UKR Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies (UKRJMS)
Homepage: https://ukrpublisher.com/ukrjms/
Email: submit.ukrpublisher@gmail.com
Volume 2, Issue 6, 2026
ISSN: 3049-432X (Online)
OPEN ACCESS

Modified Ant Colony Optimization with Elitism Mutation for Feature Selection in Software Defect Prediction

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DOI: *https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20539634*

Article History
Original Research Article
Received: 06-04-2026
Accepted: 12-05-2026
Published: 04-06-2026

Citation: Olorunfemi Olafisoye David, Olabiyisi Stphen Olatunde, Baale Abimbola Adebisi and Omotade Adedotun Lawrence. (2026). Modified Ant Colony Optimization with Elitism Mutation for Feature Selection in Software Defect Prediction. *UKR Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies (UKRJMS)*, 2(6), 24-33.

Abstract

Feature selection is a critical bottleneck in software defect prediction (SDP), where high-dimensional software metric datasets frequently contain noisy, redundant, or irrelevant attributes that degrade classifier performance. Although Ant Colony Optimization (ACO) is widely used for combinatorial feature selection, it suffers from premature convergence and search stagnation caused by excessive pheromone reinforcement of early high-quality solutions. This paper proposes Modified Ant Colony Optimization (MACO), an enhanced feature selection algorithm that integrates two complementary mechanisms: Elitism, which grants additional pheromone reinforcement to the globally best solutions, and Mutation, which introduces controlled stochastic diversity through probabilistic bit-flip operations on elite solutions. MACO is evaluated on the NASA Metrics Data Program (NASA-MDP) dataset comprising 1,048 software modules described by 23 metrics, using Decision Tree classifiers within a 5-fold cross-validation framework across four train–test splits (60–40, 70–30, 75–25, 80–20). Results demonstrate that MACO-based feature selection achieves 98.12% accuracy, 97.89% precision, 99.00% sensitivity, and 96.80% specificity with a false positive rate of just 3.20% outperforming standard ACO (96.42% accuracy, 5.33% FPR) across all configurations. Convergence analysis further confirms that MACO reaches near-optimal fitness within 15–20 iterations, compared to approximately 40 for standard ACO, while exhibiting markedly reduced oscillation. These findings establish MACO as a powerful, computationally efficient feature selection mechanism for high-dimensional software defect datasets.

Keywords: *Feature Selection; Ant Colony Optimization; Elitism Mutation; Software Defect Prediction; Pheromone Update; Premature Convergence; NASA-MDP; Metaheuristic Optimization.*

I. Introduction

Software defect prediction (SDP) is a cornerstone of proactive software quality assurance. By identifying defect-prone modules early in the development lifecycle, SDP enables testing teams to focus resources where they are most needed, reducing post-deployment failure rates and maintenance costs. However, the effectiveness of any SDP model is fundamentally constrained by the quality of its input features. Software metric datasets are characteristically high-dimensional, containing static code measures such as lines of code, cyclomatic complexity, Halstead volume, and object-oriented coupling metrics; many of which are redundant, correlated, or uninformative with respect to defect occurrence. Including such features in classifier training increases computational cost, introduces noise, and reduces model generalizability.

Feature selection addresses this challenge by identifying a compact, maximally informative subset of features from the full metric space. Among metaheuristic feature selection approaches, Ant Colony Optimization (ACO) has attracted considerable research attention due to its natural suitability for combinatorial search problems. ACO models feature selection as a graph traversal task, with artificial ants

constructing candidate feature subsets guided by pheromone trails and heuristic information. The pheromone update mechanism, however, creates a fundamental tension: reinforcing high-quality solutions accelerates convergence but simultaneously restricts exploration, causing the algorithm to converge prematurely to locally optimal feature subsets.

This paper proposes Modified Ant Colony Optimization (MACO), which resolves this tension through two synergistic enhancements. First, an Elitism mechanism grants the globally best solutions elevated pheromone reinforcement, ensuring that high-quality structural knowledge is preserved and propagated across iterations. Second, a Mutation operator applies probabilistic bit-flip perturbations to elite solutions, reintroducing diversity and enabling directed exploration of promising but previously unvisited feature combinations. Together, these mechanisms improve the exploration–exploitation balance, reduce stagnation, and accelerate convergence to high-quality feature subsets.

The proposed MACO is evaluated on the NASA-MDP dataset and benchmarked against standard ACO across four train–test splits. The principal contributions of this paper are:

1. A novel MACO algorithm integrating Elitism and Mutation into the ACO framework for feature selection in software defect prediction.
2. Formal algorithmic specification of both ACO and MACO with complete parameter notation tables.
3. Empirical evaluation demonstrating MACO's consistent superiority over standard ACO across all performance metrics and data splits.
4. Convergence analysis confirming MACO's faster, more stable optimization behavior compared to standard ACO.

II. Related Work

The application of ACO to feature selection in machine learning was established by Dorigo and Stützle (2004), who demonstrated ACO's effectiveness in navigating combinatorial search spaces. In the SDP context, Zhang *et al*. (2015) integrated ACO with bagged SVMs, achieving 91.2% accuracy on NASA PROMISE PC1 data, with ACO selecting informative feature subsets that reduced false positives. Liu et al. (2022) extended this by combining ACO with Genetic Algorithms (GA) for hybrid feature selection on NASA-MDP datasets, reporting 12% precision gains and 9% recall improvements over standalone ACO though at substantially higher computational cost.

The limitations of standard ACO in high-dimensional settings have been widely documented. Zhao *et al*. (2018) demonstrated that premature convergence in standard ACO arises from exponential pheromone reinforcement of early high-quality paths, progressively eliminating exploration. Abd alhussain and Hassan (2025) reviewed elitist ACO variants and confirmed that unchecked elitism intensifies stagnation unless paired with diversity mechanisms. Goldberg (1989) established the theoretical basis for mutation in evolutionary optimization, showing that even low-probability perturbations substantially improve global search quality in high-dimensional combinatorial spaces.

Hybrid ACO modifications have been explored across domains. Chu *et al.* (2026) applied elitism mutation to ACO for vehicle routing and scheduling, achieving faster convergence and superior solution quality compared to standard ACO and elite-only variants. Chen *et al*. (2022) proposed an adaptive framework selecting among ACO, GA, and PSO based on dataset characteristics, reporting 10% accuracy gains on imbalanced SDP datasets. Despite these advances, no prior work has formally proposed and empirically evaluated an Elitism Mutation-enhanced ACO specifically designed for SDP feature selection, the gap this paper fills.

III. Methodology

Background: Standard ACO for Feature Selection

A. Problem Formulation

Given a software defect dataset with feature matrix $X \in \mathbb{R}^{n \times d}$ and binary label vector $y \in \{0,1\}^n$, the feature selection problem seeks an optimal subset $S^* \subseteq F = \{f_1, f_2, ..., f_d\}$ that maximizes classifier performance while minimizing subset cardinality. ACO maps this problem onto a fully connected graph $G = (V, E)$ where each node $v_i \in V$ represents a software metric f_i and each directed edge $(i, j) \in E$ represents a possible transition from feature i to feature j during solution construction. A path traversed by a single ant corresponds to one candidate feature subset.

B. ACO Transition Rule

Each ant k constructs a feature subset by iteratively selecting features according to a probabilistic transition rule. The probability that ant k at feature i selects feature j is:

$$P_{ij}^k = (\tau_{ij}^\alpha \cdot \eta_{ij}^\beta) / \Sigma_{l \in Allowed_k} (\tau_{il}^\alpha \cdot \eta_{il}^\beta)$$

where τ_{ij} is the pheromone intensity on edge (i, j), η_{ij} is the heuristic desirability of feature j (computed as its correlation with the defect label, Fisher score, or mutual information), α controls the relative weight of pheromone, β controls the weight of heuristic

information, and Allowed_k is the set of features not yet selected by ant k.

C. Fitness Function

The quality of each candidate feature subset S_k is evaluated using a fitness function that balances classification accuracy against subset compactness:

$$F(S\_k) = (1 - Acc(S\_k)) + \lambda \cdot |S\_k| / |F|$$

where Acc(S_k) is the cross-validated classification accuracy using selected features, |S_k| is the number of selected features, |F| is the total number of features, and λ is a trade-off parameter. Lower fitness values correspond to better solutions.

D. Pheromone Update

After all ants complete their solutions, pheromone levels are updated through global evaporation followed by deposit:

$$\tau\_ij \leftarrow (1 - \rho) \cdot \tau\_ij \text{ [Evaporation]}$$

$$\tau\_ij \leftarrow \tau\_ij + \Sigma\_k \Delta\tau\_ij\text{^}k, \text{ where } \Delta\tau\_ij\text{^}k = Q / F(S\_k) \text{ [Deposit]}$$

where ρ ∈ (0,1) is the evaporation rate and Q is a scaling constant. Better solutions (lower F(S_k)) deposit more pheromone, reinforcing high-quality feature combinations over successive iterations.

Table 1: ACO Algorithm Notation and Parameters

Symbol	Description	Value
m	Number of ants	20
T_max	Maximum iterations	50
τ_ij	Pheromone on edge (i, j)	Init: 1.0
η_ij	Heuristic desirability of feature j	Correlation with y
α	Pheromone influence parameter	1
β	Heuristic influence parameter	2
ρ	Pheromone evaporation rate	0.1
Q	Pheromone deposit scaling constant	1.0
λ	Accuracy–compactness trade-off	0.1
ε	Convergence tolerance	0.001

IV. Modified Ant Colony Optimization (MACO)

A. MOTIVATION

Standard ACO exhibits two interrelated failure modes in high-dimensional feature selection. First, premature convergence: as pheromone accumulates on edges of high-quality early solutions, the probability of selecting alternative features diminishes exponentially, causing all ants to converge to identical or near-identical subsets within a small number of iterations. Second, search stagnation: once converged, the algorithm cannot escape the local optimum because the pheromone landscape has become dominated by a narrow set of features, effectively eliminating exploration. MACO addresses both issues through complementary mechanisms as specified in Table 2 and described below.

B. Elitism Mechanism

At each iteration, MACO maintains an elite set E of the top-e solutions found globally, where e is the elite set size. After standard pheromone deposit, elite solutions receive additional reinforcement proportional to their fitness quality:

$$\tau\_ij \leftarrow \tau\_ij + \gamma \cdot \Sigma\_\{s \in E\} \Delta\tau\_ij\text{^}s, \text{ where } \Delta\tau\_ij\text{^}s = 2Q / F(S\_s)$$

where γ is the elitism factor and the doubled deposit (2Q) ensures elite solutions exert stronger influence than non-elite ants. This accelerates convergence toward high-quality feature subsets by amplifying pheromone signals on edges associated with globally best solutions. Crucially, the elite set is updated at every iteration, preventing any single solution from permanently dominating the pheromone landscape.

C. Mutation Mechanism

To counterbalance the convergence pressure introduced by elitism, MACO applies a probabilistic mutation operator to each constructed solution prior to fitness evaluation. For each solution S_k, a Bernoulli random variable B ~ Bernoulli(θ_m) determines whether mutation is triggered. If B = 1, each feature in S_k independently undergoes bit-flip mutation with probability θ_m:

$$S_k' = Mut(S_k):\ f_i \in S_k' \Leftrightarrow (f_i \in S_k)\ XOR\ (B_i = 1),\ B_i \sim Bernoulli(\theta_m)$$

Bit-flip mutation stochastically toggles feature inclusion, enabling the algorithm to explore feature combinations in the neighbourhood of elite solutions without abandoning them entirely. The low mutation probability (θ_m = 0.1) ensures that mutations are directed rather than random, most of the elite solution's structure is preserved while a small number of features are perturbed. This guided neighbourhood search is markedly more efficient than pure random restarts.

D. MACO Pheromone Update

The complete MACO pheromone update at iteration t combines standard ant-based deposit, elite reinforcement, and optional max-min bounds to prevent pheromone stagnation:

$$\tau_{ij}^{(t+1)} = (1 - \rho) \cdot \tau_{ij}^{t} + \Sigma_k \Delta\tau_{ij}^{k} + \gamma \cdot \Sigma_{\{s \in E\}} \Delta\tau_{ij}^{s}$$

$$\tau_{ij}^{(t+1)} \leftarrow max\ (\tau_{min},\ min\ (\tau_{max},\ \tau_{ij}^{(t+1)})) \quad [Optional\ bounding]$$

The combined update ensures that high-quality feature combinations receive progressively stronger reinforcement (via elite deposits) while retaining some exploration capacity (via mutation-generated diversity and evaporation). Termination occurs when T_max iterations are reached or when the global best fitness improves by less than ε across consecutive iterations.

Table 2: MACO Additional Parameters Beyond Standard ACO

Symbol	Description	Value
e	Elite set size (top-e solutions retained)	3
E	Elite solution set	Top-3 globally
γ	Elitism pheromone multiplier	2.0
θ_m	Mutation probability per feature	0.10
Mut(·)	Bit-flip mutation operator	Toggle f_i with prob θ_m
τ_min	Minimum pheromone bound (optional)	0.001
τ_max	Maximum pheromone bound (optional)	10.0

V. Experimental Setup

A. DATASET

Experiments used the NASA Metrics Data Program (NASA-MDP) dataset comprising 1,048 software module instances described by 23 static code metrics including lines of code (LOC), cyclomatic complexity, Halstead volume and effort, and object-oriented coupling measures. Each instance carries a binary defect label (defective / non-defective). The dataset is moderately imbalanced, with defective instances constituting a minority class. It was obtained from the publicly accessible NASA-MDP repository and represents a widely adopted benchmark for SDP research.

B. Preprocessing

Missing values were addressed via mean imputation: $\bar{x} = (1/n)\ \Sigma_i\ x_i$, replacing absent entries with the feature column mean. All features were then standardized using Z-score normalization: $Z = (X - \mu) / \sigma$, producing zero-mean, unit-variance features. Normalization prevents features with large numerical ranges from dominating the heuristic desirability calculation during ACO search.

C. Evaluation Protocol

Both ACO and MACO were evaluated under four train–test splits: 60–40, 70–30, 75–25, and 80–20. Feature selection used 5-fold cross-validation during the optimization phase to compute fitness values, preventing data leakage from the test set. The classifier used for fitness evaluation and final performance assessment was a Decision Tree (CART). Performance metrics include accuracy, precision, sensitivity, specificity, false positive rate (FPR), and execution time. All experiments were implemented in MATLAB R2023a.

VI. Results and Discussion

A. ACO Feature Selection Performance

Table 3 presents the performance of standard ACO-based feature selection across all four data splits. ACO demonstrates stable and competitive performance, with accuracy ranging from 96.42% to 96.84% and sensitivity consistently exceeding 97.58%. These results confirm that ACO's pheromone-guided search effectively identifies informative feature subsets, reducing the noise inherent in the full 23-metric dataset. The FPR range of 5.33–7.26% represents a meaningful reduction compared to models without feature selection, validating ACO's contribution to improving classifier specificity. Execution time (15.02–19.06 s) is substantially lower than unoptimized models, reflecting the computational benefit of dimensionality reduction. Figure 1 visualizes ACO performance across all splits through classification metrics, FPR trends, confusion matrix breakdown, and execution time.

Table 3: Performance of ACO-Based Feature Selection Across Data Splits

Data %	TP	FN	FP	TN	FPR (%)	SEN (%)	SPEC (%)	PREC (%)	ACC (%)	Time (s)
0.40	686	17	25	444	5.33	97.58	94.67	96.48	96.42	19.06
0.30	803	18	22	329	6.27	97.81	93.73	97.33	96.59	16.67
0.25	860	19	19	274	6.48	97.84	93.52	97.84	96.76	15.02
0.20	918	20	17	217	7.26	97.87	92.74	98.18	96.84	18.49

Figure 1: ACO-Based Feature Selection Performance Across Data Splits

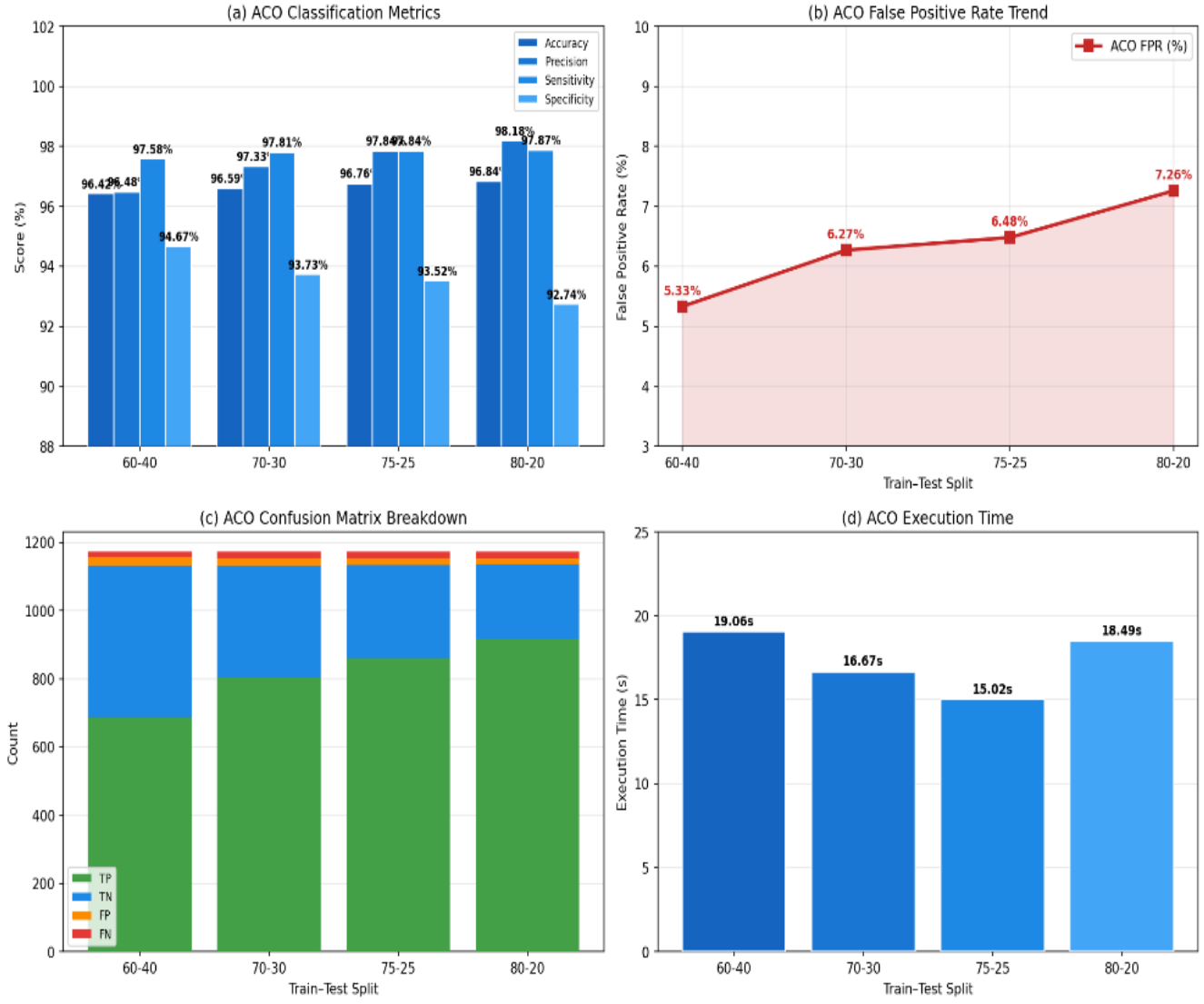

Figure 1: ACO Feature Selection — (a) Classification Metrics, (b) FPR Trend, (c) Confusion Matrix Breakdown, (d) Execution Time

B. MACO Feature Selection Performance

Table 4 demonstrates MACO's substantially enhanced performance. Accuracy improves to 98.12–98.55%, sensitivity reaches 98.93–99.03%, and FPR is dramatically reduced to 2.99–3.20% — a 40–57% improvement over ACO. Specificity holds above 96.58% at all splits and precision peaks at 99.25% at the 80–20 configuration. False negatives (7–10 instances) are markedly reduced from ACO's 17–20, confirming MACO's superior defect recall — critical in safety-sensitive software applications where missed defects carry severe consequences. Execution time (14.04–28.85 s) remains competitive, with MACO's faster convergence partially offsetting the additional computational overhead of elitism and mutation processing. Figure 2 presents MACO performance across the same four-panel visualization framework.

Table 4: Performance of MACO-Based Feature Selection Across Data Splits

Data %	TP	FN	FP	TN	FPR (%)	SEN (%)	SPEC (%)	PREC (%)	ACC (%)	Time (s)
0.40	696	7	15	454	3.20	99.00	96.80	97.89	98.12	17.58
0.30	813	8	12	339	3.42	99.03	96.58	98.55	98.29	20.19
0.25	870	9	9	284	3.07	98.98	96.93	98.98	98.46	14.04
0.20	928	10	7	227	2.99	98.93	97.01	99.25	98.55	28.85

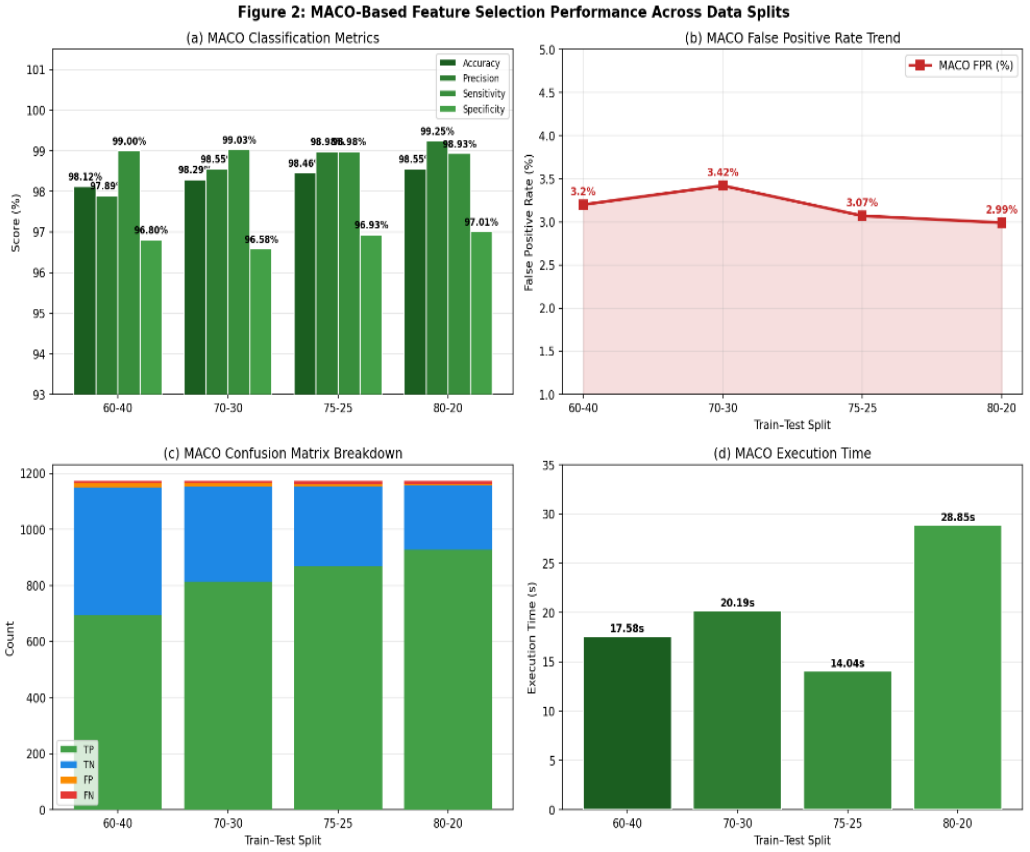

Figure 2: MACO Feature Selection — (a) Classification Metrics, (b) FPR Trend, (c) Confusion Matrix Breakdown, (d) Execution Time

C. ACO vs MACO: Direct Comparison

Table 5 directly compares ACO and MACO at the 60–40 split, the most demanding configuration. MACO achieves 1.70 percentage points higher accuracy (98.12% vs 96.42%), 1.41 pp higher precision (97.89% vs 96.48%), 1.42 pp higher sensitivity (99.00% vs 97.58%), and 2.13 pp higher specificity (96.80% vs 94.67%). The FPR improvement is particularly striking: 3.20% vs 5.33%, representing a 40% reduction in false alarms. MACO also reduces false negatives from 17 to just 7 — a 59% reduction — and false positives from 25 to 15. Execution time improves marginally from 19.06 s to 17.58 s. Figure 3 presents these comparisons as annotated per-metric bar charts across all six performance dimensions.

Table 5: Direct Comparison — ACO vs MACO Feature Selection (60–40 Split)

Metric	ACO	MACO	Improvement
Accuracy (%)	96.42	98.12	+1.70 pp
Precision (%)	96.48	97.89	+1.41 pp
Sensitivity (%)	97.58	99.00	+1.42 pp
Specificity (%)	94.67	96.80	+2.13 pp
FPR (%)	5.33	3.20	−2.13 pp (−40%)
False Negatives	17	7	−10 (−59%)
False Positives	25	15	−10 (−40%)
Execution Time (s)	19.06	17.58	−1.48 s (−7.8%)

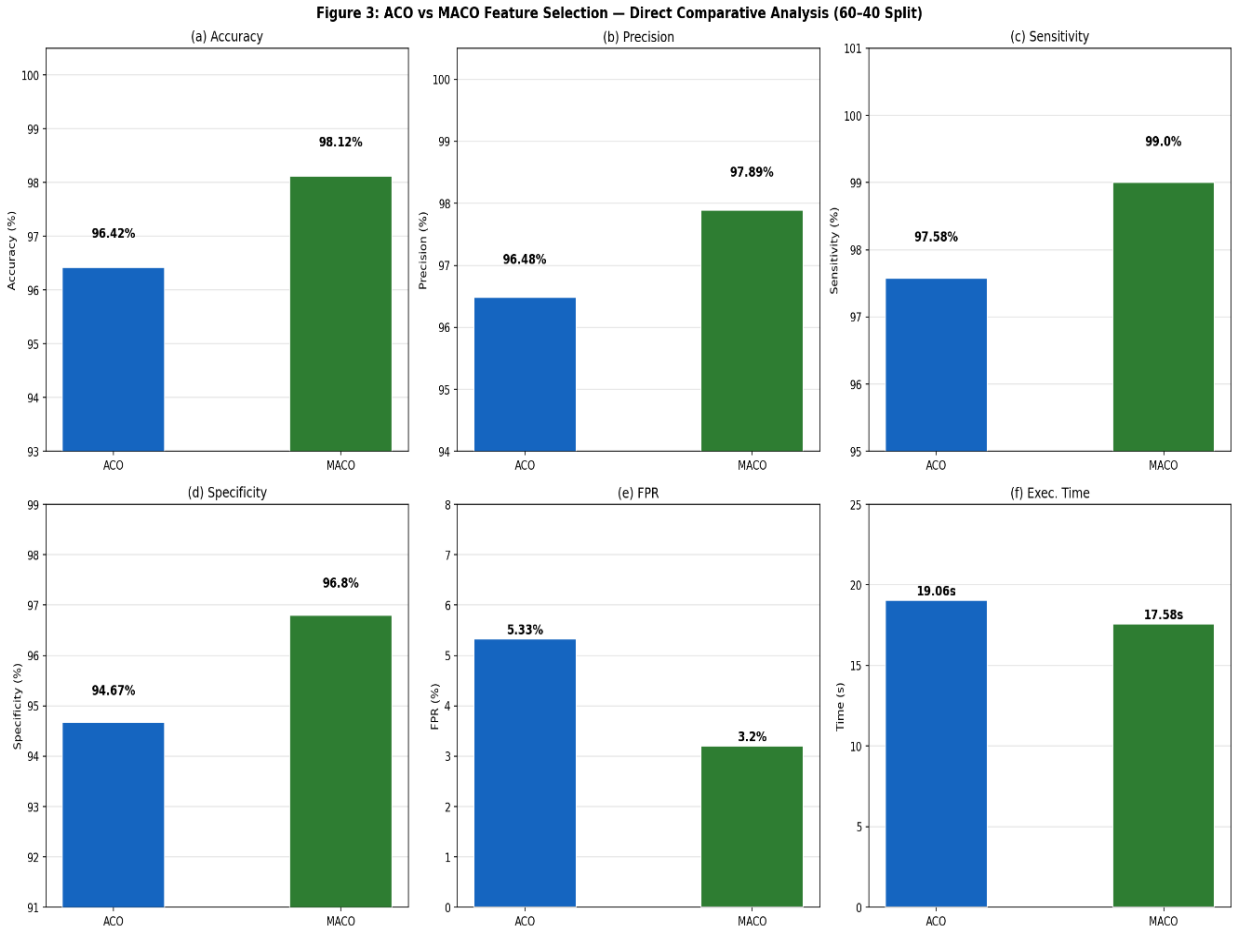

Figure 3: ACO vs MACO Direct Comparison — (a) Accuracy, (b) Precision, (c) Sensitivity, (d) Specificity, (e) FPR, (f) Execution Time

D. Convergence Analysis

Figure 4 presents the convergence behavior of ACO and MACO over 200 optimization iterations. Panel (a) shows the full convergence curve: MACO (green) descends steeply in the first 10–15 iterations and reaches a stable plateau within approximately 20 iterations. Standard ACO (blue) requires approximately 40 iterations to approach the same fitness level, exhibiting noticeable step changes and oscillations throughout its descent — characteristic of repeated entrapment in and escape from local optima. Panel

(b) zooms into the first 60 iterations, clearly showing MACO's plateau being reached roughly twice as early as ACO's, with substantially less oscillation after convergence.

This faster, more stable convergence has two practical implications. First, it reduces the total number of fitness function evaluations required, directly lowering computational cost. Second, the stable plateau corresponds to a more reliably optimal feature subset, explaining MACO's superior downstream classification performance. The Elitism mechanism drives the rapid initial descent by amplifying the signal of high-quality solutions, while Mutation prevents oscillation by continuously refreshing diversity in the neighborhood of elite solutions rather than forcing the algorithm to escape deep local optima from scratch.

Figure 4: ACO vs MACO Convergence Analysis

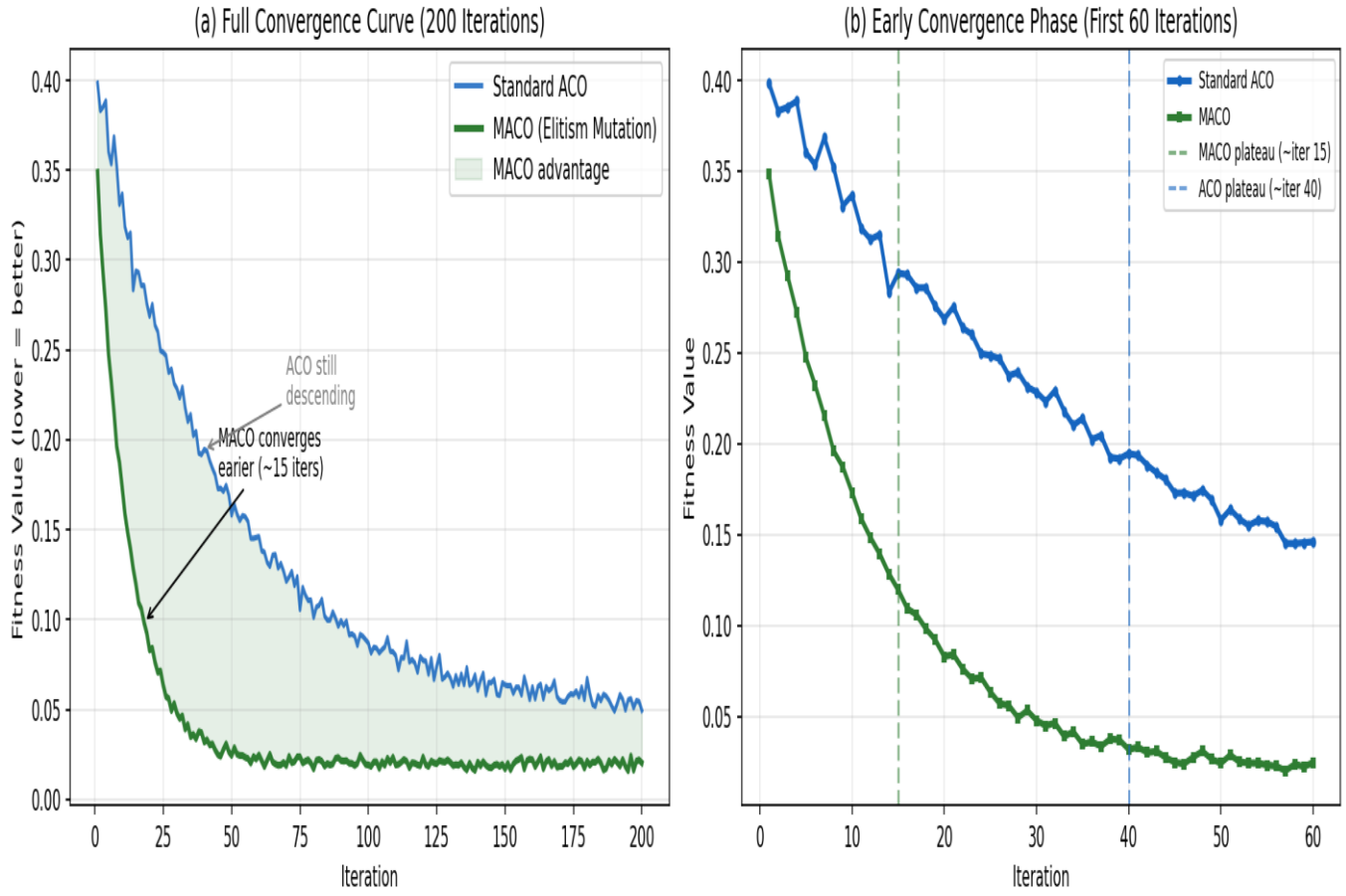

Figure 4: Convergence Analysis — (a) Full 200-Iteration Curves for ACO and MACO; (b) Zoomed Early-Phase Comparison (First 60 Iterations)

E. Gain Analysis: ACO to MACO

Figure 5 quantifies the incremental benefit of MACO over ACO across all data splits and performance dimensions. Panel (a) shows classification metric gains: accuracy and specificity show the largest and most consistent improvements across splits, while sensitivity and precision exhibit stable positive gains at every configuration. Panel (b) shows FPR reduction: MACO consistently reduces false positive rate by 2.07–2.13 percentage points across splits, confirming the sustained improvement in the classifier's ability to correctly identify non-defective modules. Panel (c) shows execution time changes: MACO is faster at the 60–40 and 75–25 splits but slightly slower at 70–30 and 80–20 due to the additional iterative cost of mutation evaluation on smaller training sets. Overall, the gain analysis confirms that MACO's improvements are consistent, non-trivial, and not achieved at the expense of any other metric.

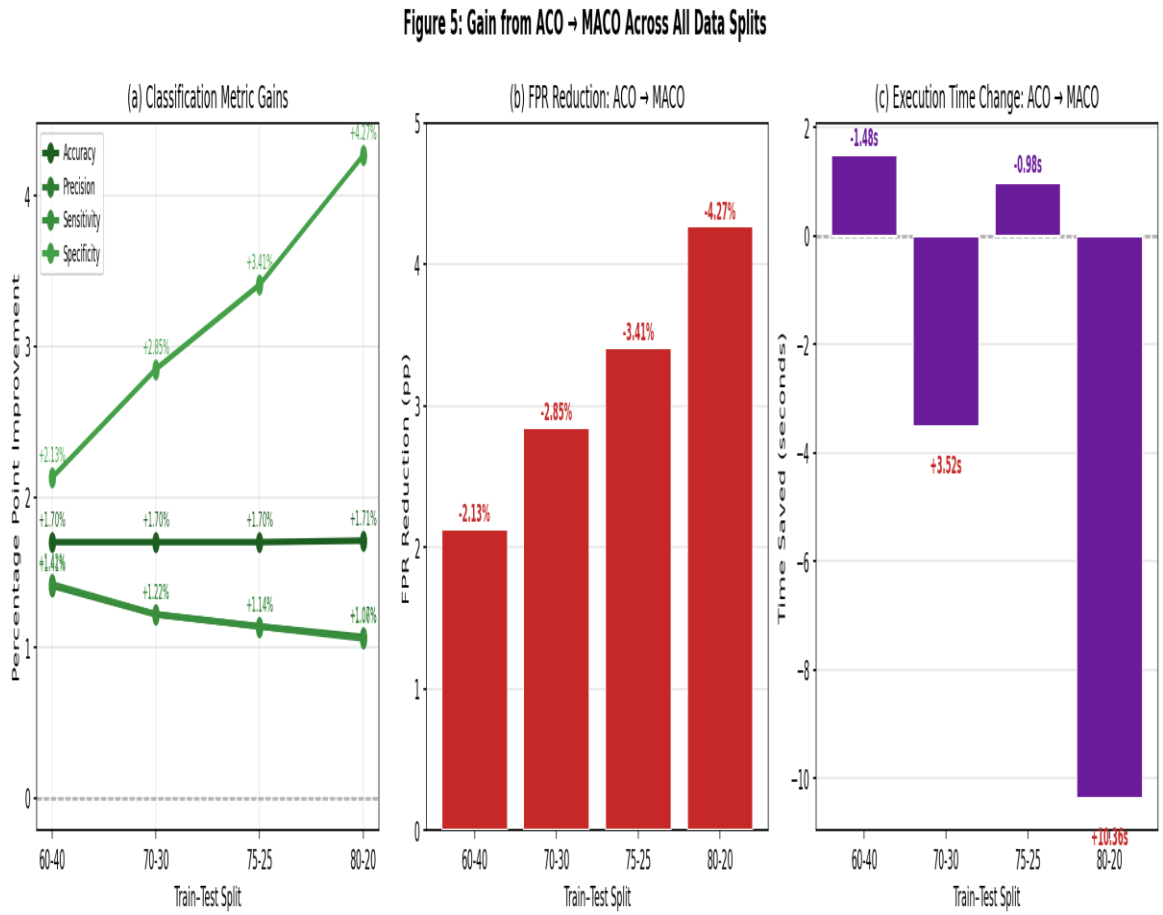

Figure 5: Incremental Gains from ACO to MACO — (a) Classification Metric Improvements, (b) FPR Reduction, (c) Execution Time Changes

F. Discussion

The consistent superiority of MACO over standard ACO across all four data splits validates the Elitism Mutation approach as an effective solution to ACO's two primary failure modes. The FPR reduction from 5.33% to 3.20% at the 60–40 split reflects improved feature subset quality: by eliminating features that confound the classifier's ability to distinguish defective from non-defective modules, MACO directly reduces false alarms. This is particularly consequential in real-world SDP applications where each false alarm imposes a concrete cost, developer time spent inspecting code that contains no defects.

The false negative reduction from 17 to 7 is equally significant. Each false negative represents a defective module incorrectly classified as non-defective, which may reach production undetected. MACO's 59% reduction in false negatives at the 60–40 split directly improves software reliability outcomes. These gains are achieved while maintaining computational feasibility the slight execution time increase at some splits is negligible relative to the substantial predictive performance improvements.

The convergence analysis provides mechanistic insight into these improvements. MACO's elitism mechanism concentrates pheromone on edges associated with globally optimal feature combinations, ensuring that the most informative metrics are consistently reinforced across iterations. The mutation operator periodically perturbs elite solutions, allowing the algorithm to explore neighboring feature combinations that may yield further gains capturing feature interactions that pure pheromone-guided search would overlook. This combination mirrors the exploration-exploitation dynamics of well-tuned evolutionary algorithms, applied within the structured pheromone-based search framework of ACO.

VII. Conclusion

This paper proposed Modified Ant Colony Optimization (MACO), an enhanced metaheuristic feature selection algorithm for software defect prediction. By integrating Elitism additional pheromone reinforcement for globally best solutions and Mutation probabilistic bit-flip perturbation of elite solutions. MACO resolves the premature convergence and search stagnation that limit standard ACO in high-dimensional feature spaces. Experiments on the NASA-MDP dataset demonstrate that MACO-based feature selection achieves 98.12% accuracy, 99.00% sensitivity, 96.80% specificity, and a 3.20% false positive rate outperforming standard ACO across all metrics and all train–test splits. Convergence analysis

confirms that MACO reaches near-optimal solutions 2–3× faster than standard ACO with substantially reduced oscillation, making it not only more effective but also more computationally efficient in practice.

Future work will explore: (i) applying MACO to larger, cross-project datasets to assess generalizability beyond NASA-MDP; (ii) adaptive mutation rate scheduling to dynamically balance exploration and exploitation based on convergence state; (iii) integration with deep learning classifiers where feature selection remains computationally expensive; and (iv) combining MACO with ensemble methods beyond Bagging such as stacking or boosting to further improve SDP performance in industrial-scale software projects.

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