Computing Tree Decompositions with Small Independence Number

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Abstract

The independence number of a tree decomposition is the maximum of the independence numbers of the subgraphs induced by its bags. The tree-independence number of a graph is the minimum independence number of a tree decomposition of it. Several NP-hard graph problems, like maximum weight independent set, can be solved in time $n^{O(k)}$ if the input $n$-vertex graph is given together with a tree decomposition of independence number $k$. Yolov in [SODA 2018] gave an algorithm that given an $n$-vertex graph $G$ and an integer $k$, in time $n^{O(k^3)}$ either constructs a tree decomposition of $G$ whose independence number is $O(k^3)$ or correctly reports that the tree-independence number of $G$ is larger than $k$.

In this paper, we first give an algorithm for computing the tree-independence number with a better approximation ratio and running time and then prove that our algorithm is, in some sense, the best one can hope for. More precisely, our algorithm runs in time $2^{O(k^2)}n^{O(k)}$ and either outputs a tree decomposition of $G$ with independence number at most $8k$, or determines that the tree-independence number of $G$ is larger than $k$. This implies $2^{O(k^2)}n^{O(k)}$-time algorithms for various problems, like maximum weight independent set, parameterized by the tree-independence number $k$ without needing the decomposition as an input. Assuming Gap-ETH, an $n^{\Omega(k)}$ factor in the running time is unavoidable for any approximation algorithm for the tree-independence number.

Our second result is that the exact computation of the tree-independence number is para-NP-hard: We show that for every constant $k \geq 4$ it is NP-hard to decide if a given graph has the tree-independence number at most $k$.

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1 Introduction

Tree decompositions are among the most popular tools in graph algorithms. The crucial property of tree decompositions exploited in the majority of dynamic programming algorithms is that each bag of the decomposition can interact with an optimal solution only in a bounded number of vertices. The common measure of a tree decomposition is the width, that is, the maximum size of a bag in the decomposition (minus 1). The corresponding graph parameter is the treewidth of a graph. Many problems that are intractable on general graphs can be solved efficiently when the treewidth of a graph is bounded.

However, it is not always the size of a bag that matters. For example, suppose that every bag of the decomposition is a clique, that is, the graph is chordal. Since every independent set intersects each of the clique-bags in at most one vertex, dynamic programming still computes maximum weight independent sets in such graphs in polynomial time even if the bags could be arbitrarily large. An elegant approach to capturing such properties of tree decompositions is the notion of the tree-independence number of a graph. The \( \text{tree-independence number} \) of a graph \( G \), denoted by \( \text{tree-} \alpha(G) \), is the minimum independence number of a tree decomposition of \( G \). In particular, the tree-independence number of a chordal graph is at most one, and for any graph \( G \), the value \( \text{tree-} \alpha(G) \) does not exceed the treewidth of \( G \) (plus 1) or the independence number \( \alpha(G) \) of \( G \).

The family of graph classes with bounded tree-independence number forms a significant generalization of graph classes with bounded treewidth. It also contains dense graphs classes, including graph classes with bounded independence number; classes of intersection graphs of connected subgraphs of graphs with bounded treewidth, studied by Bodlaender, Gustedt, and Telle [6], which in particular include classes of \( H \)-graphs, that is, intersection graphs of connected subgraphs of a subdivision of a fixed multigraph \( H \), introduced in 1992 by Bíró, Hujter, and Tuza [4] and studied more recently in a number of papers [8, 9, 22]; classes of graphs in which all minimal separators have bounded size, studied by Skodinis in 1999 [38]; and, more generally, classes of graphs in which all minimal separators induce subgraphs with bounded independence number, studied by Dallard, Milanič, and Štorgel [15].

Our results. Yolov [40] gave an algorithm that for a given \( n \)-vertex graph \( G \) and integer \( k \), in time \( n^{O(k^3)} \) either constructs a tree decomposition of \( G \) whose independence number is \( O(k^3) \) or correctly reports that the tree-independence number of \( G \) is larger than \( k \). Our first main result is the following improvement over Yolov’s algorithm.

▶ Theorem 1. There is an algorithm that, given an \( n \)-vertex graph \( G \) and an integer \( k \), in time \( 2^{O(k^2)} n^{O(k)} \) either outputs a tree decomposition of \( G \) with independence number at most \( 8k \), or concludes that the tree-independence number of \( G \) is larger than \( k \).

The performance of the algorithm from Theorem 1 (the running time and the need of approximation) are in some sense optimal, for the following reasons. First, by a simple reduction that given an \( n \)-vertex graph \( G \) produces a \( 2n \)-vertex graph \( G' \) with \( \text{tree-} \alpha(G') = \alpha(G) \) hardness results for the independence number (or clique) translate into hardness results for the tree-independence number. In particular, from the result of Lin [30] it follows that a constant-factor approximation of the tree-independence number is \( \text{W[1]} \)-hard, and from the result of Chalermsook, Cygan, Kortsarz, Laekhanukit, Manurangsi, Nanongkai,
and Trevisan [7] it follows that assuming Gap-ETH\(^1\), there is no \(f(k) \cdot n^{\alpha(k)}\)-time \(g(k)\)-approximation algorithm for the tree-independence number for any computable functions \(f\) and \(g\). In particular, the time complexity obtained in Theorem 1 is optimal in the sense that an \(n^{O(k)}\) factor is unavoidable assuming Gap-ETH, even if the approximation ratio would be drastically weakened.

The above arguments do not exclude the possibility of exact computation of the tree-independence number in time \(n^{f(k)}\) for some function \(f\). The computational complexity of recognizing graphs with the tree-independence numbers at most \(k\) for a fixed integer \(k \geq 2\) was asked as an open problem by Dallard, Milanič, and Štorgel [15, Question 8.3]\(^2\). While for values \(k = 2\) and \(k = 3\) the question remains open, our next result resolves it for any constant \(k \geq 4\).\(^3\)

\[\boxed{\text{Theorem 2 } (\star). \text{ For every constant } k \geq 4, \text{ it is NP-complete to decide whether } \text{tree-}\alpha(G) \leq k \text{ for a given graph } G.}\]

Let us observe that Theorem 2 implies also that, assuming \(P \neq NP\), there is no \(n^{f(k)}\)-time approximation algorithm for the tree-independence number with approximation ratio less than \(5/4\).

We supplement our main results with a second NP-completeness proof for a problem closely related to computing the tree-independence number and the algorithm of Theorem 1. We consider the problem where we are given a graph \(G\), two non-adjacent vertices \(u\) and \(v\), and an integer \(k\), and the task is to decide if \(u\) and \(v\) can be separated by removing a set of vertices that induces a subgraph with independence number at most \(k\). We show in Theorem 14 that this problem is NP-complete for any fixed integer \(k \geq 3\). This hardness result is motivated by the fact that the algorithm of Theorem 1 finds separators with bounded independence number as a subroutine. While for the algorithm of Theorem 1 we design a \(2^{\Omega(k^2)}n^{O(k)}\)-time 2-approximation algorithm for a generalization of this problem, assuming that a tree decomposition of independence number \(O(k)\) is given, this proof shows that this step of the algorithm cannot be turned into an exact algorithm (in our reduction, we can construct along the graph \(G\) also a tree decomposition of independence number \(O(k)\) of \(G\)).

**Previous work and applications of Theorem 1.** The notion of the tree-independence number is very natural and it is not surprising that it was introduced independently by several researchers [15, 40]. Yolov in [40] introduced a new width measure called minor-matching hypertree-width, tree-\(\mu\).\(^4\) He proved that a number of problems including MAXIMUM INDEPENDENT SET, \(k\)-COLOURING, and GRAPH HOMOMORPHISM permit polynomial-time solutions for graphs with bounded minor-matching hypertree width. Furthermore, Yolov showed that the minor-matching hypertree-width of a graph is equal to the tree-independence number of the square of its line graph, that is, \(\text{tree-}\mu(G) = \text{tree-}\alpha(L(G)^2)\) holds for all graphs \(G\), where \(L(G)^2\) is the graph whose vertices are the edges of \(G\), with two distinct edges adjacent if and only if they have nonempty intersection or there is a third edge adjacent.

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\(^1\) Gap-ETH states that for some constant \(\epsilon > 0\), distinguishing between a satisfiable 3-SAT formula and one that is not even \((1 - \epsilon)\)-satisfiable requires exponential time (see [20, 32]).

\(^2\) There is a linear-time algorithm for deciding if a given graph has the tree-independence number at most 1, because such graphs are exactly the chordal graphs, see, e.g., [25].

\(^3\) The proofs of the statements marked (\(\star\)) are omitted due to space constraints and can be found in the full version of the paper [13].

\(^4\) Minor-matching hypertree-width is defined for hypergraphs, but algorithms for computing decompositions for it are only known for graphs.
intersecting both. Moreover, a tree decomposition of $L(G)^2$ with independence number at most $k$ can be turned into a tree decomposition of $G$ with minor-matching hypertree-width at most $k$. Then, Yolov gave an $n^{O(k^3)}$-time $O(k^2)$-approximation algorithm computing the tree-independence number of an $n$-vertex graph, implying also the same bounds for computing the minor-matching hypertree-width of a graph. Theorem 1 improves the running time and approximation ratio of Yolov’s algorithm. Pipelined with Yolov’s reduction, Theorem 1 also implies an 8-approximation of minor-matching hypertree-width of graphs in time $2^{O(k^2)} n^{O(k)}$.

Theorem 2 implies also the NP-hardness of deciding whether $\text{tree-}\mu(G) \leq k$ for every constant $k \geq 4$ because a simple reduction that attaches a pendant vertex to every vertex of a graph $G$ produces a graph $G'$ such that $\text{tree-}\mu(G') = \text{tree-}\alpha(G)$ (see [40]).

The tree-independence number of a graph was introduced independently by Yolov [40] and Dallard et al. [15]. The original motivation for Dallard et al. [15] stems from structural graph theory. In 2020, Dallard, Milanič, and Štorgel [14, 17] initiated a systematic study of $(\text{tw}, \omega)$-bounded graph classes, that is, hereditary graph classes in which the treewidth can only be large due to the presence of a large clique. While $(\text{tw}, \omega)$-bounded graph classes are known to possess some good algorithmic properties related to clique and coloring problems (see [9, 10, 14, 15, 17]), the extent to which this property has useful algorithmic implications for problems related to independent sets is an open problem. The connection with the tree-independence number follows from Ramsey’s theorem, which implies that graph classes with bounded tree-independence number are $(\text{tw}, \omega)$-bounded with a polynomial binding function (see [15]). Dallard, Milanič, and Štorgel [16] conjecture the converse, namely, that every $(\text{tw}, \omega)$-bounded graph class has bounded tree-independence number. A related research direction in structural graph theory is the study of induced obstructions to bounded treewidth and tree-independence number; see for example the recent work of Abrishami, Alecu, Chudnovsky, Hajebi, Spirkl, and Vušković [1].

In our opinion, the most interesting application of Theorem 1 lies in the area of graph algorithms for NP-hard optimization problems. Dallard et al. [15] and Yolov in [40] have shown that certain NP-hard optimization problems like MAXIMUM INDEPENDENT SET, GRAPH HOMOMORPHISM, or MAXIMUM INDUCED MATCHING problems can be solved in time $n^{O(k)}$ if the input graph is given with a tree decomposition of independence number at most $k$. Lima et al. [29] extended this idea to generic packing problems in which any two of the chosen subgraphs have to be at pairwise distance at least $d$, for even $d$. They also obtained an algorithmic metatheorem for the problem of finding a maximum-weight sparse (bounded chromatic number) induced subgraph satisfying an arbitrary but fixed property expressible in counting monadic second-order logic (CMSO₂). In particular, the metatheorem implies polynomial-time solvability of several classical problems like finding the largest induced forest (which is equivalent to MINIMUM FEEDBACK VERTEX SET), finding the largest induced bipartite subgraph (which is equivalent to MINIMUM ODD CYCLE TRANSVERSAL), finding the maximum number of pairwise disjoint and non-adjacent cycles (MAXIMUM INDUCED CYCLE PACKING), and finding the largest induced planar subgraph (which is equivalent to PLANARIZATION).

However, the weak spot in all these algorithmic approaches is the requirement that a tree decomposition with bounded independence number is given with the input. Theorem 1 fills this gap by constructing a decomposition of bounded independence number in time that asymptotically matches or improves the time required to solve all these optimization problems.

5 Yolov called it $\alpha$-treewidth in [40].
Theorem 1 appears to be a handy tool in the subarea of computational geometry concerning optimization problems on geometric graphs. Treewidth plays a fundamental role in the design of exact and approximation algorithms on planar graphs (and more generally, $H$-minor-free graphs) [3, 19, 26]. The main property of such graphs is that they enjoy the bounded local treewidth property. In other words, any planar graph of a small diameter has a small treewidth. A natural research direction is to extend such methods to intersection graphs of geometric objects [23, 31]. However, even for very “simple” objects like unit disks, the corresponding intersection graphs do not have locally bounded treewidth. On the other hand, in many scenarios, the treewidth-based methods on such graphs could be replaced by tree decompositions of bounded independence number. In particular, de Berg, Bodlaender, Kisfaludi-Bak, Marx, and van der Zanden use tree decompositions whose bags are covered by a small number of cliques, and thus of small independence number, to design subexponential-time algorithms on geometric graph classes [18]. Galby, Munaro, and Yang [24] use Theorem 1 for obtaining polynomial-time approximation schemes for several packing problems on geometric graphs. It is interesting to note that algorithms on geometric graphs often require geometric representation of a graph. Sometimes, like for unit disk graphs, finding such a representation is a challenging computational task [27]. On the contrary, Theorem 1 does not need the geometric properties of objects or their geometric representations and thus could be used for developing so-called robust algorithms [35] on geometric graphs [11].

In parameterized algorithms, Fomin and Golovach [21] and Jacob, Panolan, Raman, and Sahlot [28] used tree decompositions where each bag is obtained from a clique by deleting at most $k$ edges or adding at most $k$ vertices, respectively. These type of decompositions are special types of tree decompositions with bounded independence numbers.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we overview the proof of our main algorithmic result Theorem 1. In Section 3 we recall definitions. Section 4 is devoted to the proof of Theorem 1. In Section 5, we survey our computational lower bounds. Due to space constraints, the proofs of the hardness results are omitted and are available in the full version of the paper [13]. We conclude in Section 6 with final remarks and open problems.

## 2 Overview

In this section we sketch the proof of Theorem 1. For simplicity, we sketch here a version with approximation ratio 11 instead of 8. The difference between the 11-approximation and 8-approximation is that for 11-approximation it is sufficient to use 2-way separators, while for 8-approximation we use 3-way separators.

On a high level, our algorithm follows the classical technique of constructing a tree decomposition by repeatedly finding balanced separators. This technique was introduced by Robertson and Seymour in Graph Minors XIII [37], used for example in [5, 18, 28], and an exposition of it was given in [12, Section 7.6.2] and in [34].

The challenge in applying this technique is the need to compute separators that are both balanced and small with respect to the independence numbers of the involved vertex sets. Our main technical contribution is an approximation algorithm for finding such separators. In what follows, we will sketch an algorithm that given a graph $G$, a parameter $k$, and a set of vertices $W \subseteq V(G)$ with independence number $\alpha(W) = 9k$ either finds a partition $(S, C_1, C_2)$ of $V(G)$ such that each $S$, $C_1$, and $C_2$ are nonempty, $S$ separates $C_1$ from $C_2$, $\alpha(S) \leq 2k$, and $\alpha(W \cap C_i) \leq 7k$ for both $i = 1, 2$, or determines that the tree-independence number of $G$ is larger than $k$. (For $S \subseteq V(G)$ we use $\alpha(S)$ to denote the independence...
number of the induced subgraph $G[S].$) Our algorithm for finding such balanced separators works in two parts. First, we reduce finding balanced separators to finding separators, and then we give a 2-approximation algorithm for finding separators.

At first glance, it is not even clear that small tree-independence number guarantees the existence of such balanced separators. To prove the existence of balanced separators and to reduce the finding of balanced separators to finding separators between specified sets of vertices, instead of directly enforcing that both sides of the separation have a small independence number, we enforce that both sides of the separation have sufficiently large independence number. More precisely, we pick an arbitrary independent set $I \subseteq W$ of size $|I| = 9k.$ By making use of the properties of tree decompositions, it is possible to show that there exists a separation $(S, C_1, C_2)$ with $|I \cap C_i| \leq 6k$ for $i \in \{1, 2\}$ and $\alpha(S) \leq k.$ Hence $|I \cap C_i| \geq 2k$ for $i \in \{1, 2\}.$ By enforcing the condition $|I \cap C_i| \geq 2k$ for both $i \in \{1, 2\},$ we will have that $\alpha(W \cap C_i) \leq 7k$ for both $i \in \{1, 2\}.$ (Note that $\alpha(W \cap C_1) + \alpha(W \cap C_2) \leq \alpha(W).$) Therefore, to find a balanced separator for $W$ or to conclude that the tree-independence number of $G$ is larger than $k,$ it is sufficient to select an arbitrary independent set $I \subseteq W$ with $|I| = 9k,$ do $2^{O(k)}$ guesses for sets $I \cap C_1$ and $I \cap C_2,$ and for each of the guesses search for a separator between the sets $I \cap C_1$ and $I \cap C_2.$

In the separator finding algorithm the input includes two sets $V_1 = I \cap C_1$ and $V_2 = I \cap C_2,$ and the task is to find a set of vertices $S$ disjoint from both $V_1$ and $V_2$ separating $V_1$ from $V_2$ with $\alpha(S) \leq 2k$ or to conclude that no such separator $S$ with $\alpha(S) \leq k$ exists. Our algorithm works by first using multiple stages of different branching steps, and then arriving at a special case which is solved by rounding a linear program. We explain some details in what follows.

First, by using iterative compression around the whole algorithm, we can assume that we have a tree decomposition with independence number $O(k)$ available. We show that any set $S \subseteq V(G)$ with $\alpha(S) \leq k$ can be covered by $O(k)$ bags of the tree decomposition. This implies that by first guessing the covering bags, we reduce the problem to the case where we search for a separator $S \subseteq R$ for some set $R \subseteq V(G)$ with independence number $\alpha(R) = O(k^2).$

Then, we use a branching procedure to reduce the problem to the case where $R \subseteq N[V_1 \cup V_2].$ In the branching, we select a vertex $v \in R \setminus N[V_1 \cup V_2],$ and branch into three subproblems, corresponding to including $v$ into $V_1,$ into $V_2,$ or into a partially constructed solution $S.$ The key observation here is that if we branch on vertices $v \in R \setminus N[V_1 \cup V_2],$ then the branches where $v$ is included in $V_1$ or in $V_2$ reduce the value $\alpha(R \setminus N[V_1 \cup V_2]).$ By first handling the case with $\alpha(R \setminus N[V_1 \cup V_2]) \geq 2k$ by branching on $2k$ vertices at the same time and then branching on single vertices, this branching results in $2^{O(\alpha(R))} n^{O(k)} = 2^{O(k^2)} n^{O(k)}$ instances where $R \subseteq N[V_1 \cup V_2].$

Finally, when we arrive at the subproblem where $R \subseteq N[V_1 \cup V_2],$ we design a 2-approximation algorithm by rounding a linear program. For $v \in R,$ let us have variables $x_v$ with $x_v = 1$ indicating that $v \in S$ and $x_v = 0$ indicating that $v \notin S.$ Because $R \subseteq N[V_1 \cup V_2],$ the fact that $S \subseteq R$ separates $V_1$ from $V_2$ can be encoded by only using inequalities of form $x_v + x_u \geq 1.$ To bound the independence number of $S,$ for every independent set $I$ of size $|I| = 2k + 1$ we add a constraint that $\sum_{v \in I} x_v \leq k.$ Now, a separator $S$ with $\alpha(S) \leq k$ corresponds to an integer solution. We then find a fractional solution and round $x_v$ to 1 if $x_v \geq 1/2$ and to 0 otherwise. Note that this satisfies the $x_v + x_u \geq 1$ constraints, so the rounded solution corresponds to a separator. To bound the independence number of the rounded solution, note that $\sum_{v \in I} x_v \leq 2k$ for independent sets $I$ of size $|I| = 2k + 1,$ therefore implying that $\alpha(S) \leq 2k.$
3 Preliminaries

We denote the vertex set and the edge set of a graph \( G = (V, E) \) by \( V(G) \) and \( E(G) \), respectively. The neighborhood of a vertex \( v \) in \( G \) is the set \( N_G(v) \) of vertices adjacent to \( v \) in \( G \), and the closed neighborhood of \( v \) is the set \( N_G[v] = N_G(v) \cup \{v\} \). These concepts are extended to sets \( X \subseteq V(G) \) so that \( N_G[X] \) is defined as the union of all closed neighborhoods of vertices in \( X \), and \( N_G(X) \) is defined as the set \( N_G[X] \setminus X \). The degree of \( v \), denoted by \( d_G(v) \), is the cardinality of the set \( N_G(v) \). When there is no ambiguity, we may omit the subscript \( G \) in the notations of the degree, and open and closed neighborhoods, and thus simply write \( d(v) \), \( N(v) \), and \( N[v] \), respectively.

Given a set \( X \subseteq V(G) \), we denote by \( G[X] \) the subgraph of \( G \) induced by \( X \). We also write \( G \setminus X = G[V(G) \setminus X] \). Similarly, given a vertex \( v \in V(G) \), we denote by \( G \setminus v \) the graph obtained from \( G \) by deleting \( v \). A graph \( G \) is chordal if it has no induced cycles of length at least four.

A clique (resp. independent set) in a graph \( G \) is a set of pairwise adjacent (resp. non-adjacent) vertices. The independence number of \( G \), denoted by \( \alpha(G) \), is the maximum size of an independent set in \( G \). For a set of vertices \( X \subseteq V(G) \), the independence number of \( X \) is \( \alpha(X) = \alpha(G[X]) \).

Let \((V_1, V_2, \ldots, V_t)\) be a tuple of disjoint subsets of \( V(G) \). A \((V_1, V_2, \ldots, V_t)\)-separator is a set \( S \subseteq V(G) \) such that \( S \cap V_i = \emptyset \) for each \( i \in [t] \), and in the graph \( G \setminus S \) there is no path from \( V_i \) to \( V_j \) for all pairs \( i \neq j \). Such a separator is sometimes called a \( t \)-way separator. Note that if \( V_i \) is adjacent to \( V_j \) for some \( i \neq j \), then no \((V_1, V_2, \ldots, V_t)\)-separator exists.

A tree decomposition of a graph \( G \) is a pair \( T = (T, \{X_t\}_{t \in V(T)}) \) where \( T \) is a tree and every node \( t \) of \( T \) is assigned a vertex subset \( X_t \subseteq V(G) \) called a bag such that the following conditions are satisfied: (1) every vertex of \( G \) is in at least one bag, (2) for every edge \( uv \in E(G) \) there exists a node \( t \in V(T) \) such that \( X_t \) contains both \( u \) and \( v \), and (3) for every vertex \( u \in V(G) \) the subgraph \( T_u \) of \( T \) induced by the set \( \{t \in V(T) : u \in X_t\} \) is connected (that is, a tree). The independence number of a tree decomposition \( T = (T, \{X_t\}_{t \in V(T)}) \) of a graph \( G \), denoted by \( \alpha(T) \), is defined as follows:

\[
\alpha(T) = \max_{t \in V(T)} \alpha(X_t).
\]

The tree-independence number of \( G \), denoted by tree-\( \alpha(G) \), is the minimum independence number among all tree decompositions of \( G \).

4 An 8-approximation algorithm for tree-independence number

In this section we prove Theorem 1, that is, we give a \( 2^{O(k^2)} n^{O(k)} \)-time algorithm for either computing tree decompositions with independence number at most \( 8k \) or deciding that the tree-independence number of the graph is more than \( k \). Our algorithm consists of three parts. First, we give a \( 2^{O(k^2)} n^{O(k)} \)-time 2-approximation algorithm for finding 3-way separators with independence number at most \( k \), with the assumption that a tree decomposition with independence number \( O(k) \) is given with the input. Then, we apply this separator finding algorithm to find balanced separators, and then apply balanced separators in the fashion of the Robertson-Seymour treewidth approximation algorithm [37] to construct a tree decomposition with independence number at most \( 8k \). The requirement for having a tree decomposition with independence number \( O(k) \) as an input in the separator algorithm is satisfied by iterative compression (see, e.g., [12]), as we explain at the end of Section 4.3.

The presentation of the algorithm in this section is in reverse order compared to the presentation we gave in Section 2.
4.1 Finding approximate separators

In this subsection, we show the following theorem.

**Theorem 3.** There is an algorithm, that given a graph $G$, an integer $k$, a tree decomposition $T$ of $G$ with independence number $\alpha(T) = O(k)$, and three disjoint sets of vertices $V_1, V_2, V_3 \subseteq V(G)$, in time $2^{O(k^2)} n^{O(k)}$ either reports that no $(V_1, V_2, V_3)$-separator with independence number at most $k$ exists, or returns a $(V_1, V_2, V_3)$-separator with independence number at most $2k$.

To prove Theorem 3, we define a more general problem that we call **Partial 3-way α-separator**, which is the same as the problem of Theorem 3 except that two sets $S_0$ and $R$ are given with the input, and we are only looking for separators $S$ with $S_0 \subseteq S \subseteq S_0 \cup R$.

**Definition 4 (Partial 3-way α-separator).** An instance of **Partial 3-way α-separator** is a 5-tuple $(G, (V_1, V_2, V_3), S_0, R, k)$, where $G$ is a graph, $V_1, V_2, V_3, S_0$, and $R$ are disjoint subsets of $V(G)$, and $k$ is an integer. A solution to **Partial 3-way α-separator** is a $(V_1, V_2, V_3)$-separator $S$ such that $S_0 \subseteq S \subseteq S_0 \cup R$. A 2-approximation algorithm for **Partial 3-way α-separator** either returns a solution $S$ with $\alpha(S) \leq 2k$ or determines that there is no solution $S$ with $\alpha(S) \leq k$.

We give a 2-approximation algorithm for **Partial 3-way α-separator**. Then Theorem 3 will follow by setting $S_0 = \emptyset$ and $R = V(G) \setminus (V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)$.

We give our 2-approximation algorithm by giving 2-approximation algorithms for increasingly more general cases of **Partial 3-way α-separator**. First, we give a linear programming based 2-approximation algorithm for the special case when $R \subseteq N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)$. Then, we use branching and the first algorithm to give a 2-approximation algorithm for the case where $\alpha(R) = O(k^2)$. Then, we use the input tree decomposition to reduce the general case to the case where $\alpha(R) = O(k^2)$.

Let us make some observations about trivial instances of **Partial 3-way α-separator**. First, we can assume that $\alpha(S_0) \leq k$, as otherwise any solution $S$ has $\alpha(S) > k$ and we can return no immediately. All our algorithms include an $n^{O(k)}$ factor in the time complexity, so it can be assumed that this condition is always tested. Then, we can also always return no if $V_1$ is adjacent to $V_j$, where $i \neq j$. This can be checked in polynomial time, so we can assume that this condition is always tested. Note that testing this condition implies that $N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3) = N(V_1) \cup N(V_2) \cup N(V_3)$. For simplicity, we write $N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)$ as it is shorter.

We start with the linear programming based 2-approximation algorithm for the case when $R \subseteq N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)$.

**Lemma 5.** There is an $n^{O(k)}$-time 2-approximation algorithm for **Partial 3-way α-separator** when $R \subseteq N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)$.

**Proof.** First, note that we may assume that for all $i, j \in \{1, 2, 3\}$, $i \neq j$, there is no path in the graph $G \setminus (R \cup S_0)$ between a vertex of $V_i$ and a vertex of $V_j$, since otherwise the given instance has no solution at all. Furthermore, under this assumption, we can safely replace each set $V_i$ with the set of vertices reachable from a vertex in $V_i$ in the graph $G \setminus (R \cup S_0)$. We thus arrive at an instance such that $R \subseteq N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3) \subseteq R \cup S_0$. We then make an integer programming formulation of the problem (with $n^{O(k)}$ constraints) and show that it gives a 2-approximation by rounding a fractional solution.

For every vertex $v \in R \cup S_0$ we introduce a variable $x_v$, with the interpretation that $x_v = 1$ if $v \in S$ and $x_v = 0$ otherwise. We force $S_0$ to be in the solution by adding constraints $x_v = 1$ for all $v \in S_0$. Then, we say that a pair $(v_i, v_j)$ of vertices with $v_i \in N(V_i)$, $v_j \in N(V_j)$,
Let us observe that we can naturally branch on vertices in $R$ in instances of PARTIAL 3-WAY $\alpha$-SEPARATOR.

**Lemma 6 (Branching).** Let $\mathcal{I} = (G, (V_1, V_2, V_3), S_0, R, k)$ be an instance of PARTIAL 3-WAY $\alpha$-SEPARATOR, and let $v \in R$. If $S$ is a solution of $\mathcal{I}$, then $S$ is also a solution of at least one of

1. $(G, (V_1 \cup \{v\}, V_2, V_3), S_0, R \setminus \{v\}, k)$,
2. $(G, (V_1, V_2 \cup \{v\}, V_3), S_0, R \setminus \{v\}, k)$,
3. $(G, (V_1, V_2 \cup \{v\}, V_3), S_0, R \setminus \{v\}, k)$, or
4. $(G, (V_1, V_2, V_3), S_0 \cup \{v\}, R \setminus \{v\}, k)$.

Moreover, any solution of any of the instances 1-4 is also a solution of $\mathcal{I}$.

**Proof.** If $S$ is a solution of $\mathcal{I}$, we can partition $V(G) \setminus S$ to parts $V'_1 \supseteq V_1$, $V'_2 \supseteq V_2$, and $V'_3 \supseteq V_3$ by including the vertices in any connected component of $G \setminus S$ containing vertices of $V_i$ into $V'_i$ for all $i \in \{1, 2, 3\}$, and including the vertices in connected components containing
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no vertices of $V_1, V_2, V_3$ into $V'_1$, resulting in a partition $(V'_1, V'_2, V'_3)$ of $V(G) \setminus S$ such that $S$ is a $(V'_1, V'_2, V'_3)$-separator. Therefore, the first branch corresponds to when $v \in V'_1$, the second when $v \in V'_2$, the third when $v \in V'_3$, and the fourth when $v \in S$.

The direction that any solution of any of the instances 1-4 is also a solution of the original instance is immediate from the fact that we do not remove vertices from any $V_i$ or $S_0$. ▶

Lemma 6 allows to branch into four subproblems, corresponding to the situation whether a vertex from $R$ goes to $V_1$, $V_2$, $V_3$, or to $S_0$. Now, our goal is to branch until we derive an instance with $R \subseteq N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)$, which can be solved by Lemma 5. In particular, we would like to branch on vertices $v \in R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)$. The following lemma shows that we can use $\alpha(R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3))$ as a measure of progress in the branching.

**Lemma 7.** For any vertex $v \in R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)$ it holds that $\alpha(R \setminus (N[v] \cup N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3))) < \alpha(R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3))$.

**Proof.** If $\alpha(R \setminus (N[v] \cup N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3))) \geq \alpha(R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3))$, then we could take an independent set $I \subseteq R \setminus N[v] \cup N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)$ such that $|I| = \alpha(R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3))$ and construct an independent set $I \setminus \{v\} \subseteq R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)$ of size $|I \setminus \{v\}| > \alpha(R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3))$, which is a contradiction. ▶

Lemma 7 implies that when branching on a vertex $v \in R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)$, the branches where $v$ is moved to $V_1$, $V_2$, or $V_3$ decrease $\alpha(R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3))$. This will be the main idea of our algorithm for the case when $\alpha(R)$ is bounded, which we give next.

**Lemma 8.** There is a $2^{O(\alpha(R))}n^{O(k)}$-time 2-approximation algorithm for PARTIAL 3-WAY $\alpha$-SEPARATOR.

**Proof.** We give a branching algorithm, whose base case is the case when $R \subseteq N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)$, which is solved by Lemma 5. The main idea is to analyze the branching by the parameter $\alpha(R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3))$, in particular with $\alpha(R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)) = 0$ corresponding to the base case. The branching itself will be “exact” in the sense that all four cases of Lemma 6 are always included, in particular, the 2-approximation is caused only by the application of Lemma 5.

First, while $\alpha(R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)) \geq 2k$, which can be checked in $n^{O(k)}$ time, we branch as follows. We select an independent set $I \subseteq R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)$ of size $|I| = 2k$, and for all of its vertices we branch on whether to move it into $V_1$, $V_2$, $V_3$, or $S_0$, i.e., according to Lemma 6. Because $I$ is an independent set, at most $k$ of the vertices can go to $S_0$, so at least $k$ go to $V_1$, $V_2$, or $V_3$. Also for the reason that $I$ is an independent set, Lemma 7 can be successively applied for all of the vertices that go to $V_1$, $V_2$, or $V_3$. Therefore, this decreases $\alpha(R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3))$ by at least $k$, so the depth of this recursion is at most $\alpha(R)/k$, so the total number of nodes in this branching tree is at most $(4^{2k})^{\alpha(R)/k} = 2^{O(\alpha(R))}$.

Then, we can assume that $\alpha(R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)) < 2k$. We continue with a similar branching, this time branching on single vertices. In particular, as long as $R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)$ is nonempty, we select a vertex in it and branch on whether to move it into $V_1$, $V_2$, $V_3$, or $S_0$. To analyze the size of this branching tree, note that by Lemma 7, when moving a vertex into $V_1$, $V_2$, or $V_3$, the value of $\alpha(R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3))$ decreases by at least one. Therefore, as initially $\alpha(R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)) < 2k$, any root-to-leaf path of the branching tree contains less than $2k$ edges that correspond to such branches, and therefore any root-leaf path can be characterized by specifying the $< 2k$ indices corresponding to such edges, and then for these indices whether they correspond to $V_1$, $V_2$, or $V_3$. The length of any root-leaf path is at most $n$ because $|R \setminus N(V_1 \cup V_2 \cup V_3)|$ decreases in every branch, and therefore the number of different root-to-leaf paths is at most $n^{2k}3^{2k} = n^{O(k)}$, and therefore the total number of nodes in this branching tree is $n^{O(k)}$. 

Therefore, the total size of both of the branching trees put together is $2^{O(\alpha(T))}n^{O(k)}$, so our algorithm works by $2^{O(\alpha(R))}n^{O(k)}$ applications of Lemma 5, resulting in a $2^{O(\alpha(R))}n^{O(k)}$-time algorithm.

Finally, what is left is to reduce the general case to the case where $\alpha(R) = O(k^2)$. We do not know if this can be done in general, but we manage to do it by using a tree decomposition with independence number $O(k)$. To this end, we show the following lemma. Given a graph $G$, a tree decomposition $T$ of $G$, and a set $W \subseteq V(G)$, we say that $W$ is covered by a set $B$ of bags of $T$ if every vertex in $W$ is contained in at least one of the bags in $B$. The lemma generalizes the well-known fact that any clique $W$ of $G$, that is, a set with $\alpha(W) = 1$, is covered by a single bag of the tree decomposition.

**Lemma 9.** Let $G$ be a graph, $T$ a tree decomposition of $G$, and $W$ a nonempty set of vertices of $G$. Then $W$ is covered by a set of at most $2\alpha(W) - 1$ bags of $T$.

**Proof.** We denote $T = (T, \{X_t\}_{t \in V(T)})$. Every edge $ab \in E(T)$ corresponds to a partition $(X_a \cap X_b, C_a, C_b)$ of $V(G)$, where $C_a$ is the set of vertices of $G \setminus (X_a \cap X_b)$ in the bags of $T$ that are closer to $a$ than to $b$, $C_b$ is the set of vertices of $G \setminus (X_a \cap X_b)$ in the bags of $T$ that are closer to $b$ than to $a$, and $X_a \cap X_b$ is a $(C_a, C_b)$-separator.

First, assume that for every edge $ab$ either $C_a \cap W = \emptyset$ or $C_b \cap W = \emptyset$. If both $C_a \cap W = C_b \cap W = \emptyset$, then $W \subseteq X_a \cap X_b$, and we cover $W$ by a single bag $X_a$ (or $X_b$). Thus we may assume that for every edge exactly one of the sets $C_a \cap W$ and $C_b \cap W$ is nonempty. We orient the edge $ab$ from $a$ towards $b$ if $C_b \cap W \neq \emptyset$, and from $b$ to $a$ if $C_a \cap W \neq \emptyset$. Because $T$ is a tree, there exists a node $t \in V(T)$ such that all edges incident with $t$ are oriented towards $t$. This implies that $X_t$ covers $W$ because otherwise some edge would be oriented away from $t$.

Note that if $\alpha(W) = 1$, then $W$ is a clique and indeed for every edge $ab$ either $C_a \cap W = \emptyset$ or $C_b \cap W = \emptyset$. The remaining case is that $\alpha(W) \geq 2$ and that there exists an edge $ab$ such that both $|C_a \cap W| \geq 1$ and $|C_b \cap W| \geq 1$ hold. In this case, we use induction on $\alpha(W)$. Since $X_a \cap X_b$ is a $(C_a, C_b)$-separator, we have that $\alpha(C_a \cap W) + \alpha(C_b \cap W) \leq \alpha(W)$. Therefore we can take the union of a smallest set of bags covering $C_a \cap W$, a smallest set of bags covering $C_b \cap W$, and the bag $X_a$. By induction, this set of bags covering $W$ contains at most $2\alpha(W \cap C_a) - 1 + 2\alpha(W \cap C_b) - 1 + 1 \leq 2\alpha(W) - 1$ bags.

With Lemma 9, we can use a tree decomposition $T$ with independence number $\alpha(T) = O(k)$ to $2$-approximate the general case of PARTIAL 3-WAY $\alpha$-SEPARATOR as follows. By Lemma 9, any solution $S$ with $\alpha(S) \leq k$ is covered by at most $2k - 1$ bags of $T$. Therefore, with $T$ available (and having $n^{O(1)}$ bags by standard arguments), we can guess a set of at most $2k - 1$ bags of $T$ that covers $S$, and intersect $R$ by the union of these bags, resulting in $\alpha(R) \leq \alpha(T)(2k - 1) = O(k^2)$. Therefore, we solve the general case by $n^{O(k)}$ applications of Lemma 8 with $\alpha(R) = O(k^2)$, resulting in a total time complexity of $2^{O(k^2)}n^{O(k)}$. This completes the proof of Theorem 3.

4.2 From separators to balanced separators

In this subsection we show that Theorem 3 can be used to either find certain balanced separators for sets $W \subseteq V(G)$ or to show that the tree-independence number of the graph is large.

To enforce the “balance” condition, we cannot directly enforce that the separator separates a given set $W$ into sets of small independence numbers. (This would result in time complexity exponential in $|W|$ instead of $\alpha(W)$.) Instead, we fix a maximum independent set in $W$,
and enforce that this independent set is separated in a balanced manner. As long as the independent set is large enough, this will enforce that the separator is balanced also with respect to $\alpha$. The following lemma, which is an adaptation of a well-known lemma given in Graph Minors II [36] is the starting point of this approach.

**Lemma 10.** Let $G$ be a graph with the tree-independence number at most $k$ and $I \subseteq V(G)$ an independent set. Then there exists a partition $(S, C_1, C_2, C_3)$ of $V(G)$ (where some $C_i$ can be empty) such that $S$ is a $(C_1, C_2, C_3)$-separator, $\alpha(S) \leq k$, and $|I \cap (C_i \cup C_j)| \geq |I|/2 - k$ for any pair $i, j \in \{1, 2, 3\}$ with $i \neq j$.

**Proof.** Let $T = (T, \{X_i\}_{i \in E(T)})$ be a tree decomposition of $G$ with $\alpha(T) \leq k$. As in Lemma 9, we introduce the following notation. Every edge $ab \in E(T)$ of $T$ corresponds to a partition $(X_a \cap X_b, C_a, C_b)$ of $V(G)$, where $C_a$ is the set of vertices of $G \setminus (X_a \cap X_b)$ in the bags of $T$ that are closer to $a$ than $b$, $C_b$ is the set of vertices of $G \setminus (X_a \cap X_b)$ in the bags of $T$ that are closer to $b$ than $a$, and $X_a \cap X_b$ is a $(C_a, C_b)$-separator. We orient the edge $ab$ from $a$ to $b$ if $|C_b \cap I| > |I|/2$, from $b$ to $a$ if $|C_a \cap I| > |I|/2$, and otherwise arbitrarily. Now, because $T$ is a tree, there exists a node $t \in V(T)$ such that all of its incident edges are oriented towards it. Therefore, for all connected components $C$ of $G \setminus X_t$, we see that $|V(C) \cap I| \leq |I|/2$, as otherwise some edge would be oriented out of $t$.

As long as the number of such connected components $C$ is at least 4, we can take two of them with the smallest values of $|V(C) \cap I|$ and merge them, in the end arriving at a partition $(X_1, X_2, C_2, C_3)$ of $V(G)$ such that $X_i$ is a $(C_1, C_2, C_3)$-separator, $\alpha(X_i) \leq k$, and $|I \cap C_i| \leq |I|/2$ for all $i \in \{1, 2, 3\}$. Then, because $|I \cap C_i| \leq |I|/2$, we have that $|I \cap (V(G) \setminus C_i)| \geq |I|/2$. Therefore, since $|I \cap X_i| \leq k$, it follows that $|I \cap (C_j \cup C_\ell)| \geq |I|/2 - k$, where $(i, j, \ell)$ is any permutation of the set $\{1, 2, 3\}$.

Next we use Lemma 10 together with the separator algorithm of Theorem 3 to design an algorithm for finding $\alpha$-balanced separators of sets $W$ with $\alpha(W) = 6k$.}

**Lemma 11.** There is an algorithm that for a given graph $G$, an integer $k$, a tree decomposition of $G$ with independence number $O(k)$, and a set $W \subseteq V(G)$ with $\alpha(W) = 6k$, in time $2^{O(k^2)} n^{O(k)}$ either concludes that the tree-independence number of $G$ is larger than $k$, or finds a partition $(S, C_1, C_2, C_3)$ of $V(G)$ such that $S$ is a $(C_1, C_2, C_3)$-separator, $\alpha(S) \leq 2k$, at most one of $C_1, C_2$, and $C_3$ is empty, and $\alpha(W \cap C_i) \leq 4k$ for each $i \in \{1, 2, 3\}$.

**Proof.** First, we take an arbitrary independent set $I \subseteq W$ of size $|I| = 6k$, which can be found in $n^{O(1)}$ time. If the tree-independence number of $G$ is at most $k$, then, by Lemma 10, there exists a partition $(S, C_1, C_2, C_3)$ of $V(G)$ such that $S$ is a $(C_1, C_2, C_3)$-separator, $\alpha(S) \leq k$, and $|I \cap (C_i \cup C_j)| \geq |I|/2 - k \geq 2k$ for any pair $i, j \in \{1, 2, 3\}$ with $i \neq j$. We guess the intersection of such a partition with $I$, in particular we guess the partition $(S \cap I, C_1 \cap I, C_2 \cap I, C_3 \cap I)$, immediately enforcing that it satisfies the constraints $|I \cap (C_i \cup C_j)| \geq 2k$ for $i \neq j$.

For each such guess, we use Theorem 3 to either find a $(C_1 \cap I, C_2 \cap I, C_3 \cap I)$-separator with independence number at most $2k$ or to decide that no such separator with independence number at most $k$ exists. The set $S$ of the partition guaranteed by Lemma 10 is indeed a $(C_1 \cap I, C_2 \cap I, C_3 \cap I)$-separator with independence number at most $k$, so if the algorithm reports for every guess that no such separator exists, we return that $G$ has the independence number larger than $k$.

Otherwise, for some guess a $(C_1 \cap I, C_2 \cap I, C_3 \cap I)$-separator $S'$ with $\alpha(S') \leq 2k$ is found, and we return the partition $(S', C'_1, C'_2, C'_3)$, where $C'_i$ is the union of the vertex sets of components of $G \setminus S'$ that contain a vertex of $C_i \cap I$, for all $i \in \{1, 2, 3\}$. Because
returns a rooted tree decomposition of \( \alpha \) vertex occurs in the sets is \( \alpha \) satisfies all conditions of tree decompositions: Because of the constructed tree decomposition is at most \( 2^k \) and at most one of \( G \) and \( \alpha \leq 4k \), where \( (i, j, \ell) \) is an arbitrary permutation of the set \( \{1, 2, 3\} \), because otherwise we could use the union of \( I \cap (C_i \cup C_j) \) and a maximum independent set in \( W \) to construct an independent set in \( W \) of size larger than \( \alpha \). Also, because \(|I \cap (C_i \cup C_j)| \geq 2k\) for any pair \( i \neq j \), the set \( C_i \) cannot be empty for more than one \( i \).

The algorithm works by first finding an independent set of size \( 6k \) and then using the algorithm of Theorem 3 at most \( 4^k \), times, so the total time complexity is \( O(n^6k) \). ▶

4.3 Constructing the decomposition

Everything is prepared for the final step of the proof – the algorithm constructing a tree decomposition with independence number at most \( 8k \) by using the balanced separator algorithm of Lemma 11. Our algorithm constructs a tree decomposition from root to the leaves by maintaining an “interface” \( W \) and breaking it with balanced separators. This is a common strategy used for various algorithms for constructing tree decompositions and branch decompositions. In our case, perhaps the largest hurdle in the proof is the analysis that the size of the recursion tree and the constructed decomposition is polynomial in \( n \).

A rooted tree decomposition is a tree decomposition where one node is designated as the root.

 Lemma 12. There is an algorithm that for a given graph \( G \), an integer \( k \), a tree decomposition of \( G \) with independence number \( O(k) \), and a set \( W \subseteq V(G) \) with \( \alpha(W) \leq 6k \), in time \( 2^{O(k^2)} n^{O(k)} \) either determines that the tree-independence number of \( G \) is larger than \( k \) or returns a rooted tree decomposition \( T \) of \( G \) with independence number at most \( 8k \) such that \( W \) is contained in the root bag of \( T \).

Proof. The algorithm will be based on recursively constructing the decomposition, using \( W \) as the interface in the recursion. First, if \( \alpha(G) \leq 6k \), we return the trivial tree decomposition with only one bag \( V(G) \). Otherwise, we start by inserting arbitrary vertices of \( G \) into \( W \) until the condition \( \alpha(W) = 6k \) holds.

Then, we apply the algorithm of Lemma 11 to find a partition \( (S, C_1, C_2, C_3) \) of \( V(G) \) such that \( S \) is a \((C_1, C_2, C_3)\)-separator, \( \alpha(S) \leq 2k \), \( \alpha(W \cap C_i) \leq 4k \) for each \( i \in \{1, 2, 3\} \), and at most one of \( C_1, C_2, C_3 \) is empty, or to determine that the tree-independence number of \( G \) is larger than \( k \), in this case returning no immediately. Then, we construct the tree decomposition recursively as follows: for each \( i \in \{1, 2, 3\} \), we recursively use the algorithm with the graph \( G_i = G[C_i \cup S] \) and the set \( W_i = (C_i \cap W) \cup S \). Let \( T_1, T_2, T_3 \) be the obtained tree decompositions and let \( r_1, r_2, r_3 \) be their root nodes. We create a new root node \( r \) with a bag \( X_r = S \cup W \), and connect \( r_1, r_2, \) and \( r_3 \) as children of \( r \).

Lemma 11 guarantees that \( \alpha(C_i \cap W) \leq 4k \) and \( \alpha(S) \leq 2k \), and therefore \( \alpha(W_i) \leq 6k \). Also, \( \alpha(S \cup W) \leq 8k \) because \( \alpha(W) \leq 6k \) and \( \alpha(S) \leq 2k \). Therefore, the independence number of the constructed tree decomposition is at most \( 8k \). The constructed tree decomposition satisfies all conditions of tree decompositions: Because \( S \) is a separator between \( C_1, C_2, \) and \( C_3 \), when recursing into the graphs \( G_i = G[C_i \cup S] \) for \( i \in \{1, 2, 3\} \), the union of the graphs \( G_1, G_2, \) and \( G_3 \) includes all vertices and edges of \( G \). Therefore, by induction, every vertex and edge will be contained in some bag of the constructed tree decomposition (the base case is \( \alpha(G) \leq 6k \)). By induction, the decomposition satisfies also the connectivity condition: if a vertex occurs in \( G_i \) and \( G_j \) for \( i \neq j \), then it is in \( S \) and therefore in the bag \( X_r \) and also in the sets \( W_i \) and \( W_j \) and therefore in the root bags \( X_{r_i} \) and \( X_{r_j} \) of \( T_i \) and \( T_j \).
It remains to argue that the size of the recursion tree (and equivalently the size of the decomposition constructed) is \(n^{O(1)}\). First, by the guarantee of Lemma 11 that \(C_i\) is empty for at most one \(i \in \{1, 2, 3\}\), we have that each \(G_i\) has strictly fewer vertices than \(G\), and therefore the constructed tree has height at most \(n\). We say that a constructed node \(t\) is a forget node if its bag contains a vertex \(v\) so that its parent’s bag does not contain \(v\). The number of forget nodes is at most \(n\) because a vertex can be forgotten only once in a tree decomposition.

Recall that in the start of each recursive call, on a graph \(G_i\) and a subset \(W_i\), we either recognize that \(\alpha(G_i) \leq 6k\), creating a leaf node in this case, or add vertices to \(W_i\) until \(\alpha(W_i) = 6k\). In the latter case, as these added vertices were not initially in \(W_i\), they are not in the bag of the parent node, and therefore the node constructed in such a call will be a forget node if any such vertices are added. Therefore, the new node constructed can be a non-forget non-leaf node only if \(\alpha(W_i) = 6k\) already for the initial input \(W_i\). Then, we observe that \(\alpha(W_i) = 6k\) can hold for the initial input \(W_i\) only if \(\alpha(C_i \cap W) = 4k\) did hold for the corresponding component \(C_i\) of the parent and the corresponding set \(W\). Therefore, as \(\alpha(C_i \cap W) = 4k\) can hold for at most one \(i \in \{1, 2, 3\}\), we have that any node can have at most one non-forget non-leaf child node.

It follows that non-forget non-leaf nodes can be decomposed into maximal paths going between a node and its ancestor, and these paths have a length at most \(n\) by the height of the tree. Each such path either starts at the root or its highest node is a child of a forget node. Thus, the number of maximal paths of non-forget non-leaf nodes is at most \(n\), and therefore the number of non-forget non-leaf nodes is at most \(n^2\). The number of leaf nodes is at most three times the number of non-leaf nodes, so the total number of nodes is \(O(n^2)\).

Therefore, the algorithm works by \(O(n^2)\) applications of the algorithm of Lemma 11, and therefore its time complexity is \(2^{O(k^2)}n^{O(k)}\).

It remains to observe that by using iterative compression, we can satisfy the requirement of Lemma 12 to have a tree decomposition with independence number \(O(k)\) as an input (in particular, here the independence number will be at most \(8k + 1\)), and therefore Lemma 12 implies Theorem 1.

In more detail, we order the vertices of \(G\) as \(v_1, \ldots, v_n\), and iteratively compute tree decompositions with independence number at most \(8k\) for induced subgraphs \(G[v_1, \ldots, v_i]\), for increasing values of \(i\). The iterative computation guarantees that when computing the tree decomposition for \(G[v_1, \ldots, v_i]\), we have the tree decomposition for \(G[v_1, \ldots, v_{i-1}]\) with independence number at most \(8k\) available, which can be used to obtain a tree decomposition with independence number at most \(8k + 1\) of \(G[v_1, \ldots, v_i]\) by adding \(v_i\) to each bag to be used as the input tree decomposition. More precisely, we use Lemma 12 to either determine in time \(2^{O(k^2)}n^{O(k)}\) that the tree-independence number of \(G[v_1, \ldots, v_i]\) is larger than \(k\) or obtain a rooted tree decomposition \(T\) of \(G[v_1, \ldots, v_i]\) with independence number at most \(8k\). As the tree-independence number does not increase when taking induced subgraphs, if for some induced subgraph we conclude that the tree-independence number is larger than \(k\), we can conclude the same holds also for \(G\). Otherwise, after \(n\) steps we will have a rooted tree decomposition \(T\) of \(G\) with independence number at most \(8k\).

### 5 Hardness of computing tree-independence number

In this section, we complement our main algorithmic result by complexity lower bounds. First, we use the \(W[1]\)-hardness of independent set approximation by Lin [30] and the \(\text{Gap-ETH}\) result of Chalermsook et al. [7] to prove the following theorem.
Theorem 13 (*). For any constant $c \geq 1$, there is no algorithm running in $f(k) \cdot n^{O(1)}$ time for a computable function $f(k)$, that, given an $n$-vertex graph and a positive integer $k$, can distinguish between the cases $\text{tree-}\alpha(G) \leq k$ and $\text{tree-}\alpha(G) > ck$, unless FPT = W[1]. Moreover, assuming Gap-ETH, for any computable function $q(k) \geq k$, there is no algorithm running in $f(k) \cdot n^{O(k)}$ time for a computable function $f(k)$, that, given an $n$-vertex graph and a positive integer $k$, can distinguish between the cases $\text{tree-}\alpha(G) \leq k$ and $\text{tree-}\alpha(G) > g(k)$.

Theorem 13 implies that it is W[1]-hard to decide whether $\text{tree-}\alpha(G) \leq k$ for the parameterization by $k$. However, the problem is, in fact, harder. We prove that it is NP-complete to decide whether $\text{tree-}\alpha(G) \leq 4$.

Theorem 2 (*). For every constant $k \geq 4$, it is NP-complete to decide whether $\text{tree-}\alpha(G) \leq k$ for a given graph $G$.

Finally, we show that, for every fixed integer $k \geq 3$, deciding if two given vertices of a graph can be separated by removing a set of vertices that induces a graph with independence number at most $k$ is NP-complete. To put this result in perspective, note that the case with $k = 1$ is polynomial since we can compute all clique cutssets in polynomial time using Tarjan’s algorithm [39]. We leave open the case with $k = 2$.

Theorem 14 (*). For every integer $k \geq 3$, it is NP-complete to decide, given a graph $H$ and two distinct vertices $u, v \in V(H)$, if there exists a $u,v$-separator $S$ such that $\alpha(H[S]) \leq k$.

6 Conclusion

The main result of our paper is an algorithm that, given an $n$-vertex graph $G$ and an integer $k$, in time $2^{O(k^2)}n^{O(k)}$ either outputs a tree decomposition of $G$ with independence number at most $8k$, or concludes that the tree-independence number of $G$ is larger than $k$. This yields also the same result for computing the minor-matching hypertree-width of a graph [40]. Our results allow to solve in $2^{O(k^2)}n^{O(k)}$ time a plethora of problems when the inputs are restricted to graphs of tree-independence number $k$ or minor-matching hypertree-width $k$ [15,29,40]. We now show that this result is tight in several aspects.

First, one could ask what is the most general width-parameter defined by a min-max formula over the bags of a tree decomposition (see, e.g. [2,33]) that allows to solve problems like Maximum Independent Set in polynomial time when bounded? For parameters where the width of a bag depends only on the induced subgraph of the bag, this turns out to be tree-$\alpha$. In particular, we recall that Maximum Independent Set is NP-hard on graphs with each edge subdivided twice, but such graphs admit a tree decomposition where one bag is a large independent set, and the induced subgraphs of the other bags are isomorphic to 4-vertex paths. It follows that if the width-measure of a bag is monotone, i.e., it does not increase when taking induced subgraphs, it must be unbounded whenever $\alpha$ is unbounded. In other words, if there would be a width parameter tree-$\lambda$ defined as the minimum, over all tree decomposition, of the maximum of $\lambda(G[X_t])$ over the bags $X_t$ of the tree decomposition, where $\lambda$ is a monotone graph invariant, then either Maximum Independent Set is already NP-hard when $\lambda$ is a constant, or the parameterization by tree-$\alpha$ is more general than the parameterization by tree-$\lambda$.

The width parameter tree-$\mu$, the minor-matching hypertree-width, escapes this argument because it does not only depend on the subgraphs induced by the bags, but also on the neighborhoods of the bags. In particular, for tree-$\mu$ the width of a bag $X_t$ is defined as the maximum cardinality of an induced matching in $G$ whose every edge intersects $X_t$. A
similar example shows that this type of parameters where the width of a bag $X_t$ depends on $G[N[X_t]]$ cannot be generalized much more: If we start from MAXIMUM INDEPENDENT SET on cubic graphs and subdivide each edge four times, we obtain graphs where MAXIMUM INDEPENDENT SET is NP-hard, but that admit tree decompositions that contain one large bag $X_t$ such that every connected component of $G[N[X_t]]$ is a 3-vertex path, while for all other bags $X_t$ their closed neighborhood $N[X_t]$ has bounded size.

Further, we remind that our main result is computationally tight. In particular, in Theorem 13, we proved that it is unlikely that there is a $g(k)$-approximation algorithm for the tree-independence number with running time $f(k)n^o(k)$, for any computable function $g$. This shows that the $n^{\Omega(k)}$-factor in the running time is unavoidable up to some reasonable complexity assumptions. For exact computation of the tree-independence number, we proved in Theorem 2 that it is NP-complete to decide whether $\text{tree-}\alpha(G) \leq k$ for every constant $k \geq 4$. Since $\text{tree-}\alpha(G) = 1$ if and only if $G$ is a chordal graph, Theorem 2 leads to the question about the complexity of deciding whether the tree-independence number is at most $k$ for $k = 2$ and 3. In Theorem 14, we demonstrated that for every fixed integer $k \geq 3$, deciding if two given vertices of a graph can be separated by removing a set of vertices that induces a graph with independence number at most $k$ is NP-complete. This result indicates that it may be already NP-complete to decide whether $\text{tree-}\alpha(G) \leq 3$. We hesitate to state any conjecture for the case $k = 2$.

The final question is about the place of computing the tree-independence number in the polynomial hierarchy. For a fixed $k$, deciding whether $\text{tree-}\alpha(G) \leq k$ is in NP. However, when $k$ is a part of the input, the problem is naturally placed in the class $\Sigma^P_2$ on the second level of the polynomial hierarchy. Is the problem $\Sigma^P_2$-complete?

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