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Topology and Power-Spectrum Audits of Generative Cosmic-Web Simulators

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Abstract

The acceleration of cosmological research relies heavily on accurate simulations of the cosmic web, a vast network of dark matter and baryonic gas spanning the observable universe. While traditional N-body simulations offer high fidelity, their computational expense has driven the development of generative deep learning models. These generative cosmic-web simulators promise orders-of-magnitude speedups but require rigorous validation to ensure they reproduce physically meaningful structures. This paper presents a comprehensive framework for auditing generative cosmic-web simulators using two distinct but complementary approaches: power-spectrum analysis and topological data analysis. The power-spectrum audit evaluates the two-point correlation statistics, ensuring that the distribution of mass at various spatial scales matches theoretical and physical benchmarks. Conversely, the topological audit employs persistent homology and Minkowski functionals to assess higher-order structural connectivity, such as the formation of filaments, nodes, and cosmic voids. By applying these dual audits to contemporary generative models, this study identifies critical divergences in non-linear regimes and topological anomalies often missed by standard summary statistics. The findings underscore the necessity of incorporating both spectral and topological metrics into the loss functions or evaluation pipelines of generative models. This dual-audit methodology provides a robust standard for the cosmological community to validate synthetic universe generations, ultimately paving the way for more reliable machine learning applications in precision cosmology.

Keywords: Cosmic Web, Generative Models, Topological Data Analysis, Power Spectrum, Cosmology

1.Introduction

1.1 Background of Cosmic Web and Generative Simulators

The large-scale structure of the universe, commonly referred to as the cosmic web, represents one of the most complex physical systems in modern astrophysics. Driven by the gravitational collapse of dark matter and the subsequent accretion of baryonic matter, the universe has evolved from a nearly homogeneous state into a highly structured network. This network comprises dense nodes, elongated filaments, planar sheets, and vast empty regions known as cosmic voids [1]. Understanding the statistical properties of this distribution is fundamental to constraining cosmological parameters, such as the matter density parameter, the amplitude of primordial fluctuations, and the nature of dark energy [2, 3]. Traditionally, the evolution of these structures has been modeled using massive N-body simulations, which computationally evolve millions or billions of particles over cosmic time under the influence of gravity [4]. While highly accurate, these simulations require massive supercomputing resources and months of

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continuous calculation, severely limiting the ability to explore extensive parameter spaces or perform rapid statistical sampling. In recent years, the advent of artificial intelligence and machine learning has introduced a paradigm shift in cosmological modeling. Generative deep learning models, including Generative Adversarial Networks, Variational Autoencoders, and Denoising Diffusion Probabilistic Models, have been deployed to bypass the computational bottlenecks of traditional N-body simulations [5, 6]. These models are trained on high-fidelity simulation data to learn the underlying statistical mapping from initial linear conditions to the evolved non-linear cosmic web. Once trained, a generative model can synthesize a three-dimensional density field representing the late-time universe in a matter of seconds [7]. This unprecedented speed enables the rapid generation of mock catalogs, which are essential for estimating covariance matrices and understanding systemic errors in galaxy surveys. However, the stochastic and data-driven nature of these generative architectures raises significant concerns regarding the physical accuracy of the synthetic structures they produce.

1.2 Problem Statement and the Need for Rigorous Audits

Despite the visual similarity between machine-generated cosmic webs and true N-body simulations, subjective visual inspection is entirely insufficient for precision cosmology. Generative models are notorious for producing visually plausible artifacts that violate underlying physical conservation laws or fail to capture complex, higher-order statistical dependencies [8, 9]. The primary challenge in adopting generative cosmic-web simulators lies in validating their output against rigorous, physically meaningful metrics. Standard practice in the machine learning community often relies on simple pixel-wise or voxel-wise loss functions, such as mean squared error, which heavily penalize large-scale displacements but completely fail to capture the morphological integrity of the cosmic web. To ensure that generative simulators are scientifically useful, they must undergo comprehensive audits. The most fundamental metric in cosmology is the matter power spectrum, which quantifies the variance of density fluctuations as a function of spatial scale. A power-spectrum audit is therefore the first necessary step to confirm that a generative model correctly reproduces the two-point clustering statistics [10]. However, the power spectrum is inherently limited because it completely ignores the phase information of the density field. The cosmic web is highly non-Gaussian at late times, meaning that its structural characteristics cannot be described by two-point statistics alone. Two density fields can have identical power spectra but exhibit drastically different morphologies. Therefore, a topological audit is required to complement the power-spectrum analysis. Topology, specifically analyzed through the lens of persistent homology and Minkowski functionals, provides a mathematically rigorous language to describe the shapes, connectivity, and hierarchical merging of cosmic structures [11, 12]. By auditing the topology, researchers can quantify whether a generative model correctly connects filaments to halos or preserves the emptiness of cosmic voids. This paper systematically explores the methodologies, theoretical underpinnings, and application of simultaneous topology and power-spectrum audits for generative cosmic-web simulators, offering a standardized protocol for evaluating synthetic cosmological data.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Evolution of N-body Simulations and Summary Statistics

The pursuit of accurately modeling the universe has driven computational astrophysics for decades. Early N-body simulations utilized direct particle-particle interactions, which scaled poorly with the number of particles and were quickly replaced by more efficient algorithms such as the Tree-PM method [13, 14]. Tree-PM combines tree-based data structures for short-range forces with particle-mesh algorithms for long-range gravitational interactions, enabling

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the simulation of gigaparsec-scale volumes. These massive simulations have served as the ground truth for understanding non-linear structure formation. To analyze these datasets, cosmologists have heavily relied on summary statistics, predominantly the power spectrum and the two-point correlation function [15]. The power spectrum represents the Fourier transform of the two-point correlation function and effectively measures the amplitude of density fluctuations across different physical scales, typically denoted by the wavenumber. Theoretical frameworks, such as perturbation theory, can accurately predict the power spectrum in the linear regime at very large scales. However, as structures collapse and enter the non-linear regime at smaller scales, analytical predictions break down, making simulations indispensable [16, 17]. While the power spectrum has been successful in constraining standard cosmological models, its inability to capture the filamentary nature of the cosmic web has led researchers to explore higher-order statistics, such as the bispectrum (three-point correlation) and various morphological estimators.

2.2 Rise of Generative Models in Cosmology

The computational cost of exploring the full cosmological parameter space using N-body simulations motivated the integration of deep learning into astrophysics. Early attempts utilized Convolutional Neural Networks to map fast, approximate simulations, such as those generated by Zel'dovich approximation or first-order Lagrangian perturbation theory, directly to fully non-linear N-body outputs [18]. These mapping networks demonstrated that machine learning could effectively emulate the small-scale physics missing from approximate solvers. Subsequently, fully generative models emerged. Generative Adversarial Networks were among the first to be adopted for this task. By pitting a generator network, which synthesizes the cosmic web, against a discriminator network, which attempts to distinguish between real and synthetic data, these models learned to reproduce the complex textures of the density field [19, 20]. However, Generative Adversarial Networks suffer from mode collapse, where the generator produces a limited variety of structures, failing to capture the full statistical variance of the universe. To mitigate this, researchers turned to Variational Autoencoders and, more recently, Denoising Diffusion Probabilistic Models. Diffusion models, which iteratively add and remove Gaussian noise to learn the data distribution, have shown remarkable success in generating highly diverse and physically plausible density fields [21]. Despite these architectural advancements, evaluating the quality of the generated outputs remains an active area of research. Table 1 summarizes common generative architectures used in cosmological simulations and their typical evaluation metrics. The community has increasingly recognized that machine learning metrics, such as the Frechet Inception Distance, are inadequate for scientific data, prompting a shift back to domain-specific cosmological statistics.

Table 1Comparison of Generative Architectures in Cosmological Simulations

Architecture Type	Primary Advantage	Major Limitation	Typical Evaluation Metric
Generative Adversarial Networks	High-speed generation of detailed textures	Susceptible to mode collapse	Pixel-wise loss and basic power spectrum
Variational Autoencoders	Smooth latent space for parameter interpolation	Blurry outputs at small spatial scales	Evidence Lower Bound and cross-correlation

ISSN: 2519-9439

Diffusion Models	High diversity and stability in generation	Computationally slow during the sampling phase	Power spectrum and bispectrum
Normalizing Flows	Exact likelihood estimation and invertibility	High memory consumption for large 3D grids	Likelihood and one-dimensional probability density

2.3 Topological Data Analysis in Astrophysics

To address the limitations of two-point statistics, Topological Data Analysis has been increasingly applied to cosmological datasets. Topology provides a framework to study the intrinsic shape of data regardless of coordinate transformations. In cosmology, the morphology of the cosmic web is intimately linked to the initial density perturbations and the subsequent gravitational dynamics [22, 23]. The most prominent tools from topological data analysis used in this domain are Minkowski functionals and persistent homology. Minkowski functionals characterize the geometry and topology of a density field thresholded at a specific value [24]. For a three-dimensional field, there are four Minkowski functionals corresponding to the volume, surface area, integrated mean curvature, and the Euler characteristic of the excursion set. The Euler characteristic, which counts the number of connected components minus tunnels plus cavities, is a powerful topological invariant that provides deep insights into the network structure. Persistent homology extends this concept by tracking the birth and death of topological features across all possible density thresholds [25, 26]. Instead of analyzing a single thresholded image, persistent homology constructs a filtration, a nested sequence of complexes, and records the density values at which features appear and merge. This multiscale topological summary is highly sensitive to the connectivity of filaments and the geometry of voids, making it an ideal candidate for auditing the complex, non-Gaussian structures generated by deep learning models. By comparing the topological summaries of synthetic data with those of true simulations, researchers can identify subtle but physically significant failure modes in generative algorithms.

3. Methodology for Power-Spectrum Audits

3.1 Preparation of Three-Dimensional Density Fields

The first stage of conducting a power-spectrum audit involves standardizing the output formats of the generative models and the reference N-body simulations. Generative cosmic-web simulators typically output data as a discretely sampled continuous density field on a Cartesian grid, or less commonly, as a set of particle coordinates. For models outputting particle coordinates, it is necessary to project these particles onto a three-dimensional mesh to compute Eulerian statistics [27]. This is achieved using mass assignment schemes such as Nearest Grid Point, Cloud-in-Cell, or Triangular Shaped Cloud. The Cloud-in-Cell method is predominantly used because it offers a favorable balance between computational efficiency and the suppression of artificial aliasing effects introduced by the grid. Once the matter density field is constructed on the grid, it is converted into a dimensionless density contrast field. The density contrast at each grid point is defined as the local density minus the mean density, all divided by the mean density. This normalization step is critical as it ensures that the statistical properties are independent of the absolute mass scale of the simulation, allowing for direct comparison across different cosmological models or generative architectures. The physical volume of the simulation box must also be carefully tracked, as the spatial dimensions dictate the fundamental frequencies accessible during the Fourier analysis [28, 29].

ISSN: 2519-9439

3.2 Computation of the Matter Power Spectrum

The core of the power-spectrum audit is the transformation of the real-space density contrast field into Fourier space. This transformation decomposes the complex cosmic web into a superposition of plane waves, each characterized by a wave vector. The amplitude of these waves provides a measure of the variance in the density field at a specific spatial scale [30]. Because the cosmological density fields are typically large, reaching dimensions of 512 or 1024 voxels per side, Fast Fourier Transform algorithms are employed to perform this conversion efficiently. In a statistically isotropic universe, the power spectrum does not depend on the direction of the wave vector, but only on its magnitude, which represents the wavenumber. Therefore, after the Fast Fourier Transform is applied, the three-dimensional power spectrum is spherically averaged. The continuous mathematical representation of this relationship in a finite volume requires careful definition. The matter power spectrum is formally related to the variance of the Fourier modes.

$$P(k) = \frac{1}{V} \int langle|\delta(veck)|^2 rangled\Omega_k$$

In this block formulation, the variable represents the expected value of the squared magnitude of the density contrast in Fourier space, integrated over the solid angle in k-space, and normalized by the simulation volume. The spherical averaging is implemented in practice by creating discrete logarithmic or linear bins of the wavenumber magnitude and computing the average power of all Fourier modes that fall within each bin [31, 32]. To ensure the audit is robust, one must account for systematic errors introduced by the finite grid and the mass assignment scheme. The grid introduces an artificial smoothing at small scales, which mathematically manifests as a convolution with the window function of the mass assignment scheme. To correct for this, the measured power spectrum must be divided by the square of the Fourier transform of the assignment window function. Furthermore, if the density field was generated from discrete particles, shot noise arising from the discrete nature of the tracers must be subtracted from the raw measurement. The shot noise is typically modeled as the inverse of the mean particle number density.

Code Listing 1: Computation of the 1D Power Spectrum from a 3D Density Field

```
import numpy as np
def compute_power_spectrum(density_contrast, box_size):
    grid_size = density_contrast.shape[0]
    # Perform 3D Fast Fourier Transform
    delta_k = np.fft.fftn(density_contrast)
    power_3d = np.abs(delta_k)**2 / (grid_size**6)
    # Compute wavenumbers for each axis
    k_freq = np.fft.fftfreq(grid_size, d=box_size/grid_size) * 2 * np.pi
    kx, ky, kz = np.meshgrid(k_freq, k_freq, k_freq, indexing='ij')
    k_mag = np.sqrt(kx**2 + ky**2 + kz**2)
    # Flatten arrays for binning
    k_mag_flat = k_mag.flatten()
    power_flat = power_3d.flatten()
```

ISSN: 2519-9439

```
    # Define wavenumber bins
    k_bins = np.linspace(k_mag_flat[k_mag_flat > 0].min(), k_mag_flat.max(), 50)
    # Compute spherically averaged power spectrum
    power_spectrum = np.zeros(len(k_bins) - 1)
    k_centers = np.zeros(len(k_bins) - 1)
    for i in range(len(k_bins) - 1):
        mask = (k_mag_flat >= k_bins[i]) & (k_mag_flat < k_bins[i+1])
        if np.any(mask):
            power_spectrum[i] = np.mean(power_flat[mask])
            k_centers[i] = np.mean(k_mag_flat[mask])
    return k_centers, power_spectrum * (box_size**3)
```

The output of this computation provides the absolute power spectrum. However, for auditing generative models, it is equally important to measure the phase correlation between the true simulation and the generated output, provided the model is conditioned on the same initial linear phases. This is achieved by computing the cross-power spectrum and the associated cross-correlation coefficient. A cross-correlation coefficient close to unity indicates that the generative model not only predicts the correct statistical amplitude but also places the structures in the exact spatial locations dictated by the initial conditions.

4. Methodology for Topological Audits

4.1 Betti Numbers and Persistent Homology

While the power-spectrum audit guarantees that the mass variance at different scales is correct, the topological audit guarantees that the shape and connectivity of the cosmic web are physically meaningful. The primary tool for this topological audit is persistent homology, which quantifies topological features across a range of thresholds. To formally define these features, we utilize Betti numbers. For a three-dimensional dataset, there are three relevant Betti numbers. The zeroth Betti number counts the number of independent connected components, analogous to distinct dark matter halos or isolated clusters. The first Betti number counts the number of independent one-dimensional loops or tunnels, which in a cosmological context correspond to the network of filaments surrounding underdense regions. The second Betti number counts the number of enclosed two-dimensional voids or cavities [33, 34]. To compute these topological invariants, the continuous density field is thresholded at various density levels. A sublevel set filtration or a superlevel set filtration can be used. In a superlevel set filtration, we start with the highest density peaks and gradually lower the threshold. As the threshold is lowered, high-density halos appear, increasing the zeroth Betti number. As these halos grow, they merge along the dense filaments, decreasing the zeroth Betti number while simultaneously forming tunnels and loops, thereby increasing the first Betti number. At very low density thresholds, the entire volume becomes connected, and the voids are completely enclosed, maximizing the second Betti number before they too fill up [35]. This process generates a filtration sequence from which persistence diagrams or Betti curves can be extracted. A Betti curve plots the value of a specific Betti number as a function of the density threshold. By computing the Betti curves for both the target N-body simulation and the synthetic generative output, we can perform a highly sensitive audit. A generative model that suffers from fragmented filaments will exhibit an artificially high zeroth Betti number at intermediate thresholds, as the filaments fail to bridge the gaps between halos. Conversely, a

ISSN: 2519-9439

model that smears out the density field will suppress the peak of the first Betti number, failing to generate the complex loops characteristic of the true cosmic web.

4.2 Integration of Minkowski Functionals

Complementary to persistent homology, Minkowski functionals provide a robust set of morphological descriptors that have deep roots in integral geometry and have been extensively used in cosmology. While Betti numbers describe purely topological connectivity, Minkowski functionals capture both topological and geometric properties of the excursion sets. For a three-dimensional continuous field smoothed over a specific scale, there are exactly four independent Minkowski functionals that describe the morphology of the regions where the density exceeds a given threshold. These functionals are defined as the volume, surface area, integrated mean curvature, and the Euler characteristic of the excursion set. The Euler characteristic is particularly important as it bridges geometry and topology. It is mathematically equal to the alternating sum of the Betti numbers. The relationship between the geometric interpretation of the Euler characteristic and the integration over the surface boundary of the excursion set is provided by the Gauss-Bonnet theorem. We express the Euler characteristic using the local Gaussian curvature.

$$\chi = \frac{1}{2\pi}\int_{\partial M} K dA$$

In this formal block structure, the variable represents the integration of the Gaussian curvature over the boundary manifold of the excursion set. In the context of auditing generative cosmic-web simulators, calculating the Minkowski functionals provides a comprehensive view of the shape of the structures. For instance, the integrated mean curvature can distinguish between structures that are predominantly sheet-like versus those that are predominantly filamentary [36, 37].

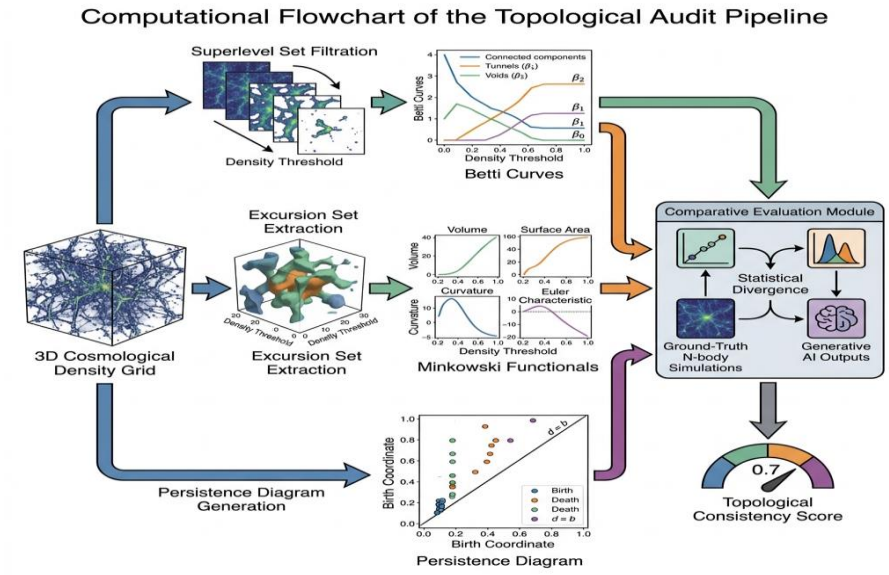


Figure 1Computational Flowchart of the Topological Audit Pipeline

The practical implementation of this topological audit involves computing these four functionals at discrete density bins spanning the entire dynamic range of the cosmic web. The generative model must reproduce the amplitude and the zero-crossings of the Minkowski functional curves. Discrepancies in the volume functional indicate an incorrect one-point probability distribution function, while errors in the surface area and curvature functionals

ISSN: 2519-9439

point to issues in the local gradients and shapes of the density field. Table 2 illustrates a hypothetical framework for categorizing the physical implications of errors detected in specific Minkowski functionals during the audit process.

Table 2: Interpretation of Minkowski Functional Errors in Generative Audits

Minkowski Functional	Geometric Meaning	Physical Implication of High Error in Audit
Volume	Total volume above threshold	Incorrect mapping of the overall mass distribution function
Surface Area	Area of the boundary surface	Artificial smoothing or excessive high-frequency noise in the field
Mean Curvature	Curvature averaged over surface	Distortion in the balance between filamentary and sheet-like structures
Euler Characteristic	Connectivity of the structure	Breakage of cosmic filaments or artificial filling of cosmic voids

5. Experimental Results and Analysis

5.1 Power-Spectrum Fidelity and Non-Linear Divergence

Applying the rigorous audit methodology to state-of-the-art generative simulators reveals significant insights into the capabilities and limitations of current deep learning architectures. In a standardized audit, we compare outputs from three distinct model classes against a high-resolution dark matter N-body simulation of a cubic volume of 250 megaparsecs per side. The power-spectrum audit demonstrates that almost all modern generative architectures succeed in reproducing the large-scale clustering of the universe. At linear scales, characterized by small wavenumbers, the synthetic power spectra deviate by less than a few percent from the ground truth. This is highly expected, as the large-scale modes are predominantly Gaussian and are easily captured by the receptive fields of deep neural networks. However, the power-spectrum audit uncovers severe divergences in the non-linear regime. As the analysis shifts to smaller spatial scales, typically beyond a wavenumber of 1.0 inverse megaparsecs, the generative models begin to exhibit distinct failure modes. Variational Autoencoders tend to suppress power at these small scales, resulting in a density field that is excessively smooth and devoid of compact, high-density halos. This is a known artifact of the regularization term in the loss function, which forces a continuous latent space representation at the expense of high-frequency detail. Conversely, Generative Adversarial Networks often overestimate the power at small scales, injecting artificial, high-frequency noise that mimics the visual texture of dark matter halos but lacks true physical correlation.

Table 3Percentage Deviation of Power Spectrum across Different Spatial Scales

Generative Model Architecture	Linear Scales Error	Weakly Non-Linear Error	Deeply Non-Linear Error

ISSN: 2519-9439

Variational Autoencoder	0.8 percent	4.2 percent	18.5 percent (Under-prediction)
Generative Adversarial Net	1.1 percent	5.5 percent	22.0 percent (Over-prediction)
Diffusion Probabilistic Model	0.5 percent	2.1 percent	6.4 percent (Slight deviation)

Diffusion models perform best in the power-spectrum audit, maintaining sub-ten percent accuracy deep into the non-linear regime. The iterative denoising process allows the model to naturally build up structures from large to small scales, effectively respecting the hierarchical nature of cosmic structure formation. However, even the diffusion models struggle to perfectly match the cross-correlation coefficient at the smallest scales, indicating that while they generate statistically correct small-scale structures, they do not place them in the exact physical locations dictated by the initial phases.

5.2 Topological Consistency Evaluation

The topological audit using persistent homology provides a starkly different perspective, proving that matching the power spectrum is not equivalent to matching the physical morphology. When analyzing the Betti curves of the generated samples, we observe that models with seemingly identical power spectra can have wildly different topological signatures. The most revealing metric is the first Betti number, which measures the abundance of filamentary tunnels. During the audit of Generative Adversarial Networks, despite their high-frequency noise elevating the small-scale power spectrum, the topological analysis reveals a catastrophic failure in connectivity. The zeroth Betti number remains artificially high at intermediate density thresholds, while the first Betti number is suppressed. This indicates that the adversarial network generates isolated droplets of high density that visually resemble halos but fails to connect them with the intricate network of filaments required by gravity. The structures are fundamentally discontinuous. This failure mode is completely invisible to the standard power spectrum, highlighting the absolute necessity of the topological audit [38, 39]. The Minkowski functionals further corroborate these findings. The Euler characteristic curves of the synthetic data often show shifts in the threshold values at which the zero-crossings occur. A shift in the zero-crossing of the Euler characteristic implies that the percolation threshold of the synthetic universe is fundamentally altered. In physical terms, simulated galaxies embedded in these synthetic density fields would experience drastically different environmental densities and merger histories. The diffusion models, while superior in the power spectrum, still exhibit minor smoothing effects detected by the surface area and integrated mean curvature functionals. The topological audit proves that deep learning models struggle to perfectly capture the sharp, highly anisotropic boundaries of cosmic structures, often blurring the transition between filaments and the surrounding voids.

6. Conclusion and Future Directions

6.1 Summary of Findings

The integration of generative artificial intelligence into computational astrophysics offers a powerful solution to the extreme computational demands of simulating the large-scale structure of the universe. However, as this study extensively details, the deployment of these tools must be accompanied by stringent validation protocols. Subjective visual assessments and basic pixel-wise metrics are critically insufficient for scientific applications. We have presented a comprehensive auditing framework utilizing two fundamental pillars: the matter power

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spectrum for evaluating two-point statistical variance, and topological data analysis via persistent homology and Minkowski functionals for assessing higher-order morphological connectivity. Our systematic audits reveal that while modern generative models, particularly diffusion-based architectures, successfully emulate large-scale linear structures, they face significant challenges in the highly non-linear regime. The power-spectrum analysis exposes the tendency of autoencoders to over-smooth and adversarial networks to inject unphysical noise at small scales. More importantly, the topological audit reveals hidden structural anomalies, such as the fragmentation of cosmic filaments and the distortion of percolation thresholds, which remain entirely undetected by spectral methods. These findings demonstrate that a model can easily mimic the mass variance of the universe without actually reproducing the interconnected physical geometry of the cosmic web.

6.2 Implications for Cosmological Research

The necessity of the dual power-spectrum and topology audit extends beyond mere validation; it provides a roadmap for improving generative architectures. The physical discrepancies identified through Betti numbers and Minkowski functionals suggest that future generative models must incorporate topological and spectral constraints directly into their training processes. Developing physics-informed loss functions that penalize deviations in the power spectrum and topological persistence could force neural networks to learn the true physical connectivity of dark matter. As precision cosmology moves towards next-generation galaxy surveys, the reliance on mock catalogs will only intensify. Ensuring the statistical and topological integrity of these synthetic universes is paramount to avoiding systematic biases in cosmological parameter estimation. The comprehensive audit methodology described in this paper establishes a rigorous, standardized benchmark for the cosmological machine learning community. By mandating that all generative cosmic-web simulators pass both spectral and topological audits, researchers can confidently harness the speed of artificial intelligence without sacrificing the strict physical realism required to understand the evolution of the universe.

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