

arulesViz: Interactive Visualization of Association Rules with R

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Abstract Association rule mining is a popular data mining method to discover interesting relationships between variables in large databases. An extensive toolbox is available in the R-extension package **arules**. However, mining association rules often results in a vast number of found rules, leaving the analyst with the task to go through a large set of rules to identify interesting ones. Sifting manually through extensive sets of rules is time-consuming and strenuous. Visualization and especially interactive visualization has a long history of making large amounts of data better accessible. The R-extension package **arulesViz** provides most popular visualization techniques for association rules. In this paper, we discuss recently added interactive visualizations to explore association rules and demonstrate how easily they can be used in **arulesViz** via a unified interface. With examples, we help to guide the user in selecting appropriate visualizations and interpreting the results.

Introduction

Many organizations generate a significant amount of transaction data on a daily basis. For example, a department store like “Macy’s” stores customer shopping information originating from point-of-sale systems and online shopping on a large scale. Association rule mining (Agrawal et al., 1993; Tan et al., 2006) is one of the major techniques to detect and extract useful information from large-scale transaction data. Rules found in the data are of the form ‘if customers purchase in a transaction products A and B then they are more likely also to purchase product C in the same transaction.’ This approach can be easily extended to non-retail settings by replacing products with web pages, movies, different answers to a questionnaire, etc. A well-known practical problem with association rule mining is that it tends to create a significant number of potentially interesting rules. Analysts are often overwhelmed by the sheer number of rules and need tools to support exploring large sets of rules efficiently.

Visualization has a long history of making large data sets better accessible and is successfully used to communicate both abstract and concrete ideas in many areas like education, engineering, and science (Prangsmal et al., 2009). According to Chen et al. (2008), the application of visualization falls into two phases. First, the exploration phase where the analysts will use graphics that are mostly incompatible for presentation purposes but make it easy to find interesting and important features of the data. The amount of interaction needed during exploration is very high and includes filtering, zooming, and rearranging data. After key findings are discovered in the data, these results must be presented in a way suitable for presentation for a larger audience. In this second phase, it is important that the analyst can manipulate the presentation to highlight the findings. Many researchers applied visualization techniques like scatter plots, matrix visualizations, graphs, mosaic plots and parallel coordinates plots to help analyze association rules (see Bruzzese and Davino (2008) for a recent overview paper).

This paper introduces the recently added implementations of interactive versions of several popular visualization techniques in the R-package **arulesViz** (Hahsler, 2017) and demonstrates how to use the package’s simple unified interface. Choosing an appropriate visualization and interpreting the results needs some experience. To give the user some guidance, this paper discusses three major groups of interactive visualizations including scatter plots, matrix visualization and graph-based visualization. With examples, the paper shows how the results of different visualizations can be interpreted to gain more insight into the found set of association rules.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. We start with definitions used in association rule mining and a discussion of different visualization methods for association rules. Then, we introduce the unified interface in package **arulesViz**. We demonstrate with small examples how to create and interpret different interactive visualizations. We conclude the paper with a short discussion of how the plots can be used to explore a set of association rules.

Association rules

Mining association rules was first introduced by Agrawal et al. (1993) and, following the notation used by Agrawal et al. (1993), Hahsler et al. (2005) and Tan et al. (2006), can formally be defined as:

Let $\mathcal{D} = \{t_1, t_2, \dots, t_m\}$ be a set of transactions called the *database*, and let $I = \{i_1, i_2, \dots, i_n\}$ be

the set of all *items* considered in the database. Each transaction in \mathcal{D} has a unique transaction ID and contains a subset of the items in I . A *rule* is defined as an expression $X \Rightarrow Y$ where $X, Y \subseteq I$ and $X \cap Y = \emptyset$. The sets of items (for short *itemsets*) X and Y are called *antecedent* (left-hand-side or LHS) and *consequent* (right-hand-side or RHS) of the rule. Often rules are restricted to only a single item in the consequent.

Association rules are rules which surpass a user-specified minimum support and minimum confidence threshold. The *support*, $\text{supp}(X)$, of an itemset X is a measure of importance defined as the proportion of transactions in the data set which contain the itemset. The *confidence* of a rule is defined as $\text{conf}(X \Rightarrow Y) = \text{supp}(X \cup Y) / \text{supp}(X)$, measuring how likely it is to see Y in a transaction containing X . An association rule $X \Rightarrow Y$ needs to satisfy

$$\text{supp}(X \cup Y) \geq \sigma \quad \text{and} \quad \text{conf}(X \Rightarrow Y) \geq \delta,$$

where σ and δ are the minimum support and minimum confidence thresholds, respectively.

Another popular measure for association rules used throughout this paper is *lift* (Brin et al., 1997). The lift of a rule is defined as

$$\text{lift}(X \Rightarrow Y) = \text{supp}(X \cup Y) / (\text{supp}(X) \text{supp}(Y))$$

and can be interpreted as the deviation of the support of the whole rule from the support expected under independence given the supports of both sides of the rule. Greater lift values ($\gg 1$) indicate stronger associations. Measures like support, confidence, and lift are called interest measures because they help with focusing on potentially more interesting rules. For a more detailed treatment of association rules and interest measures, we refer the reader to the introduction paper (Hahsler et al., 2005) for package **arules** (Hahsler et al., 2017) and the literature referred to there.

Association rules are typically generated in a two-step process. First, minimum support is used to produce the set of all *frequent itemsets* for the data set. Frequent itemsets are itemsets which satisfy the minimum support constraint. Then, in a second step, each frequent itemset is used to generate all possible candidate rules from it, and all rules which do not satisfy the minimum confidence constraint are removed. Analyzing this process, we can see that in the worst case we will generate $2^n - n - 1$ frequent itemsets with more than two items from a database with n distinct items. Since each frequent itemset will in the worst case generate at least two rules, we will end up with a set of rules in the order of $O(2^n)$. Typically, increasing minimum support is used to keep the number of association rules found at a manageable size. However, this also removes potentially interesting rules with less support. Therefore, the need to deal with large sets of association rules is unavoidable when applying association rule mining in a real setting. Here we discuss interactive visualization as a potential means to analyze large sets of association rules.

Visualizing association rules

Many researchers applied existing visualization techniques to sets of association rules. Several popular techniques are discussed in the overview by Bruzzese and Davino (2008) and implemented in **arulesViz** (Hahsler, 2017). Here we focus on interactive visualizations falling into one of the three most important groups scatter plots, matrix visualization, and graph-based visualization. The main components of the three groups of visualization are shown in Figure 1. Scatter plots focus on interest measures, and rules with similar values for these measures are placed close to each other. Matrix visualizations focus on visualizing rules that have the same antecedent or consequent by placing them in the same column or row, respectively. The graph-based visualization shows how rules share individual items. The properties of interactive visualizations in these groups implemented in **arulesViz** are summarized in Table 1. The table includes information on the maximum size of the rule set that can be effectively visualized, the number of measures of interestingness that are visualized, the primary focus of the visualization, and the interactive features that are currently available. Additional static and interactive visualizations are available in package **arulesViz** and we refer the reader to the package's manual for these.

Visualization starts with a set of association rules formalized here as the set

$$\mathcal{R} = \{\langle X_1, Y_1, \theta_1 \rangle, \dots, \langle X_i, Y_i, \theta_i \rangle, \dots, \langle X_n, Y_n, \theta_n \rangle\},$$

where X_i is the rule antecedent, Y_i is the rule consequent and θ_i is a vector with available measures of interestingness (e.g., support, confidence, lift) for the i -th rule, $i = 1, \dots, n$.

A straightforward visualization of association rules is to produce a scatter plot with two interest measures on the axes (see Figure 1(a)). Such a presentation can be found already in an early paper by Bayardo, Jr. and Agrawal (1999) when they discuss *sc-optimal rules*. Scatter plots focus solely on

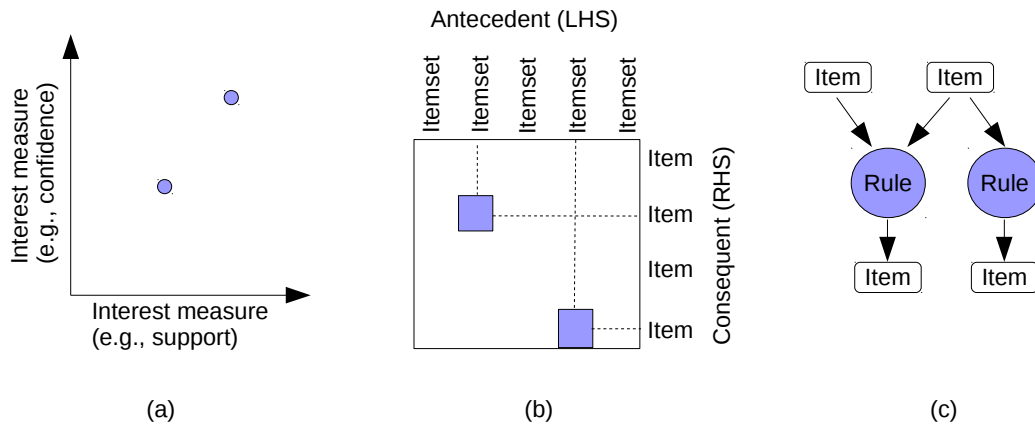


Figure 1: The main components of association rule visualization using (a) a scatter plot, (b) matrix visualization, and (c) graph-based visualization. Rules are shown in color. Color shading can be used to indicate the value of an additional interest measure of the rule (e.g., lift).

Technique	Method (arulesViz)	Set size	Measures	Focus	Interactive features
Scatter plot	"scatterplot"	1,000s	3	Interest measures	hover, zoom, pan
Two-Key plot	"two-key plot"	1,000s	2 + order	Rule length	hover, zoom, pan
Matrix-based	"matrix"	< 1,000	1	RHS & LHS	hover, zoom, pan
Grouped matrix	"grouped matrix"	100,000s	2	RHS & LHS	drill down, inspect
Graph-based	"graph"	100s	2	Items	hover, zoom, pan, brush
Graph-b. (external)	"graph"	1,000s	2	Items	tool dependent

Table 1: Interactive visualization methods based on scatter plots, matrix visualization and graphs available in **arulesViz**.

the measures of interestingness θ_i by choosing two measures (often support and confidence) for the x and y-axis, respectively. A third measure (often lift) can be added to the plot using color. [Unwin et al. \(2001\)](#) introduced a special version of a scatter plot called the *Two-key plot*. Here support and confidence are used for the x and y-axis and the color of the points is used to indicate "order," which is defined as the number of items contained in the rule. Scatter plots can be used for large sets of association rules and give an impression of the distribution of rules concerning large and small values for the chosen interest measures. However, it completely ignores the items in rules and the fact that rules share items. This leads to the issue that two almost identical rules, differing only by a single item, can be located in very different areas on the plot. Standard interactive features for scatter plots can be used. This includes zooming into the plot, panning, and hovering over points to obtain information about the rule it represents. The number of rules that can be effectively visualized and interactively explored (with zooming in) is theoretically not limited, however, for practical purposes it depends mainly on the capability of the display system to render the needed amount of points in an acceptable amount of time. Also overplotting becomes a problem for large rule sets. This typically limits the rule set size to no more than several 1,000 rules.

While the scatter plot focuses on the similarity of rules regarding measures of interestingness like support and confidence, matrix-based visualization for association rules organizes rules in a matrix using distinct antecedent and consequent itemsets as the columns and rows, respectively. The matrix \mathbf{M} is created by identifying the set of A unique antecedents and C unique consequents in \mathcal{R} . An $A \times C$ matrix $\mathbf{M} = (m_{ac})$, $a = 1, \dots, A$ and $c = 1, \dots, C$, is created with one column for each unique antecedent and one row for each unique consequent. The matrix is populated by setting $m_{ac} = \theta_{i,m}$ where $i = 1, \dots, n$ is the rule index, m is a chosen interest measure (e.g., lift), and a and c correspond to the position of X_i and Y_i in the matrix. The matrix is displayed using matrix shading, i.e., a color-shaded square at the intersection of the antecedent column and the consequent row of a given rule ([Ong et al., 2002](#)). The basic layout is shown in Figure 1(b). If no rule is available for an antecedent/consequent combination, which can easily happen because of the minimum support constraint, then the value in the matrix is undefined and the intersection area in the plot is left blank. Note that association rules in **arules** and most other tools restrict the consequent to a single item, but the size of the antecedent itemset is not restricted. This means that the number of rows in \mathbf{M} is typically much smaller than the number of columns. The order of the rows and columns of the visualized matrix can have a profound impact on the effectiveness of the visualization in guiding the analyst in exploring the rule set. [Ong et al. \(2002\)](#) suggest to reorder antecedents by increasing support and the

consequents by increasing confidence. Two other options are to organize the itemsets by similarity by placing antecedents with similar items close together, or by organizing them so more interesting rules can be easily identified (e.g., placing the rules with highest lift in the top-left corner of the matrix by simply ordering rows and columns by decreasing average lift). Matrix-based visualization is limited in the number of rules it can visualize effectively since large sets of rules typically also have large sets of unique antecedents resulting in a huge matrix which makes exploration more challenging using repeated zooming in and out. This is somewhat mitigated by reordering the matrix, but we still recommend to use less than 1,000 rules.

The grouped matrix-based visualization (Hahsler and Karpienko, 2016) enhances matrix-based visualization by organizing the large set of different antecedents (columns) into a small set of groups via clustering. For grouping, the set of antecedents is split into a set of k groups $\mathcal{S} = \{S_1, S_2, \dots, S_k\}$ while minimizing the within-cluster sum of squares

$$\operatorname{argmin}_{\mathcal{S}} \sum_{i=1}^k \sum_{\mathbf{m}_j \in S_i} \|\mathbf{m}_j - \boldsymbol{\mu}_i\|^2,$$

where \mathbf{m}_j , $j = 1, \dots, A$, is a column vector representing all rules with the same antecedent and $\boldsymbol{\mu}_i$ is the center (mean) of the vectors in S_i . We use the k -means algorithm by Hartigan and Wong (1979) and restart it ten times with randomly initialized centers to find a suitable solution. Before clustering, the missing values for antecedent/confidence combinations that do not pass the minimum support, or minimum confidence threshold are replaced by a neutral element (e.g., 1 for lift). The result is a smaller matrix with groups of antecedents as columns. Similar to the regular matrix-based visualization, the matrix is again sorted such that more interesting groups are moved to the top left corner and grouped rules are presented using a balloon plot. For interactive exploration, drilling-down into a group can be easily done by selecting only the rules in the group and applying the same clustering procedure again. Note that the standard matrix visualization is a special case of the grouped visualization with $k = A$.

Graph-based techniques (Klemettinen et al., 1994; Rainsford and Roddick, 2000; Buono and Costabile, 2005; Ertek and Demiriz, 2006) concentrate on the relationship between individual items reflecting their membership in different association rules. Association rules are visualized using two different types of vertices to represent the set of items I (or the subset that is used in the rule set) and the set of rules \mathcal{R} , respectively. The edges indicate the relationship in rules. An example is shown in Figure 1(c). Interest measures are typically added to the plot as labels, by color or width of the arrows displaying the edges, or by the size and color of the vertices. For visualization, standard graph drawing algorithms (e.g., force-directed layout algorithms) are used to create the layout. Standard interactive features available for graph visualization (e.g., zooming and panning) can be used. Graph-based visualization offers a very appealing representation of rules but they tend to become cluttered and thus are only viable for small rule sets (typically 100 or less). External tools for network visualization allow more advanced visualization, with tool-dependent interactive features like grouping nodes which may make this visualization useful for even larger rule sets.

In the following, we will present how these visualizations and interactive features can be created and used to analyze association rules with **arulesViz**.

Data preparation and unified interface of **arulesViz**

The package **arulesViz** (Hahsler, 2017) is part of the **arules** package ecosystem for handling and mining association rules (Hahsler et al., 2011). Considerable effort has been put into providing a straightforward and consistent interface, which allows the user to explore different visualization options easily. Before we start with the visualization, we need to mine some association rules. Throughout this paper, we use a small demo data set called “Groceries” which is included in **arules**. We use this data set so the reader can easily reproduce the presented results. We first load the package and the data set.

```
library("arulesViz")
data("Groceries")
```

Groceries contains sales data from a small grocery store with 9835 transactions and a moderate number of 169 items (product groups). It is easy to mine association rules using the Apriori algorithm implemented in **arules**. Since the data set is very sparse with each transaction only containing a small fraction of the 169 product groups, we use a very low minimum support threshold of 0.1% of the transactions. To create more rules, we also reduce the minimum confidence threshold from the default value of 80% to 50%.

```
rules <- apriori(Groceries, parameter = list(support = 0.001, confidence = 0.5))
```

	LHS	RHS	support	confidence	lift	count
[53]	{Instant food products,soda}	{hamburger meat}	0.001	0.632	18.996	12.000
[37]	{soda,popcorn}	{salty snack}	0.001	0.632	16.698	12.000
[444]	{flour,baking powder}	{sugar}	0.001	0.556	16.408	10.000
[327]	{ham,processed cheese}	{white bread}	0.002	0.633	15.045	19.000
[551]	{whole milk,Instant food products}	{hamburger}	0.002	0.500	15.028	15.000

Showing 1 to 10 of 5,668 entries

(a)

	LHS	RHS	support	confidence	lift	count
[18]	{liquor,red/blush wine}	{bottled beer}	0.002	0.905	11.235	19.000
[19]	{soda,liquor}	{bottled beer}	0.001	0.571	7.096	12.000

Showing 1 to 2 of 2 entries (filtered from 5,668 total entries)

(b)

Figure 2: Interactive data table for the mined rule set. Table (a) shows the rules sorted by lift. The top three rules represent typical barbecue needs including hamburger meat, movie snacks, and baking ingredients, respectively. Table (b) shows the rules filtered with only rules with beer in the consequent (RHS). We see that other alcoholic beverages in the LHS produce high-lift rules.

rules

set of 5668 rules

The result is a set of 5668 association rules. Many real applications may include thousands of items and rule sets with millions of rules, but even inspecting all 5668 rules in this example manually is cumbersome. Common practice is to examine only the top rules according to a measure of interestingness which can be done in **arules** using the functions `sort()` and `inspect()`. To make inspection easier, **arulesViz** provides an interactive `inspect` method which creates a data table using package **DT** (Xie, 2016).

`inspectDT(rules)`

Figure 2 shows the result of this interactive inspection method which allows the user to sort rules given different interest measures, specify ranges for measures, and provides filters for items. In the example in Figure 2(a) we sort the rules by lift. We can see that the result is a set of product groups we would expect to be highly correlated. The first three rules represent typical barbecue needs including hamburger meat, movie snacks, and baking ingredients, respectively. In Figure 2(b), we selected only

the rules with 'beer' in the rules consequent (RHS). The rules show very strong relationship (a high lift value) with liquor, soda, and wine, but a rather low support of only 0.2% and 0.1%, respectively.

While interactive inspection of rules using a table is very useful for experts who know what they are looking for, visualization and especially interactive visualization can help to understand the found rules better. Different visualization methods are quite distinct regarding presentation, but in **arulesViz** much work has been spent on creating a single, simple and consistent interface that allows the user to analyze a rule set quickly using different methods. The main interface is the `plot()` method is defined as

```
plot(x, method = NULL, measure = "support", shading = "lift", engine = "default",
     data = NULL, control = NULL, ...)
```

where

- `x` is the set of rules to be visualized,
- `method` is the visualization method (some are given in Table 1 and more can be found in the manual page included in **arulesViz**),
- `measure` and `shading` contain the interest measures used by the plot,
- `engine` was introduced in a recent release to let the user choose between different rendering engines (e.g., using R's grid static graphics, grid-based interactive features or HTML widgets),
- `data` can contain the transaction data set used to mine the rules (only necessary for some methods),
- `control` is a list with visualization-specific control arguments to customize the plot. Using the control argument `verbose = TRUE` will show all available arguments and the default values for the chosen method and engine. For convenience additional arguments are appended to the control list.

In the following sections, we will introduce the main interactive visualization methods implemented in **arulesViz** with simple examples. Static and additional methods are described in the package documentation.

Scatter plot

A scatter plot for association rules uses two interest measures, one on each of the axes. The default plot for association rules in **arulesViz** is a scatter plot using support and confidence on the axes. The measure defined by shading (default: lift) is visualized by the color of the points. A color key is provided to the right of the plot.

```
plot(rules)
```

The resulting plot for the rules mined in the previous section is shown in Figure 3. We can see that rules with high lift have typically a relatively low support. Bayardo, Jr. and Agrawal (1999) argue that the most interesting rules (sc-optimal rules) reside on the support/confidence border. This can be clearly seen by high-lift rules residing close to the bottom-left corner of the plot which represents the minimum support cut-off. Since support and confidence are the results of counting, rules often share the same support and confidence value, leading to considerable overplotting. The plot function automatically adds some jitter in this case. Any measure stored in the quality slot of the set of rules can be used for the axes (vector of length 2 for parameter measure) or for color shading (shading). The following measures are available for our set of rules.

```
head(quality(rules))
```

```
  support confidence lift
1 0.00112      0.733 2.87
2 0.00122      0.522 2.84
3 0.00132      0.591 2.31
4 0.00132      0.565 2.21
5 0.00132      0.520 2.04
6 0.00366      0.643 2.52
```

These are the default measures generated by the Apriori implementation used in **arules**. To add other measures, we refer the reader to the function `interestMeasure()` included in **arules**.

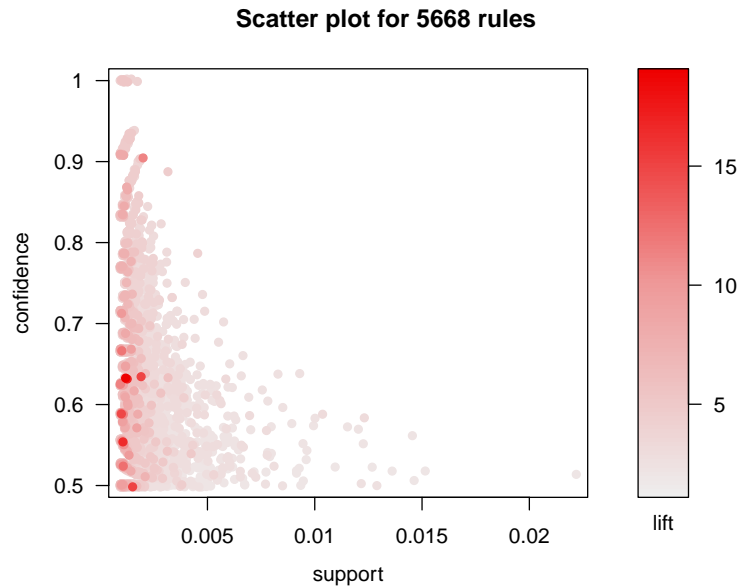


Figure 3: Default scatter plot showing support, confidence, and lift of rules. The plot mainly gives an overview of the distribution of support and confidence in the rule set. There are a few high-confidence rules in the top left corner, and high-lift rules are located close to the minimum support threshold (left corner of the plot).

The default plot is a static visualization providing limited utility for exploration since the individual rules cannot be identified directly in the plot. **arulesViz** offers a JavaScript-based scatter plot visualization using **plotly** (Sievert et al., 2017) which is capable of creating an interactive HTML widget. This visualization can be selected by setting the engine parameter to "htmlwidget", and it supports identifying rules by hovering over a point, zooming in and out, and panning.

```
plot(rules, engine = "htmlwidget")
```

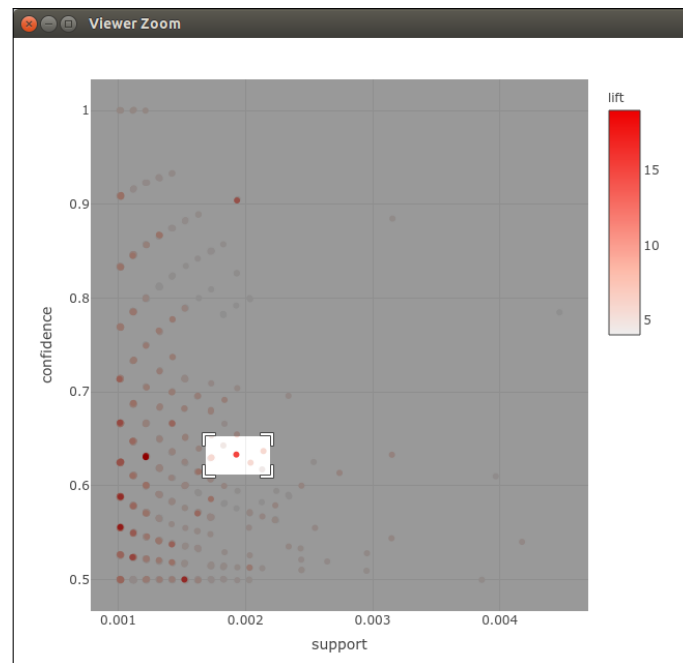
Warning message:

```
plot: Too many rules supplied. Only plotting the best 1000 rules using measure
lift (change parameter max if needed)
```

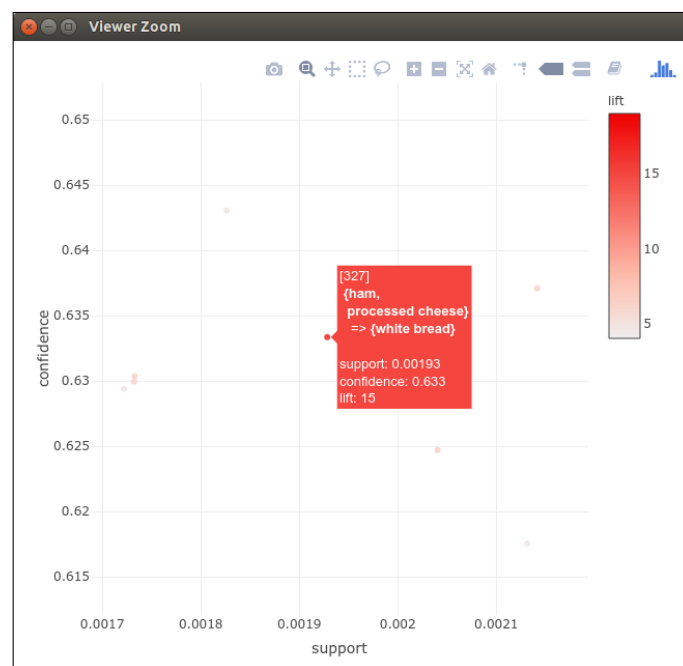
Note that HTML widgets are rendered by the client which gets very slow with many points. This is why the number of rules visualized is by default restricted to the 1,000 rules with the highest value for the measure of interestingness specified in shading (default is lift). The call above creates a warning message to notify the user that not all rules are included in the plot. The user can change the limit for the restriction using the control parameter `max`. For example, `max = Inf` visualizes all rules. Figure 4 shows an example of the interactive use of the plot. In Figure 4(a), we zoom into a region of average confidence that contains some high-lift rules (dark red). Figure 4(b) shows the zoomed-in view where rules can be inspected by hovering over the corresponding point. The selected rule has high support and contains the ingredients necessary to make ham and cheese sandwiches. The number in brackets ([327]) is the index in the rule set. Note that the tight groups of rules with low support and a confidence around 0.63 represent rules with the same confidence and support. They are just spread out slightly using jitter to reduce overplotting.

Matrix-based visualization

Matrix-based visualization creates a matrix with unique antecedent and consequent itemsets forming the columns and rows, respectively. The matrix contains the values for an interest measure selected by the analyst and is visualized using matrix shading. The order of rows and columns is arbitrary, however, to improve the ability to analyze the data, we suggest in **arulesViz** to reorder the matrix such that the row averages decrease from top to bottom and the column averages decrease from left to right. This pushes the rules with higher values of interestingness to the top-left position in the plot. Here we plot the rules using the method `matrix` and render it using an HTML widget.

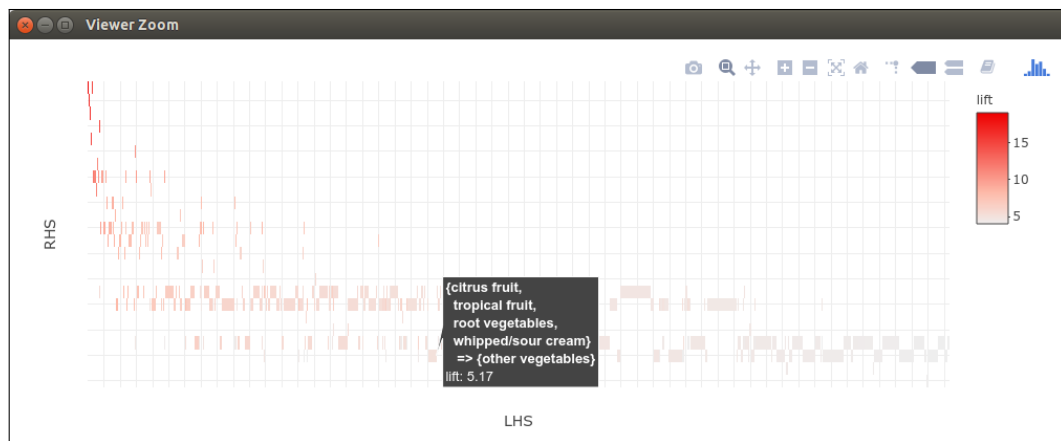


(a)

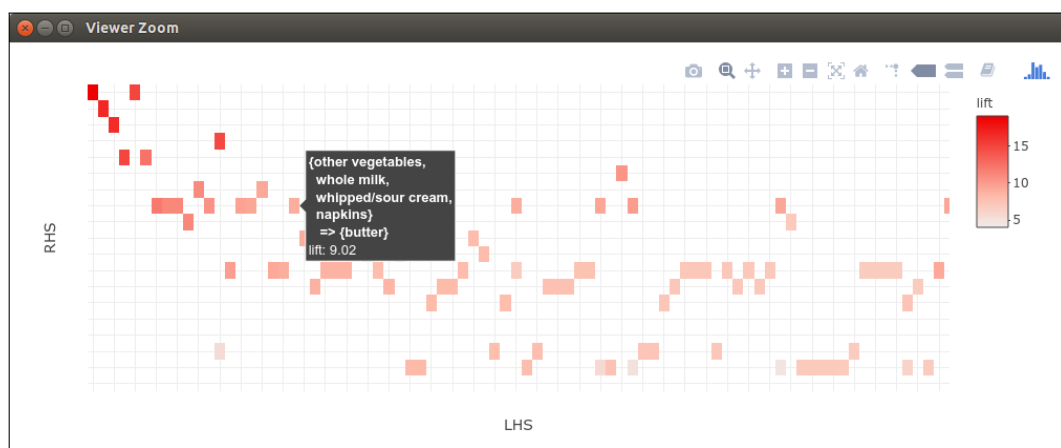


(b)

Figure 4: Interactive scatter plot producing a HTML widget. This plot only visualizes the 1000 rules with the highest lift. Plot (a) shows how the area around high-lift rules is selected for zooming in. Plot (b) showed the selected region and hovering over the high-lift rule reveals that it contains ingredients to make sandwiches.



(a)



(b)

Figure 5: Interactive matrix-based visualization where the matrix is ordered such that the rules with the largest lift values are located close to the top-left corner. Only the 1000 rules with the highest lift are visualized. Hovering over a rule close to the bottom in plot (a) shows that the row contains many rules with the consequent “root vegetables.” Plot (b) is zoomed into the top-left corner. The highlighted rule has the consequent “butter”. There are many entries in the row indicating that many strong rules are resulting in butter.

```
plot(rules, method = "matrix", engine = "htmlwidget")
```

Warning message:

```
plot: Too many rules supplied. Only plotting the best 1000 rules using
lift (change parameter max if needed)
```

The warning message shows again that only the top 1,000 rules are included in the visualization for performance reasons. The resulting plot is shown in Figure 5. Rows represent rules with the same consequent. A rule from the row with the consequent “root vegetables” is highlighted in Figure 5(a). There are many rules with this consequent and the lift is still relatively high, since only the 1,000 rules with the highest lift are visualized. The plot guides the analyst to the rules with the highest lift by placing them in the top-left corner. Figure 5(b) shows the plot zoomed into the top-left corner. A rule is inspected and contains “butter”. The many other entries in the same row indicate that butter is part of many strong rules. Other rows can easily be inspected by hovering over a rule in that row.

Matrix-based visualization is limited in the number of rules it can visualize effectively since large sets of rules typically also have large sets of unique antecedents. This would require the analyst to repeatedly zoom in and out. Grouped matrix-based visualization (Hahsler and Karpienko, 2016) enhances matrix-based visualization by grouping antecedents of rules via clustering and sorting rules by “interestingness” to handle a larger number of rules. Grouped rules are presented as an aggregate in a matrix that is visualized as a balloon plot.

```
plot(rules, method = "grouped matrix", engine = "interactive")
```

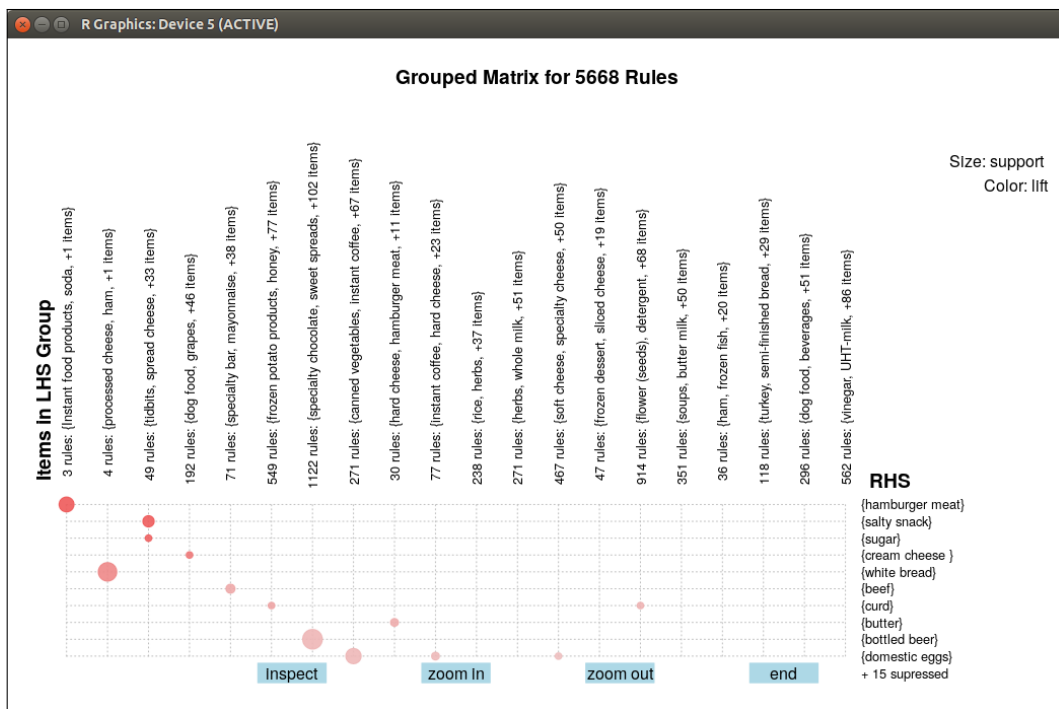


Figure 6: Grouped matrix-based visualization. The highest interest group (top-left hand corner) consists of 3 rules which contain “Instant food product”, “soda” and an additional item in the antecedent and all rules have the consequent “hamburger meat.”

This plot can easily visualize larger sets of rules. The resulting visualization of the set of 5668 rules mined earlier is shown in Figure 6. The visualization is very similar to the regular matrix visualization, but the columns represent groups of antecedents. The plot is again organized such that the most interesting rules according to lift (the default measure of interestingness) are shown in the top-left corner. The highest interest group consists of 3 rules which contain “Instant food products,” and “soda” and an additional item in the antecedent and the consequent is “hamburger meat.” The balloon size represents support and the color indicates lift. We also see below all RHS items, that the plot suppresses 15 consequent items representing rules with low lift values to create a less convoluted plot. The number of items shown for the antecedent groups and how many consequent items, if any, are suppressed can be specified by the user.

The interactive features of the grouped matrix visualization allow the user to identify the rules making up groups and also to zoom into and out of groups. The visualization is currently only implemented using interactive features of the `grid` graphics system (`engine = "interactive"`), and a HTML widget version is planned for the future.

Graph-based visualization

Graph-based techniques concentrate on the relationship between individual items in the rule set. `arulesViz` offers an interactive visualization based on package `visNetwork` (Almende B.V. et al., 2017).

```
plot(rules, method = "graph", engine = "htmlwidget")
```

Warning message:

```
plot: Too many rules supplied. Only plotting the best 100 rules using lift (change control parameter max if needed)
```

Graph-based visualization tend to become cluttered and thus are only viable for very small sets of rules. The warning message informs the user that only the top 100 rules are included in the visualization. Figure 7(a) shows the initial view with the graph centered. The force-directed layout used in the visualization moves items which are included in many rules and rules which share many items towards the center of the plot. Items which are in very few rules are pushed to the periphery of the plot. It is interesting to note that high-lift rules are also on the outside of the plot. This is due to the fact that rules with high lift levels typically appear at the minimum support/confidence boundary and low-support items are part of fewer rules and thus are pushed to the periphery of the graph. The



Figure 7: Graph-based visualization with items and rules as vertices. Plot (a) shows the initial view of the complete graph. Plot (b) uses zooming in to show the center of the graph, revealing the most frequent items (including “other vegetables” and “milk”). Plot (c) shows how to use the pull-down menu in the top-left corner to find the item “liquor” in the graph. Plot (d) inspects a single rule that is connected to “liquor.”

visualization suppresses labels when they become too small to be readable. Figure 7(b) uses zooming in to show the center of the graph. The items in the center (“other vegetables”, “whole milk” and “yogurt”) are the most frequently bought items and are thus part of many rules. These items are often not very interesting because domain experts typically are aware of how the most common items relate to each other. Figure 7(c) shows how the pull-down menu in the top-left corner can be used to analyze how a given item relates in the rule set with other items. In the example, the item “liquor” is selected and the visualization highlights the two rules the item is part of. Figure 7(d) inspects one of the rules. A useful strategy is to inspect all high-lift rules and the outside area of the graph to find interesting rules. For some data sets, the rules also form two or more weakly or even unconnected components indicating that the items in the groups have only little affect on each other.

A big restriction of graph-based visualization for association rules is that they are only useful for a very small set of rules. To explore large sets of rules with graphs, the analyst needs to be supported by advanced interactive features like filtering, grouping, and coloring nodes. Such features are available in interactive visualization and exploration platforms for networks and graphs like *Gephi* (Bastian

et al., 2009). **arulesViz** can export graphs for sets of association rules in the GraphML format or as a Graphviz dot-file to be explored in tools like Gephi. For example, the complete rule set can be exported by

```
saveAsGraph(rules, file = "rules.graphml")
```

This file can be imported directly into most tools for analysis.

Conclusion

While each of the three basic groups of visualizations reveal similar information, they focus on different properties of the analyzed rule set and some can visualize larger rule sets than others effectively. A single visualization by itself is typically not sufficient to understand all aspects of a rule set, but repeated use of different methods can lead the analyst to deeper insight into the data. Analysis typically starts with creating a scatter plot to inspect the rules with extreme values for support, confidence and lift. The advantage is that this visualization can deal with relatively large rule sets. Alternatively, an interactive table can also be used for this task. A grouped matrix plot can then be used to inspect the rules and group of rules. Finally, graph-based visualization can be employed to get a deeper understanding of a smaller set of rules and items. This visualization is especially useful to present found results because it is easy to understand for non-analysts. **arulesViz** makes this process easier by providing a simple and unified plot method, where different visualizations can be explored by just changing the method argument. Many methods also can create JavaScript-based HTML widgets (Vaidyanathan et al., 2017) which can be saved as HTML files, included in web-based applications using shiny (Chang et al., 2017), or used in interactive documents created with R markdown (Allaire et al., 2017).

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