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# Combining persistent homology and invariance groups for shape comparison

Patrizio Frosini · Grzegorz Jabłoński

*This paper is dedicated to the memory of Marcello D'Orta and Jerry Essan Masslo.*

**Abstract** In many applications concerning the comparison of data expressed by  $\mathbb{R}^m$ -valued functions defined on a topological space  $X$ , the invariance with respect to a given group  $G$  of self-homeomorphisms of  $X$  is required. While persistent homology is quite efficient in the topological and qualitative comparison of this kind of data when the invariance group  $G$  is the group  $\text{Homeo}(X)$  of all self-homeomorphisms of  $X$ , this theory is not tailored to manage the case in which  $G$  is a proper subgroup of  $\text{Homeo}(X)$ , and its invariance appears too general for several tasks. This paper proposes a way to adapt persistent homology in order to get invariance just with respect to a given group of self-homeomorphisms of  $X$ . The main idea consists in a dual approach, based on considering the set of all  $G$ -invariant non-expanding operators defined on the space of the admissible filtering functions on  $X$ . Some theoretical results concerning this approach are proven and two experiments are presented. An experiment illustrates the application of the proposed technique to compare 1D-signals, when the invariance is expressed by the group of affinities, the group of orientation-preserving affinities, the group of isometries, the group of translations and the identity group. Another experiment shows how our technique can be used for image comparison.

**Keywords** Natural pseudo-distance · filtering function · group action · persistent homology group · shape comparison

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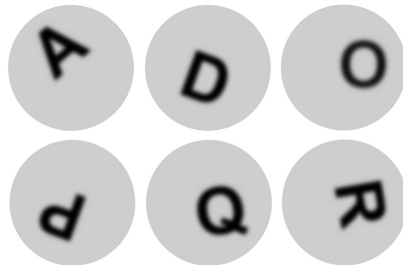
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## 1 Introduction

Persistent topology consists in the study of the properties of filtered topological spaces. From the very beginning, it has been applied to shape comparison [17, 26–28]. In this context, data are frequently represented by continuous  $\mathbb{R}^m$ -valued functions defined on a topological space  $X$ . As simple examples among many others, these functions can describe the coloring of a 3D object, the coordinates of the points in a planar curve, or the grey-levels in a x-ray CT image. Each continuous function  $\varphi : X \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^m$  is called a *filtering function* and naturally induces a (multi)filtration on  $X$ , made by the sublevel sets of  $\varphi$ . Persistent topology allows to analyse the data represented by each filtering function by examining how much the topological properties of its sublevel sets “persist” when we go through the filtration. The main mathematical tool to perform this analysis is given by persistent homology [15]. This theory describes the birth and death of  $k$ -dimensional holes when we move along the considered filtration of the space  $X$ . When the filtering function takes its values in  $\mathbb{R}$  we can look at it as a time, and the distance between the birthdate and deathdate of a hole is defined to be its *persistence*. The more persistent is a hole, the more important it is for shape comparison, since holes with small persistence are usually due to noise.

An important property of classical persistent homology consists in the fact that if a self-homeomorphism  $g : X \rightarrow X$  is given, then the filtering functions  $\varphi, \varphi \circ g$  cannot be distinguished from each other by computing the persistent homology of the filtrations induced by  $\varphi$  and  $\varphi \circ g$ . As pointed out in [25], this is a relevant issue in the applications where the functions  $\varphi, \varphi \circ g$  cannot be considered equivalent. This happens, e.g., when each filtering function  $\varphi : X = \mathbb{R}^2 \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  describes a grey-level image, since the images respectively described by  $\varphi$  and  $\varphi \circ g$  may have completely different appearances. A simple instance of this problem is illustrated in Figure 1.



**Fig. 1** Examples of letters A, D, O, P, Q, R represented by functions  $\varphi_A, \varphi_D, \varphi_O, \varphi_P, \varphi_Q, \varphi_R$  from  $\mathbb{R}^2$  to the real numbers. Each function  $\varphi_Y : \mathbb{R}^2 \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  describes the grey level at each point of the topological space  $\mathbb{R}^2$ , with reference to the considered instance of the letter  $Y$ . Black and white correspond to the values 0 and 1, respectively (so that light grey corresponds to a value close to 1). In spite of the differences between the shapes of the considered letters, the persistent homology of the functions  $\varphi_A, \varphi_D, \varphi_O, \varphi_P, \varphi_Q, \varphi_R$  is the same in every degree.

Therefore, a natural question arises: How can we adapt persistent homology in order to prevent invariance with respect to the group  $\text{Homeo}(X)$  of all self-homeomorphisms of the topological space  $X$ , maintaining just the invariance un-

der the action of the self-homeomorphisms that belong to a proper subgroup of  $\text{Homeo}(X)$ ? For example, the comparison of the letters illustrated in Figure 1 should require just the invariance with respect to the group of similarities of  $\mathbb{R}^2$ , since they all are equivalent with respect to the group  $\text{Homeo}(\mathbb{R}^2)$ . We point out that depicted letters are constructed from thick lines and therefore have some width in opposite to the concept of geometrical lines.

One could think of solving the previous problem by using other filtering functions, possibly defined on different topological spaces. For example, we could extract the boundaries of the letters in Figure 1 and consider the distance from the center of mass of each boundary as a new filtering function. This approach presents some drawbacks:

1. It “forgets” most of the information contained in the image  $\varphi : \mathbb{R}^2 \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  that we are considering, confining itself to examine the boundary of the letter represented by  $\varphi$ . If the boundary is computed by taking a single level of  $\varphi$ , this is also in contrast with the general spirit of persistent homology.
2. It usually requires an extra computational cost (e.g., to extract the boundaries of the letters in our previous example).
3. It can produce a different topological space for each new filtering function (e.g., the letters of the alphabet can have non-homeomorphic boundaries). Working with several topological spaces instead of just one can be a disadvantage.
4. It is not clear how we can translate the invariance that we need into the choice of new filtering functions defined on new topological spaces.

The purpose of this paper is to present a possible solution for the previously described problem. It is based on a dual approach to the invariance with respect to a subgroup  $G$  of  $\text{Homeo}(X)$ , and consists in changing the direct study of the group  $G$  into the study of how the operators that are invariant under the action of  $G$  act on classical persistent homology. This change of perspective reveals interesting mathematical properties, allowing to treat  $G$  as a variable in our applications. According to this method, the shape properties and the invariance group can be determined separately, depending on our task. The operators that we consider in this paper act on the space of admissible filtering functions and, in some sense, can be interpreted as the “glasses” we use to look at the data. Their use allows to combine persistent homology and the invariance with respect to the group  $G$ , extending the range of application of classical persistent homology to the cases in which we are interested in  $G$ -invariance rather than in  $\text{Homeo}(X)$ -invariance.

The idea of applying operators to filtering functions before computing persistent homology has been already considered in previous papers. For example, in [8] convolutions have been used to get a bound for the norm of persistence diagrams of a diffusing function. Furthermore, in [25] scale space persistence has been shown useful to detect critical points of a function by examining the evolution of their homological persistence values through the scale space. As for combining persistent homology and transformation groups, the interest in measuring the invariance of a signal with respect to a group of translations (i.e. the study of its periodicity or quasi-periodicity) has been studied in [10, 24], using embedding operators. However, our approach requires to consider just a particular kind of operators (i.e. non-expanding  $G$ -invariant operators on the set of admissible filtering functions), and faces the more general problem of adapting persistent homology to *any* group of self-homeomorphisms of a topological space.

For another approach to this problem, using quite a different method, we refer the reader to [16].

### 1.1 Our main idea in a nutshell

After choosing a set  $\Phi$  of admissible filtering functions from the topological space  $X$  to  $\mathbb{R}$ , and a subgroup  $G$  of  $\text{Homeo}(X)$ , we consider the set  $\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$  of all non-expanding  $G$ -invariant operators  $F : \Phi \rightarrow \Phi$ . Basically, our idea consists in comparing two functions  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2 \in \Phi$  by computing the supremum of the bottleneck distances between the classical persistence diagrams of the filtering functions  $F \circ \varphi_1$  and  $F \circ \varphi_2$ , varying  $F$  in  $\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$ . In our paper we prove that this approach is well-defined,  $G$ -invariant, stable and computable (under suitable assumptions).

### 1.2 Outline of the paper

Our paper is organized as follows. In Section 2 we introduce some concepts that will be used in the paper and recall some basic facts about persistent homology. In Section 3 we prove our main results concerning the theoretical properties of our method (Theorems 14, 15 and 16). In Section 4 we illustrate the application of our technique to an experiment concerning 1D-signals. In Section 5 a possible application to image retrieval is outlined. A short discussion concludes the paper.

## 2 Mathematical setting

Let us consider a (non-empty) triangulable metric space  $X$  with nontrivial homology in degree  $k$ . This last assumption is always satisfied for  $k = 0$  and unrestrictive for  $k > 1$ , since we can embed  $X$  in a larger triangulable space  $Y_k$  with nontrivial homology in degree  $k$ , and substitute  $X$  with  $Y_k$ . Let  $C^0(X, \mathbb{R})$  be the set of all continuous functions from  $X$  to  $\mathbb{R}$ , endowed with the topology induced by the sup-norm  $\|\cdot\|_\infty$ . Let  $\Phi$  be a topological subspace of  $C^0(X, \mathbb{R})$ , containing at least the set of all constant functions. The functions in the topological space  $\Phi$  will be called *admissible filtering functions on  $X$* .

We assume that a subgroup  $G$  of the group  $\text{Homeo}(X)$  of all homeomorphisms from  $X$  onto  $X$  is given, acting on the set  $\Phi$  by composition on the right (i.e., the action of  $g \in G$  takes each function  $\varphi \in \Phi$  to the function  $\varphi \circ g \in \Phi$ ). We do not require  $G$  to be a proper subgroup of  $\text{Homeo}(X)$ , so the equality  $G = \text{Homeo}(X)$  can possibly hold. It is easy to check that  $G$  is a topological group with respect to the topology of uniform convergence. Indeed, we can check that if two sequences  $(f_i), (g_i)$  converge to  $f$  and  $g$  in  $G$ , respectively, then the sequence  $(g_i \circ f_i)$  converges to  $(g \circ f)$  in  $G$ . Furthermore, if a sequence  $(g_i)$  converge to  $g$  in  $G$ , then the sequence  $(g_i^{-1})$  converges to  $(g^{-1})$  in  $G$ .

We also notice that if two sequences  $(\varphi_r), (g_r)$  in  $\Phi$  and  $G$  are given, converging to  $\varphi$  in  $\Phi$  and to  $g$  in  $G$ , respectively, we have that  $\|\varphi \circ g - \varphi_r \circ g_r\|_\infty \leq \|\varphi \circ g - \varphi \circ g_r\|_\infty + \|\varphi \circ g_r - \varphi_r \circ g_r\|_\infty$ . Since  $(g_r)$  converges uniformly to  $g$  in  $G$  and  $\varphi$  is uniformly continuous on the compact space  $X$ ,  $\lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \|\varphi \circ g - \varphi \circ g_r\|_\infty = 0$ . Moreover,  $\|\varphi \circ g_r - \varphi_r \circ g_r\|_\infty = \|\varphi - \varphi_r\|_\infty$ , due to the invariance of the sup-norm under

composition of the function inside the norm with homeomorphisms. Since  $(\varphi_r)$  converges uniformly to  $\varphi$  in  $\Phi$ ,  $\lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \|\varphi \circ g_r - \varphi_r \circ g_r\|_\infty = \lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \|\varphi - \varphi_r\|_\infty = 0$ . Hence  $\lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \|\varphi \circ g - \varphi_r \circ g_r\|_\infty = 0$  and  $\lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \varphi_r \circ g_r = \varphi \circ g$ .

Therefore, the right action of  $G \subseteq \text{Homeo}(X)$  on the set  $\Phi$  is continuous.

If  $S$  is a subset of  $\text{Homeo}(X)$ , the set  $\{\varphi \circ s : \varphi \in \Phi, s \in S\}$  will be denoted by the symbol  $\Phi \circ S$ . Obviously,  $\Phi \circ G = \Phi$ .

We can consider the natural pseudo-distance  $d_G$  on the space  $\Phi$  (cf. [20, 12–14, 3]):

**Definition 1** *The pseudo-distance  $d_G : \Phi \times \Phi \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  is defined by setting*

$$d_G(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) = \inf_{g \in G} \max_{x \in X} |\varphi_1(x) - \varphi_2(g(x))|.$$

*It is called the (1-dimensional) natural pseudo-distance associated with the group  $G$  acting on  $\Phi$ .*

The term “1-dimensional” refers to the fact that the filtering functions are real-valued. The concepts considered in this paper can be easily extended to the case of  $\mathbb{R}^m$ -valued filtering functions, by substituting the absolute value in  $\mathbb{R}$  with the max-norm  $\|(u_1, \dots, u_m)\| := \max_i |u_i|$  in  $\mathbb{R}^m$ . However, the use of  $\mathbb{R}^m$ -valued filtering functions would require the introduction of a technical machinery that is beyond the purposes of our research (cf., e.g., [6]), in order to adapt the bottleneck distance to the new setting. Therefore, for the sake of simplicity, in this paper we will just consider the 1-dimensional case.

We observe that the max-norm distance  $d_\infty$  on  $\Phi$ , defined by setting  $d_\infty(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) := \|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2\|_\infty$  is just the natural pseudo-distance  $d_G$  in the case that  $G$  is the trivial group  $Id$ , containing only the identity homeomorphism and acting on  $\Phi$ . Moreover, the definition of  $d_G$  immediately implies that if  $G_1$  and  $G_2$  are subgroups of  $\text{Homeo}(X)$  acting on  $\Phi$  and  $G_1 \subseteq G_2$ , then  $d_{G_2}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) \leq d_{G_1}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2)$  for every  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2 \in \Phi$ . As a consequence, the following double inequality holds, for every subgroup  $G$  of  $\text{Homeo}(X)$  and every  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2 \in \Phi$  (see also Theorem 5.2 in [6]):

$$d_{\text{Homeo}(X)}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) \leq d_G(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) \leq d_\infty(\varphi_1, \varphi_2).$$

**Remark 2** *The proof that  $d_G$  is a pseudo-metric does use the assumption that  $G$  is a group, and we can give a simple example of a subset  $S$  of  $\text{Homeo}(X)$  for which the function  $\mu_S(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) := \inf_{s \in S} \|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2 \circ s\|_\infty$  is not a pseudo-distance on  $\Phi$ . In order to do that, let us set  $\Phi := C^0(S^1, \mathbb{R})$ , and consider the set  $S \subseteq \text{Homeo}(S^1)$  containing just the identity  $id$  and the counterclockwise rotation  $\rho$  of  $\pi/2$  radians. Obviously,  $S = \{id, \rho\}$  is a subset, but not a subgroup of  $\text{Homeo}(S^1)$ . We have that  $\mu_S(\sin \theta, \cos \theta) = 0$  (because  $\cos \theta = \sin(\rho(\theta))$ ) and  $\mu_S(\cos \theta, -\sin \theta) = 0$  (because  $-\sin \theta = \cos(\rho(\theta))$ ), but*

$$\begin{aligned} \mu_S(\sin \theta, -\sin \theta) &= \min\{\|\sin \theta - (-\sin \theta)\|_\infty, \|\sin \theta - (-\sin(\rho(\theta)))\|_\infty\} = \\ &= \|\sin \theta + \cos \theta\|_\infty = \sqrt{2}. \end{aligned}$$

*Therefore the triangular inequality does not hold, so that  $\mu_S$  is not a pseudo-distance on  $\Phi$ .*

The rationale of using the natural pseudo-distance is that pattern recognition is usually based on comparing properties that are described by functions defined on a topological space. These properties are often the only accessible data, implying that every discrimination should be based on them. The fundamental assumption is that two objects cannot be distinguished if they share the same properties with respect to a given observer (cf. [2]).

In order to proceed, we consider the set  $\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$  of all operators that verify the following properties:

1.  $F$  is a function from  $\Phi$  to  $\Phi$ ;
2.  $F(\varphi \circ g) = F(\varphi) \circ g$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $g \in G$ ;
3.  $\|F(\varphi_1) - F(\varphi_2)\|_\infty \leq \|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2\|_\infty$  for every  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2 \in \Phi$  (i.e.  $F$  is non-expansive).

Obviously,  $\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$  is not empty, since it contains at least the identity operator.

Properties 1 and 2 show that  $F$  is a  $G$ -operator, referring to the right action of  $G$  on  $\Phi$ .

**Remark 3** *The operators that we are considering are not required to be linear. However, due to the non-expansivity property, the operators in  $\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$  are 1-Lipschitz and hence are continuous.*

In this paper, we shall say that a pseudo-metric  $\bar{d}$  on  $\Phi$  is *strongly  $G$ -invariant* if it is invariant under the action of  $G$  with respect to each variable, i.e., if  $\bar{d}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) = \bar{d}(\varphi_1 \circ g, \varphi_2) = \bar{d}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2 \circ g) = \bar{d}(\varphi_1 \circ g, \varphi_2 \circ g)$  for every  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2 \in \Phi$  and every  $g \in G$ .

**Remark 4** *It is easily seen that the natural pseudo-distance  $d_G$  is strongly  $G$ -invariant.*

**Example 5** *Take  $X = S^1$ ,  $G$  equal to the group  $R(S^1)$  of all rotations of  $S^1$ , and  $\Phi$  equal to the set  $C^0(S^1, \mathbb{R})$  of all continuous functions from  $S^1$  to  $\mathbb{R}$ . As an example of an operator in  $\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$  we can consider the operator  $F_\alpha$  defined by setting  $F_\alpha(\varphi)(x) := \frac{1}{2} \cdot (\varphi(x) + \varphi(x_\alpha))$  for every  $\varphi \in C^0(S^1, \mathbb{R})$  and every  $x \in S^1$ , where  $x_\alpha$  denotes the point obtained from  $x$  by rotating  $S^1$  of a fixed angle  $\alpha$ . It is easy to check that  $F_\alpha$  is a non-expansive  $R(S^1)$ -invariant (linear) operator defined on  $C^0(S^1, \mathbb{R})$ . An example of a non-expansive  $R(S^1)$ -invariant non-linear operator defined on  $C^0(S^1, \mathbb{R})$  is given by the operator  $\bar{F}$  defined by setting  $\bar{F}(\varphi)(x) = \varphi(x) + 1$  for every  $\varphi \in C^0(S^1, \mathbb{R})$  and every  $x \in S^1$ .*

This simple statement holds (the symbol  $\mathbf{0}$  denotes the function taking the value 0 everywhere):

**Proposition 6**  $\|F(\varphi)\|_\infty \leq \|\varphi\|_\infty + \|F(\mathbf{0})\|_\infty$  for every  $F \in \mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$  and every  $\varphi \in \Phi$ .

*Proof*  $\|F(\varphi)\|_\infty = \|F(\varphi) - F(\mathbf{0}) + F(\mathbf{0})\|_\infty \leq \|F(\varphi) - F(\mathbf{0})\|_\infty + \|F(\mathbf{0})\|_\infty \leq \|\varphi - \mathbf{0}\|_\infty + \|F(\mathbf{0})\|_\infty = \|\varphi\|_\infty + \|F(\mathbf{0})\|_\infty$ , since  $F$  is non-expansive.

If  $\mathcal{F} \neq \emptyset$  is a subset of  $\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$  and  $\Phi$  is bounded with respect to  $d_\infty$ , then we can consider the function

$$d_{\mathcal{F}}(F_1, F_2) := \sup_{\varphi \in \Phi} \|F_1(\varphi) - F_2(\varphi)\|_\infty$$

from  $\mathcal{F} \times \mathcal{F}$  to  $\mathbb{R}$ .

**Proposition 7** *If  $\mathcal{F}$  is a non-empty subset of  $\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$  and  $\Phi$  is bounded then the function  $d_{\mathcal{F}}$  is a distance on  $\mathcal{F}$ .*

*Proof* See Appendix B.

**Remark 8** *The sup in the definition of  $d_{\mathcal{F}}$  cannot be replaced with max. As an example, consider the case  $X = [0, 1]$ ,  $\Phi = C^0([0, 1], [0, 1])$ ,  $G$  equal to the group containing just the identity and the homeomorphism taking each point  $x \in [0, 1]$  to  $1 - x$ ,  $F_1(\varphi)$  equal to the constant function taking everywhere the value  $\max \varphi$ , and  $F_2(\varphi)$  equal to the constant function taking everywhere the value  $\int_0^1 \varphi(x) dx$ . Both  $F_1$  and  $F_2$  are non-expansive  $G$ -operators. We have that  $d_{\mathcal{F}}(F_1, F_2) = 1$ , but no function  $\psi \in \Phi = C^0([0, 1], [0, 1])$  exists, such that  $\|F_1(\psi) - F_2(\psi)\|_{\infty} = 1$ . To prove this, we firstly observe that*

$$1 \geq \max F_1(\varphi) = \min F_1(\varphi) = \max \varphi \geq \max F_2(\varphi) = \min F_2(\varphi) = \int_0^1 \varphi(x) dx \geq 0$$

for any  $\varphi \in C^0([0, 1], [0, 1])$ .

Obviously,

$$d_{\mathcal{F}}(F_1, F_2) = \sup_{\varphi \in \Phi} \left| \max \varphi - \int_0^1 \varphi(x) dx \right| = \sup_{\varphi \in \Phi} \left( \max \varphi - \int_0^1 \varphi(x) dx \right) \leq 1.$$

Let us consider a sequence of continuous functions  $(\varphi_i : [0, 1] \rightarrow [0, 1])$ , such that  $\max \varphi_i = 1$  and  $\int_0^1 \varphi_i(x) dx \leq 1/i$ . We have that

$$\|F_1(\varphi_i) - F_2(\varphi_i)\|_{\infty} = \left| \max \varphi_i - \int_0^1 \varphi_i(x) dx \right| = \max \varphi_i - \int_0^1 \varphi_i(x) dx \geq 1 - 1/i$$

so that  $d_{\mathcal{F}}(F_1, F_2) \geq 1$ . Hence  $d_{\mathcal{F}}(F_1, F_2) = 1$ .

In order to have  $\|F_1(\psi) - F_2(\psi)\|_{\infty} = 1$ , the equality  $\max \psi - \int_0^1 \psi(x) dx = 1$  should hold. This is clearly impossible, hence no function  $\psi \in \Phi$  exists, such that  $\|F_1(\psi) - F_2(\psi)\|_{\infty} = 1$ .

## 2.1 Persistent homology

Before proceeding, we recall some basic definitions and facts in persistent homology. For a more detailed and formal treatment, we refer the interested reader to [15, 2, 4, 7]. Roughly speaking, persistent homology describes the changes of the homology groups of the sub-level sets  $X_t = \varphi^{-1}((-\infty, t])$  varying  $t$  in  $\mathbb{R}$ , where  $\varphi$  is a real-valued continuous function defined on a topological space  $X$ . The parameter  $t$  can be seen as an increasing time, whose change produces the birth and death of  $k$ -dimensional holes in the sub-level set  $X_t$ . For  $k = 0, 1, 2$ , the expression “ $k$ -dimensional holes” refers to connected components, tunnels and voids, respectively. The distance between the birthdate and deathdate of a hole is defined to be its *persistence*. The more persistent is a hole, the more important it is for shape comparison, since holes with small persistence are usually due to noise.

Persistent homology can be introduced in several different settings, including the one of simplicial complexes and simplicial homology, and the one of topological spaces and singular homology. As for the link between the discrete and the topological settings, we refer the interested reader to [5,11]. In this paper we will consider the topological setting and the singular homology functor  $H$ . An elementary introduction to singular homology can be found in [21].

The concept of persistence can be formalized by the definition of persistent homology group with respect to the function  $\varphi : X \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ :

**Definition 9** *If  $u, v \in \mathbb{R}$  and  $u < v$ , we can consider the inclusion  $i$  of  $X_u$  into  $X_v$ . Such an inclusion induces a homomorphism  $i^* : H_k(X_u) \rightarrow H_k(X_v)$  between the homology groups of  $X_u$  and  $X_v$  in degree  $k$ . The group  $PH_k^\varphi(u, v) := i^*(H_k(X_u))$  is called the  $k$ -th persistent homology group with respect to the function  $\varphi : X \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ , computed at the point  $(u, v)$ . The rank  $r_k(\varphi)(u, v)$  of this group is said the  $k$ -th persistent Betti number function with respect to the function  $\varphi : X \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ , computed at the point  $(u, v)$ .*

**Remark 10** *It is easy to check that the persistent homology groups (and hence also the persistent Betti number functions) are invariant under the action of  $\text{Homeo}(X)$ . For further discussion see Appendix A.*

A classical way to describe persistent Betti number functions (up to subsets of measure zero of their domain) is given by *persistence diagrams*. Another equivalent description is given by *barcodes* (cf. [4]). The  $k$ -th persistence diagram is the set of all pairs  $(b_j, d_j)$ , where  $b_j$  and  $d_j$  are the birthdate and the deathdate of the  $j$ -th  $k$ -dimensional hole, respectively. When a hole never dies, we set its deathdate equal to  $\infty$ . For technical reasons, the points  $(t, t)$  are added to each persistent diagram. Two persistence diagrams  $D_1, D_2$  can be compared by computing the maximum movement of their points that is necessary to change  $D_1$  into  $D_2$ , measured with respect to the maximum norm. This metric naturally induces a pseudo-metric  $d_{match}$  on the sets of the persistent Betti number functions. We recall that a pseudo-metric is just a metric without the property assuring that if two points have a null distance then they must coincide. For a formal definition of persistence diagram and of the distance (named bottleneck distance) that is used to compare persistence diagrams, we refer the reader to [15]. For more details about the existence of pairs of different persistent Betti number functions that are associated with the same persistent diagram, we refer the interested reader to [6].

A key property of the distance  $d_{match}$  is its stability with respect to  $d_\infty$  and  $d_{\text{Homeo}(X)}$ , stated in the following result.

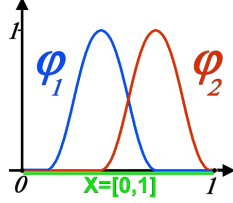
**Theorem 11** *If  $k$  is a natural number and  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2 \in \Phi = C^0(X, \mathbb{R})$ , then*

$$d_{match}(r_k(\varphi_1), r_k(\varphi_2)) \leq d_{\text{Homeo}(X)}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) \leq d_\infty(\varphi_1, \varphi_2).$$

The proof of the inequality  $d_{match}(r_k(\varphi_1), r_k(\varphi_2)) \leq d_\infty(\varphi_1, \varphi_2)$  in Theorem 11 can be found in [9] (Main Theorem) for the case of tame filtering functions and in [6] (Theorem 3.13) for the general case of continuous functions. The statement of Theorem 11 easily follows from the definition of  $d_{\text{Homeo}(X)}$  (see Theorem 5.2 in [6]). Theorem 11 also shows that the natural pseudo-distance  $d_G$  allows to



obtain a stability result for persistence diagrams that is better than the classical one, involving  $d_\infty$ . Figure 2 illustrates this fact, displaying two filtering functions  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2 : [0, 1] \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  such that  $d_{\text{match}}(r_k(\varphi_1), r_k(\varphi_2)) = d_{\text{Homeo}(X)}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) = 0 < \|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2\|_\infty = 1$ .



**Fig. 2** These two functions have the same persistent homology ( $d_{\text{match}}(r_k(\varphi_1), r_k(\varphi_2)) = 0$ ), but  $\|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2\|_\infty = 1$ . However, they are equivalent with respect to the group  $G = \text{Homeo}([0, 1])$ , hence  $d_{\text{Homeo}(X)}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) = 0$ . As a consequence,  $d_{\text{Homeo}(X)}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2)$  gives an upper bound of  $d_{\text{match}}(r_k(\varphi_1), r_k(\varphi_2))$  that is better than the one given by the sup-norm  $\|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2\|_\infty$ , via the classical *Bottleneck Stability Theorem* for persistence diagrams (cf. [9]).

## 2.2 Strongly $G$ -invariant comparison of filtering functions via persistent homology

Let us fix a non-empty subset  $\mathcal{F}$  of  $\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$ . For every fixed  $k$ , we can consider the following pseudo-metric  $D_{\text{match}}^{\mathcal{F}, k}$  on  $\Phi$ :

$$D_{\text{match}}^{\mathcal{F}, k}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) := \sup_{F \in \mathcal{F}} d_{\text{match}}(r_k(F(\varphi_1)), r_k(F(\varphi_2)))$$

for every  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2 \in \Phi$ , where  $r_k(\varphi)$  denotes the  $k$ -th persistent Betti number function with respect to the function  $\varphi : X \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ . We will usually omit the index  $k$ , when its value is clear from the context or not influential.

**Proposition 12**  $D_{\text{match}}^{\mathcal{F}}$  is a strongly  $G$ -invariant pseudo-metric on  $\Phi$ .

*Proof* Theorem 11 and the non-expansivity of every  $F \in \mathcal{F}$  imply that

$$\begin{aligned} d_{\text{match}}(r_k(F(\varphi_1)), r_k(F(\varphi_2))) &\leq \\ \|F(\varphi_1) - F(\varphi_2)\|_\infty &\leq \\ \|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2\|_\infty. \end{aligned}$$

Therefore  $D_{\text{match}}^{\mathcal{F}}$  is a pseudo-metric, since it is the supremum of a family of pseudo-metrics that are bounded at each pair  $(\varphi_1, \varphi_2)$ . Moreover, for every  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2 \in \Phi$  and every  $g \in G$

$$\begin{aligned} D_{\text{match}}^{\mathcal{F}}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2 \circ g) &:= \\ \sup_{F \in \mathcal{F}} d_{\text{match}}(r_k(F(\varphi_1)), r_k(F(\varphi_2 \circ g))) &= \\ \sup_{F \in \mathcal{F}} d_{\text{match}}(r_k(F(\varphi_1)), r_k(F(\varphi_2) \circ g)) &= \\ \sup_{F \in \mathcal{F}} d_{\text{match}}(r_k(F(\varphi_1)), r_k(F(\varphi_2))) &= \\ D_{\text{match}}^{\mathcal{F}}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) \end{aligned}$$

because of Property 2 in the definition of  $\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$  and the invariance of persistent homology under the action of homeomorphisms (Remark 10). Due to the fact that the function  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  is symmetric, this is sufficient to guarantee that  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  is strongly  $G$ -invariant.

### 2.3 Approximating $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$

A method to approximate  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  is given by the next proposition.

**Proposition 13** *Assume  $\Phi$  bounded. Let  $\mathcal{F}^* = \{F_1, \dots, F_m\}$  be a finite subset of  $\mathcal{F}$ . If for every  $F \in \mathcal{F}$  at least one index  $i \in \{1, \dots, m\}$  exists, such that  $d_{\mathcal{F}}(F_i, F) \leq \epsilon$ , then*

$$\left| D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}^*}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) - D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) \right| \leq 2\epsilon$$

for every  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2 \in \Phi$ .

*Proof* Let us assume  $F \in \mathcal{F}$  and  $d_{\mathcal{F}}(F_i, F) \leq \epsilon$ . Because of the definition of  $d_{\mathcal{F}}$ , for any  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2 \in \Phi$  we have that  $\|F_i(\varphi_1) - F(\varphi_1)\|_{\infty} \leq \epsilon$  and  $\|F_i(\varphi_2) - F(\varphi_2)\|_{\infty} \leq \epsilon$ . Hence

$$d_{match}(r_k(F_i(\varphi_1)), r_k(F(\varphi_1))) \leq \epsilon \text{ and } d_{match}(r_k(F_i(\varphi_2)), r_k(F(\varphi_2))) \leq \epsilon$$

because of the stability of persistent homology (Theorem 11). It follows that

$$|d_{match}(r_k(F_i(\varphi_1)), r_k(F_i(\varphi_2))) - d_{match}(r_k(F(\varphi_1)), r_k(F(\varphi_2)))| \leq 2\epsilon.$$

The thesis of our proposition immediately follows from the definitions of  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  and  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}^*}$ .

Therefore, if we can cover  $\mathcal{F}$  by a finite set of balls of radius  $\epsilon$ , centered at points of  $\mathcal{F}$ , the approximation of  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2)$  can be reduced to the computation of the maximum of a finite set of bottleneck distances between persistence diagrams, which are well-known to be computable by means of efficient algorithms.

This fact leads us to study the properties of the topological space  $\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$ . We will do that in the next section.

## 3 Main theoretical results

We start by proving that the pseudo-metric  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  is stable with respect to both the natural pseudo-distance associated with the group  $G$  and the sup-norm.

**Theorem 14** *If  $\emptyset \neq \mathcal{F} \subseteq \mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$ , then  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}} \leq d_G \leq d_{\infty}$ .*

*Proof* For every  $F \in \mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$ , every  $g \in G$  and every  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2 \in \Phi$ , we have that

$$\begin{aligned} d_{match}(r_k(F(\varphi_1)), r_k(F(\varphi_2))) &= \\ d_{match}(r_k(F(\varphi_1)), r_k(F(\varphi_2) \circ g)) &= \\ d_{match}(r_k(F(\varphi_1)), r_k(F(\varphi_2 \circ g))) &\leq \\ \|F(\varphi_1) - F(\varphi_2 \circ g)\|_{\infty} &\leq \|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2 \circ g\|_{\infty}. \end{aligned}$$

The first equality follows from the invariance of persistent homology under the action of  $\text{Homeo}(X)$  (Remark 10), and the second equality follows from the fact that  $F$  is a  $G$ -operator. The first inequality follows from the stability of persistent homology (Theorem 11), while the second inequality follows from the non-expansivity of  $F$ .

It follows that, if  $\mathcal{F} \subseteq \mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$ , then for every  $g \in G$  and every  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2 \in \Phi$

$$D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) \leq \|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2 \circ g\|_{\infty}.$$

Hence,

$$\begin{aligned} D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) &\leq \inf_{g \in G} \|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2 \circ g\|_{\infty} \leq \\ &\|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2\|_{\infty} = d_{\infty}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) \end{aligned}$$

for every  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2 \in \Phi$ .

The natural pseudo-distance  $d_G$  and the pseudo-distance  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  are defined in completely different ways. The former is based on a variational approach involving the set of all homeomorphisms in  $G$ , while the latter refers only to a comparison of persistent homologies depending on a family of  $G$ -invariant operators. Therefore, the next result may appear unexpected.

**Theorem 15**  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)} = d_G$ .

*Proof* For every  $\psi \in \Phi$  let us consider the operator  $F_{\psi}$  defined by setting  $F_{\psi}(\varphi)$  equal to the constant function taking everywhere the value  $d_G(\varphi, \psi)$ , for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  (i.e.,  $F_{\psi}(\varphi)(x) = d_G(\varphi, \psi)$  for any  $x \in X$ ).

We observe that

- i)  $F_{\psi}$  is a  $G$ -operator on  $\Phi$ , because the strong invariance of the natural pseudo-distance  $d_G$  with respect to the group  $G$  (Remark 4) implies that if  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and  $g \in G$ , then  $F_{\psi}(\varphi \circ g)(x) = d_G(\varphi \circ g, \psi) = d_G(\varphi, \psi) = F_{\psi}(\varphi)(g(x)) = (F_{\psi}(\varphi) \circ g)(x)$ , for every  $x \in X$ .
- ii)  $F_{\psi}$  is non-expansive, because  $\|F_{\psi}(\varphi_1) - F_{\psi}(\varphi_2)\|_{\infty} = |d_G(\varphi_1, \psi) - d_G(\varphi_2, \psi)| \leq d_G(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) \leq \|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2\|_{\infty}$ .

Therefore,  $F_{\psi} \in \mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$ .

For every  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2, \psi \in \Phi$  we have that

$$d_{match}(r_k(F_{\psi}(\varphi_1)), r_k(F_{\psi}(\varphi_2))) = |d_G(\varphi_1, \psi) - d_G(\varphi_2, \psi)|.$$

Indeed, apart from the trivial points on the line  $\{(u, v) \in \mathbb{R}^2 : u = v\}$ , the persistence diagram associated with  $r_k(F_{\psi}(\varphi_1))$  contains only the point  $(d_G(\varphi_1, \psi), \infty)$ , while the persistence diagram associated with  $r_k(F_{\psi}(\varphi_2))$  contains only the point  $(d_G(\varphi_2, \psi), \infty)$ . Both the points have the same multiplicity, which equals the (non-null)  $k$ -th Betti number of  $X$ .

Setting  $\psi = \varphi_2$ , we have that

$$d_{match}(r_k(F_{\varphi_2}(\varphi_1)), r_k(F_{\varphi_2}(\varphi_2))) = d_G(\varphi_1, \varphi_2).$$

As a consequence, we have that

$$D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) \geq d_G(\varphi_1, \varphi_2).$$

By applying Theorem 14, we get  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) = d_G(\varphi_1, \varphi_2)$  for every  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2 \in \bar{\Phi}$ .

The following two results (Theorem 16 and Corollary 18) hold, when the metric space  $(\bar{\Phi}, d_\infty)$  is compact.

**Theorem 16** *If  $(\bar{\Phi}, d_\infty)$  is a compact metric space, then the metric space  $(\mathcal{F}(\bar{\Phi}, G), d_{\mathcal{F}(\bar{\Phi}, G)})$  is compact.*

*Proof* Since  $\bar{\Phi}$  is bounded, Proposition 7 guarantees that the distance  $d_{\mathcal{F}(\bar{\Phi}, G)}$  is defined. Furthermore,  $(\mathcal{F}(\bar{\Phi}, G), d_{\mathcal{F}(\bar{\Phi}, G)})$  is a metric space, hence it will suffice to prove that it is sequentially compact. Therefore, let us assume that a sequence  $(F_i)$  in  $\mathcal{F}(\bar{\Phi}, G)$  is given.

Since  $(\bar{\Phi}, d_\infty)$  is a compact (and hence separable) metric space, we can find a countable and dense subset  $\Phi^* = \{\varphi_j\}_{j \in \mathbb{N}}$  of  $\bar{\Phi}$ . We can extract a subsequence  $(F_{i_h})$  from  $(F_i)$ , such that for every fixed index  $j$  the sequence  $(F_{i_h}(\varphi_j))$  converges to a function in  $\bar{\Phi}$  with respect to the sup-norm. (This follows by recalling that  $F_i : \bar{\Phi} \rightarrow \bar{\Phi}$  for every index  $i$ , with  $(\bar{\Phi}, d_\infty)$  compact, and by applying a classical diagonalization argument.)

Now, let us consider the operator  $\bar{F} : \bar{\Phi} \rightarrow \bar{\Phi}$  defined in the following way.

We define  $\bar{F}$  on  $\Phi^*$  by setting  $\bar{F}(\varphi_j) := \lim_{h \rightarrow \infty} (F_{i_h}(\varphi_j))$  for each  $\varphi_j \in \Phi^*$ .

Then we extend  $\bar{F}$  to  $\bar{\Phi}$  as follows. For each  $\varphi \in \bar{\Phi}$  we choose a sequence  $(\varphi_{j_r})$  in  $\Phi^*$ , converging to  $\varphi$  in  $\bar{\Phi}$ , and set  $\bar{F}(\varphi) := \lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \bar{F}(\varphi_{j_r})$ . We claim that such a limit exists in  $\bar{\Phi}$  and does not depend on the sequence that we have chosen, converging to  $\varphi$  in  $\bar{\Phi}$ . In order to prove that the previous limit exists, we observe that for every  $r, s \in \mathbb{N}$

$$\begin{aligned} & \|\bar{F}(\varphi_{j_r}) - \bar{F}(\varphi_{j_s})\|_\infty = \\ & \left\| \lim_{h \rightarrow \infty} (F_{i_h}(\varphi_{j_r})) - \lim_{h \rightarrow \infty} (F_{i_h}(\varphi_{j_s})) \right\|_\infty = \\ & \lim_{h \rightarrow \infty} \|F_{i_h}(\varphi_{j_r}) - F_{i_h}(\varphi_{j_s})\|_\infty \leq \\ & \lim_{h \rightarrow \infty} \|\varphi_{j_r} - \varphi_{j_s}\|_\infty = \\ & \|\varphi_{j_r} - \varphi_{j_s}\|_\infty \end{aligned} \tag{3.1}$$

because each operator  $F_{i_h}$  is non-expansive.

Since the sequence  $(\varphi_{j_r})$  converges to  $\varphi$  in  $\bar{\Phi}$ , it follows that  $(\bar{F}(\varphi_{j_r}))$  is a Cauchy sequence. The compactness of  $\bar{\Phi}$  implies that  $(\bar{F}(\varphi_{j_r}))$  converges in  $\bar{\Phi}$ .

If another sequence  $(\varphi_{k_r})$  is given in  $\Phi^*$ , converging to  $\varphi$  in  $\bar{\Phi}$ , then for every index  $r$

$$\|\bar{F}(\varphi_{j_r}) - \bar{F}(\varphi_{k_r})\|_\infty \leq \|\varphi_{j_r} - \varphi_{k_r}\|_\infty$$

and the proof goes as in (3.1) with  $\varphi_{j_s}$  replaced by  $\varphi_{k_r}$ .

Since both  $(\varphi_{j_r})$  and  $(\varphi_{k_r})$  converge to  $\varphi$ , it follows that  $\lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \bar{F}(\varphi_{j_r}) = \lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \bar{F}(\varphi_{k_r})$ . Therefore the definition of  $\bar{F}(\varphi)$  does not depend on the sequence  $(\varphi_{j_r})$  that we have chosen, converging to  $\varphi$ .

Now we have to prove that  $\bar{F} \in \mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$ , i.e., that  $\bar{F}$  verifies the three properties defining this set of operators.

We have already seen that  $\bar{F} : \Phi \rightarrow \Phi$ .

For every  $\varphi, \varphi' \in \Phi$  we can consider two sequences  $(\varphi_{j_r}), (\varphi_{k_r})$  in  $\Phi^*$ , converging to  $\varphi$  and  $\varphi'$  in  $\Phi$ , respectively. Due to the fact that the operators  $F_{i_h}$  are non-expansive, we have that

$$\begin{aligned} & \|\bar{F}(\varphi) - \bar{F}(\varphi')\|_\infty = \\ & \left\| \lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \bar{F}(\varphi_{j_r}) - \lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \bar{F}(\varphi_{k_r}) \right\|_\infty = \\ & \left\| \lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \lim_{h \rightarrow \infty} (F_{i_h}(\varphi_{j_r})) - \lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \lim_{h \rightarrow \infty} (F_{i_h}(\varphi_{k_r})) \right\|_\infty = \\ & \lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \lim_{h \rightarrow \infty} \|F_{i_h}(\varphi_{j_r}) - F_{i_h}(\varphi_{k_r})\|_\infty \leq \\ & \lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \lim_{h \rightarrow \infty} \|\varphi_{j_r} - \varphi_{k_r}\|_\infty = \\ & \lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \|\varphi_{j_r} - \varphi_{k_r}\|_\infty = \\ & \|\varphi - \varphi'\|_\infty. \end{aligned}$$

Therefore, the operator  $\bar{F}$  is non-expansive. As a consequence, it is also continuous.

Now we can prove that the sequence  $(F_{i_h})$  converges to  $\bar{F}$  with respect to  $d_{\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)}$ . Let us consider an arbitrarily small  $\epsilon > 0$ . Since  $\Phi$  is compact and  $\Phi^*$  is dense in  $\Phi$ , we can find a finite subset  $\{\varphi_{j_1}, \dots, \varphi_{j_n}\}$  of  $\Phi^*$  such that for each  $\varphi \in \Phi$  an index  $r \in \{1, \dots, n\}$  exists, such that  $\|\varphi - \varphi_{j_r}\|_\infty \leq \epsilon$ . Since the sequence  $(F_{i_h})$  converges pointwise to  $\bar{F}$  on the set  $\Phi^*$ , an index  $\bar{h}$  exists, such that  $\|\bar{F}(\varphi_{j_r}) - F_{i_h}(\varphi_{j_r})\|_\infty \leq \epsilon$  for any  $h \geq \bar{h}$  and any  $r \in \{1, \dots, n\}$ .

Therefore, for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  we can find an index  $r \in \{1, \dots, n\}$  such that  $\|\varphi - \varphi_{j_r}\|_\infty \leq \epsilon$  and the following inequalities hold for every index  $h \geq \bar{h}$ , because of the non-expansivity of  $\bar{F}$  and  $F_{i_h}$ :

$$\begin{aligned} & \|\bar{F}(\varphi) - F_{i_h}(\varphi)\|_\infty \leq \\ & \|\bar{F}(\varphi) - \bar{F}(\varphi_{j_r})\|_\infty + \|\bar{F}(\varphi_{j_r}) - F_{i_h}(\varphi_{j_r})\|_\infty + \|F_{i_h}(\varphi_{j_r}) - F_{i_h}(\varphi)\|_\infty \leq \\ & \|\varphi - \varphi_{j_r}\|_\infty + \|\bar{F}(\varphi_{j_r}) - F_{i_h}(\varphi_{j_r})\|_\infty + \|\varphi_{j_r} - \varphi\|_\infty \leq 3\epsilon. \end{aligned}$$

We observe that  $\bar{h}$  does not depend on  $\varphi$ , but only on  $\epsilon$  and the set  $\{\varphi_{j_1}, \dots, \varphi_{j_n}\}$ .

It follows that  $\|\bar{F}(\varphi) - F_{i_h}(\varphi)\|_\infty \leq 3\epsilon$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $h \geq \bar{h}$ .

Hence,  $\sup_{\varphi \in \Phi} \|\bar{F}(\varphi) - F_{i_h}(\varphi)\|_\infty \leq 3\epsilon$  for every  $h \geq \bar{h}$ . Therefore, the sequence  $(F_{i_h})$  converges to  $\bar{F}$  with respect to  $d_{\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)}$ .

The last thing that we have to prove is that  $\bar{F}$  is a  $G$ -operator. Let us consider a  $\varphi \in \Phi$ , a sequence  $(\varphi_{j_r})$  in  $\Phi^*$  converging to  $\varphi$  in  $\Phi$ , and a  $g \in G$ . Obviously, the sequence  $(\varphi_{j_r} \circ g)$  converges to  $\varphi \circ g$  in  $\Phi$ . We recall that the right action of  $G$  on  $\Phi$  is continuous,  $\bar{F}$  is continuous and each  $F_{i_h}$  is a  $G$ -operator. Hence, given that

the sequence  $(F_{i_h})$  converges to  $\bar{F}$  with respect to  $d_{\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)}$ ,

$$\begin{aligned}
& \bar{F}(\varphi \circ g) = \\
& \bar{F}\left(\lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \varphi_{j_r} \circ g\right) = \\
& \lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \bar{F}(\varphi_{j_r} \circ g) = \\
& \lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \lim_{h \rightarrow \infty} (F_{i_h}(\varphi_{j_r} \circ g)) = \\
& \lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \lim_{h \rightarrow \infty} (F_{i_h}(\varphi_{j_r}) \circ g) = \\
& \lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \left( \left( \lim_{h \rightarrow \infty} (F_{i_h}(\varphi_{j_r})) \right) \circ g \right) = \\
& \left( \lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \lim_{h \rightarrow \infty} (F_{i_h}(\varphi_{j_r})) \right) \circ g = \\
& \left( \lim_{r \rightarrow \infty} \bar{F}(\varphi_{j_r}) \right) \circ g = \\
& \bar{F}(\varphi) \circ g.
\end{aligned}$$

This proves that  $\bar{F}$  is a  $G$ -operator.

In conclusion,  $\bar{F} \in \mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$ .

From the fact that the sequence  $(F_{i_h})$  converges to  $\bar{F}$  with respect to  $d_{\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)}$ , it follows that  $(\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G), d_{\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)})$  is sequentially compact.

**Example 17** *As a simple example of a case where the previous Theorem 16 can be applied, we can consider  $X = S^1 \subset \mathbb{R}^2$ ,  $\Phi$  equal to the set of all 1-Lipschitz functions from  $S^1$  to  $[0, 1]$ , and  $G$  equal to the topological group of all isometries of  $S^1$ . The topological space  $\Phi$  can be easily shown to be compact by applying the Ascoli-Arzelà Theorem.*

**Corollary 18** *Assume that the metric space  $(\Phi, d_\infty)$  is compact. Let  $\mathcal{F}$  be a non-empty subset of  $\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$ . For every  $\epsilon > 0$ , a finite subset  $\mathcal{F}^*$  of  $\mathcal{F}$  exists, such that*

$$\left| D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}^*}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) - D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) \right| \leq \epsilon$$

for every  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2 \in \Phi$ .

*Proof* Let us consider the closure  $\bar{\mathcal{F}}$  of  $\mathcal{F}$  in  $\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$ . Let us also consider the covering  $\mathcal{U}$  of  $\bar{\mathcal{F}}$  obtained by taking all the open  $\frac{\epsilon}{2}$ -balls centered at points of  $\mathcal{F}$ . Theorem 16 guarantees that  $\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$  is compact, hence also  $\bar{\mathcal{F}}$  is compact. Therefore we can extract a finite covering  $\{B_1, \dots, B_m\}$  of  $\bar{\mathcal{F}}$  from  $\mathcal{U}$ . We can set  $\mathcal{F}^*$  equal to the set of centers of the balls  $B_1, \dots, B_m$ . The statement of our corollary immediately follows from Proposition 13.

The previous Corollary 18 shows that, under suitable hypotheses, the computation of  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2)$  can be reduced to the computation of the maximum of a finite set of bottleneck distances between persistence diagrams, for every  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2 \in \Phi$ .

### 3.1 Comments on the use of $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$

The goal of this paper is to propose  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  as a comparison tool that shares with the natural pseudo-distance  $d_G$  the property of being invariant under the action of a given group of homeomorphisms, but is more suitable than  $d_G$  for computation and applications. As for this subject, two observations are important.

On the one hand, the reader could think of the direct approximation of  $d_G$  as a valid alternative to the use of  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$ . This approach would lead to consider a *finite* subgroup  $H$  of  $G$  and to compute the pseudo-metric  $d_H(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) = \min_{h \in H} \|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2 \circ h\|_{\infty}$  as an approximation of  $d_G$ . Unfortunately, in many cases we cannot obtain a good approximation of the topological group  $G$  by means of a finite subgroup  $H$ , even if  $G$  is compact. As a simple example, we can consider the group  $G = SO(3)$  of all orientation-preserving isometries of  $\mathbb{R}^3$  that take the point  $(0, 0, 0)$  to itself. Obviously,  $SO(3)$  is a compact topological group with respect to the topology of uniform convergence. It is well known that the only finite subgroups of  $SO(3)$  are the ones in the following list [1]:

- Cyclic subgroups of order  $n$ . For  $n \geq 3$  they contain the orientation-preserving isometries of  $\mathbb{R}^3$  that take a given regular polygon with  $n$  vertexes and center of mass  $(0, 0, 0)$  to itself, without changing its orientation. If  $n = 1$  and  $n = 2$  we have the trivial cyclic subgroup and a cyclic subgroup generated by the rotation of  $\pi$  radians around a fixed axis through the point  $(0, 0, 0)$ , respectively. The cardinality of each of these subgroups is  $n$ .
- Dihedral subgroups  $D_n$  for  $n \geq 2$ . For  $n \geq 3$  they contain the orientation-preserving isometries of  $\mathbb{R}^3$  that take a given regular polygon with  $n$  vertexes and center of mass  $(0, 0, 0)$  to itself (possibly changing its orientation). If  $n = 2$  we have the subgroup generated by the rotation of  $\pi$  radians around a fixed axis  $r$  through the point  $(0, 0, 0)$  and the rotation of  $\pi$  radians around a fixed axis  $s$  through the point  $(0, 0, 0)$ , with  $s$  orthogonal to  $r$ . The cardinality of each of these subgroups is  $2n$ .
- Tetrahedral subgroups (i.e. the groups of all orientation-preserving isometries taking a given regular tetrahedron with center of mass  $(0, 0, 0)$  to itself). The cardinality of each of these subgroups is 12.
- Octahedral subgroups (i.e. the groups of all orientation-preserving isometries taking a given regular octahedron with center of mass  $(0, 0, 0)$  to itself). The cardinality of each of these subgroups is 24.
- Icosahedral subgroups (i.e. the groups of all orientation-preserving isometries taking a given regular icosahedron with center of mass  $(0, 0, 0)$  to itself). The cardinality of each of these subgroups is 60.

Now, we restrict the homeomorphisms in  $SO(3)$  to the 2-sphere  $S^2 \subset \mathbb{R}^3$ , and endow  $S^2$  with the Euclidean metric. With a little abuse of notation, we maintain the symbol  $SO(3)$  for this new group of homeomorphisms. The group  $SO(3)$  acts on the set  $\Phi$  of the 1-Lipschitz functions from  $S^2$  to  $\mathbb{R}$ , by composition on the right.  $\Phi$  is a topological space with respect to the topology induced by the sup-norm. It can be easily shown to be compact by applying the Ascoli-Arzelà Theorem.

If  $H$  is a cyclic or dihedral subgroup of  $SO(3)$  then a unit vector  $w_H \in S^2$  exists, such that for each homeomorphism  $h \in H$  we have  $h(w_H) = \pm w_H$ . In this case, let us take a unit vector  $w'_H \in S^2$  such that  $w'_H \cdot w_H = 0$ , and consider the functions  $\varphi_H, \psi_H \in \Phi$  defined by setting  $\varphi_H(v) := |v \cdot w_H|$  and  $\psi_H(v) := |v \cdot w'_H|$  for  $v \in S^2$ .

We can find a  $\rho \in SO(3)$  such that  $w'_H = \rho(w_H)$ . We have that  $\varphi_H = \psi_H \circ \rho$ , and hence  $d_{SO(3)}(\varphi_H, \psi_H) = 0$ . Moreover,  $\varphi \circ \rho' = \varphi$  for every  $\rho' \in H$ . It follows that  $d_H(\varphi_H, \psi_H) = \|\varphi - \psi\|_\infty$ , that is a positive value, independent of the particular cyclic or dihedral subgroup  $H$  we have considered.

If  $H$  is a tetrahedral subgroup of  $SO(3)$  then a tetrahedron  $T_H$  inscribed to  $S^2$  exists, such that the homeomorphisms  $h \in H$  are the restriction to  $S^2$  of the ones that preserve  $T_H$  and its orientation. Let  $V_H$  be the set of the vertexes of  $T_H$ . In this case, let us choose a face of  $T_H$  and take its center of mass  $v_H$ . Then we consider the counterclockwise rotation  $\rho$  of  $\alpha := \frac{2\pi}{6}$  radians around the vector  $v_H$ . Finally, let us consider the functions  $\varphi_H, \psi_H \in \Phi$  defined by setting  $\varphi_H(v)$  equal to the Euclidean distance of  $v$  from the set  $V_H$  and  $\psi_H := \varphi_H \circ \rho$ . The rotation  $\rho$  belongs to  $SO(3)$ , and hence  $d_{SO(3)}(\varphi_H, \psi_H) = 0$ . Moreover, each function  $\varphi_H \circ \rho'$  with  $\rho' \in H$  vanishes at every point in the set  $V_H$ , while  $\psi_H$  does not, by construction. It follows that  $d_H(\varphi_H, \psi_H)$  is a positive value, independent of the particular tetrahedral subgroup  $H$  that we have considered. If  $H$  is an octahedral or icosahedral subgroup of  $SO(3)$  we can proceed analogously, substituting the tetrahedron with an octahedron or an icosahedron.

In conclusion, a positive constant  $c$  exists such that for every finite subgroup  $H$  of  $SO(3)$  we can find two functions  $\varphi_H, \psi_H \in \Phi$  with  $d_{SO(3)}(\varphi_H, \psi_H) = 0$  and  $d_H(\varphi_H, \psi_H) \geq c$ . It follows that the approximation error  $\|d_H - d_{SO(3)}\|_\infty$  is greater than a positive constant for any finite subgroup  $H$  of  $SO(3)$ .

We recall that the attempt of approximating  $G$  by a set  $S$  instead of a group  $H$  appears inappropriate, because if  $S$  is not a group then the function  $\mu_S(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) := \min_{s \in S} \|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2 \circ s\|_\infty$  is not a pseudo-metric (see Remark 2). This makes the use of  $\mu_S$  impractical for data retrieval.

It follows that, in general, the idea of a direct approximation of  $d_G$  seems unsuitable for applications. For the general problem of sampling  $SO(3)$ , we refer the interested reader to the paper [23].

On the other hand,  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}^*}$  is always a strongly  $G$ -invariant pseudo-metric giving a lower bound for  $d_G$ , for any subset  $\mathcal{F}^*$  of  $\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$ . Moreover, if  $\mathcal{F}^* \subseteq \mathcal{F}$  is an  $\epsilon$ -approximation of  $\mathcal{F}$  and  $\Phi$  is bounded, the pseudo-metric  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}^*}$  is a  $2\epsilon$ -approximation of  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  (Proposition 13). We have also seen (Corollary 18) that the existence of an  $\epsilon$ -approximation  $\mathcal{F}^* \subseteq \mathcal{F}$  of any  $\mathcal{F} \subseteq \mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$  is always guaranteed in the case that  $\Phi$  is compact. Therefore, at least in this case, there is no obstruction to obtain a finite set  $\mathcal{F}^*$  for which the pseudo-metric  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}^*}$  is an arbitrarily good approximation of  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$ , contrary to what happens for the pseudo-distance  $d_G$ . Indeed, we have shown that no finite subgroup  $H$  exists for which the pseudo-distance  $d_H$  is an arbitrarily good approximation of  $d_G$ , in general. In other words,  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  has better properties than  $d_G$  with respect to approximation. Furthermore, the results of the experiments described in Sections 4 and 5 show that the use of some small family of simple operators may produce a pseudo-metric  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}^*}$  that is not far from  $d_G$  and can be efficiently used for data retrieval, even if  $\mathcal{F}^*$  is not a good approximation of  $\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$ .

These observations justify the use of  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  in place of  $d_G$ , for practical purposes.

We also wish to underline the dual nature of our approach. When  $G$  becomes “larger and larger” the associated family  $\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$  of non-expansive  $G$ -invariant operators becomes “smaller and smaller”, so making the computation of  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)}$



easier and easier, contrarily to what happens for the direct computation of  $d_G$ . In other words, the approach based on  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)}$  seems to be of use exactly when  $d_G$  is difficult to compute in a direct way. Moreover, assuming that  $\mathcal{F}$  is a finite subset of  $\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)$  and  $H$  is a finite subgroup of  $G$ , the duality in the definitions of  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)}$  and  $d_G$  causes another important difference in the use of  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  and  $d_H$  as respective approximations. It consists in the fact that while  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  is a *lower* bound for  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}(\Phi, G)} = d_G$ ,  $d_H$  is an *upper* bound for  $d_G$ . As a consequence, if we take the pseudo-metric  $d_G$  as the ground truth, the retrieval errors associated with the use of  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  are just false positive, while the ones associated with the use of  $d_H$  are just false negative.

**Remark 19** *It is not our present purpose to pursue the approximation of  $d_G$  by using  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  via Theorem 15. Indeed, on the one hand that theorem does not say anything about the way of choosing a suitable set of operators. On the other hand it could be that the use of  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  to approximate  $d_G$  requires a family of operators whose complexity equals the one of directly approximating  $d_G$  via brute force. This would not be strange, because the current state of development of research does not allow to estimate  $d_G$  from a practical point of view, generally speaking. We highlight that the problem of quickly approximating the natural pseudo-distance is unsolved also in the case of  $G$  equal to  $\text{Homeo}(X)$ , to the best of the authors' knowledge. Moreover, the only result we know concerning the approximation of  $d_G$  via persistent homology is limited to filtering functions from  $S^1$  to  $\mathbb{R}^2$  [19], and its relevance is purely theoretical.*

Therefore, our purpose is just to introduce a new and easily computable pseudo-metric that is a lower bound for  $d_G$ . Nevertheless, we can make two relevant observations. First of all, the path to the approximation of  $d_G$  via  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  is not closed, even if it probably requires to develop further ideas. Indeed, Theorem 16 states the compactness of the set of all non-expansive  $G$ -operators, so laying the groundwork for the study of new approximation schemes. Secondly, even if no theoretical approach to the choice of our operators is presently available, it can happen that the use of some small family of simple operators produces a pseudo-metric  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  that is not far from  $d_G$ . We shall devote Section 4 to check this possibility in an experiment concerning data represented by functions from  $\mathbb{R}$  to  $\mathbb{R}$ .

**Remark 20** *The pseudo-distance  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  is based on the set  $\mathcal{F}$ . The smallest set  $\mathcal{F}$  of non-expansive  $G$ -operators such that  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  coincides with the natural pseudo-distance  $d_G$  is the one containing just the operator  $F_\psi$  defined in the proof of Theorem 15. However, this trivial set of operators is completely useless from the point of view of applications, since computing  $F_\psi$  for every  $\psi \in \Phi$  is equivalent to computing the natural pseudo-distance  $d_G$ . As for the applications to shape comparison, we need the operators in  $\mathcal{F}$  to be simple to compute and  $\mathcal{F}$  to be small, but still large enough to guarantee that  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  is not too far from  $d_G$ .*

## 4 Experiments

In the previous section we have seen that our approach to shape comparison via non-expansive  $G$ -operators applied to persistent homology allows to get invariance with respect to arbitrary subgroups  $G$  of  $\text{Homeo}(X)$ . However, some assumptions are required, concerning  $G$  and the set  $\Phi$  of admissible filtering functions. A natural

question arises about what happens in practical applications, when our assumptions are not always guaranteed to hold. To answer this question, we provide numerical results for some experiments concerning piecewise linear functions. Our experiments may be described as the construction of a dataset that provides functionality to retrieve the most similar functions with respect to a given “query” function, after arbitrarily choosing an invariance group  $G$ .

The goal of this section is to show that our approximation of the natural pseudo-distance  $d_G$  via the use of a finite subset of operators is well behaving. A motivating factor is Corollary 18, stating that if the set  $\Phi$  of admissible filtering functions is compact, then for every set of operators  $\mathcal{F}$  there exists a finite set of operators  $\mathcal{F}^*$  such that the pseudo-distance induced by  $\mathcal{F}^*$  is  $\epsilon$ -close to the pseudo-distance induced by the set  $\mathcal{F}$ , even if it is an infinite set. While it is impractical to use the proof of Corollary 18 to build the finite set  $\mathcal{F}^*$ , we show that a small subset of  $\mathcal{F}$  is sufficient in several applications, both in the compact and in the non-compact case.

Our ground truth for shape comparison is the pseudo-distance  $d_G$ , approximated by brute force methods (when possible). On the one hand, the approximation of  $d_G$  usually has a large computational cost, as we shall see in this section. On the other hand,  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  allows to get a simple and easy-implementable approximation of  $d_G$ . This fact justifies our approach.

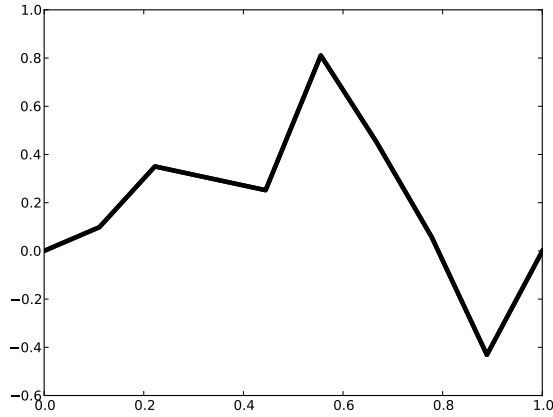
In our experiments we have set  $\Phi := C^0(\mathbb{R}, \mathbb{R})$ . We have chosen to work with a dataset  $\Phi_{ds} \subset \Phi$  of 20.000 piecewise linear functions  $\varphi : \mathbb{R} \rightarrow [-1, 1]$ , with support contained in the closed interval  $[0, 1]$ . In order to obtain the graph of each function we have randomly chosen six points  $(x_1, y_1), (x_2, y_2), \dots, (x_6, y_6)$  in the rectangle  $[0, 1] \times [-1, 1]$ , with  $0 < x_1 < x_2 < \dots < x_6 < 1$ . The graph of the function on  $[0, 1]$  is obtained by connecting  $(0, 0)$  to  $(x_1, y_1)$ ,  $(x_1, y_1)$  to  $(x_2, y_2)$ ,  $(x_2, y_2)$  to  $(x_3, y_3)$ ,  $(x_3, y_3)$  to  $(x_4, y_4)$ ,  $(x_4, y_4)$  to  $(x_5, y_5)$ ,  $(x_5, y_5)$  to  $(x_6, y_6)$ , and  $(x_6, y_6)$  to  $(1, 0)$  by segments. Additionally, for computational reasons we require that all functions are Lipschitz, with a given Lipschitz constant  $C$ , hence each function with a Lipschitz constant greater than  $C$  is filtered out. An example of a randomly generated function is presented in Fig. 3.

*Invariance groups and operators* To evaluate the approach described in this paper, we use five invariance groups  $G_i$ , for  $i = 1, \dots, 5$ . Each group  $G_i$  induces a strongly  $G_i$ -invariant pseudo-metric  $d_{G_i}$ . Then we define a set  $\mathcal{F}_i^*$  of non-expansive  $G_i$ -operators for each group  $G_i$ . Here is the list of the groups we have used in our experiments:

1.  $G_1$ : the group of all affine transformations from  $\mathbb{R}$  to  $\mathbb{R}$ ;
2.  $G_2$ : the group of all orientation-preserving affine transformations from  $\mathbb{R}$  to  $\mathbb{R}$ ;
3.  $G_3$ : the group of all isometries of  $\mathbb{R}$ ;
4.  $G_4$ : the group of all translations of  $\mathbb{R}$ ;
5.  $G_5$ : the trivial group containing just the identity map  $id : \mathbb{R} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ .

Let us recall our notations:

- $d_G(\varphi, \psi)$  is the infimum of  $\|\varphi - \psi \circ g\|_\infty$  for  $g \in G$ .
- $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}^*}(\varphi, \psi)$  is the supremum of the bottleneck distances between the persistence diagrams of  $F(\varphi)$  and  $F(\psi)$ , for  $F$  varying in the finite set  $\mathcal{F}^*$  of non-expansive  $G$ -operators acting on  $\Phi$ .



**Fig. 3** One of the functions used in our experiments. The function is zero outside the closed interval  $[0, 1]$ .

In our experiments we have tested the use of the pseudo-distances  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}_i^*}$  to decide if two functions in our dataset are similar with respect to the invariance groups  $G_i$ . This approach avoids the computation of the natural pseudo-distances  $d_{G_i}$ , which can be hard to approximate.

*Finding the most similar function with respect to the chosen invariance group* After constructing the dataset  $\Phi_{ds}$  that we have previously described, we compute the 0-th persistence diagram of  $F(\varphi)$ , for every  $\varphi \in \Phi_{ds}$  and every  $F \in \mathcal{F}_i^*$ , varying the index  $i$ . Afterwards, we choose a “query” function  $\varphi_q$  in our dataset, which will be compared with all functions in  $\Phi_{ds}$ . Finally, we compute  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}_i^*}(\varphi_q, \varphi)$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi_{ds}$  and  $i = 1, \dots, 5$ . In Figures 4–8 we show the most similar functions with respect to  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}_1^*}, \dots, D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}_5^*}$  (i.e. the functions  $\varphi$  minimizing  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}_i^*}(\varphi_q, \varphi)$ , with  $\varphi \neq \varphi_q$ ).

In the next subsections we describe the operators that we have used in our experiments, for each invariance groups  $G_i$ .

#### 4.1 Invariance with respect to the group $G_1$ of all affinities of the real line

The first group that we consider, denoted by  $G_1$ , consists of all affinities of the real line (i.e. maps  $x \mapsto ax + b$  with  $a \neq 0, b \in \mathbb{R}$ ). Intuitively, we can squeeze, stretch, horizontally reflect and translate the graph of the function.

In order to define the non-expansive  $G_1$ -operators that we will use in this section, we introduce the operator  $F_{\hat{w}, \hat{c}}$  defined as:

$$F_{\hat{w}, \hat{c}}(\varphi)(x) := \sup_{r \in \mathbb{R}} \sum_{i=1}^n w_i \cdot \varphi(x + rc_i), \quad (4.1)$$

where  $\hat{w}$  and  $\hat{c}$  are two vectors  $\hat{w} := (w_1, \dots, w_n)$ ,  $\hat{c} := (c_1, \dots, c_n)$  in  $\mathbb{R}^n$ . If we set  $\sum_{i=1}^n |w_i| = 1$ , then we can easily check that  $F_{\hat{w}, \hat{c}}$  is a non-expansive  $G_1$ -operator. From the computational point of view, the operator  $F_{\hat{w}, \hat{c}}$  can be approximated by substituting the supremum in its definition with a maximum for  $r$  belonging to a finite set.

In order to apply our method to approximate  $d_{G_1}$ , we will consider the set  $\mathcal{F}_1^*$ , consisting of the following non-expansive  $G_1$ -operators:

- $F_1^a$ , defined by setting  $F_1^a(\varphi)(x) = \varphi(x)$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $x \in \mathbb{R}$ ;
- $F_1^b$ , defined by setting  $F_1^b(\varphi)(x) = -\varphi(x)$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $x \in \mathbb{R}$ ;
- $F_1^c := F_{\hat{w}, \hat{c}}$ , where  $\hat{w} = (0.3, 0.4, 0.3)$  and  $\hat{c} = (0.3, 0.6, 0.9)$ ;
- $F_1^d := F_{\hat{w}, \hat{c}}$ , where  $\hat{w} = (-0.3, 0.4, -0.3)$  and  $\hat{c} = (0.3, 0.6, 0.9)$ ;
- $F_1^e := F_{\hat{w}, \hat{c}}$ , where  $\hat{w} = (-0.2, 0.2, -0.2, 0.2, -0.2)$  and  $\hat{c} = (0.2, 0.4, 0.6, 0.8, 1.0)$ .

In Fig. 4 we show an example of retrieval in our dataset. The two functions (solid black lines) that are most similar to a given query function (dotted blue line) are displayed. We also show the alignments of the retrieved functions to the query function. These alignments have been obtained via brute force computation, by approximating every affine transformation in  $G_1$ . One can notice that if we restrict ourselves to consider a finite set  $S_1$  of affinities from  $\mathbb{R}$  to  $\mathbb{R}$ , the inclusion  $S_1 \subset G_1$  implies that for every  $\varphi_1, \varphi_2$  in our dataset

$$D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}_1^*}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) \leq d_{G_1}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) \leq \min_{g \in S_1} \|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2 \circ g\|_\infty.$$

This is due to the stability of  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}}$  with respect to the natural pseudo-distance  $d_G$  associated with the group  $G$  (Theorem 14), and to the definition of natural pseudo-distance. It follows that if

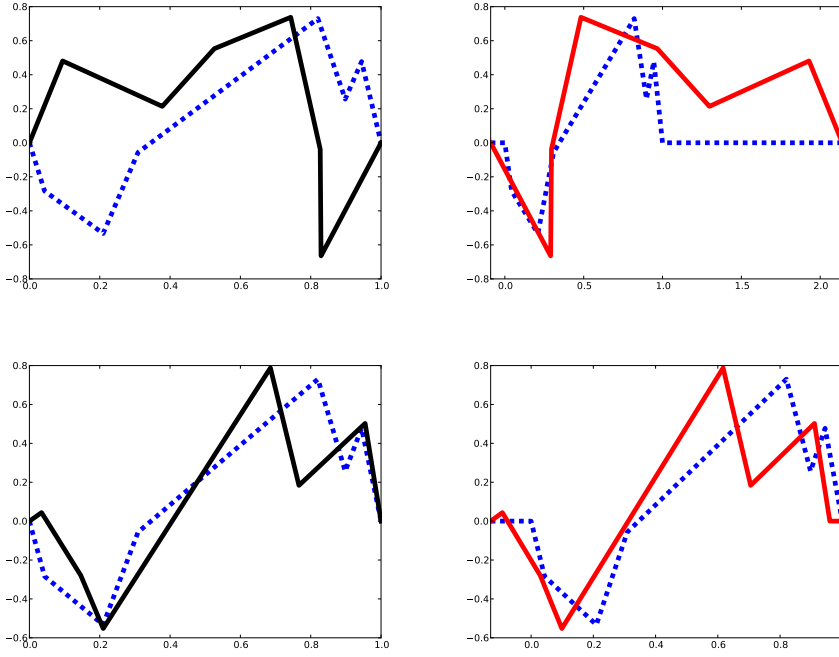
$$\left| D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}_1^*}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) - \min_{g \in S_1} \|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2 \circ g\|_\infty \right| \leq \epsilon$$

then

$$\left| D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}_1^*}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) - d_{G_1}(\varphi_1, \varphi_2) \right| \leq \epsilon.$$

This inequality suggests a method to evaluate the approximation of  $d_{G_1}$  that we obtain by means of  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}_1^*}$ , via an estimate of the value  $\min_{g \in S_1} \|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2 \circ g\|_\infty$ . We choose  $c := 10C$  and discretize the domains for  $a$  and  $b$ , by considering two sets  $\{a_1, \dots, a_{r_a}\}$  and  $\{b_1, \dots, b_{r_b}\}$ , with  $1/c \leq |a_i| \leq c$  and  $-c \leq b_j \leq c$  for  $1 \leq i \leq r_a$  and  $1 \leq j \leq r_b$ . Then we compute  $\min_{i,j} \|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2 \circ g_{ij}\|_\infty$ , where  $g_{ij}(x) := a_i x + b_j$ . In practice, we set  $C = 5$  and discretize the intervals  $[\frac{1}{50}, 50]$  and  $[-50, 50]$  by choosing equidistant points with the distance between neighboring points equal to 0.01. This approach requires the computation of the sup-distance  $d_\infty$  between  $\varphi_1$  and  $\varphi_2 \circ g_{ij}$  for  $r_a r_b$  functions  $g_{ij}$ . The overall computation of  $\min_{i,j} \|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2 \circ g_{ij}\|_\infty$  is painstakingly slow, and we performed it just to find an upper bound for the distance between  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}_1^*}$  and  $d_{G_1}$ , in order to evaluate our method. Actually, the purpose of our approach is to avoid the computation of  $\min_{i,j} \|\varphi_1 - \varphi_2 \circ g_{ij}\|_\infty$  and  $d_{G_1}$ , and substituting  $d_{G_1}$  with  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}_1^*}$ .

We encourage the readers to analyze the presented results. We point out that in Fig. 4 the graphs of the retrieved functions (solid black lines) are similar to the



**Fig. 4** Output of the experiment concerning the invariance group  $G_1$ : the most similar (solid black line, left upper plot) and the second most similar function (solid black line, left lower plot) with respect to the query function (dotted blue line) are displayed. On the right side the results of alignment of the retrieved function to the query function are displayed (solid red lines). These alignments are obtained via brute force computation, by approximating the affine transformations in  $G_1$ . They are added to allow a visual and qualitative comparison.

graph of the “query” function (dotted blue line), with respect to the group  $G_1$ . The red graphs show how we can get good alignments of the retrieved functions to the query function by applying affine transformations.

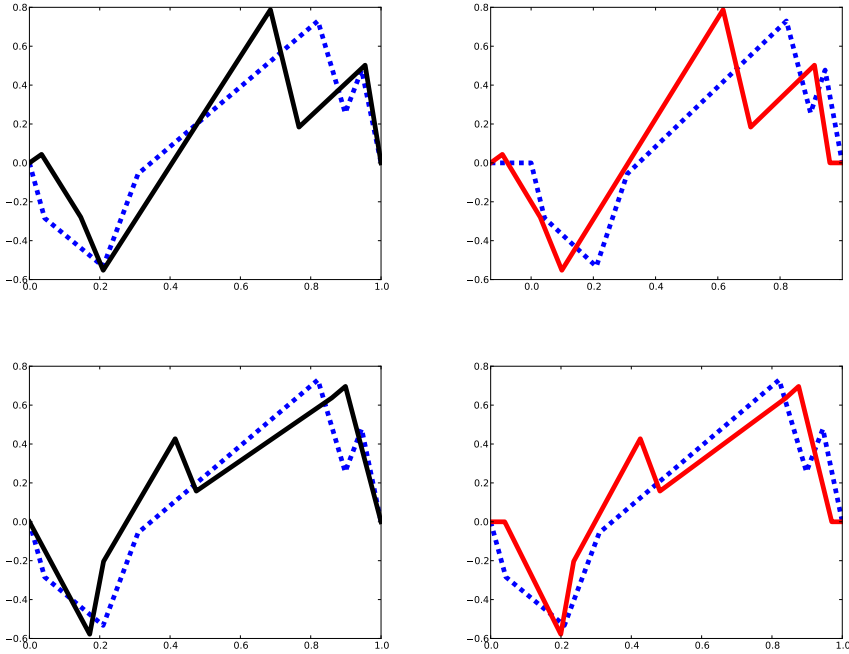
#### 4.2 Invariance with respect to the group $G_2$ of all orientation-preserving affinities of the real line

The second group that we consider, denoted by  $G_2$ , consists of all affinities of the real line that preserve the orientation (i.e. maps  $x \mapsto ax + b$  with  $a > 0$  and  $b \in \mathbb{R}$ ). This group is smaller than  $G_1$  - one cannot use reflections to align the functions. With reference to the operator  $F_{\hat{w}, \hat{c}}$  defined in (4.1), it is easy to check that after changing the condition  $r \in \mathbb{R}$  to  $r > 0$  in (4.1), the operator is invariant under the group of all orientation-preserving affinities. Let us denote this new operator as  $\bar{F}_{\hat{w}, \hat{c}}$ . With reference to the other operators used in previous subsection 4.1, we know that  $F_1^a$  and  $F_1^b$  are non-expansive  $G_2$ -operators. As a consequence we use them also for the invariance group  $G_2$ , adding the operators  $F_2^a, F_2^b, F_2^c, F_2^d$  and  $F_2^e$  defined as follows:

- $F_2^a := \bar{F}_{\hat{w}, \hat{c}}$ , where  $\hat{w} = (0.3, 0.4, 0.3)$  and  $\hat{c} = (0.3, 0.6, 0.9)$ ;

- $F_2^b := \bar{F}_{\hat{w}, \hat{c}}$ , where  $\hat{w} = (-0.3, 0.4, -0.3)$  and  $\hat{c} = (0.3, 0.6, 0.9)$ ;
- $F_2^c := \bar{F}_{\hat{w}, \hat{c}}$ , where  $\hat{w} = (-0.2, 0.2, -0.2, 0.2, -0.2)$  and  $\hat{c} = (0.2, 0.4, 0.6, 0.8, 1.0)$ ;
- $F_2^d := \bar{F}_{\hat{w}, \hat{c}}$ , where  $\hat{w} = (0.2, -0.2, 0.2, -0.2, 0.2)$  and  $\hat{c} = (0.2, 0.4, 0.6, 0.8, 1.0)$ ;
- $F_2^e := \bar{F}_{\hat{w}, \hat{c}}$ , where  $\hat{w} = (-0.1, 0.2, -0.4, 0.2, -0.1)$  and  $\hat{c} = (0.2, 0.4, 0.6, 0.8, 1.0)$ .

In plain words, the group  $G_2$  does not allow reflections, but only squeezing/stretching and translations. In Fig. 5 we show an example of retrieval in our dataset. The two functions (solid black lines) that are most similar to a given query function (dotted blue line) are displayed. The red graphs show how we can get good alignments of the retrieved functions to the query function by applying orientation-preserving affine transformations. These alignments have been obtained by approximating the transformations in  $G_2$ .



**Fig. 5** Output of the experiment concerning the invariance group  $G_2$ . Color and type of plots are the same as in Fig. 4.

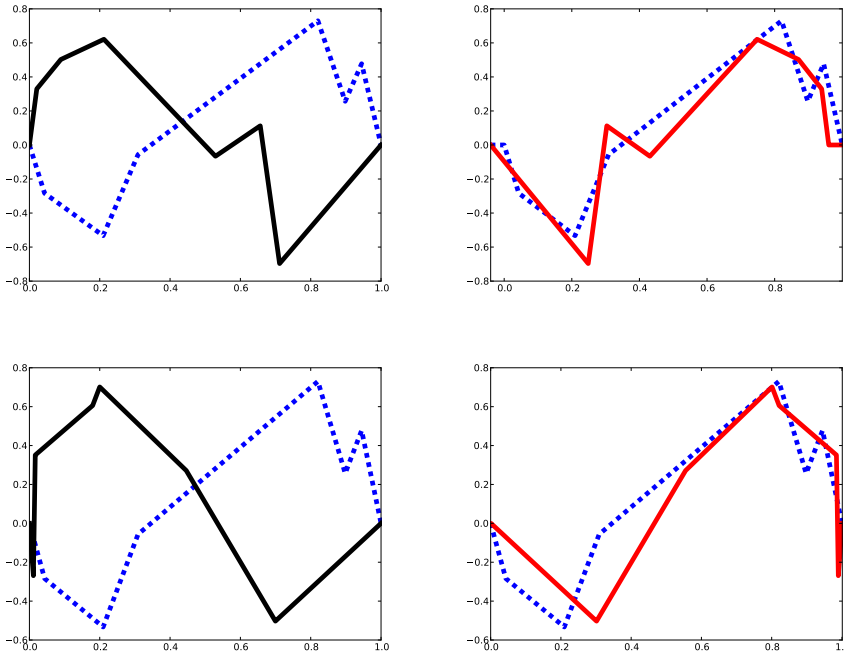
#### 4.3 Invariance with respect to the group of all isometries of the real line

The third group that we consider, denoted by  $G_3$ , consists of all isometries of the real line (i.e. maps  $x \mapsto ax + b$  with  $a = \pm 1$  and  $b \in \mathbb{R}$ ).

Since  $G_3 \subseteq G_1$ , the operators that we have used for comparison with respect to the group  $G_1$  are also  $G_3$ -operators. As a consequence we can use them also for the invariance group  $G_3$ , adding the operators  $F_3^a$ ,  $F_3^b$ ,  $F_3^c$ ,  $F_3^d$  and  $F_3^e$  defined as follows:

- $F_3^a$ , defined by setting  $F_3^a(\varphi)(x) = \max(\varphi(x - \frac{1}{4}), \varphi(x), \varphi(x + \frac{1}{4}))$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $x \in \mathbb{R}$ ;
- $F_3^b$ , defined by setting  $F_3^b(\varphi)(x) = \frac{1}{3}(\varphi(x - \frac{1}{4}) + \varphi(x) + \varphi(x + \frac{1}{4}))$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $x \in \mathbb{R}$ ;
- $F_3^c$ , defined by setting  $F_3^c(\varphi)(x) = \frac{1}{3}(\varphi(x - \frac{1}{3}) + \varphi(x) + \varphi(x + \frac{1}{3}))$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $x \in \mathbb{R}$ ;
- $F_3^d$ , defined by setting  $F_3^d(\varphi)(x) = \frac{1}{5}(\varphi(x - \frac{1}{3}) + \varphi(x - \frac{1}{4}) + \varphi(x) + \varphi(x + \frac{1}{4}) + \varphi(x + \frac{1}{3}))$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $x \in \mathbb{R}$ ;
- $F_3^e$ , defined by setting  $F_3^e(\varphi)(x) = \max(\varphi(x - \frac{1}{3}), \varphi(x - \frac{1}{4}), \varphi(x), \varphi(x + \frac{1}{4}), \varphi(x + \frac{1}{3}))$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $x \in \mathbb{R}$ .

In Fig. 6 we show an example of retrieval in our dataset. The two functions (solid black lines) that are most similar to a given query function (dotted blue line) are displayed. The red graphs show how we can get good alignments of the retrieved functions to the query function by applying an isometry. These alignments have been obtained by approximating the transformations in  $G_3$ .



**Fig. 6** Output of the experiment concerning the invariance group  $G_3$ . Color and type of plots are the same as in Fig. 4.

#### 4.4 Invariance with respect to the group of all translations of the real line

The fourth group that we consider, denoted by  $G_4$ , consists of all translations of the real line (i.e. maps  $x \mapsto x + b$  with  $b \in \mathbb{R}$ ).

Since  $G_4 \subseteq G_3$ , the operators that we have used for comparison with respect to the group  $G_3$  are also  $G_4$ -operators. As a consequence we can use them also for the invariance group  $G_4$ , adding the operators  $F_4^a$ ,  $F_4^b$ ,  $F_4^c$ ,  $F_4^d$  and  $F_4^e$  defined as follows:

- $F_4^a$ , defined by setting  $F_4^a(\varphi)(x) = \max(\varphi(x), \varphi(x + \frac{1}{4}))$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $x \in \mathbb{R}$ ;
- $F_4^b$ , defined by setting  $F_4^b(\varphi)(x) = \frac{1}{2}(\varphi(x - \frac{1}{4}) + \varphi(x))$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $x \in \mathbb{R}$ ;
- $F_4^c$ , defined by setting  $F_4^c(\varphi)(x) = \frac{1}{2}(\varphi(x) + \varphi(x + \frac{1}{4}))$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $x \in \mathbb{R}$ ;
- $F_4^d$ , defined by setting  $F_4^d(\varphi)(x) = \frac{1}{3}(\varphi(x) + \varphi(x + \frac{1}{5}) + \varphi(x + \frac{2}{5}))$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $x \in \mathbb{R}$ ;
- $F_4^e$ , defined by setting  $F_4^e(\varphi)(x) = \max(\varphi(x), \varphi(x + \frac{1}{5}), \varphi(x + \frac{2}{5}))$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $x \in \mathbb{R}$ .

In Fig. 7 we show an example of retrieval in our dataset. The two functions (solid black lines) that are most similar to a given query function (dotted blue line) are displayed. The red graphs show how we can get good alignments of the retrieved functions to the query function by applying translations. These alignments have been obtained by approximating the translations in  $G_4$ .

#### 4.5 Invariance with respect to the trivial group

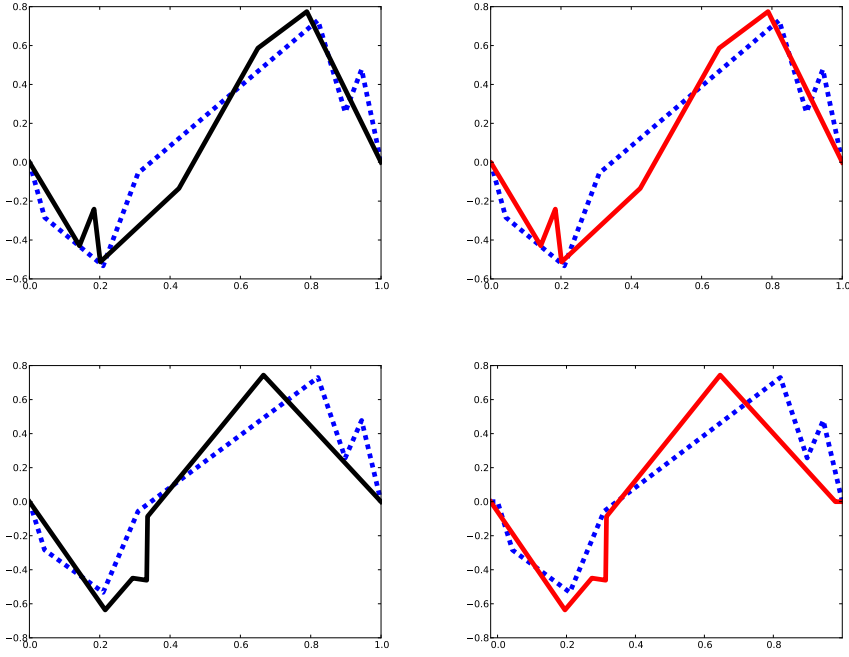
The fifth (and last) group that we consider, denoted by  $G_5$ , is the trivial group  $Id$  containing just the identity. We observe that the concept of  $Id$ -operator coincides with the concept of operator.

Since  $G_5 \subseteq G_4$ , the operators that we have used for comparison with respect to the group  $G_4$  are also  $G_5$ -operators. As a consequence we can use them also for the invariance group  $G_5 = Id$ , adding the operators  $F_5^a$ ,  $F_5^b$ ,  $F_5^c$ ,  $F_5^d$  and  $F_5^e$  defined as follows:

- $F_5^a$ , defined by setting  $F_5^a(\varphi)(x) = \varphi(x) \sin(5\pi x)$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $x \in \mathbb{R}$ ;
- $F_5^b$ , defined by setting  $F_5^b(\varphi)(x) = \varphi(x) \sin(9\pi x)$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $x \in \mathbb{R}$ ;
- $F_5^c$ , defined by setting  $F_5^c(\varphi)(x) = (\varphi(x) + 2) \cdot g_{\frac{1}{4}}(x)$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $x \in \mathbb{R}$ ;
- $F_5^d$ , defined by setting  $F_5^d(\varphi)(x) = (\varphi(x) + 2) \cdot g_{\frac{1}{2}}(x)$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $x \in \mathbb{R}$ ;
- $F_5^e$ , defined by setting  $F_5^e(\varphi)(x) = \frac{1}{2}(\varphi(x) + 2) \cdot (g_{\frac{3}{8}}(x) + g_{\frac{5}{8}}(x))$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and every  $x \in \mathbb{R}$

where  $g_\mu(x) = e^{-\left(\frac{x-\mu}{0.1}\right)^2}$ .





**Fig. 7** Output of the experiment concerning the invariance group  $G_4$ . Color and type of plots are the same as in Fig. 4.

In Fig. 8 we show an example of retrieval in our dataset. The two functions (solid black lines) that are most similar to a given query function (dotted blue line) are displayed. No alignment is necessary here, since the unique allowed transformation is the identity, and  $d_{G_5}$  equals the sup-norm.

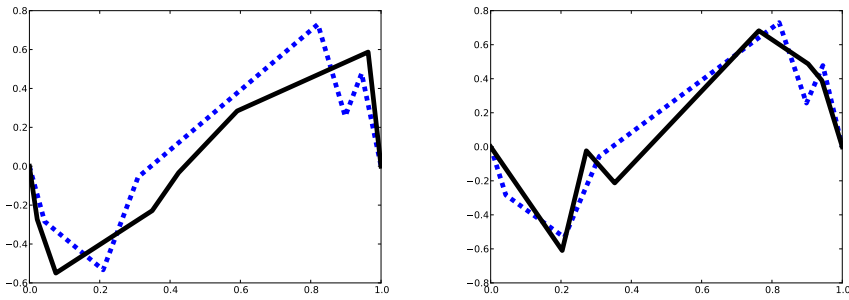
From the practical point of view, the computation of  $d_{G_5}$  can be done directly, without using the pseudo-distance  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}_5^*}$  as an approximation. However, we decided to include this last experiment for the sake of completeness, in order to show how our method behaves also in this trivial case.

#### 4.6 Quantitative results

The purpose of this section is to give a quantitative estimate of the approximation of the natural pseudo-distance  $d_{G_i}$  via the pseudo-distance  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}_i^*}$ . Due to the time-consuming nature of the computation of  $d_{G_i}$ , we use only part of the set  $\Phi_{ds}$ .

In Table 1 we show the mean value of  $d_{G_i}$  for  $i = 1, \dots, 5$  and statistics of the error between  $d_{G_i}$  and  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}_i^*}$ : mean absolute error (MAE) and mean relative error (MRE).

On average, the relative error results to be around 0.25-0.35, with the best results for the group  $G_1$  and  $G_2$ . However, we decided not to try to get better results by enlarging the sets of operators, but to keep these sets small.



**Fig. 8** Output of the experiment concerning the invariance group  $G_5 = Id$ . The most similar and the second most similar function (solid black lines) with respect to the query function (dotted blue line) are displayed.

Group	Mean $d_{G_i}$	MAE	MRE
$G_1$	0.71	0.17	0.25
$G_2$	0.75	0.20	0.27
$G_3$	0.80	0.26	0.32
$G_4$	0.83	0.27	0.32
$G_5$	1.25	0.45	0.35

**Table 1** Mean values for  $d_{G_i}$ , mean absolute error (MAE), mean relative error (MRE) between  $d_{G_i}$  and  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}_i^*}$  computed on 1000 functions from  $\Phi_{ds}$  ( $5 \times 10^5$  pairs) in case of  $G_3, G_4, G_5$  and on 100 functions ( $5 \times 10^3$  pairs) in case of  $G_1$  and  $G_2$ . The reason of not using the whole set of functions was computation time for the brute force approximation.

The results displayed in Table 1 show that a small set of operators is sufficient to produce a relatively good approximation of the pseudo-distances  $d_{G_i}$  that we have considered. The most important question and natural next step is to find heuristics or optimal methods to decide which operators bring most information.

In our opinion it is surprising that a set of just a few operators is sufficient to get a good approximation of any natural pseudo-distance  $d_{G_i}$ . This fact seems quite promising, since it opens the way to an alternative approach to approximate the natural pseudo-distance, besides the one based on brute-force computation.

## 5 Towards an image retrieval system

The experiment in the previous section was prepared to show quantitative results. In this section we present another experiment, whose goal is to show qualitative results. We demonstrate how our approach can be used in a simple image retrieval task, where the invariance group consists of all isometries of  $\mathbb{R}^2$ . We compute the pseudodistance  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}_i^*}$  using 12 operators, and referring just to homology in degree 0. While in the previous experiment there was no reason to use homology in degree 1, this could be of use in the image case. Nevertheless, we do not include it to speed-up computations.

We keep the notation consistent with the one in the previous section. The dataset of objects consists of 10.000 grey-level images with three to six spots. Each

spot is generated by adding a 2D bump function with randomly chosen size at a randomly chosen position, whereas images are represented as functions from  $\mathbb{R}^2$  to the interval  $[0, 1]$  with support in the square  $[0, 1]^2$ . However, in this experiment the set  $\Phi$  of admissible filtering functions will consist of all continuous functions from  $\mathbb{R}^2$  to  $[-1, 1]$  with support in the square  $[0, 1]^2$ . This choice will allow us to use a wider range of operators.



**Fig. 9** Examples of grey-level images from the dataset used in the second experiment. Black and white represent the values 1 and 0, respectively.

In order to skip unnecessary technical details, we confine ourselves to give a concise description of the operators that we have used. We have chosen 12 operators, divided into two families of six. The first family consists of the following operators:

1. Identity operator;
2. An operator taking each function  $\varphi \in \Phi$  to the constant function whose value is  $\int_{\mathbb{R}^2} \varphi(\xi) d\xi$ ;
3. Four operators based on convolution of the image  $\varphi$  with different kernels. These operators are formally defined as follows:

$$F_{\beta}(\varphi)(\mathbf{x}) := \int_{\mathbb{R}^2} \varphi(\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{y}) \cdot \beta(\|\mathbf{y}\|_2) d\mathbf{y}$$

where  $\beta$  is an integrable function s.t.  $\int_{\mathbb{R}^2} |\beta(\|\mathbf{y}\|_2)| d\mathbf{y} \leq 1$  (here,  $\|\mathbf{y}\|_2$  denotes the Euclidean norm of the vector  $\mathbf{y}$ ). This condition is necessary in the proof of non-expansiveness, and  $\beta$  can be considered as a kernel function. We used the following four kernel functions:

$$- \beta(t) = \begin{cases} 16/\pi, & \text{if } 0 \leq t \leq 1/4 \\ 0, & \text{if } t < 0 \vee t > 1/4 \end{cases}.$$

$$\begin{aligned}
- \beta(t) &= \begin{cases} 16/\pi, & \text{if } 0 \leq t \leq 1/8 \\ -16/\pi, & \text{if } 1/8 \leq t \leq 1/4 \\ 0, & \text{if } t < 0 \vee t > 1/4 \end{cases} . \\
- \beta(t) &= \begin{cases} 16/\pi, & \text{if } 0 \leq t \leq 1/16 \\ -16/\pi, & \text{if } 1/16 \leq t \leq 1/8 \\ 16/\pi, & \text{if } 1/8 \leq t \leq 3/16 \\ -16/\pi, & \text{if } 3/16 \leq t \leq 1/4 \\ 0, & \text{if } t < 0 \vee t > 1/4 \end{cases} . \\
- \beta(t) &= \begin{cases} 4/\pi, & \text{if } 0 \leq t \leq 1/4 \\ -4/\pi, & \text{if } 1/4 \leq t \leq 1/2 \\ 0, & \text{if } t < 0 \vee t > 1/2 \end{cases} .
\end{aligned}$$

The second family consists of the operators that we can obtain by reversing the sign of the previous six operators. Overall, we have twelve operators. The reader can easily verify that our twelve operators are non-expansive and  $G$ -invariant, when  $G$  is the group of all isometries of  $\mathbb{R}^2$ .

We look for the most similar images to three images from the dataset. In each of the Figures 10, 11 and 12 we present the three images that have the smallest computed pseudo-distance with respect to a query image.

**Remark 21** *Due to the randomness of the method we used to construct our images, it is quite unlikely that our dataset contains two identical (or even nearly identical) images, especially when the number of bumps that appear in the images is 5 or 6. We would like to underline that our goal is not to find images that are equal to each other, but images that resemble each other with respect to the group of isometries.*

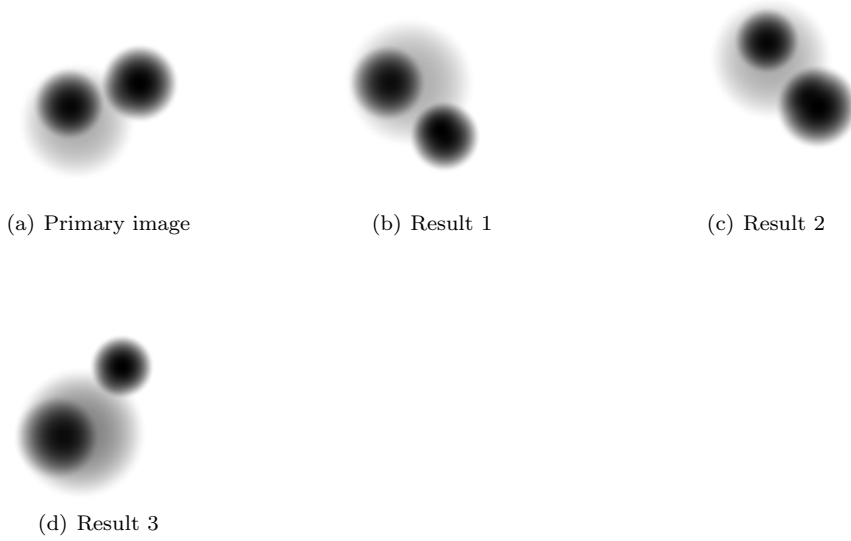
**Remark 22** *We intentionally decided to build our dataset by producing images that do not encode meaningful information for humans. Otherwise, the qualitative results would be biased by a priori knowledge of the image content. In our research we focus on topological and geometrical properties, and neglect the perceptual aspects of image comparison. Therefore, we decided not to use standard datasets from image comparison and retrieval projects.*

## Discussion and future work

In our paper we have described a method to combine persistent homology and the invariance with respect to a given group  $G$  of homeomorphisms, acting on a set  $\Phi$  of filtering functions. This technique allows us to treat  $G$  as a variable in our problem, and to distinguish functions that are not directly distinguishable in the classical setting. Our approach is based on a new pseudo-distance depending on a set of non-expansive  $G$ -invariant operators, that approximates the natural pseudo-distance in the limit.

Some relevant questions remain open:

- How can we choose the  $G$ -invariant operators in order to get the best possible results, depending on the set  $\Phi$  and the group  $G$ ? How large should the set of operators be? Is it possible to build a dictionary of operators to be used for a specific group?



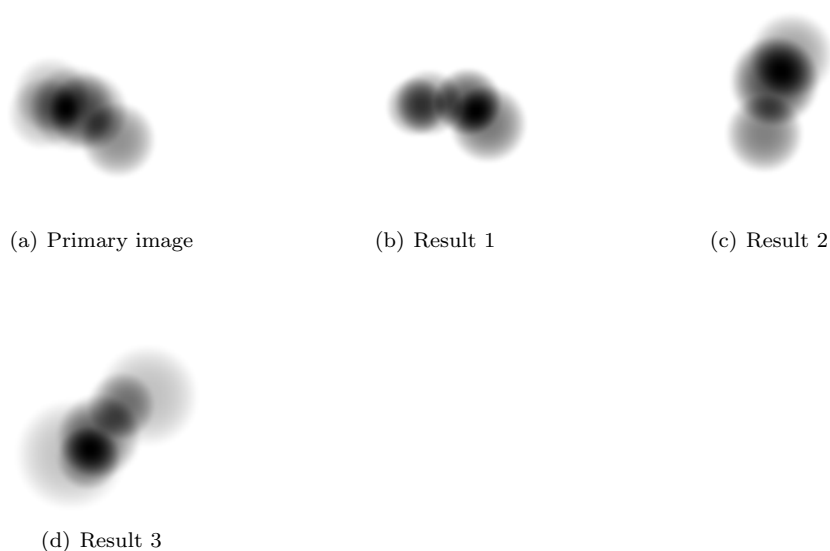
**Fig. 10** Most similar images to the query image from a dataset of 2D artificial images. Computed pseudo-distances  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}^*}$  are respectively 0.035, 0.042 and 0.050 for images 10(b), 10(c) and 10(d). The second image can be approximately obtained from the first one via reflection and rotation, which are both isometries. The third and the fourth images require only rotation.

- How could our theoretical results be applied to problems in shape comparison?
- How could our approach benefit from the use of multidimensional persistence?

Our first experiments suggest that the introduced method is pretty robust, taking advantage from the stability of persistent homology. We hope that this property can open the way to new applications of the concept of persistence, in presence of constraints concerning the invariance of our data.

In conclusion, we would also like to consider the problem of formalizing the framework that we have described in this paper. In our approach, each object belonging to a given dataset is seen as a collection  $\{\varphi_i : X_i \rightarrow \mathbb{R}\}$  of continuous functions. These functions represent the measurements made on the object. No attempt is made to define the objects in a direct way, according to the idea that each object is accessible just via acts of measurement (cf. [2]).

However, the measurements  $\{\varphi_i : X_i \rightarrow \mathbb{R}\}$  are not directly used by the observer that has to judge about similarity and dissimilarity. Indeed, perception usually changes the signals  $\{\varphi_i : X_i \rightarrow \mathbb{R}\}$  into several new (and usually simpler) collections  $\{\psi_i^j : X_i \rightarrow \mathbb{R}\}$  of data. This passage is given by some operators  $F_j$ , taking each function  $\varphi_i \in \Phi_j$  into a new function  $\psi_i^j$ . In the approach that we have presented, these operators are supposed to be  $G$ -invariant and non-expansive, because perception usually benefits of some invariance and quantitative constraint. In other words, the observer is represented by an ordered family  $\{F_j : \Phi_j \rightarrow \Phi_j\}$  of suitable operators, each one acting on a set  $\Phi_j$  of admissible signals. As a consequence, two objects in the dataset can be distinguished if and only if the observer



**Fig. 11** Most similar images to the query image from a dataset of 2D artificial images. Computed pseudo-distances  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}^*}$  are respectively 0.039, 0.046 and 0.050 for images 11(b), 11(c) and 11(d).

is endowed with an operator  $F$ , changing the corresponding signals into two new signals that are not equivalent with respect to the invariance group.

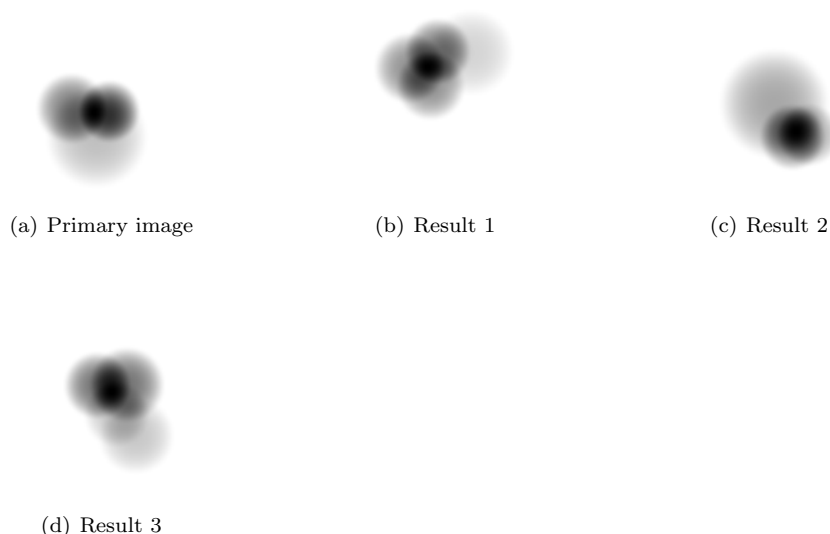
We think that this approach could benefit of a precise categorical formalization, and we plan to devote our research to this topic in the future.

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**Fig. 12** Most similar images to the query image from a dataset of 2D artificial images. Computed pseudo-distances  $D_{match}^{\mathcal{F}^*}$  are respectively 0.011, 0.015 and 0.019 for images 12(b), 12(c) and 12(d).

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### A Remark

If  $X$  and  $Y$  are two homeomorphic spaces and  $h : Y \rightarrow X$  is a homeomorphism, then the persistent homology group with respect to the function  $\varphi : X \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  and the persistent homology group with respect to the function  $\varphi \circ h : Y \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  are isomorphic at each point  $(u, v)$  in the domain. The isomorphism between the two persistent homology groups is the one taking each homology class  $[c = \sum_{i=1}^r a_i \cdot \sigma_i] \in PH_k^\varphi(u, v)$  to the homology class  $[c' = \sum_{i=1}^r a_i \cdot (h^{-1} \circ \sigma_i)] \in PH_k^{\varphi \circ h}(u, v)$ , where each  $\sigma_i$  is a singular simplex involved in the representation of the cycle  $c$ .

### B Proof of Proposition 7

*Proof* 1. The value  $d_{\mathcal{F}}(F_1, F_2)$  is finite for every  $F_1, F_2 \in \mathcal{F}$ , because  $\Phi$  is bounded. Indeed, a finite constant  $L$  exists such that  $d_\infty(\varphi, \mathbf{0}) := \|\varphi\|_\infty \leq L$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$ . Hence  $\|F_1(\varphi) - F_2(\varphi)\|_\infty \leq \|F_1(\varphi)\|_\infty + \|F_2(\varphi)\|_\infty \leq 2L$  for any  $\varphi \in \Phi$  and any  $F_1, F_2 \in \mathcal{F}$ , since  $F_1(\varphi), F_2(\varphi) \in \Phi$ . This implies that  $d_{\mathcal{F}}(F_1, F_2) \leq 2L < \infty$  for every  $F_1, F_2 \in \mathcal{F}$ .

2.  $d_{\mathcal{F}}$  is obviously symmetrical.
3. The triangle inequality holds, since

$$\begin{aligned} d_{\mathcal{F}}(F_1, F_2) &:= \sup_{\varphi \in \Phi} \|F_1(\varphi) - F_2(\varphi)\|_\infty \leq \\ &\sup_{\varphi \in \Phi} (\|F_1(\varphi) - F_3(\varphi)\|_\infty + \|F_3(\varphi) - F_2(\varphi)\|_\infty) \leq \\ &\sup_{\varphi \in \Phi} \|F_1(\varphi) - F_3(\varphi)\|_\infty + \sup_{\varphi \in \Phi} \|F_3(\varphi) - F_2(\varphi)\|_\infty = \\ &d_{\mathcal{F}}(F_1, F_3) + d_{\mathcal{F}}(F_3, F_2) \end{aligned}$$

for any  $F_1, F_2, F_3 \in \mathcal{F}$ .

4. The definition of  $d_{\mathcal{F}}$  immediately implies that  $d_{\mathcal{F}}(F, F) = 0$  for any  $F \in \mathcal{F}$ .
5. If  $d_{\mathcal{F}}(F_1, F_2) = 0$ , then the definition of  $d_{\mathcal{F}}$  implies that  $\|F_1(\varphi) - F_2(\varphi)\|_\infty = 0$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$ , and hence  $F_1(\varphi) = F_2(\varphi)$  for every  $\varphi \in \Phi$ . Therefore  $F_1 \equiv F_2$ .