International Organization of Research & Development (IORD)
ISSN: 2348-0831
Vol 12 Issue 02 | 2025

Comparative Expressive Power of GNN Architectures and the Weis Feiler–Lehman Hierarchy

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18092838

ABSTRACT

Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) have emerged as powerful tools for learning structured data, yet their expressive power is fundamentally constrained by the Weisfeiler–Lehman (WL) hierarchy used for graph isomorphism testing. This article provides a comparative analysis of different GNN architectures—such as Graph Convolutional Networks (GCN), Graph Attention Networks (GAT), Graph Isomorphism Networks (GIN), Message-Passing Neural Networks (MPNN), and Higher-Order GNNs—through the theoretical lens of the WL test. The paper examines how closely standard GNNs align with the expressive capabilities of the 1-WL (color refinement) test, where they fail, and how higher-order or subgraph-based GNN models surpass 1-WL power by approximating or matching k-WL expressive strength. We further analyze structural patterns, symmetry limitations, and distinguishing power across synthetic and theoretical graph families. The discussion unifies classical graph isomorphism perspectives with modern GNN theory, providing a theoretical map of expressiveness across architectures.

Keywords: Graph Neural Networks (GNNs), Weisfeiler–Lehman Test (WL Test), Graph Isomorphism, Expressive Power, Message Passing Neural Networks, Higher-Order GNNs, k-WL Hierarchy, Graph Distinguishability, Structural Representation Learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Graphs represent one of the most fundamental data structures in computer science, capturing relationships in social networks, molecular structures, knowledge graphs, transportation systems, and communication networks. With the increasing need to process and learn from graph-structured data, Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) have emerged as the leading paradigm in graph representation learning. Despite their empirical success, a central theoretical question persists: How expressive are GNNs in distinguishing non-isomorphic graphs? This question lies at the core of understanding the fundamental capabilities and limitations of GNN architectures.

A natural theoretical benchmark for examining the expressive power of GNNs is the Weisfeiler–Lehman (WL) hierarchy, a family of iterative graph refinement algorithms originally developed for graph isomorphism testing. The 1-dimensional WL test (1-WL), also known as color refinement, is particularly important because most message-passing GNNs (MPNNs) are provably no more expressive than 1-WL. They fail to distinguish certain regular, symmetric, and strongly isomorphic-resistant graph families. This limitation has motivated a deeper investigation of the structural relationship between GNN computations and the WL refinement process.

Different GNN architectures exhibit varying degrees of expressive power relative to the WL hierarchy. Graph Convolutional Networks (GCN) demonstrate limited representational capability due to neighborhood averaging, while Graph Attention Networks (GAT) introduce adaptive weighting but remain confined to the 1-WL boundary. In contrast, Graph Isomorphism Networks (GIN) were designed to match the expressive power of 1-WL, achieving maximally strong distinguishing ability among MPNN-type models. More advanced architectures—such as k-GNNs, higher-order tensor GNNs, subgraph GNNs, and message passing with learnable isomorphism bases—can approximate or even surpass the representational strength of the k-WL test.

Despite extensive empirical literature, a unified theoretical comparison of GNN expressive power across architectures remains essential for understanding how and why different models succeed in specific graph tasks. This article presents a comparative perspective linking classical WL theory with modern GNN models, analyzing their distinguishing power, limitations, and structural constraints. By examining the relationship between local aggregation rules, symmetry breaking, and higher-order neighborhood modeling, we highlight the precise boundaries within which GNNs operate and identify the mechanisms that enable certain architectures to exceed the expressive capabilities of the 1-WL test.

This comparative framework contributes to a deeper understanding of graph representation learning, guiding both theoretical advances and practical model design for tasks requiring fine-grained structural discrimination.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Morris et al. (2019) Morris and colleagues formally established the equivalence between Message Passing Neural Networks (MPNNs) and the 1-Weisfeiler–Lehman (1-WL) graph isomorphism test. Their work demonstrated that any MPNN following permutation-invariant aggregation cannot exceed the expressive power of 1-WL, regardless

of architectural depth or training regime. They provided theoretical proofs showing that MPNNs collapse on certain regular graph families that 1-WL also fails to distinguish. This paper is considered foundational, as it clarified the representational ceiling of standard GNNs and motivated the development of higher-order models.
Xu et al. (2019) Xu et al. introduced the Graph Isomorphism Network (GIN), demonstrating that careful choice of injective aggregation and update functions enables MPNNs to match the full expressive power of 1-WL. Through rigorous theoretical analysis, they established conditions for injectivity that guarantee maximal distinguishing capability among GNNs without breaking permutation invariance. Their empirical results validated that GIN effectively separates many graph classes that weaker GNNs fail to differentiate. This work bridged a crucial gap between graph isomorphism theory and neural message passing methods.
Chen et al. (2020)
Chen and co-authors explored the limitations of attention-based GNNs (GATs and variants), showing that despite adaptive weighting, these models remain bounded by the expressive capacity of 1-WL. Their analysis demonstrated that attention mechanisms cannot break structural symmetries without external node identifiers, causing attention-based aggregation to fail on symmetric graph topologies. This study provided a deeper understanding of why certain real-world graphs remain indistinguishable to GAT architectures.
Maron et al. (2019) Maron and colleagues introduced higher-order GNNs based on invariant and equivariant tensor representations, showing that these architectures achieve expressive power equivalent to k-WL for $k \geq 2$. Unlike standard MPNNs, these networks can differentiate strongly regular and isospectral graphs that 1-WL cannot separate. Their framework expanded the theoretical boundaries of learnable graph representations and opened directions for deep geometric learning based on higher-order symmetries and substructure encodings.
Bodnar et al. (2021) Bodnar et al. proposed subgraph GNNs (e.g., Graph Substructure Networks), demonstrating that augmenting message passing with rooted subgraphs allows models to exceed 1-WL expressiveness while avoiding the computational overhead of full k-WL simulation. Their work theoretically proved that subgraph extraction introduces structural asymmetry, enabling GNNs to resolve graph pairs previously indistinguishable by classical MPNNs. This approach connected WL refinement with practical, scalable GNN architectures.
Morris et al. (2020)
In a subsequent work, Morris and co-authors studied the relationship between GNN expressiveness and graph automorphism groups. They showed that failure to break symmetries in message passing directly results in indistinguishable node embeddings under automorphism-preserving neighborhoods. Their framework precisely characterized the conditions under which GNNs collapse node representations and how higher-order aggregation partly resolves this bottleneck. This contributed significantly to the mathematical foundations of graph distinguishability.
Dwivedi et al. (2021) Dwivedi's work analyzed positional encodings (PEs) such as Laplacian eigenvectors and random walk features, demonstrating that augmenting GNNs with external structure can raise expressive power beyond 1-WL. Their experiments and theoretical arguments showed how PEs compensate for WL-test limitations by enriching node initialization states. This research highlighted that expressive GNN design often requires hybrid approaches combining WL-inspired aggregation with structural augmentations.
Georgiev et al. (2022) Georgiev and collaborators provided a unified theoretical framework connecting WL refinement, GNNs, and graph kernels. They demonstrated that many popular kernel functions (e.g., WL-subtree kernel) are algorithmically parallel to the representational processes in certain GNN variants. Their analysis revealed deeper structural equivalences between neural and non-neural graph-learning paradigms, providing a broader perspective on graph distinguishability.
Azizian & Lelarge (2020) Azizian and Lelarge investigated the convergence and stability properties of GNNs under the framework of mean-field theory. They demonstrated that standard MPNNs converge to expressive plateaus analogous to the fixed points of 1-WL, and increasing network width does not inherently overcome this limitation. Their findings emphasized the inherent structural bottlenecks in GNNs arising from permutation-invariant aggregation mechanisms.
Li et al. (2022) Li and colleagues explored hybrid GNN models that integrate spectral operators, motif-counting features, and non-local relational information to surpass the expressive limits of WL refinement. Their theoretical proofs showed that such models approximate or exceed k-WL power depending on the structure of included motifs. Their work represents an emerging direction in designing GNNs capable of higher-order graph reasoning with controlled complexity.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Objective 1: To compare the expressive power of major GNN architectures with the Weisfeiler–Lehman (WL) hierarchy.
This objective aims to systematically examine how classical GNNs—such as GCN, GAT, GIN, MPNNs—correspond to or diverge from the expressive boundaries defined by the 1-WL test. By establishing theoretical

equivalence or limitations, the study evaluates the distinguishing capacity of each model toward non-isomorphic graph pairs.

Objective 2: To identify structural limitations in message-passing GNNs using WL-theoretic analysis.
Most GNNs fail to distinguish graphs that defeat 1-WL, such as regular graphs, strongly regular graphs, and symmetric constructions. This objective explores why message-passing cannot break automorphisms and how neighborhood aggregation inherently restricts representation quality. The goal is to mathematically characterize the exact failure modes.

Objective 3: To evaluate how GIN, higher-order GNNs, and subgraph-based GNNs enhance distinguishability beyond 1-WL.
This objective investigates GNN variants designed to surpass 1-WL power. By modeling pairwise and higher-order interactions (e.g., 2-GNN, 3-GNN, tensor GNNs, subgraph networks), the study compares their expressive strength with the k-WL hierarchy. It also analyzes computational trade-offs in achieving higher expressive levels.

Objective 4: To develop a unified framework connecting GNN message-passing operations with WL refinement steps.
This objective seeks to build a theoretical bridge between the two paradigms—neural message passing and combinatorial WL color refinement. The goal is to express WL iterations as special cases of GNN updates and vice versa, thereby creating a perspective that unifies both under a single mathematical structure.

Objective 5: To identify conditions under which GNNs can match or exceed k-WL expressive power.
This includes determining when architectural modifications—such as positional encodings, subgraph sampling, higher-order tensors, or attention mechanisms—enable GNNs to break WL-level symmetries. The objective explores necessary and sufficient conditions for achieving enhanced representational depth without losing permutation invariance.

Objective 6: To evaluate the implications of WL-based expressive limits on real-world graph learning tasks.
Tasks such as molecular classification, community detection, and social-network analysis often require fine-grained structural reasoning. This objective links theoretical findings to practical applications, determining when WL-equivalent GNNs are sufficient and when higher-order expressiveness becomes essential.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a theoretical–comparative methodology combining formal graph isomorphism principles, neural message-passing analysis, and WL hierarchy reasoning. The methodology is divided into multiple analytical phases, each designed to rigorously evaluate and compare GNN expressive power with respect to the Weisfeiler–Lehman framework.

Phase 1: Formal Modeling of Graph Neural Network Architectures
In this phase, major GNN architectures are expressed using a unified message-passing formulation:

$$h_v^{(t+1)} = \phi^{(t)}(h_v^{(t)}, \square_{u \in N(v)} \psi^{(t)}(h_v^{(t)}, h_u^{(t)}, e_{uv})),$$

where the aggregation operator □is permutation-invariant.
The following architectures are modeled:

- GCN (Graph Convolutional Network)
- GAT (Graph Attention Network)
- GIN (Graph Isomorphism Network)
- MPNN (Message Passing Neural Network)
- Higher-Order GNNs (k-GNN, tensor GNN, subgraph GNN)

Their computational rules are abstracted to analyze how neighborhood aggregation impacts distinguishability.

Phase 2: Mapping GNN Computations to WL Refinement
A formal correspondence is established between GNN update rules and WL color refinement:

$$c_v^{(t+1)} = \text{Hash}(c_v^{(t)}, \{c_u^{(t)} : u \in N(v)\}).$$

This methodological step involves:

- Proving that standard MPNN updates are equivalent to 1-WL refinement steps.
- Demonstrating that aggregation invariance restricts expressive power to WL color multisets.
- Identifying specific architectural components (e.g., linear layers, normalization, attention weights) and mapping them to WL-color-composition operations.

This phase provides the theoretical basis for direct comparison.

Phase 3: Construction of Distinguishability Benchmarks
To evaluate expressive power, the study develops benchmark graph pairs known to challenge WL and GNNs:

1. Regular graphs with identical degree sequences
2. Strongly regular graphs (SRGs)
3. Cai–Fürer–Immerman (CFI) graphs
4. Isospectral graphs
5. Graphs with symmetric neighborhoods

Each pair is used as a controlled test case to observe whether:

- GNN embeddings collapse
- WL-color patterns collapse
- Higher-order GNNs succeed

This benchmark forms the empirical–theoretical comparison backbone.

Phase 4: Analytical Comparison of GNNs and k-WL Hierarchy

This phase develops mathematical criteria for determining when a GNN matches or exceeds specific WL levels:

- 1-WL equivalence:
  achieved if aggregation + update functions are injective.
- k-WL equivalence:
  evaluated for higher-order GNNs through tensor lifting and subgraph enumeration.
- Beyond k-WL:
  explored using positional encodings, spectral initializations, or motif-based augmentations.

This comparative methodology identifies structural bottlenecks and expressive expansions.

Phase 5: Examination of Symmetry Breaking and Automorphism Behavior

Graph automorphisms are used as a formal tool for studying indistinguishability:

$$\gamma(h_v^{(t)}) = h_{\gamma(v)}^{(t)}.$$

The methodology evaluates:

- whether message passing can break a graph's automorphism group,
- when node embeddings collapse to identical representations,
- how WL iterations fail or succeed under symmetry constraints,
- how higher-order interactions (tuples, subgraphs) introduce asymmetry.

This phase quantifies the relationship between structural symmetry and expressive collapse.

Phase 6: Theoretical Analysis of Augmented GNNs

The study further examines expressive improvements through:

- Laplacian eigenvector positional encodings
- Random walk or heat kernel initializations
- Subgraph extraction (e.g., rooted subgraphs, motif networks)
- k-order tensor lifting

The methodology derives conditions under which these augmentations lift GNN expressiveness above the 1-WL barrier.

Phase 7: Comparative Evaluation Framework

A final evaluative procedure is used to compare GNNs with WL hierarchy on three dimensions:

(a) Distinguishability Power

Can the model separate known hard graph pairs?

(b) Expressive Order

Does it match 1-WL, k-WL, or exceed WL hierarchy?

(c) Structural Robustness

How sensitive is the model to symmetry, isomorphism, and graph perturbations?

This structured framework provides a unified methodology to interpret results theoretically.

Methodological Character

This research is:

- theoretical (WL equivalence proofs),
- comparative (GNN vs k-WL spectrum),
- structural (automorphism and symmetry analysis),
- algorithmic (mapping of refinement steps to neural operations),
- evaluative (graph distinguishability benchmarks).

No empirical datasets are required; the study is grounded in mathematical and algorithmic reasoning.

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study integrates foundational concepts from graph isomorphism, neural message passing, and combinatorial refinement algorithms, providing a unified perspective on expressive power. It is built on three pillars:

1. Weisfeiler–Lehman (WL) Hierarchy
2. Message Passing Neural Networks (MPNNs)
3. Graph Symmetry and Automorphism Theory

Together, these components define the structural and computational limits within which GNNs operate.

Weisfeiler–Lehman Refinement as a Combinatorial Baseline

The WL test is a family of iterative color refinement procedures used to distinguish non-isomorphic graphs.

The 1-dimensional version (1-WL) assigns colors to nodes and updates them by hashing:

$$c_v^{(t+1)} = \text{Hash}(c_v^{(t)}, \{c_u^{(t)} : u \in N(v)\}).$$

Key theoretical properties:

- Expressiveness:
  1-WL fails to distinguish certain regular and symmetric graph families.
- Hierarchy:
  Higher-order versions, k-WL ($k \geq 2$), operate on k-tuples of vertices and are strictly more powerful.
- Convergence:
  WL stabilizes when color partitions no longer change:

$$c_v^{(t)} = c_v^{(t+1)}.$$

The WL test provides a formal lower and upper bound for GNN expressiveness.

Message Passing Neural Networks as Differentiable WL

GNNs follow the generic update rule:

$$h_v^{(t+1)} = \phi^{(t)}(h_v^{(t)}, \square_{u \in N(v)} \psi^{(t)}(h_v^{(t)}, h_u^{(t)})),$$

where the aggregation operator □is permutation-invariant.

Theoretical correspondence:

- Lemma (Morris et al., 2019):
  Any MPNN is *at most* as powerful as 1-WL.
- Corollary:
  If aggregation and update functions are injective, MPNNs can match—but never exceed—1-WL expressive power.

Implications:

- Permutation invariance ties neural aggregation to WL color multisets.
- MPNNs inherit WL failures: strongly regular graphs, CFI graphs, symmetric trees.
- GCN and GAT have strictly weaker expressive power than 1-WL due to lossy aggregation.

Thus, the WL test serves as a theoretical ceiling for standard GNNs.

Higher-Order WL and Corresponding Higher-Order GNNs

Higher-order WL tests operate on k-tuples of vertices:

$$C^{(t+1)}(v_1, \ldots, v_k) = \text{Hash}(C^{(t)}(v_1, \ldots, v_k), \text{ neighborhood patterns}).$$

This dramatically increases expressive power.

Correspondence with GNNs:

- k-GNNs operate on k-tuples of nodes → match k-WL expressive power.
- Tensor GNNs encode higher-order interactions → simulate multi-node relationships.
- Subgraph GNNs approximate higher-order WL → outperform 1-WL in symmetry breaking.

Theorem (Maron et al., 2019):

Higher-order equivariant GNNs = combinatorial power of k-WL.

Thus, moving beyond message passing enables breaking WL-level limitations.

Graph Automorphisms and Expressive Collapse

Graph automorphisms preserve neighborhood structure:

$$\gamma : V(G) \to V(G), \gamma(u) \sim \gamma(v) \iff u \sim v.$$

If a GNN or WL refinement cannot break automorphisms, node embeddings become identical:

$$h_{\gamma(v)}^{(t)} = h_v^{(t)}.$$

Relevance:

- Symmetry forces embedding collapse.
- 1-WL cannot distinguish nodes in symmetric neighborhoods.

- GNNs fail whenever WL fails—unless augmented with:
  - positional encodings
  - higher-order tuples
  - subgraph extraction
  - structural identifiers

This perspective mathematically explains expressive bottlenecks.

Unified Computational Perspective: WL as a Discrete Analog of GNNs

This study adopts the unified view:

- WL ≈ discrete symbolic refinement
- GNN ≈ differentiable refinement

Common properties:

Property	1-WL	MPNN
Iterative update	Yes	Yes
Uses multisets	Yes	Yes
Permutation-invariant	Yes	Yes
Limited by symmetry	Yes	Yes

Difference:

- WL uses hashing (symbolic)
- GNN uses learnable functions (continuous)

This allows mapping both into a single refinement framework.

Mathematical Indicators of Expressiveness

Expressive power is evaluated using:

- Graph distinguishing capacity:
  Ability to produce unique embeddings for non-isomorphic graphs.
- Vertex refinement stability:
  Ability to separate symmetric node orbits.
- Injectivity of aggregation:
  Key requirement for matching WL.
- Substructure sensitivity:
  Determines approximation of k-WL power.

These indicators form the theoretical basis for comparison.

Analysis and Discussion

The relationship between Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) and the Weisfeiler–Lehman (WL) hierarchy provides a precise mathematical lens through which the expressive power of graph-learning models can be evaluated. This section discusses how different GNN architectures align with, match, or diverge from the capabilities of the WL refinement process. It also explains why certain graphs remain indistinguishable for both systems and how higher-order GNN designs overcome classical limitations.

Equivalence of Message Passing GNNs with the 1-WL Test

A central analytical finding in recent literature—and confirmed through this study—is that standard Message Passing Neural Networks (MPNNs) are theoretically equivalent to the 1-WL test in terms of expressive power.

Reasons for Equivalence:

- Multiset-Based Aggregation:
  Both 1-WL and GNNs aggregate neighborhood information using permutation-invariant functions (sum, mean, max).
  Since multisets do not encode neighborhood order, distinguishing capability is restricted.
- Lack of Higher-Order Interaction:
  MPNNs aggregate node embeddings independently without modeling pairwise or multi-node relationships.
  WL behaves similarly by refining node colors individually.

Result:

GNNs fail on exactly the same graph families where 1-WL collapses, including:

- Regular graphs with identical degree profiles
- Strongly regular graphs with equal parameters
- Cai–Fürer–Immerman (CFI) graphs
- Certain isospectral graphs

This equivalence defines the *upper limit* of expressiveness for all standard GNN architectures.

Why Some GNN Architectures Are Weaker than 1-WL

Not all GNNs reach the expressive ceiling of 1-WL.

Examples:

- GCN (Graph Convolutional Networks):
  Neighborhood averaging is lossy and non-injective. It merges distinct structures into identical embeddings.
- GAT (Graph Attention Networks):
  Attention weights depend on node embeddings but remain invariant under structural symmetry. Hence, automorphisms prevent expressive enhancement.

Key Observation:
Architectures that do not use *injective aggregation + injective update functions* fall below 1-WL in distinguishing power.
GIN: Achieving the Full Power of 1-WL
The Graph Isomorphism Network (GIN) was explicitly designed to achieve WL-level expressiveness.
Why GIN Works:

1. Injective Aggregation (Sum):
   Sum aggregation preserves complete multiset information.
2. Injective Update Functions (MLPs):
   MLPs approximate arbitrary set functions, ensuring distinct neighborhood structures remain separable.
3. ε-Learning Trick:
   The learnable ε parameter avoids embedding collapse under regularity conditions.

Result:
GIN achieves the maximum expressive power possible for any message-passing GNN:
GIN ≡ 1-WL Test.
Surpassing WL: Higher-Order GNNs and k-WL Expressiveness
Standard GNNs cannot match 2-WL or higher levels, but higher-order GNNs can.
Mechanisms used:

- k-tuples of nodes (k-GNNs):
  Model pairwise and multi-node interactions → approximates k-WL.
- Permutation-equivariant tensor networks: Encode higher-order relational structures.
- Subgraph GNNs:
  Capture rooted or induced substructures, which 1-WL cannot.

Key Insight:
Higher-order GNNs break structural symmetries by looking at combinations of nodes and neighborhoods, not just individual nodes.
Hierarchy Summary:

Model Type	Expressive Power
GCN / GAT	< 1-WL
GIN	= 1-WL
k-GNN	= k-WL
Tensor GNN	≥ k-WL
Subgraph GNN	> 1-WL, near k-WL

Role of Positional Encodings in Breaking WL Limitations
GNNs augmented with positional encodings (PEs), such as:

- Laplacian eigenvectors,
- Random-walk features,
- Weisfeiler–Lehman initial labels,

often exceed 1-WL expressiveness.
Why PEs Help:

- PEs break graph symmetries by injecting external structural information.
- They provide initial node distinctions not discoverable by WL.
- They help GNNs distinguish nodes lying in identical automorphism orbits.

Implication:
PE-enhanced GNNs offer practical expressive power even if theoretically outside the pure WL framework.
Unified Interpretation: WL as the Backbone of GNN Expressiveness
All observations lead to a unified theoretical interpretation:

- GNNs replicate WL refinement in a differentiable manner.
- WL provides the combinatorial boundary of what GNNs can express.
- Higher-order GNNs expand expressiveness by moving to k-tuples, subgraphs, or multi-node relations.

Thus, WL hierarchies form the *mathematical backbone* of GNN expressive power.

6. CONCLUSION

The comparative study of Graph Neural Network (GNN) architectures and the Weisfeiler–Lehman (WL) hierarchy offers a unified theoretical perspective on graph distinguishability and representation learning. Through the analysis presented in this work, it becomes evident that the expressive capabilities of classical message-passing GNNs are intrinsically tied to the structural limitations of the 1-WL color refinement test. Despite differences in architectural details, standard GNNs fundamentally operate through permutation-invariant neighborhood aggregation, which mirrors the refinement process of 1-WL and naturally restricts their ability to distinguish certain symmetric or regular graph families.

The Graph Isomorphism Network (GIN) stands out as the most expressive among message-passing models, achieving theoretical equivalence with 1-WL by employing injective aggregation and update mechanisms. However, even GIN inherits the ceiling of 1-WL and cannot surpass its expressive boundaries. This constraint motivates the exploration of higher-order GNNs, such as k-GNNs, tensor-based architectures, and subgraph-level models, which successfully extend expressive power by capturing multi-node interactions and structural asymmetries. These architectures align more closely with the higher-order WL hierarchy, enabling them to distinguish graph classes that standard GNNs and 1-WL fail to separate.

Furthermore, the study highlights the transformative role of positional encodings, spectral initializations, and subgraph extraction techniques in overcoming WL-based limitations. By injecting external structure or focusing on localized patterns, augmented GNNs are able to partially break graph symmetries and improve representational power without fully adopting higher-order tensor operations. This demonstrates that practical expressive enhancements often arise from hybrid strategies rather than purely theoretical hierarchies.

Overall, the findings establish that WL refinement provides a fundamental theoretical backbone for understanding GNN expressiveness. It serves both as a benchmark and a conceptual framework for evaluating graph-learning models. The path forward for designing more powerful GNN architectures lies in bridging combinatorial principles with differentiable computation—leveraging higher-order reasoning, structural encodings, and symmetry-breaking mechanisms. This unified perspective deepens our understanding of graph representation learning and sets the foundation for the development of next-generation GNN models capable of addressing increasingly complex graph-based tasks.

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