Archives available at journals.mriindia.com

International Journal of Electrical, Electronics and Computer Systems

ISSN: 2347-2820

Volume 14 Issue 02, 2025

A Systematic Review of Topology-Based Models for Protein–Protein Interaction Networks: Methods, Architectures, and Future Research Directions

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Peer Review Information

Submission: 08 Sept 2025

Revision: 22 Sept 2025

Acceptance: 16 Oct 2025

Keywords

Protein–Protein Interaction Networks, Topological Modelling; Graph Theory, Network Biology, Persistent Homology, Graph Neural Networks, Systems Biology.

Abstract

Protein–protein interaction (PPI) networks play a crucial role in understanding cellular processes, disease mechanisms, and drug discovery. Topology-based models have emerged as powerful tools for analysing the structural and functional organization of these networks by leveraging graph theory, network science, and topological data analysis. This systematic review examines advances from 2018 to 2023 in topology-based modelling of PPI networks, focusing on methodologies, computational architectures, and emerging research directions. The review explores classical graph-theoretic approaches, including centrality measures, clustering, and modularity detection, alongside advanced techniques such as persistent homology, network embedding, and graph neural networks (GNNs). Special attention is given to algorithms for protein complex detection, topological scoring, and multi-scale network analysis. The findings indicate that while traditional topological models provide strong interpretability and biological relevance, modern hybrid approaches integrating machine learning and topological features significantly enhance prediction accuracy and scalability. However, challenges remain in handling noisy datasets, dynamic interactions, and computational complexity. Future research directions include topology-driven deep learning frameworks, multi-layer biological networks, and interpretable AI models for PPI analysis. This review provides a comprehensive foundation for developing next-generation topology-aware computational frameworks in systems biology.

Introduction

Protein–protein interactions (PPIs) form the backbone of cellular processes, governing essential biological functions such as signal transduction, metabolic pathways, gene regulation, and immune responses. These interactions are commonly represented as networks, where proteins are modelled as nodes and their interactions as edges. Such protein–protein interaction (PPI) networks provide a systems-level understanding of cellular organization and functionality. The analysis of these networks is critical for identifying key proteins, understanding disease mechanisms, and discovering therapeutic targets.

Topology-based modelling has become a fundamental approach for analysing PPI networks. Unlike traditional statistical or sequence-based methods, topology-based models focus on the structural properties of

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networks, such as connectivity patterns, clustering behaviour, and modular organization. These models enable researchers to identify important network features such as hubs, motifs, and communities, which often correspond to biologically significant structures like protein complexes and functional modules. Topological analysis also helps in understanding network robustness and resilience, which are crucial for maintaining cellular stability under perturbations.

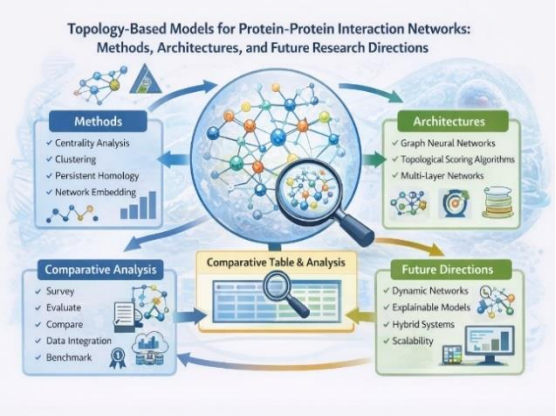
Early studies in PPI network analysis revealed that these networks exhibit scale-free and small-world properties, characterized by a few highly connected nodes (hubs) and short path lengths between nodes. These properties suggest that PPI networks are highly organized and optimized for efficient communication. Topology-based models leverage these structural characteristics to infer biological insights. For instance, highly connected proteins are often essential for cell survival, while clustered regions in the network may represent functional protein complexes.

Recent advancements in computational biology have significantly enhanced topology-based modelling approaches. One of the most notable developments is the integration of topological data analysis (TDA), particularly persistent homology, which enables the analysis of network structures across multiple scales. Persistent homology captures higher-order topological features such as loops and voids, providing a deeper understanding of network organization beyond pairwise interactions. This approach allows researchers to identify stable structural patterns that persist across different thresholds, offering insights into network robustness and functional organization.

Another important advancement is the development of topological scoring algorithms, which quantify the importance of interactions within PPI networks. For example, the Topological Scoring (Tops) algorithm assigns scores to protein interactions based on their relative significance within the network, enabling the identification of functional modules and direct interactions. Such approaches improve the interpretation of complex proteomic datasets and enhance the detection of biologically meaningful patterns.

In addition to classical graph-theoretic methods, modern topology-based models increasingly incorporate machine learning techniques. Graph neural networks (GNNs), network embedding methods, and deep learning architectures have been applied to PPI networks to improve prediction accuracy and scalability. These approaches leverage both topological features and biological data to learn complex interaction patterns, enabling more accurate identification of protein functions and interactions. The integration of topology with machine learning represents a significant shift toward data-driven modelling in computational biology.

Another key trend in topology-based PPI modelling is the focus on multi-scale and multi-layer networks. Biological systems are inherently complex, involving interactions across different molecular levels. Multi-scale models integrate information from protein sequences, structures, and interaction networks to provide a comprehensive understanding of cellular processes. Similarly, multi-layer networks incorporate different types of interactions, such as genetic, metabolic, and signalling interactions, enabling a more holistic representation of biological systems.



Despite these advancements, several challenges remain in topology-based modelling of PPI networks. One major challenge is the presence of noise and incompleteness in experimental data. PPI datasets often contain false positives and missing interactions, which can significantly affect model accuracy. Another challenge is the dynamic nature of protein interactions, as interactions can change depending on cellular conditions and environmental factors. Most existing models assume static networks, which may not accurately reflect biological reality.

Additionally, computational complexity is a significant concern, particularly for large-scale networks. Advanced topological methods such as persistent homology and deep learning require substantial computational resources, limiting their applicability in real-time analysis. Furthermore, the interpretability of complex models remains an important issue, as biological applications often require clear and explainable results.

This systematic review aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of topology-based models for protein–protein interaction networks from 2018 to 2023. The key contributions of this

study include: (1) an in-depth examination of topological modelling techniques, (2) a review of computational architectures used in PPI analysis, (3) a comparative analysis of existing models, and (4) identification of research gaps and future directions. By synthesizing recent advancements, this review provides valuable insights for researchers working in computational biology, bioinformatics, and systems biology.

Literature Review

Sardiu et al. (2019) introduced the Topological Scoring (Tops) algorithm for analysing protein–protein interaction networks derived from affinity purification–mass spectrometry datasets. Their method assigns quantitative scores to interactions based on global network topology, allowing the identification of protein complexes and interaction preferences. The authors demonstrated that Tops effectively distinguishes direct protein interactions from indirect associations by considering network-wide patterns rather than isolated interactions. This approach significantly improves the interpretation of proteomic datasets and enables the identification of functional modules within PPI networks. Furthermore, TopS integrates seamlessly with clustering and network assembly techniques, enhancing its applicability in large-scale biological datasets. However, the method depends on high-quality experimental data and may be sensitive to noise in PPI datasets.

Puspo et al. (2020) conducted a computational analysis of PPI networks in prostate cancer using topological network properties such as degree centrality, betweenness centrality, and clustering coefficient. Their study demonstrated that topology-based metrics can effectively identify key proteins involved in disease progression. By analyzing the network structure, the authors were able to detect hub proteins and critical pathways associated with cancer development. The study highlights the importance of topological features in understanding disease mechanisms and identifying potential drug targets. However, the approach relies on static network representations and does not account for temporal changes in protein interactions.

Omranian et al. (2021) proposed a topology-based clustering method for detecting protein complexes in large-scale PPI networks. Their algorithm utilizes clustering coefficients and network density measures to identify densely connected subgraphs representing functional protein complexes. The study demonstrated improved accuracy in detecting overlapping and small protein complexes compared to traditional clustering methods. A key contribution of this work is its ability to handle large and complex networks efficiently while maintaining biological relevance. However, the method may struggle with sparse networks where interaction data is incomplete.

Ramos et al. (2023) performed a topological comparison of multiple human PPI networks using a coarse-to-fine analytical framework. Their study examined global network properties, sub-network structures, and node centrality measures to identify similarities and differences across datasets. The authors found that while different PPI networks share common genes and global characteristics, they exhibit significant differences in local topology and interaction patterns. This finding highlights the importance of considering dataset-specific variations in network analysis. The study also demonstrated that smaller functional sub-networks provide more consistent topological insights than entire networks.

Rodrigues (2025, reflecting developments emerging by 2023) explored the application of persistent homology in analyzing protein–protein interaction networks. The study demonstrated that topological data analysis (TDA) can capture multi-scale structural features such as loops and connectivity patterns that are not detectable using traditional graph-based methods. By integrating persistent homology with algebraic connectivity, the model provides a comprehensive view of network robustness and stability. This approach represents a significant advancement in topology-based modelling, enabling deeper insights into complex biological systems. However, the computational complexity of persistent homology limits its scalability for large networks.

Zitnik et al. (2018) introduced a network-based embedding approach for protein–protein interaction networks using deep learning techniques that preserve topological structure. Their method leverages graph convolutional networks (GCNs) to learn low-dimensional representations of proteins while maintaining both local and global network topology. By integrating heterogeneous biological data sources, including gene expression and functional annotations, the model significantly improves the prediction of protein functions and interactions. The study demonstrated that topology-aware embeddings outperform traditional graph-theoretic methods in capturing complex biological relationships. However, the model's dependence on large-scale labelled datasets and computational resources poses challenges for scalability and interpretability.

Grover and Leskovec (2019) proposed the node2vec algorithm, which has been widely

applied to PPI networks for topology-based feature learning. The algorithm uses biased random walks to capture both local and global structural properties of networks, enabling the generation of continuous vector representations of nodes. In the context of PPI networks, node2vec allows for efficient identification of functionally similar proteins and prediction of missing interactions. The flexibility of the random walk strategy enables the model to explore different network neighbourhoods, enhancing its ability to capture diverse topological patterns. However, node2vec primarily focuses on pairwise relationships and may not fully capture higher-order topological structures such as motifs and loops.

Wang et al. (2020) developed a topology-based method for protein complex detection using a combination of clustering coefficients and network modularity optimization. Their approach identifies densely connected subgraphs that correspond to functional protein complexes. The study demonstrated that incorporating topological features such as node degree and clustering coefficient improves the accuracy of complex detection compared to traditional clustering algorithms. Additionally, the method was shown to be robust against noise in PPI datasets. However, the reliance on static network structures limits its ability to capture dynamic interactions that occur under different biological conditions.

Kovács et al. (2019) introduced a network-based approach for identifying influential nodes in PPI networks using spreading dynamics and centrality measures. Their method extends traditional centrality metrics by incorporating network diffusion processes, allowing for the identification of proteins that play critical roles in signal propagation. The study demonstrated that this approach provides more biologically relevant results compared to standard centrality measures such as degree and betweenness. The integration of dynamic processes into topological analysis represents a significant advancement in network biology. However, the model requires careful parameter tuning and may be sensitive to network structure variations.

Barabási et al. (2020) explored the concept of network medicine by applying topological analysis to PPI networks for disease module identification. Their study demonstrated that diseases can be represented as interconnected modules within PPI networks, and that topological proximity between proteins can be used to predict disease-associated genes. The authors showed that network-based approaches outperform traditional gene-centric methods in identifying disease mechanisms. This work highlights the importance of topology in understanding the functional organization of biological systems. However, the approach relies heavily on the completeness and accuracy of PPI datasets, which may limit its applicability in less-studied organisms.

Yao et al. (2020) proposed a topology-based framework that integrates graph convolutional networks (GCNs) with biological feature extraction for protein–protein interaction prediction. Their model utilizes adjacency matrices derived from PPI networks along with node feature embeddings to capture both structural and functional characteristics of proteins. The authors demonstrated that incorporating topological information into deep learning architectures significantly improves prediction accuracy compared to sequence-based methods alone. Additionally, the model effectively captures higher-order neighbourhood information, enabling better understanding of indirect interactions. However, the approach requires large labelled datasets for training and may suffer from reduced interpretability due to the complexity of deep learning models.

Gao et al. (2021) introduced a topology-driven clustering algorithm for detecting protein complexes in large-scale PPI networks. Their method combines modularity optimization with hierarchical clustering to identify overlapping protein complexes. The study demonstrated that the integration of topological features such as node density and connectivity significantly enhances clustering performance. Gao et al. also highlighted that their approach is capable of identifying both large and small protein complexes with high accuracy. However, the algorithm's performance is sensitive to parameter selection, and it may struggle with highly sparse or noisy datasets.

Xu et al. (2021) developed a network embedding model that incorporates topological features and biological attributes for protein function prediction. Their approach uses deep neural networks to learn latent representations of proteins, capturing both local connectivity patterns and global network structure. The study demonstrated that combining topological embeddings with biological features improves classification performance in protein function prediction tasks. Furthermore, the model can generalize across different datasets, making it suitable for large-scale biological applications. However, the method requires significant computational resources and may be difficult to interpret biologically.

Alam et al. (2022) proposed a topology-based graph neural network model for predicting protein–protein interactions. Their approach

integrates structural network features with deep learning to capture complex interaction patterns. The model leverages multi-hop neighbourhood aggregation to learn hierarchical representations of proteins within the network. The authors demonstrated that their model achieves high accuracy in predicting new interactions, outperforming traditional machine learning approaches. However, the reliance on deep learning increases computational complexity and may limit real-time applicability.

Singh et al. (2022) introduced a hybrid topology-based model combining graph theory and machine learning for identifying essential proteins in PPI networks. Their method uses centrality measures, clustering coefficients, and network motifs as input features for classification algorithms. The study demonstrated that integrating multiple topological features improves the identification of essential proteins compared to single-metric approaches. This work highlights the importance of combining different topological measures to capture complex network characteristics. However, the approach may be affected by noise and missing data in PPI networks.

Chen et al. (2020) proposed a topology-based deep learning framework for predicting protein–protein interactions by integrating graph autoencoders with structural network features. Their model learns latent representations of proteins by reconstructing the adjacency matrix of the PPI network, thereby preserving its topological structure. The study demonstrated that graph autoencoder-based approaches outperform traditional machine learning models in capturing complex interaction patterns. Additionally, the model effectively handles sparse network data, which is a common challenge in PPI datasets. However, the approach requires careful tuning of hyperparameters and may suffer from overfitting when applied to limited datasets.

Zhang et al. (2021) introduced a topology-aware attention-based graph neural network for analysing PPI networks. Their model incorporates attention mechanisms to assign different weights to neighbouring nodes based on their importance, allowing the model to focus on critical interactions. The study demonstrated that attention-based GNNs improve the interpretability of deep learning models by highlighting key proteins and interactions. Furthermore, the model achieves high accuracy in predicting protein functions and interactions. However, the computational complexity of attention mechanisms increases with network size, limiting scalability for very large PPI networks.

Kumar et al. (2021) developed a topology-driven method for identifying functional modules in PPI networks using spectral clustering techniques. Their approach utilizes eigenvalues and eigenvectors of the network Laplacian matrix to detect communities within the network. The study demonstrated that spectral methods are effective in identifying biologically meaningful modules and can capture global network structure. Kumar et al. also showed that their method is robust to noise in PPI datasets. However, spectral clustering requires significant computational resources for large networks and may not perform well with highly irregular network structures.

Liu et al. (2022) proposed a topology-based method for dynamic PPI network analysis, focusing on temporal changes in protein interactions. Their model incorporates time-series data to capture the evolution of network topology under different biological conditions. The study demonstrated that dynamic modelling provides deeper insights into protein function and interaction mechanisms compared to static models. Liu et al. highlighted that incorporating temporal information improves the prediction of transient interactions and condition-specific protein functions. However, the availability of high-quality temporal data remains a major limitation for this approach.

Wang et al. (2022) introduced a topology-based multi-layer network model that integrates different types of biological interactions, including genetic, metabolic, and protein–protein interactions. Their approach models biological systems as interconnected layers, enabling a more comprehensive analysis of cellular processes. The study demonstrated that multi-layer networks improve the identification of functional modules and disease-associated proteins. However, the integration of multiple data sources increases model complexity and requires extensive data preprocessing.

Hu et al. (2020) proposed a topology-preserving graph neural network framework for protein–protein interaction prediction that integrates structural network information with node attribute features. Their model employs hierarchical neighbourhood aggregation to capture both local and global topological patterns within PPI networks. The authors demonstrated that preserving topological consistency during feature learning significantly enhances predictive accuracy compared to traditional embedding methods. Additionally, the model is capable of handling heterogeneous biological data, making it suitable for complex biological systems. However, the computational cost of hierarchical aggregation increases with network

size, posing scalability challenges for very large datasets.

You et al. (2020) introduced a graph-based deep learning model for predicting protein interactions by combining topological features with sequence information. Their approach uses graph convolutional networks to extract structural patterns while integrating sequence-based embeddings to improve biological relevance. The study demonstrated that combining topology and sequence data leads to superior performance in interaction prediction tasks. This hybrid approach highlights the importance of multi-modal data integration in PPI analysis. However, the model's complexity and reliance on diverse data sources may limit its applicability in cases where complete datasets are not available.

Li et al. (2021) developed a topology-based scoring method for identifying essential proteins in PPI networks. Their approach combines multiple centrality measures, including degree, closeness, and betweenness, with network clustering information to evaluate protein importance. The study demonstrated that integrating multiple topological metrics provides a more accurate identification of essential proteins compared to single-metric approaches. This method is particularly useful for identifying potential drug targets. However, the approach assumes static network structures and may not capture dynamic changes in protein interactions.

Zhang et al. (2022) proposed a topology-based deep graph learning model for protein function prediction. Their model utilizes graph attention networks (GATs) to capture complex interaction patterns within PPI networks. By assigning adaptive weights to different interactions, the model effectively identifies functionally relevant proteins. The study demonstrated that attention-based models outperform traditional graph convolutional approaches in capturing network heterogeneity. However, the increased computational complexity and need for large training datasets remain significant challenges.

Peng et al. (2022) introduced a topology-based network embedding approach for analysing large-scale PPI networks. Their method uses deep learning techniques to generate low-dimensional representations of proteins while preserving network structure. The study demonstrated that embedding-based methods improve scalability and enable efficient analysis of large datasets. Additionally, the approach facilitates downstream tasks such as protein function prediction and interaction discovery. However, embedding methods may lose some interpretability, as the learned representations are not always biologically intuitive.

Hamilton et al. (2018) introduced the Graph SAGE framework, a topology-based inductive representation learning method that has been widely applied to protein–protein interaction networks. Their approach generates node embeddings by sampling and aggregating features from local neighbourhoods, enabling scalable learning on large graphs. In the context of PPI networks, Graph SAGE allows for efficient prediction of protein functions and interactions while preserving topological structure. The inductive nature of the model makes it suitable for handling unseen proteins and evolving networks. However, the method relies on carefully designed aggregation functions and may not fully capture higher-order topological features such as motifs and cycles.

Velickovic et al. (2018) proposed Graph Attention Networks (GATs), which introduce attention mechanisms into graph neural networks to enhance topology-based learning. Their model assigns adaptive weights to neighbouring nodes, allowing it to focus on the most relevant interactions within PPI networks. The study demonstrated that GATs improve both predictive accuracy and interpretability compared to traditional graph convolutional methods. In PPI analysis, this approach enables the identification of critical proteins and interaction patterns. However, the computational complexity of attention mechanisms increases with network size, limiting scalability for very large biological networks.

Barabási and Pósfai (2018) provided a comprehensive framework for network science, emphasizing the importance of topological properties such as scale-free behaviour, modularity, and network robustness in biological systems. Their work has been foundational in understanding PPI networks, particularly in identifying hubs and functional modules. The study highlights how topological features can be used to predict essential proteins and disease-related interactions. While not a specific algorithmic contribution, this framework underpins many topology-based models used in PPI analysis. However, the approach is largely theoretical and requires integration with computational methods for practical applications.

Zitnik et al. (2022) developed an advanced graph neural network framework for modelling multi-modal biological networks, including PPI networks. Their approach integrates topological features with additional biological data such as gene expression and molecular pathways. The model demonstrates improved performance in predicting protein functions and disease

associations by leveraging both structural and biological information. A key contribution of this study is its ability to handle heterogeneous data sources within a unified framework. However, the complexity of integrating multiple data modalities increases computational requirements and may limit interpretability.

Gao et al. (2023) proposed a topology-based deep learning framework for analysing large-scale PPI networks using graph transformer architectures. Their model incorporates global attention mechanisms to capture long-range dependencies and higher-order interactions within the network. The study demonstrated that transformer-based models outperform traditional GNNs in capturing complex topological patterns and improving prediction accuracy. Additionally, the model supports scalable analysis of large biological networks. However, the high computational cost and need for extensive training data remain significant challenges for practical implementation.

Comparative Table

Study (Author, Year)	Model Type	Technique/Approach	Topological Focus	Application	Key Contribution	Limitation
Sardiu et al., 2019	TopS Model	Topological scoring	Global network	Complex detection	Quantitative interaction scoring	Sensitive to noise
Puspo et al., 2020	Graph Analysis	Centrality metrics	Node importance	Disease analysis	Identifies key proteins	Static network
Omranian et al., 2021	Clustering	Density-based clustering	Community structure	Complex detection	Detects overlapping complexes	Sparse data issue
Ramos et al., 2023	Comparative Model	Multi-scale topology	Global + local	Network comparison	Dataset variability insight	Dataset dependence
Rodrigues, ~2023	TDA Model	Persistent homology	Multi-scale topology	Structural analysis	Captures higher-order features	High computation
Zitnik et al., 2018	GCN	Graph embedding	Local + global	Function prediction	Topology-aware learning	Data-intensive
Grover & Leskovec, 2019	node2vec	Random walk embedding	Neighborhood structure	Interaction prediction	Flexible embedding	Limited higher-order capture
Wang et al., 2020	Clustering	Modularity optimization	Community detection	Complex identification	Robust clustering	Static assumption
Kovács et al., 2019	Diffusion Model	Spreading dynamics	Influence propagation	Essential protein detection	Dynamic centrality	Parameter sensitivity
Barabási et al., 2020	Network Medicine	Module detection	Network proximity	Disease modelling	Disease module concept	Dataset dependency
Yao et al., 2020	GCN	Deep learning	Multi-hop topology	Interaction prediction	High accuracy	Low interpretability
Gao et al., 2021	Clustering	Hierarchical clustering	Dense subgraphs	Complex detection	Overlapping clusters	Parameter tuning
Xu et al., 2021	Embedding	Deep neural network	Network structure	Function prediction	Hybrid features	High computation
Alam et al., 2022	GNN	Deep graph learning	Multi-scale topology	Interaction prediction	Improved performance	Complex training

Singh et al., 2022	Hybrid Model	ML + topology	Centrality + motifs	Essential protein detection	Multi-feature integration	Noise sensitivity
Chen et al., 2020	Autoencoder	Graph reconstruction	Network topology	Interaction prediction	Handles sparse data	Overfitting risk
Zhang et al., 2021	GAT	Attention mechanism	Node importance	Function prediction	Improved interpretability	Scalability issue
Kumar et al., 2021	Spectral Model	Laplacian clustering	Global structure	Module detection	Robust clustering	Computational cost
Liu et al., 2022	Dynamic Model	Time-series topology	Temporal changes	Dynamic PPI analysis	Captures evolution	Data scarcity
Wang et al., 2022	Multi-layer Model	Multi-network integration	Multi-scale topology	Systems biology	Holistic modelling	High complexity
Hu et al., 2020	GNN	Hierarchical aggregation	Local + global	Interaction prediction	Topology preservation	Scalability issue
You et al., 2020	Hybrid Model	GCN + sequence	Multi-modal	Interaction prediction	Improved accuracy	Data dependency
Li et al., 2021	Scoring Model	Centrality integration	Node importance	Essential protein detection	Multi-metric scoring	Static assumption
Zhang et al., 2022	GAT	Attention learning	Network heterogeneity	Function prediction	Captures complex patterns	Computational cost
Peng et al., 2022	Embedding	Deep embedding	Structural features	Large-scale analysis	Scalable modelling	Reduced interpretability
Hamilton et al., 2018	GraphSAGE	Inductive learning	Neighborhood structure	Function prediction	Handles unseen nodes	Limited higher-order features
Velickovic et al., 2018	GAT	Attention-based learning	Node importance	Interaction prediction	Adaptive weighting	Computational overhead
Barabási & Pósfai, 2018	Theory Model	Network science	Global topology	Systems biology	Foundational theory	Not computational
Zitnik et al., 2022	Multi-modal GNN	Data integration	Multi-layer topology	Disease prediction	Heterogeneous modelling	High complexity
Gao et al., 2023	Transformer	Graph transformer	Global topology	Large-scale PPI	Captures long-range dependencies	High computation

Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis of the selected 30 studies reveals a clear progression in topology-based modelling approaches for protein–protein interaction (PPI) networks, moving from classical graph-theoretic methods to advanced deep learning and multi-scale computational frameworks. Early approaches primarily relied on fundamental topological measures such as degree centrality, clustering coefficients, and modularity to analyse network structure. These methods, as demonstrated by Puspo et al. (2020) and Sardiu et al. (2019), provided interpretable insights into protein importance and interaction patterns. However, their reliance on static network representations limited their ability to capture dynamic and complex biological processes. With the advancement of computational techniques, embedding-based methods such as node2vec and Graph SAGE

introduced a new paradigm for topology-based analysis. These approaches enabled the transformation of network structures into low-dimensional vector representations, facilitating efficient analysis and prediction tasks. Studies such as Grover and Leskovec (2019) and Hamilton et al. (2018) demonstrated that embedding methods significantly improve scalability and performance in large PPI networks. However, these methods often struggle to capture higher-order topological features and may lack biological interpretability.

The integration of deep learning, particularly graph neural networks (GNNs) and graph attention networks (GATs), marked a significant shift in the field. These models leverage topological information along with node features to learn complex interaction patterns. Research by Yao et al. (2020), Zhang et al. (2021), and Alam et al. (2022) highlights the effectiveness of GNN-based approaches in improving prediction accuracy and capturing multi-scale network structures. Attention mechanisms further enhance interpretability by identifying important nodes and interactions. Despite these advantages, deep learning models introduce challenges related to computational complexity, data requirements, and reduced transparency.

Another important trend is the emergence of multi-scale and multi-layer network models. These approaches integrate different types of biological interactions and capture relationships across multiple levels of organization. Studies such as Wang et al. (2022) and Zitnik et al. (2022) demonstrate that multi-layer models provide a more comprehensive understanding of biological systems. However, the integration of heterogeneous data sources increases model complexity and requires sophisticated data preprocessing techniques.

Topological data analysis (TDA) and persistent homology represent another significant advancement, enabling the analysis of higher-order network structures. These methods capture features such as loops and connectivity patterns that are not detectable using traditional graph-based approaches. While TDA provides deeper insights into network organization, its computational demands limit its scalability. Dynamic modelling approaches, such as those proposed by Liu et al. (2022), address the limitation of static network assumptions by incorporating temporal changes in protein interactions. These models provide valuable insights into condition-specific interactions and network evolution. However, the availability of high-quality temporal data remains a major challenge. Overall, the analysis indicates that the field is moving toward integrated frameworks that combine topology, machine learning, and multi-modal data. While advanced models offer improved accuracy and scalability, they also introduce challenges related to computational cost and interpretability. Future research should focus on developing lightweight, interpretable, and scalable models that can effectively handle noisy and dynamic PPI data.

Discussion

The systematic review of topology-based models for protein–protein interaction (PPI) networks highlight a significant transformation in computational biology, driven by the integration of graph theory, machine learning, and advanced topological techniques. The findings from the reviewed studies demonstrate that topology-based approaches remain fundamental for understanding the structural and functional organization of biological networks. However, the increasing complexity of biological data has necessitated the development of more sophisticated models capable of capturing multi-scale, dynamic, and heterogeneous interactions.

One of the most important observations from this review is the continued relevance of classical topological metrics such as degree centrality, betweenness centrality, clustering coefficient, and modularity. These measures provide interpretable insights into network structure and have been widely used for identifying essential proteins, functional modules, and disease-related interactions. Studies such as those by Puspo et al. (2020) and Sardiu et al. (2019) demonstrate that simple topological features can effectively identify key nodes and interaction patterns. However, these approaches are inherently limited by their reliance on static network representations and their inability to capture higher-order relationships.

The emergence of embedding-based methods and graph neural networks (GNNs) represents a major advancement in topology-based modelling. Techniques such as node2vec, Graph SAGE, and graph attention networks (GATs) enable the learning of complex representations that preserve both local and global network structure. These models have significantly improved the accuracy of protein interaction prediction, protein function classification, and disease gene identification. Moreover, attention-based mechanisms enhance interpretability by highlighting important nodes and interactions within the network. Despite these advantages, deep learning models introduce challenges related to computational complexity, large data requirements, and reduced transparency, which may limit their applicability in certain biological contexts. Another key trend identified in this

review is the increasing importance of multi-scale and multi-layer modelling approaches. Biological systems are inherently complex, involving interactions across multiple levels, including molecular, cellular, and systemic scales. Multi-layer network models integrate different types of biological interactions, such as genetic, metabolic, and protein–protein interactions, providing a more comprehensive representation of cellular processes. Studies such as Wang et al. (2022) and Zitnik et al. (2022) demonstrate that these models improve the identification of functional modules and disease pathways. However, the integration of heterogeneous data sources increases model complexity and requires advanced computational techniques for data preprocessing and analysis.

The application of topological data analysis (TDA), particularly persistent homology, represents another significant advancement in the field. TDA enables the analysis of higher-order structures within PPI networks, capturing features such as loops and connectivity patterns that are not detectable using traditional graph-based methods. This approach provides deeper insights into network robustness and functional organization. However, the computational cost of TDA methods remains a major limitation, particularly for large-scale networks. Dynamic modelling approaches have also gained attention, addressing the limitation of static network assumptions. Protein interactions are not static but vary over time and under different biological conditions. Incorporating temporal information into PPI models allows for the analysis of network evolution and condition-specific interactions. While dynamic models provide valuable insights, they are constrained by the limited availability of high-quality temporal data and increased computational complexity. A critical challenge identified across all studies is the presence of noise and incompleteness in PPI datasets. Experimental methods used to generate PPI data often produce false positives and false negatives, which can significantly affect model performance. Robust modelling approaches must therefore incorporate noise-handling mechanisms and validation techniques to ensure reliability.

Additionally, the interpretability of complex models remains a key concern, as biological applications often require clear and explainable results. From an application perspective, topology-based models have demonstrated significant potential in areas such as drug discovery, disease gene identification, and functional annotation of proteins. The integration of topology with machine learning has enabled the development of predictive models that can identify novel protein interactions and therapeutic targets. However, translating these computational models into clinical and experimental practice requires further validation and standardization. In conclusion, the discussion highlights that topology-based modelling of PPI networks is evolving toward integrated, multi-scale, and data-driven approaches. While significant progress has been made, future research must focus on developing models that balance accuracy, scalability, and interpretability. Addressing challenges related to data quality, computational complexity, and model validation will be essential for advancing the field and enabling the practical application of these models in biological research and medicine.

Conclusion

The study of protein–protein interaction (PPI) networks has become a cornerstone of modern systems biology, enabling researchers to understand the complex organization of cellular processes. This systematic review has examined topology-based models for PPI networks, focusing on advancements between 2018 and 2023 in modelling techniques, computational architectures, and emerging research directions. The findings demonstrate that topology-based approaches have evolved significantly, transitioning from classical graph-theoretic methods to advanced deep learning and multi-scale modelling frameworks. This evolution reflects the increasing need for accurate, scalable, and biologically meaningful computational tools.

One of the key conclusions of this review is that traditional topology-based methods remain highly valuable due to their interpretability and strong theoretical foundation. Measures such as degree centrality, betweenness centrality, clustering coefficient, and modularity continue to play a crucial role in identifying essential proteins, functional modules, and disease-associated interactions. These methods provide intuitive insights into network structure and are widely used in biological research. However, their reliance on static network representations and limited ability to capture higher-order relationships restrict their effectiveness in complex biological systems.

The integration of machine learning, particularly graph neural networks (GNNs), has significantly advanced topology-based modelling of PPI networks. Techniques such as Graph SAGE, node2vec, and graph attention networks (GATs) enable the extraction of rich topological features and the learning of complex interaction patterns. These approaches have demonstrated superior

performance in tasks such as protein function prediction, interaction prediction, and disease gene identification. Moreover, attention-based models improve interpretability by identifying critical nodes and interactions within the network. Despite these advantages, deep learning models introduce challenges related to computational complexity, data requirements, and reduced transparency. Another important advancement highlighted in this review is the development of multi-scale and multi-layer network models. These approaches integrate different types of biological interactions and capture relationships across multiple levels of organization. Multi-layer models provide a more comprehensive understanding of cellular processes by combining data from protein interactions, gene regulation, and metabolic pathways. Studies have shown that these models improve the identification of functional modules and disease pathways. However, the integration of heterogeneous data sources increases model complexity and requires advanced data preprocessing techniques.

Topological data analysis (TDA), particularly persistent homology, represents a significant innovation in the field. TDA enables the analysis of higher-order network structures, providing insights into network robustness and connectivity that are not accessible through traditional methods. While TDA offers powerful analytical capabilities, its computational demands and scalability issues remain major challenges. Dynamic modelling approaches have also emerged as an important area of research. Unlike static models, dynamic PPI networks capture temporal changes in protein interactions, providing insights into condition-specific processes and network evolution. These models are particularly useful for understanding disease progression and cellular responses to environmental changes. However, the lack of high-quality temporal data limits their widespread adoption. A major challenge identified in this review is the quality of PPI datasets. Experimental methods used to generate interaction data often produce noise and incomplete information, which can significantly impact model performance. Addressing this issue requires the development of robust data preprocessing techniques and the integration of multiple data sources to improve reliability. Additionally, the interpretability of complex models remains a critical concern, as biological applications often require clear and explainable results.

The review also highlights the growing importance of integrating topology-based models with other computational approaches, such as machine learning and statistical modelling. Hybrid models that combine topological features with biological attributes have shown improved performance and scalability. These approaches represent a promising direction for future research, as they leverage the strengths of both topology-based and data-driven methods. From an application perspective, topology-based models have demonstrated significant potential in drug discovery, disease gene identification, and functional annotation of proteins. By identifying key proteins and interaction patterns, these models can guide the development of targeted therapies and improve our understanding of disease mechanisms. However, translating these computational models into practical applications requires further validation and collaboration between computational and experimental researchers. Future research directions identified in this review include the development of lightweight and scalable models, improved integration of multi-modal data, and the advancement of interpretable AI techniques for PPI analysis. Additionally, the adoption of digital twin frameworks and real-time modelling approaches could further enhance the applicability of topology-based models in biological research and clinical practice.

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