# A Study of Computational Reproducibility using URLs Linking to Open Access Datasets and Software

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## Abstract

Datasets and software packages are considered important resources that can be used for replicating computational experiments. With the advocacy of Open Science and the growing interest of investigating reproducibility of scientific claims, including URLs linking to publicly available datasets and software packages has been an institutionalized part of research publications. In this preliminary study, we investigated the disciplinary dependencies and chronological trend of including open access datasets and software (OADS) in electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs), based on a hybrid classifier called OADSClassifier, consisting of a heuristic and a supervised learning model. The classifier achieves a best F1 of 0.92. We found that the inclusion of OADS URLs exhibited a strong disciplinary dependence and the fraction of ETDs containing OADS URLs has been gradually increasing over the past 20 years. We developed and share a ground truth corpus consisting of 500 manually labeled sentences containing URLs from scientific papers. The datasets and source code are available at https://github.com/lamps-lab/oadsclassifier.

## CCS Concepts

• **General and reference** → Empirical studies; • **Information systems** → *Digital libraries and archives*; • **Computing methodologies** → **Supervised learning**; *Supervised learning by classification*; **Information extraction**.

## Keywords

reproducibility, ETD, language model, open access

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## 1 Introduction

Generally, reproducibility can be defined as *the ability for a researcher to duplicate the result of a prior study using the same materials as were used by the original investigators* [1, 7]. Results can be obtained using physical experiments, involving real-world equipment, objects and human subjects, or computational experiments. Since the inception of the Internet, there has been a growing number of research papers using computational methods to perform numerical simulations, or mine big data using machine learning and deep learning models, e.g., [10, 14]. More and more papers include URLs linking to open access datasets and software (OADS) to make their works more transparent and easier to be reproduced. Many OADS refer to standard training and testing corpora, e.g., ImageNet[1], or widely adopted software packages, e.g., BERT[2]. However, there are still a large number of OADS URLs that are less well known, yet potentially useful for researchers. Automatically identifying these URLs will facilitate building repositories supporting computational reproducibility studies in multiple disciplines. Recently many venues encourage or require submitted papers to include URLs linking to OADS. A method to identify such URLs could potentially be used to characterize and assess research reproducibility.

Although recognizing URLs can be relatively straightforward using regular expressions, not all URLs link to OADS. Discovering URLs linking to OADS usually requires referring to the context around the target URL. For example, in Table 1, after inspecting the context, only the URL in the first sentence links to OADS. Manually examining research papers to extract OADS is laborious and impractical, given the rapid growth of research papers [8], and there is no automation of this task to best of our knowledge. To overcome this limitation, we propose a hybrid method to automatically identify OADS URLs. We implemented this method in a pipeline and applied it to electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs).

The goal of this paper is to *study the disciplinary dependence and chronological trends of OADS URLs identified in ETDs.* ETDs usually represent the major contribution of a student pursuing an academic degree. We have collected the full-text and metadata of about 450,000 ETDs published before 2021 [15], by crawling library repositories of universities in the United State. These ETDs covered both STEM and non-STEM disciplines. The relatively long documents, heterogeneous fields of study, and relatively broad span of years make this corpus ideal for our study.

[1] http://www.image-net.org
[2] https://github.com/google-research/bert

**Table 1: Sentences containing OADS and non-OADS URLs.**

| Sentences containing URLs | Category |
|---|---|
| The data and relevant documentation are available at http://data.stanford.edu/hcmst | OADS |
| An electronic companion to this paper is available as part of the online version that can be found at http://mansci.journal.informs.org | non-OADS |

## 2 Related Work

There has been growing interest in assessing and verifying the reproducibility of research works, especially in social and behavioral sciences (SBS), e.g., [2, 4]. In a recent study, the authors attempted to identify important features that exhibit relatively strong correlation with reproducibility labels of a corpus of SBS papers [17]. Another work presented a model for predicting the replicability of a corpus of SBS papers using a set of shallow features [18]. However, the inclusion of OADS URLs was not incorporated.

Computational reproducibility has been studied in several recent papers. One paper studied the URLs linking to datasets, focusing on papers produced by ACM SIGMOD and PVLDB [11]. The authors used a simple keyword-based method to search for links to source materials. Example keywords were "http", "online" etc. If the link was found active, they considered the resource to be available without distinguishing whether the URL truly linked to OADS.

Färber et al. (2020) analyzed the quality and usage of GitHub code repositories using the Microsoft Academic Graph (MAG) [6]. The authors found a strong bias towards specific computer science areas (e.g., machine learning) and publication venues. The authors claimed that the set of URLs from MAG was more complete and precise than directly extracting URLs from full-text, but they did not provide details on the approaches used. In other work, the authors studied 1.4 million Jupyter notebooks from GitHub, with the purpose of providing insights into the reproducibility of real notebooks [12]. They found that only 24.11% executed without errors and only 4.03% produced the same results. URLs used in the above two studies were limited to GitHub links and therefore papers containing these URLs were published mostly after 2010.

Our work incorporates all URLs that are under the HTTP or FTP protocols. We characterize the dependencies and trends using the ETDs encompassing *multiple disciplines.*

## 3 Classifying OADS URLs.

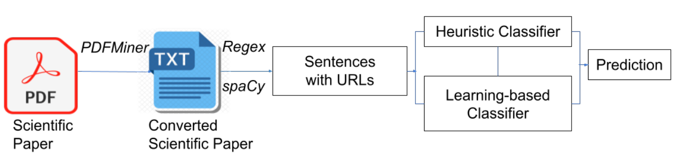


**Figure 1: OADS URL classification pipeline**

### 3.1 Architecture Overview

A schematic architecture of the pipeline is depicted in Figure 1. The pipeline consists of the following modules.

(1) **PDF to text conversion.** First, PDFs of the papers were converted to text files. In comparing PDFMiner and PyPDF2, it was found that a portion of text files converted by PyPDF2 removed white spaces between words, making it impossible to segment sentences. Therefore, PDFMiner was employed for conversion.
(2) **Sentence segmentation.** Next, sentence segmentation was performed on the converted text file. SpaCy was used for tokenizing the text into sentences. The Spacy library was imported first, and then the English language model of Spacy was loaded to iterate over the tokens of text to tokenize sentences.
(3) **Extraction of sentences with URLs.** We use the following regular expression to detect URLs in a sentence. Sentences containing URLs were then extracted.

```
(http|https|ftp|ftps)\:\/\/[a-zA-Z0-9\-\.]+\.[a-zA-Z]{2,3}(\/\S*)?
```

(4) **URL classification.** A hybrid method consisting of a heuristic model and a learning-based model was used to classify sentences containing URLs. Here, we assume that URLs contained in the same sentence have the same category. Our analysis indicated that out of 500 sentences, more than 93% of sentences contain only one URL, indicating that the number of URLs is roughly consistent with the number of sentences. For convenience, we refer to URLs linking to OADS as OADS-URLs and ETDs containing at least one OADS-URLs as OADS-ETDs.

### 3.2 Heuristic Classifier

We observed that the majority of publisher URLs do not link to OADS. Therefore, we considered a simple heuristic method to exclude URLs that end with `.pdf` or link to publishers. We built a controlled list including 54 major publishers such as Springer, Wiley, and Sagepub. This heuristic method excludes non-OADS URLs with high accuracy, so they do not need to be classified by the learning-based model. However, we will investigate in our experiments whether the language model alone can achieve higher performance without "knowing" the URL's domains.

### 3.3 Learning-based Classifier

The learning-based model encodes a sentence using a pre-trained language model. We compare three transformer-based language models, namely, BERT [5], RoBERTa [9], and DistilBERT [13]. Because these three models were trained with general text, we also compare a document level embedding model SPECTER [3], trained on academic documents. The maximum sequence length for BERT, DistilBERT, and RoBERTa was 512. The "bert-base-uncased", "roberta-base", and "distilbert-base-uncased" architectures were used for BERT, RoBERTa, and DistilBERT, respectively. To avoid overfitting, we tried different dropout values. The model performed well with a dropout rate 0.2. The output dimensions for BERT, RoBERTa, DistilBERT, and SPECTER were 768. The vector representations were used to train and test a binary logistic regression (LR) classifier.

### 3.4 Hybrid Models

To effectively use labeled data and maximize the performance, we compared three hybrid models depending on whether the heuristic classifier is used in training or testing. The model with the highest F1 was adopted for our analysis.

(1) **No heuristic classifier.** In this model, all sentences in the training (testing) corpus were encoded into vectors and used for training (testing) the LR classifier.

**Table 2: Performance for different hybrid models. The bold row has the highest F1.**

| Hybrid Model | Masking URLs | | | Original URLs | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Precision* | *Recall* | *F1* | *Precision* | *Recall* | *F1* |
| No heuristic classifier | 0.86 | 0.72 | 0.81 | 0.86 | 0.89 | 0.89 |
| Heuristic classifier for test data | 0.86 | 0.90 | 0.89 | 0.87 | 0.95 | 0.91 |
| **Heuristic classifier for train and test data** | **0.86** | **0.93** | **0.89** | **0.87** | **0.98** | **0.92** |

(2) **Heuristic classifier for test data.** The same as (1) except that the heuristic classifier was first applied to the testing data. The remaining sentences were classified using the LR classifier.
(3) **Heuristic classifier for training and test data.** The same as (1) except that the heuristic classifier was first applied to both training and testing corpora before sentence encoding.

We also investigate whether the URLs provide useful information that improves sentence representation. To this end, we prepared two sets of sentences, one with original URLs masked with the word "URL" and the other with original URLs.

## 4 Data

The ground truth dataset included 500 sentences containing URLs extracted from CORD-19 [16] and an in-house corpus of SBS papers. The dataset was independently labeled as OADS and non-OADS by two graduate students with a consensus rate of 83.6%. The students discussed with a domain expert to resolve different labels. The ground truth contains 248 samples labeled as OADS and the rest labeled as non-OADS. It was randomly split into 400 training samples and 100 test samples. Several URLs were difficult to label because of the ambiguity of the sentences containing those URLs. For example, in the sentence "For more information, see: http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/icpsr/studies/4607", there was little information in the context implying whether the URL linked to OADS. In these cases, we visited the the websites the URL linked to. When labeling URLs, we focus on determining the nature of the contents. An OADS URL may not necessarily be alive.

We randomly selected 100,000 ETDs from about 450k ETDs [15]. The entire dataset was collected by crawling 42 university libraries. A fraction of ETD metadata provided by the libraries was incomplete. Certain fields such as years were missing. All ETDs we selected contained values in the "year" and "department" fields.

Using PDFMiner, we converted 96,842 ETDs from PDF to text files. The metadata provided by the libraries contained over 60 departments. Because many departments were closely related, we consolidated departments into 18 disciplines (Figure 2) using the *Outline of Academic Disciplines* from Wikipedia[3].

## 5 Experimental Results

### 5.1 Hybrid Classifier Performance

We first compare the three hybrid models proposed in Section 3.4. The performance was evaluated using standard metrics: precision, recall, and F1-score. The results are tabulated in Table 2. For space constraints, we only show the performance when DistilBERT was used as the language model. The results indicated that adding the heuristic classifier for both training and testing data achieved the highest F1=92%, regardless whether URLs were masked or not.

[3]https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outline_of_academic_disciplines

**Table 3: Precision, recall and F1 for the OADSClassifier.**

| Language Model | Masking URLs | | | Original URLs | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Precision* | *Recall* | *F1* | *Precision* | *Recall* | *F1* |
| BERT | 0.80 | 0.90 | 0.85 | 0.86 | 0.90 | 0.88 |
| **DistilBERT** | **0.86** | **0.93** | **0.89** | **0.87** | **0.98** | **0.92** |
| RoBERTa | 0.68 | 0.88 | 0.78 | 0.74 | 0.95 | 0.83 |
| SPECTER | 0.77 | 0.80 | 0.79 | 0.78 | 0.88 | 0.83 |

Next, we investigate the effect of language models on the performance. Table 3 demonstrated that the best F1=0.92 was achieved using DistilBERT+LR, leaving URLs preserved in sentences. The BERT+LR model achieved the second best result with F1=0.88. Table 3 also demonstrates that in general the classifier achieves a higher F1-score if URLs are not masked, indicating that URLs contain useful information that aid generating a better representation. We attribute this to the WordPiece tokenizer that was used in BERT and its variants. Although an arbitrary URL is likely to be an out-of-vocabulary token, the URL can be further parsed into subword tokens. Certain subword tokens, such as the ones comprising words like "data" and "software", could be indicators of OADS URLs.

### 5.2 Disciplinary Dependence

By applying the OADSClassifier to the ETDs we selected, we identified 51,201 ($\sim$ 14%) sentences containing OADS URLs out of 369,802 sentences containing URLs. The identified OADS URLs appear in 15,951 ETDs, i.e., about 16.3% of the ETDs in our corpus.

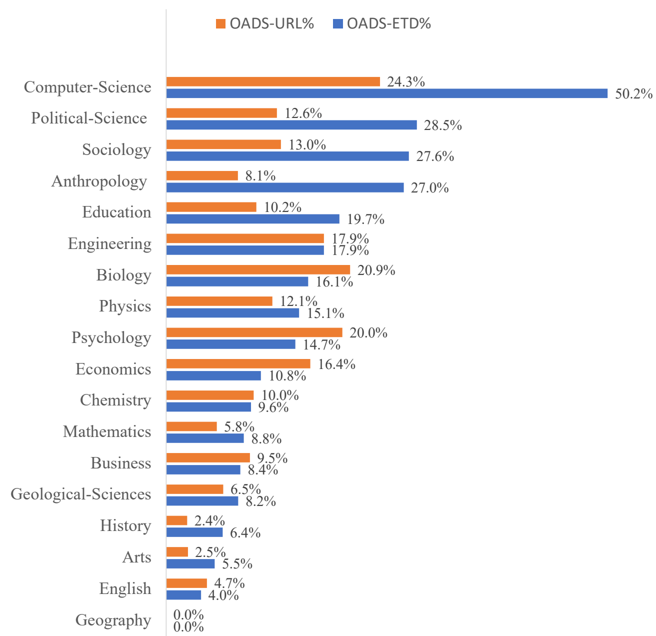


**Figure 2: Dependence of the fractions of OADS-URL and OADS-ETD for academic disciplines.**

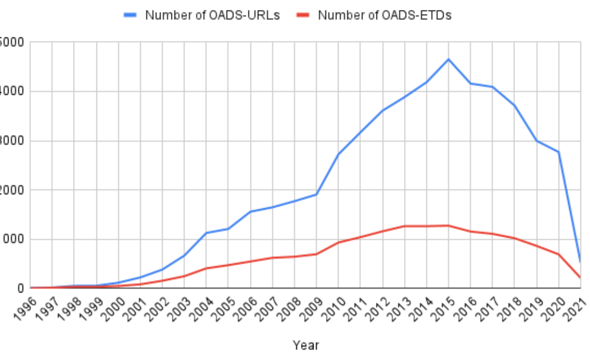


**Figure 3: Numbers of OADS-URLs and ETDs containing OADS URLs as a function of publication year.**

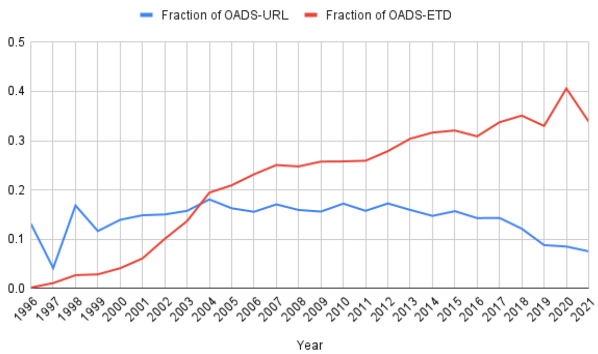


**Figure 4: Fractions of OADS URLs (blue) and ETDs containing OADS URLs (red) as a function of year.**

Next, we study how the inclusion of OADS URLs changes depending on academic discipline. Figure 2 shows two fractions:

$$\text{OADS-ETD\%} = \frac{N_{\text{OADS-ETD}}}{N_{\text{ETD}}}, \quad \text{OADS-URL\%} = \frac{N_{\text{OADS-URL}}}{N_{\text{URL}}}. \quad (1)$$

For a certain discipline, $N_{\text{OADS-ETD}}$ is the number of ETDs containing OADS-URLs and $N_{\text{ETD}}$ is the total number of ETDs in that discipline. Similarly, $N_{\text{OADS-URL}}$ is the number of OADS-URLs and $N_{\text{URL}}$ is the total number of URLs in that discipline. Figure 2 shows several interesting results. (1) Computer Science has the highest fraction of OADS-ETD% (50.2%), which is consistent with Figure 7 in Färber et al. (2020), which indicates most computer science ETDs include OADS URLs. (2) ETDs in social sciences (e.g., Political science, Sociology, Anthropology, and Education) contain a relatively higher fraction of OADS-ETD% than STEM disciplines (e.g., Engineering, Biology, and Physics). In particular, we did not find any Geography ETDs (717) containing OADS-URLs. This indicates that many social science studies use or release OADS. (3) Certain disciplines have a very small fraction of OADS-ETDs (< 10%), such as Chemistry (9.6%), Business (8.4%), and Geological-Sciences (8.2%), indicating that it is less frequent to find computationally reproducible works in these disciplines. (4) The OADS-URL% shows a more even distribution. Computer Science has the highest OADS-URLs% (24.3%), followed by Biology (20.9%) and Psychology (20.0%), indicating that most URLs in ETDs (> 75%) do not link to OADS. This phenomenon is more prominent for disciplines such as Chemistry (10%), Mathematics (5.8%), and Geological-Sciences (6.5%).

## 5.3 Chronological Trends

We also analyzed the chronological trends of OADS-URLs in ETDs. Figure 3 shows the numbers of OADS-URLs and OADS-ETDs as a function of time. The ETD dataset in [15] did not represent the ETDs in the United States. Specifically, a substantial fraction of recent ETDs was embargoed. Therefore, the trends of counts shown in Figure 3 reflect ETDs sampled in *this paper*.

However, our ETD selection criteria were not based on URLs. Assuming there is no strong correlations between the inclusion of OADS-URLs and any of the above mentioned selection criteria, the *fractions* of OADS-URLs or OADS-ETDs for certain years (or disciplines) should reflect the general trends. Note that a small number of ETD samples may introduce relatively large uncertainties, such as the data between 1996 and 2000, or the year 2021.

Figure 4 illustrates the fraction of OADS-URLs and the fraction of OADS-ETDs defined in a similar way as Eq. (1) as a function of year. Figure 4 shows two trends. First, the fraction of OADS-ETDs has been gradually increasing over the , from less than 5% in 2000 to more than 25% in 2010 to about 40% in 2020. Second, the fraction of OADS-URLs seemed relatively stable after year 2000. In fact, since 2016, this fraction gradually decreased from 15% to about 10% in 2019–2020. There are three possible reasons that could contribute to this trend. (a) The reduction of including OADS URLs in ETDs, which is unlikely according to the first trend. (b) The increase of non-OADS URLs in ETDs, and (c) the selection bias (as seen in Figure 3) due to a weak correlation between embargoed ETDs and the inclusion of OADS-URLs. Further investigations are needed to verify (b) and (c).

# 6 Conclusions and Discussion

We studied the computational reproducibility using OADS URLs as a proxy to academic documents, focusing on ETDs collected from USA universities. One key contribution is a model that automatically identifies sentences containing OADS URLs from research papers. This model achieved a best F1 of 0.92. Our analysis for URLs in ETDs found that the inclusion of OADS-URLs exhibited a strong dependence on disciplines. The fraction of OADS-ETDs gradually increases over the past 20 years. The fraction of OADS-URLs was relatively stable between 2000 and 2015.

This work is preliminary and has the following limitations. First, the training and evaluation were based on samples drawn from CORD-19 and SBS papers; we assumed the model could be transferred to other academic disciplines. The results in Table 3 indicate that the language model trained on general text (i.e., DistilBERT) beat the language model trained on academic document (i.e., SPECTER), indicating that the language discrepancy between disciplines may not be big and thus the model could be transferred for this task. Second, a more complete sample is needed to reveal more accurate dependencies and trends after 2016. In addition to addressing the above limitations, the future plans include developing a multi-class classifier that distinguishes whether OADS-URLs link to a dataset or to software, and whether they were published by the authors or included as third party resources.

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