

# MultiModalTopicExplorer: Topic modeling for exploring multi-modal data from asynchronous online conversations

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## Abstract

The constant increase in the volume of textual data has led to the development of various algorithms to summarize and understand this type of data. A promising solution is topic modeling, a statistical approach for extracting themes from high volumes of data. Humans who directly interact with and interpret the output of topic modeling may rely on visualization tools to better interpret the results. However, these tools still have limitations. Current visual representations lack support for multi-modal conversations and do not consider how topics may change over time. To address these limitations, we plan to develop MultiModalTopicExplorer a web-based interactive visualization of LDA-generated topics.

## 1 Introduction

The constant increase of the volume of textual data has led to the development of various algorithms intended to summarize and understand unstructured textual data (Peter et al., 2015). A promising solution to this problem is topic modeling, a robust statistical approach for extracting core themes or *topics* from large text corpora. Thus, when a topic modeling algorithm is applied to a large corpus of documents, such as a collection of news articles, the results will include a list of topics, such as politics, economy, or sports. Each topic is defined by a set of descriptive words ranked according to their importance for the topic and by its distribution over the corpus documents (El-Assady et al., 2018).

Although powerful, topic models do not interpret themselves; therefore, humans must be involved (Chang et al., 2009; Dou et al., 2011). Visual text analytics researchers have designed algorithms and visual representations to support topic sense-making and interpretation, making probabilistic topic results legible and exploratory to a broader

audience. (Dou et al., 2013). Topic modeling visualization tools help in understanding topic models output and issues in modeling (Kherwa and Bansal, 2019); however, they still have limitations. Finding mechanisms to improve these visual representations is still an open challenge (Jelodar et al., 2019).

Current topic modeling visualization tools lack support for multi-modal conversations. With the proliferation of web-based social media, there has been an exponential growth of asynchronous online conversations discussing a large variety of popular issues such as “US 2016 Election”, or “Samsung watch release” (Hoque and Carenini, 2015). To discuss these and other topics, social media users post textual and image data. To the best of our knowledge, non of the current topic modeling visualization tools support image representation of topics.

Additionally, traditional topic modeling visualization tools do not take into account how topics may change over time. The content discussed on social media websites is diverse, and users often react to current events as they happen, so the content is constantly evolving (Smith et al., 2015). Topic modeling visualization end-users can be interested in analyzing the evolution of main discovered topics over time.

To address these limitations, we plan to design and developed MultiModalTopicExplorer, a web-based interactive visualization of LDA-generated topics. This tool aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the most relevant topics of the corpus?
- How do these topics evolve over time (month by month)?
- What is the meaning of each topic?

The remainder of the manuscript is organized as follows. Section 2 summarizes prior work about visual representations of topic modeling algorithms outputs, discussing the current limitations and positioning this proposal. Section 3 describes the dataset we plan to use. Section 4 describes tasks abstractions. Section 5 introduces our proposal. Finally, Section 6 indicates the number of estimated hours per milestone.

## Personal expertise

**Syed Hossein Alavi (Soheil):** His research interests are: Conversational AI, Common Sense reasoning, and applied NLP. He has been working on a variety of applied NLP research projects for the past few years. Recently Soheil started working on a Question Answering research project that would benefit from both topic modeling and its visualization.

**Felipe González-Pizarro:** in his MSc. thesis, he designed, developed, and evaluated TopicVisExplorer, a set of web-based interactive visualizations of LDA-generated topics using D3.js and Python. His work is available here: <http://topicvisexplorer.tk/singlecorpus>, and <http://topicvisexplorer.tk/multicorpora>.

Moreover, this project ties in with a topic modeling project that Soheil and Felipe will start working on for the course CSCP 503-Computational Linguistics.

## 2 Related Work

A large number of techniques have been proposed for the extraction and tracking of relevant topics over a large amount of text, where Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) (Blei et al., 2003) is one of the most traditional and popular methods (Meeks and Weingart, 2012; Qiang et al., 2020). The LDA model is based on the assumption that document collections have latent topics in the form of a multinomial distribution of words, which is typically presented to users via its *top-N* highest probability words (Lau et al., 2014). The raw output of such topic modeling algorithms might be so complex that it can be difficult and time-consuming for non-expert users to understand it (Smith et al., 2014; Chaney and Blei, 2012; Murdock and Allen, 2015). To address this need and add analytic value, previous work has explored different visual representation approaches to support a human interpretation

of topic models.

### 2.1 Topic model representation

Current topic modeling visualizations tools vary in topic keywords representations, documents view, and global views of topics.

#### 2.1.1 Most relevant keywords

The most common output of topic modeling algorithms is the ranked list of the top terms of each particular topic (Kherwa and Bansal, 2019). They can be represented through different topic visualization techniques: (1) word lists; (2) word lists with bars; (3) word clouds; and (4) network graphs of terms (Smith et al., 2017). Among these alternatives, simple visualizations such as word lists or word lists with bars allow users to understand topics quicker (Smith et al., 2017).

Usually, the top keywords are shown to users as a ranked list of the most frequent terms for each particular topic (Chaney and Blei, 2012; Peter et al., 2015). In LDA, this is the same that ordering the terms by their topic-specific probability. The problem with representing topics this way is that frequent common terms in the corpus often appear near the top of such lists for multiple topics, making it hard to users to find the differences between them (Sievert and Shirley, 2014).

To mitigate this problem, an intrinsic measure to rank terms within topics was proposed. It is called *Lift* (Taddy, 2012), and it is defined as the ratio of a term’s probability within a topic to its marginal probability across the corpus. Thus, let  $\phi_{k\omega}$  denote the probability of the term  $\omega \in 1, \dots, V$  occurring in topic  $k \in 1, \dots, K$ , where  $V$  denotes the number of terms in the vocabulary and  $K$  the number of topics. Let  $p_\omega$  denote the marginal probability of the term  $\omega$  in the corpus. The ordering of keywords by *lift* is given by :

$$lift(\omega, k) = \left( \frac{\phi_{k\omega}}{p_\omega} \right) \quad (1)$$

This measure generally decreases the rankings of globally frequent terms, which can be helpful for topic interpretation. Nevertheless, it can be noisy in some cases by giving high rankings to very rare terms that occur in only a single topic. While such terms may contain useful topical content, if they are very infrequent, the topic may remain challenging to interpret (Sievert and Shirley, 2014).

Another intrinsic measure was proposed to mitigate *lift* limitations. It is called *relevance* (Sievert

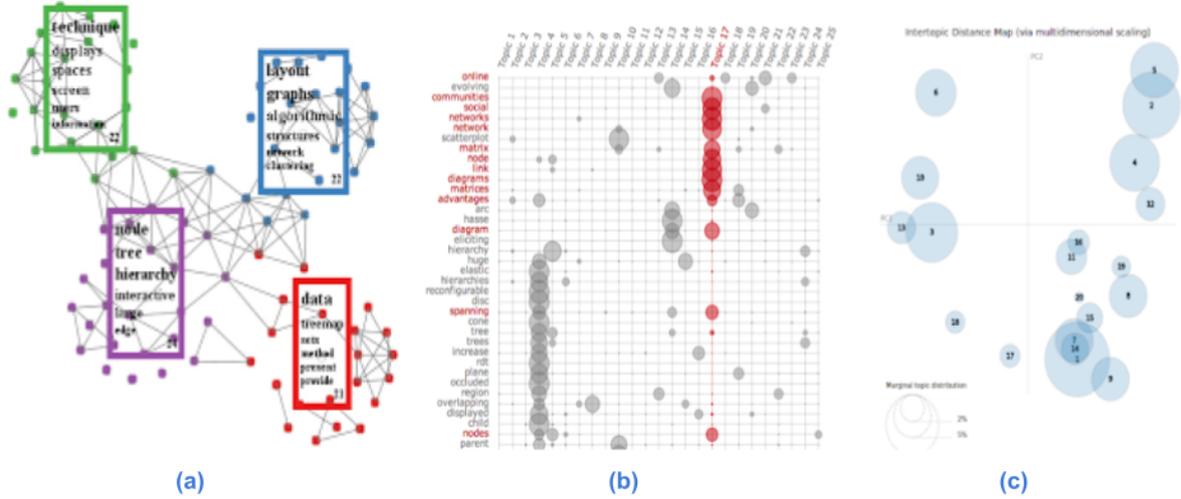


Figure 1: Layout of global view of topics in: (a) iVisClustering (b) Termite (c) LDAvis

and Shirley, 2014), and it is based on both term’s frequency as well as its *exclusivity*, the degree to which its occurrences are limited to only a few topics. Thus, the *relevance* of term  $\omega$  to topic  $k$  given a weight parameter  $\lambda$  (where  $0 \leq \lambda \leq 1$ ) is defined as:

$$r(\omega, k|\lambda) = \lambda \log(\phi_{k\omega}) + (1 - \lambda) \log\left(\frac{\phi_{k\omega}}{p_\omega}\right) \quad (2)$$

where  $\lambda$  determines the weight given to the probability of term  $\omega$  under topic  $k$  relative to its *lift* (measuring both on the log scale). Setting  $\lambda = 1$  results in the ranking of terms in decreasing order of their topic-specific probability, and setting  $\lambda = 0$  ranks terms solely by their *lift*. A user study found that the optimal value of  $\lambda$  for topic interpretation is 0.6 (Sievert and Shirley, 2014)

### 2.1.2 Most relevant documents

Sometimes the top keywords are not enough to identify the semantics of a topic (Hoque and Carenini, 2015). That is the case when the most relevant terms are poorly connected, or when they include disparate (Mimno et al., 2011) or generic terms (e.g., “yes”, “like”, “Mr”, “maybe”) (Lee et al., 2017; Boyd-Graber et al., 2014). Due to that, it is better to include another level of information such as the most relevant documents to each topic to help end-users during topic interpretation (Hoque and Carenini, 2015; Yang et al., 2017). Indeed, previous research found that when topic modeling visualization tools display documents, users can read them to ensure topics’ quality and verify if they satisfy their expectation (El-Assady et al., 2018).

There is no clear consensus regarding the best method to display documents associated with particular topics. For instance, visualizations that aim to support users in exploring asynchronous conversations position the most relevant documents of a topic according to their chronological ordering (Hoque and Carenini, 2014, 2015). Another method is to display the documents according to their contribution to the topic, as (Smith et al., 2015). Thus, the most relevant documents always appear first. In LDA, this is the same as ordering the documents regarding the topic-document probability for each topic.

### 2.1.3 Global view of topics

Along with showing the most relevant keywords and the documents associated with topics, topic modeling visualization tools offer different layouts to help users get a global view of the topic model.

One alternative is to represent relevant keywords and documents from topics through a graph layout. That is the case of iVisClustering (Lee et al., 2012) where documents (graph nodes) from one topic are visualized as colored circles with the same color. The edges between nodes represent the similarity between documents based on cosine similarity. Controlling a slider makes edges with higher values than the slider value appear, and those with smaller values disappear. For each cluster, there is a color-bordered rectangle with the most representative keywords (see Figure 1 (a)).

A second approach consists in displaying the term-topic distributions through a matrix layout. In this approach, proposed in Termite

(Chuang et al., 2012), the rows correspond to terms and the columns to topics. It uses circular areas to encode term probabilities. Thus, the most frequent terms are represented by circles with a larger area (see Figure 1 (b)).

A third alternative consists in projecting the similarity between topics into a two-dimensional space. In this approach, proposed in LDAvis (Sievert and Shirley, 2014) (see Figure 1 (c)), the topics are represented as circles. Their centers are determined by computing the distance between topics and then using multidimensional scaling to project the inter-topic distances onto two dimensions. In this layout, each topic’s overall prevalence is encoded using the areas of the circles, such that a more extensive area indicates a higher prevalence. This layout provides a global view of the topics, via their prevalences and similarities to each other, in a compact space.

## 2.2 Relevant commercial tools

As far as we know, there are not any relevant commercial tools or efforts from practitioners related to multi-modal topic modeling visualization.

## 3 Datasets

For this research effort, we focus on unstructured multimodal conversational data gathered from users’ interactions on famous social media forums such as *4Chan*.

### 3.1 4Chan dataset

4chan is an imageboard website with virtually no moderation. An “Original Poster” (OP) creates a thread by posting an image and a message. Content is organized in subcommunities, called boards with various topics of interest. Other users can post in the OP’s thread with a message or an image. On 4chan, users do not need a registered account to post content. In this project, we will focus on the politically incorrect board (pol), which has been shown to include a high volume of racist, xenophobic, and hateful content (Mittos et al., 2020)

We will use a random sample of the 4chan dataset gathered by (Papasavva et al., 2020), which contains over 3.3M threads and 134.5M posts from the Politically incorrect board (/pol/), posted over a period of almost 3.5 years (June 2016–November 2019) (Papasavva et al., 2020). We plan to evaluate how many threads can be incorporated into the visualization tool. The fact that users embed images in their posts can be useful for our novel

multi-modal topic modeling visualization of conversational texts approach. An example of a typical pol thread is given in Figure 2.

### Why this dataset?

Social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and 4chan allow users to instantly share their ideas and opinions. However, there are several ill consequences, such as online harassment, trolling, cyberbullying, fake news, and hate speech. We believe that an exploration of these conversations could help understand how these communities interact on these platforms. Moreover, it is the first step before creating automated hate speech detection and mitigation systems.

### 3.2 Other datasets

While we will focus on the 4chan dataset in this project, we expect that MultiModalTopicExplorer can support other social media data from different sources such as Twitter. Evaluating our tool with other datasets can provide insights regarding the quality of topic modeling algorithms.

## 4 Task Abstraction

As explained in Section 3, we will work with multimodal unstructured conversational data. As explained before, this tool aims to answer the questions: What are the most relevant topics of the corpus?, How these topics evolves over time?, and What is the meaning of each topic?

We will aggregate/summarize the data over periods of time (months) to figure out how topics have evolved throughout the time. In this research effort our goal is to provide a mean for topic modeling visualization tool end-users (e.g. NLP researchers) to:

1. Identify what are the most frequent topics in the given corpus.
2. Identify out of the previously identified topics, which ones people have mostly talked about in a specific month.
3. Compare the frequency of the identified topics throughout the time.
4. Identify the most important (frequent) words from each topic.
5. Identify the most relevant images from each topic.



Figure 2: Example of a typical pol thread

## 6. Identify a sample of conversations per month.

Although we mentioned NLP researchers as an example for our target audience, since the introduced datasets are widely used in other domains (e.g., social science, social computing, etc.), MultiModalTopicExplorer can potentially be used by researchers with backgrounds other than NLP as well.

## 5 MultiModalTopicExplorer

We propose an interactive visualization system called MultiModalTopicExplorer to address some limitations of previous topic modeling visualization tools. Different visual components are designed for this purpose. This section provides an overview of the visual interface features

The MultiModalTopicExplorer layout is illustrated in Figure 3. It has five components to allow users to get a sense of the most frequent topics and visualize specific information about them.

### 5.1 Most relevant topics

We will apply LDA, a widely-used topic modeling technique (Kim et al., 2020), to identify the main themes of the dataset. Our intuition is that there would be a large number of topics in the corpus, however, since we are only interested in the most frequent ones, as one of the design decisions, we will pick the top 20 frequent ones.

Figure 3 (a) shows the most relevant topics of the corpus. Each row represents a topic. The default name of each topic is indicated by its three most relevant keywords. Users can click in each row to visualize specific information about the topic such as: its most relevant keywords (see Figure 3 (c)), and its most relevant images Figure 3 (d)).

### 5.2 Evolution of topics over time

MultiModalTopicExplorer also allows users to identify the evolution of the most frequent topics over time. Figure 3 (b) shows a matrix where each column represents a period (month), and each row represents a topic. We use luminance to indicate the topic’s popularity per month (lower luminance indicates more popularity). Moreover, users can click a column to visualize a sample of conversations for that specific period (see Figure 3 (e)).

### 5.3 Most relevant keywords

The most relevant keywords panel of MultiModalTopicExplorer layout (see Figure 3 (c)) depicts a horizontal bar chart for the most relevant terms to the selected topic. For each term, two bars are unfolded. Violet bars represent the corpus-wide frequency of a given term, and the green bar represents the topic-specific frequency of such terms. This kind of linked selection allows users to examine a large number of topic-term relationships compactly and supports users in topic interpretation (Sievert and Shirley, 2014). The most useful terms to a

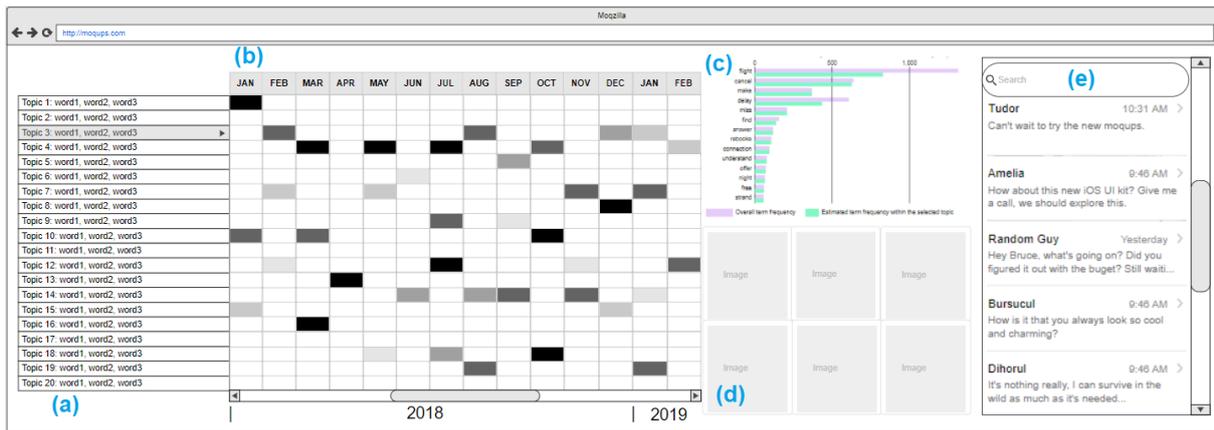


Figure 3: MultiModalTopicExplorer layout

given topic are ranked according to the *relevance* score, allowing users to flexibly rank terms in order of usefulness for topic interpretation (Sievert and Shirley, 2014). A higher relevance score designates greater importance to the frequency of terms within the selected topic (green bar). However, at the same time, it reduces the importance of their exclusivity. In other words, how rare these words are on other topics. We use a relevance score equal to 0.6, as is suggested by a prior used study (Sievert and Shirley, 2014). We plan in future versions of our project to incorporate a slider allowing users to alter relevance score hyper-parameter to better interpret the results.

#### 5.4 Most relevant images

We believe that images can help users to have a complementary perspective on the meaning of each topic. Figure 3 (d) shows the six most relevant images of the topic. These images will be retrieved from the 4chan dataset using CLIP (Radford et al., 2021), a neural network model, which recognizes a wide variety of visual concepts in images and associates them with names. We will use this model to retrieve the most related images from the dataset to the top ten keywords of each topic. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first topic modeling visualization tool that supports image content.

#### 5.5 Conversations View

This proposal includes a new component to get a sample of conversations for each month (see Figure 3 (e)). In this panel, users can also search for conversations that contain specific terms. Doing so will highlight the searched term in the documents.

### 5.6 Implementation

MultiModalTopicExplorer will be written in Javascript and Python. It will support within-browser interaction capabilities using D3 (Bostock et al., 2011). The visualization can be saved to a stand-alone HTML file for easy sharing. The full code will be available online.

#### 5.7 Ethical considerations

We will analyze publicly available data which are masked for privacy purposes. We will follow standard ethical guidelines, not attempting to track users or deanonymize them.

#### 5.8 Scenario of use

In this section we consider 3 possible scenarios of how users can interact with MultiModalTopicExplorer.

##### Scenario 1

A user wants to get an overview of all the frequent topics in the corpus. MultiModalTopicExplorer provides users a list of top 20 topics in the corpus that are sorted by their importance (e.i. frequency). If they click on each topic, the horizontal bar chart (shown by (c) in the figure) gets updated showing the representative terms for that topic, sorted by their frequencies. Additionally, images in window (d) will get updated and they will be replaced by the most relevant images for that topic.

##### Scenario 2

A user wants to see which important topics have been discussed within a specific month. The columns in the matrix in Figure 3 (shown by (b) in the figure) are aggregated threads of conversations

Table 1: Number of estimated hours per task

Task	Total	Felipe	Soheil	Deadline
Literature review	6	3	3	
Brainstorming and mock-up design	6	4	2	
Write proposal	32	16	16	Oct 21
Learn D3.js	16	6	10	
Investigate previous similar implementations	10	5	5	Oct 29
Data preprocessing	10	5	5	
LDA implementation	12	6	6	
Visualize the most important topics (Figure 3 (a))	10	5	5	Nov 8
Aggregate data for each month	10	5	5	
Find important topics for each month	6	3	3	
Visualize the aggregated data and topics (Figure 3 (b))	20	10	10	Nov 15
Find the most important words for each topic	6	3	3	
Visualize the term frequencies (Figure 3 (c))	10	5	5	Nov 21
Preprocess and retrieve the most related images for each topic	20	10	10	
Visualize the most related images for each topic (Figure 3 (d))	10	5	5	Nov 30
Visualize sample of conversations for each month (Figure 3 (e))	10	5	5	Dec 7
Presentation	10	5	5	Dec 15
Final Report	20	10	10	Dec 17
Total	220	110	110	

throughout that specific month. If user clicks on the columns, a sample of conversations from that month will be shown in window (e). Each cell  $(i, j)$  in the matrix indicates if topic  $i$  was discussed in month  $j$  or not, and if it has, how frequent it has been.

### Scenario 3

A user is interested to see how topics have evolved throughout the time (multiple months). They can achieve this goal by using the mentioned matrix. For example, if for Jan 2018, the cell has lower luminance than September 2018 for topic  $i$ , this means that topic  $i$  has been discussed more on Jan 2018 in comparison to September 2018. Although users can see a window with size 12 months, they can scroll throughout the history by the horizontal scroll at the bottom of the matrix to cover more dates.

## 6 Milestones

Table 1 shows the milestones and their estimated required time we foresee for this project. The overall estimated required time to finish this project is 220 hours.

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