0.23	83.25±0.45	81.61±0.59	-
FedSage+(Zhang et al., 2021)	72.97±5.94	69.05±1.59	57.97±12.60	70.74±0.69	65.63±3.10	65.46±0.74	79.57±0.24	82.62±0.31	80.82±0.25	-
FED-PUB (Baek et al., 2023)	83.70±0.19	81.54±0.12	81.75±0.56	72.68±0.44	72.35±0.53	67.62±0.12	86.79±0.09	86.28±0.18	85.53±0.30	-
FedGTA (Li et al., 2023)	80.06±0.63	80.59±0.38	79.01±0.31	70.12±0.10	71.57±0.34	69.94±0.14	87.75±0.01	86.80±0.01	87.12±0.05	-
AdaFGL (Li et al., 2024)	82.01±0.51	80.09±0.08	79.74±0.05	71.44±0.27	72.34±0.09	70.95±0.45	86.91±0.28	86.97±0.10	86.59±0.21	-
FedTAD (Zhu et al., 2024)	80.31±0.26	80.87±0.11	80.07±0.15	70.34±0.37	69.43±0.75	68.09±0.69	84.00±0.13	84.61±0.17	84.33±0.18	-
FedIIH (Yu et al., 2025a)	84.11±0.17	81.85±0.09	83.01±0.15	72.86±0.25	76.50±0.06	73.36±0.41	87.80±0.18	87.65±0.18	87.19±0.25	-
FedSSA (Ours)	84.67±0.05	82.32±0.04	84.13±0.09	73.06±0.08	77.65±0.10	74.09±0.09	88.11±0.07	87.78±0.13	87.37±0.14	-
Methods	Amazon-Computer			Amazon-Photo			ogbn-arxiv			Avg.
	5 Clients	10 Clients	20 Clients	5 Clients	10 Clients	20 Clients	5 Clients	10 Clients	20 Clients	All
Local	89.22±0.13	88.91±0.17	89.52±0.20	91.67±0.09	91.80±0.02	90.47±0.15	66.76±0.07	64.92±0.09	65.06±0.05	79.57
FedAvg (McMahan et al., 2017)	84.88±1.96	79.54±0.23	74.79±0.24	89.89±0.83	83.15±3.71	81.35±1.04	65.54±0.07	64.44±0.10	63.24±0.13	74.58
FedProx (Li et al., 2020)	85.25±1.27	83.81±1.09	73.05±1.30	90.38±0.48	80.92±4.64	82.32±0.29	65.21±0.20	64.37±0.18	63.03±0.04	72.84
FedPer (Arivazhagan et al., 2019)	89.67±0.34	89.73±0.04	87.86±0.43	91.44±0.37	91.76±0.23	90.59±0.06	66.87±0.05	64.99±0.18	64.66±0.11	79.94
GCFL (Xie et al., 2021)	89.07±0.91	90.03±0.16	89.08±0.25	91.99±0.29	92.06±0.25	90.79±0.17	66.80±0.12	65.09±0.08	65.08±0.04	79.90
FedGNN (Wu et al., 2021)	88.08±0.15	88.18±0.41	83.16±0.13	90.25±0.70	87.12±2.01	81.00±4.48	65.47±0.22	64.21±0.32	63.80±0.05	75.23
FedSage+(Zhang et al., 2021)	85.04±0.61	80.50±1.13	70.42±0.85	90.77±0.44	76.81±8.24	80.58±1.15	65.69±0.09	64.52±0.14	63.31±0.20	73.47
FED-PUB (Baek et al., 2023)	<u>90.74±0.05</u>	90.55±0.13	90.12±0.09	93.29±0.19	92.73±0.18	91.92±0.12	67.77±0.09	66.58±0.08	66.64±0.12	81.59
FedGTA (Li et al., 2023)	86.69±0.18	86.66±0.23	85.01±0.87	93.33±0.12	93.50±0.21	92.61±0.15	60.32±0.04	60.22±0.09	58.74±0.14	79.45
AdaFGL (Li et al., 2024)	80.20±0.05	83.62±0.26	84.53±0.23	86.69±0.19	89.85±0.83	88.11±0.05	52.73±0.19	51.77±0.36	50.94±0.08	76.97
FedTAD (Zhu et al., 2024)	82.20±1.20	85.50±0.33	83.91±1.54	92.29±0.39	90.59±0.09	89.18±0.84	65.35±0.14	64.06±0.25	64.45±0.13	78.87
FedIIH (Yu et al., 2025a)	90.74±0.13	90.86±0.23	90.44±0.05	93.42±0.02	94.22±0.08	93.55±0.09	70.30±0.06	69.34±0.02	68.65±0.04	83.10
FedSSA (Ours)	91.09±0.07	91.30±0.13	90.62±0.09	93.86±0.15	94.62±0.14	93.76±0.07	70.86±0.13	69.47±0.08	68.77±0.13	83.53

achieve the best performance among all methods

Experimental Results

■ Main Results: node classification performance on heterophilic graph datasets

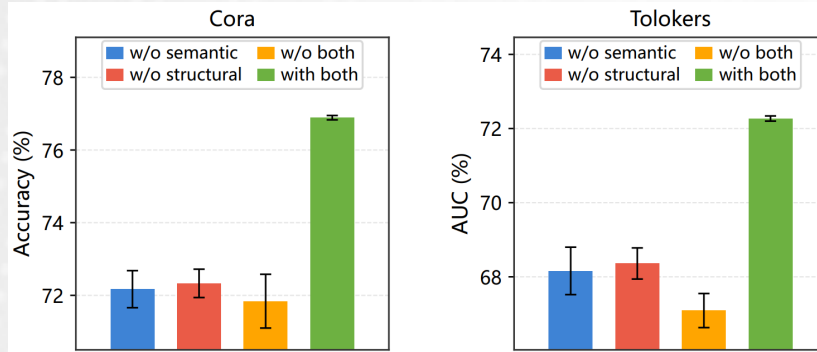
Methods	Roman-empire			Amazon-ratings			Minesweeper			-
	5 Clients	10 Clients	20 Clients	5 Clients	10 Clients	20 Clients	5 Clients	10 Clients	20 Clients	-
Local	33.65±0.13	28.42±0.26	23.89±0.32	45.03±0.31	45.89±0.19	46.02±0.02	71.35±0.17	69.96±0.16	69.31±0.09	-
FedAvg (McMahan et al., 2017)	38.93±0.32	35.43±0.32	32.00±0.39	41.26±0.53	41.66±0.14	42.20±0.21	72.60±0.08	69.68±0.09	71.36±0.16	-
FedProx (Li et al., 2020)	27.95±0.59	26.43±1.41	23.12±0.49	36.92±0.02	36.86±0.14	36.96±0.05	71.91±0.27	70.66±0.20	71.50±0.37	-
FedPer (Arivazhagan et al., 2019)	20.75±1.75	15.51±1.13	15.45±2.76	36.62±0.30	32.34±1.01	36.96±0.03	58.73±10.45	65.35±7.02	53.80±11.40	-
GCFL (Xie et al., 2021)	40.65±0.14	40.51±0.24	37.85±0.25	36.92±0.05	36.86±0.14	36.96±0.02	72.04±0.13	71.88±0.12	69.20±0.18	-
FedGNN (Wu et al., 2021)	30.26±0.11	29.09±0.13	26.60±0.02	36.80±0.06	36.72±0.00	36.45±0.09	72.15±0.13	71.08±0.07	71.71±0.27	-
FedSage+(Zhang et al., 2021)	57.26±0.00	49.07±0.00	38.36±0.00	36.82±0.00	36.71±0.00	37.03±0.02	77.74±0.00	72.80±0.00	69.70±0.00	-
FED-PUB (Baek et al., 2023)	40.80±0.26	36.77±0.30	32.67±0.39	44.41±0.41	44.85±0.17	45.39±0.50	72.18±0.02	71.69±0.71	71.41±0.87	-
FedGTA (Li et al., 2023)	61.56±0.27	60.94±0.19	59.65±0.28	41.22±0.66	39.40±0.44	39.24±0.12	73.54±1.56	72.65±1.21	69.63±4.54	-
AdaFGL (Li et al., 2024)	67.64±0.18	64.55±0.09	62.42±0.26	41.70±0.06	42.30±0.00	42.59±0.14	73.24±1.13	70.79±2.14	71.26±1.31	-
FedTAD (Zhu et al., 2024)	45.26±0.19	44.71±0.38	42.04±0.13	43.59±0.33	43.35±0.29	44.50±0.26	72.39±0.43	71.99±0.13	72.74±0.03	-
FedIIH (Yu et al., 2025a)	68.32±0.05	66.44±0.28	64.61±0.13	44.26±0.24	44.24±0.10	45.19±0.04	74.29±0.02	73.23±0.04	72.81±0.02	-
FedSSA (Ours)	68.67±0.10	66.81±0.09	65.14±0.15	45.18±0.14	45.11±0.15	46.13±0.05	82.26±0.14	82.16±0.08	82.60±0.11	-
Methods	Tolokers			Questions			Avg.			All
	5 Clients	10 Clients	20 Clients	5 Clients	10 Clients	20 Clients	5 Clients	10 Clients	20 Clients	All
Local	67.81±0.17	70.04±0.23	62.34±0.67	66.73±0.57	57.96±0.10	60.00±0.21	56.91	54.45	52.31	54.56
FedAvg (McMahan et al., 2017)	60.74±0.31	54.73±0.50	56.36±0.39	65.68±0.23	58.91±0.22	60.33±0.15	55.84	52.08	52.45	53.46
FedProx (Li et al., 2020)	42.90±0.24	41.15±0.22	40.42±0.62	47.36±0.38	45.46±0.34	46.83±0.11	45.41	44.11	43.77	44.43
FedPer (Arivazhagan et al., 2019)	46.61±9.88	54.97±13.23	44.82±11.61	58.38±9.39	59.40±9.71	62.32±1.56	44.22	45.51	42.67	44.13
GCFL (Xie et al., 2021)	64.39±1.17	59.90±0.85	58.82±0.70	60.51±1.18	59.85±0.16	60.31±0.48	54.90	53.80	52.63	53.78
FedGNN (Wu et al., 2021)	43.10±0.27	41.57±0.07	40.70±0.74	47.55±0.02	45.65±0.12	47.39±0.13	45.97	44.82	44.57	45.12
FedSage+(Zhang et al., 2021)	75.06±0.00	71.31±0.00	69.73±0.00	64.95±0.00	65.06±0.00	59.33±0.00	62.37	58.99	54.83	58.73
FED-PUB (Baek et al., 2023)	70.88±0.58	72.46±0.68	65.26±0.59	67.71±3.99	59.64±0.52	62.48±2.92	59.20	57.08	55.44	57.24
FedGTA (Li et al., 2023)	60.83±0.45	55.18±1.20	57.89±1.61	65.56±1.91	58.29±1.57	61.70±0.35	60.54	57.29	57.62	58.49
AdaFGL (Li et al., 2024)	59.26±2.18	54.78±2.12	56.61±2.93	64.23±2.09	58.82±1.14	62.84±0.49	61.21	58.25	59.14	59.54
FedTAD (Zhu et al., 2024)	60.91±0.25	53.39±1.73	56.47±1.58	68.89±1.20	58.44±1.06	61.51±1.56	58.21	54.38	55.45	56.01
FedIIH (Yu et al., 2025a)	71.09±0.26	71.32±0.09	70.30±0.10	68.32±0.03	67.99±0.09	65.40±0.07	65.26	64.64	63.66	64.52
FedSSA (Ours)	75.82±0.05	73.96±0.10	72.29±0.11	69.51±0.15	68.69±0.18	65.74±0.07	68.29	67.35	66.10	67.34

Compared with SOTA, the average performance improvement is **2.82%**.

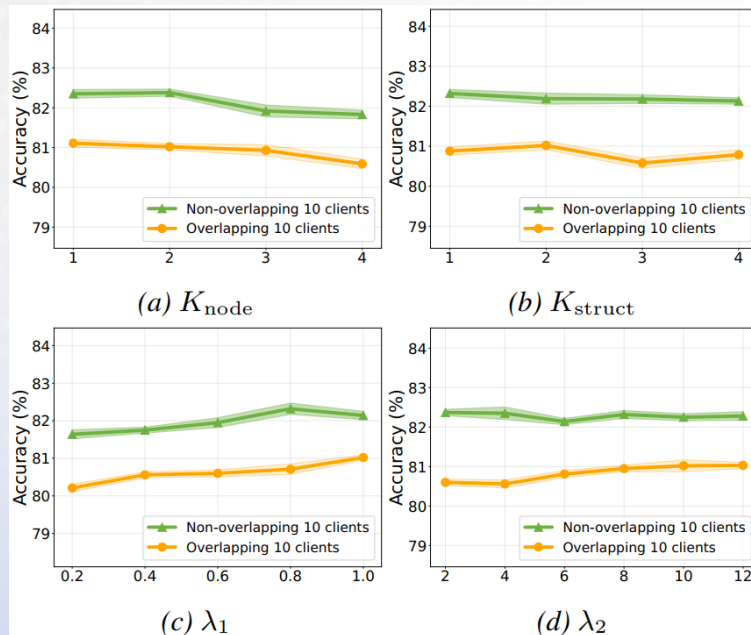
achieve the best average performance among all methods

Experimental Results

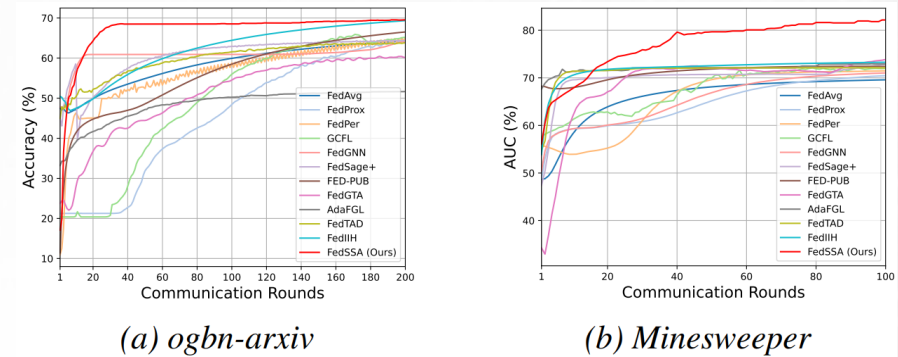
ablation studies:



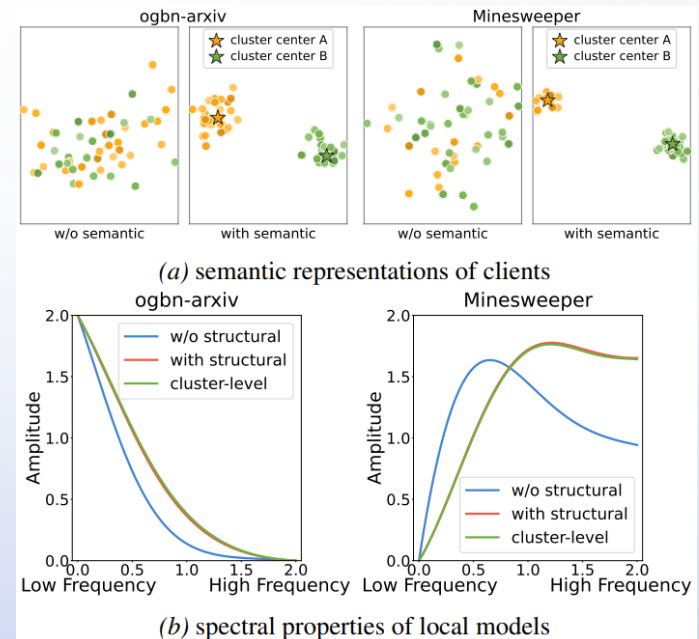
sensitivity analysis:



convergence curves:



case studies:



1 Motivation

2 Methodology

3 Experimental Results

4 Conclusion

We propose a graph **F**ederated learning method via **S**emantic and **S**tructural **A**lignment (FedSSA) to address heterogeneity in Graph Federated Learning (GFL).

- On one hand, we **minimize the divergence** between local distributions and cluster-level distributions to mitigate the heterogeneity in node features.
- On the other hand, we **align the spectral characteristics** of local spectral GNNs with those of cluster-level spectral GNNs to address the heterogeneity in structural topologies.

Our proposed FedSSA achieves strong performance on eleven datasets and outperforms the second-best method by a large margin of **2.82%** in terms of classification accuracy.



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Thank you!

Wentao Yu

joint work with Sheng Wan, Shuo Chen, Bo Han, Chen Gong

paper: <https://arxiv.org/abs/2601.21589>

code: <https://github.com/blgpb/FedSSA>