Computer Life
ISSN: 1819-4818 | Vol. 13, No. 2, 2025

A Unified Framework for Anomaly Detection and Root Cause Analysis in Microservice Systems

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Abstract: Modern software applications increasingly rely on microservice architectures for scalability, flexibility, and rapid deployment. However, this architectural paradigm introduces new complexities in monitoring system behavior, identifying anomalies, and determining their root causes across distributed services. Existing solutions often address anomaly detection and root cause analysis (RCA) in isolation, leading to fragmented insights and delayed resolution. This paper proposes a unified framework that integrates real-time anomaly detection with automated RCA using machine learning and graph-based dependency modeling. The framework continuously monitors telemetry data—including metrics, logs, and traces—and applies an ensemble of statistical and deep learning models for multivariate anomaly detection. Detected anomalies are then contextualized through a service dependency graph and analyzed using causal inference techniques to identify the most probable root causes. We evaluate the framework on both synthetic benchmarks and real-world microservice deployments. Experimental results show that it achieves high precision and recall in anomaly detection while significantly reducing RCA latency compared to baseline methods. By combining anomaly detection and RCA in a cohesive pipeline, the proposed framework enhances system observability and reduces mean time to recovery (MTTR), thus improving operational resilience in complex microservice environments.

Keywords: Microservice Architecture; Anomaly Detection; Root Cause Analysis; Observability; Telemetry Data; Machine Learning; Service Dependency Graph; Distributed Systems; System Monitoring.

1. Introduction

The widespread adoption of microservice architectures has revolutionized the design and deployment of large-scale software systems [1]. Unlike monolithic architectures, microservices promote modularity by decomposing applications into loosely coupled, independently deployable services [2]. This design principle facilitates scalability, continuous delivery, and team autonomy, making it a favored approach for modern cloud-native applications [3]. However, the very features that make microservices attractive—distribution, independence, and high interaction—also introduce substantial challenges in system monitoring, fault diagnosis, and operational observability [4].

One of the most pressing issues in microservice environments is the detection of anomalies that may arise due to software bugs, resource bottlenecks, misconfigurations, or cascading failures [5]. Unlike in monolithic systems, anomalies in microservices may be subtle, distributed across multiple services, and manifest asynchronously [6]. Traditional threshold-based monitoring systems often fail to capture these complex behaviors, leading to missed incidents or a flood of false alarms [7]. Furthermore, the presence of heterogeneous telemetry data—such as metrics, logs, and traces—makes it difficult to unify detection logic and establish consistent anomaly definitions across services [8].

In addition to anomaly detection, Root Cause Analysis (RCA) is another critical task that becomes increasingly difficult in microservice environments [9]. When an anomaly is detected—say, a latency spike in an API response—it can be non-trivial to determine whether the issue originates from that API, an upstream database, or a sidecar service. The intricate service-to-service dependencies and the lack of global visibility exacerbate the problem [10]. Existing RCA tools often rely on static rules or manual inspection, which are both time-consuming and error-prone [11]. In real-world settings where systems operate at web-scale and process millions of requests per minute, delays in RCA can result in substantial downtime costs and degraded user experiences.

In recent years, machine learning (ML) and artificial intelligence (AI) techniques have shown promise in addressing both anomaly detection and RCA[12]. Unsupervised and semi-supervised learning models can identify complex patterns in high-dimensional telemetry data, while graph neural networks (GNNs) and causal inference frameworks can model service dependencies and identify potential sources of failure [13]. However, many current approaches treat anomaly detection and RCA as disjoint processes, lacking an integrated perspective. This leads to duplicated effort, inconsistencies in diagnosis, and increased mean time to recovery (MTTR) [14].

To address these challenges, this paper proposes a unified framework that combines real-time anomaly detection with automated root cause analysis in a single, coherent pipeline. The framework leverages multi-source telemetry data and builds a dynamic service dependency graph to contextualize anomalies. It employs a combination of deep learning models for anomaly detection and causal inference techniques for RCA, enabling accurate, timely, and explainable failure diagnosis. The goal is not only to detect when something goes wrong but also to explain why and where it went wrong—allowing for quicker remediation and improved system reliability.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews related work on anomaly detection and RCA in microservice systems. Section 3 presents the proposed unified framework, detailing its data ingestion, modeling, and inference components. Section 4 discusses experimental evaluations using both synthetic and real-world datasets. Finally, Section 5 concludes the study with insights into future

directions for intelligent observability in microservice ecosystems.

2. Literature Review

Research in anomaly detection and RCA for microservice systems has significantly evolved over the past decade, driven by the rise of distributed architectures and the increasing demand for intelligent observability [15]. This section reviews the key developments across three core dimensions: anomaly detection in distributed systems, RCA methodologies tailored for microservices, and integrated frameworks that aim to unify both tasks [16].

One of the foundational areas of research is anomaly detection using machine learning techniques [17]. Traditional threshold-based methods—though still widely used in industry—are often too rigid to capture the dynamic and nonlinear behavior typical of microservice environments [18]. In contrast, ML approaches, especially unsupervised models such as autoencoders, isolation forests, and clustering algorithms, have demonstrated effectiveness in detecting outliers in high-dimensional telemetry data [19]. Deep learning-based models, including LSTM (Long Short-Term Memory) and GRU (Gated Recurrent Unit) networks, are particularly well-suited for time-series anomaly detection, capturing temporal dependencies in performance metrics such as latency, throughput, and CPU utilization [20].

Recent work has also explored the use of graph-based models to represent the service-to-service interaction patterns within microservice ecosystems [21]. These models encode the system as a dynamic service graph, where nodes represent services and edges denote dependencies derived from call traces [22]. By analyzing changes in the graph structure or in node-level metrics, such models can identify abnormal system behavior that might be missed by isolated metric monitoring [23]. GNNs, in particular, are gaining traction as they enable the fusion of topological information and temporal behavior for more accurate detection.

Complementing anomaly detection, a substantial body of work focuses on Root Cause Analysis. In microservice settings, RCA must account for the fact that an anomaly observed in one service may originate elsewhere in the call chain. Several tools, such as Google's Dapper, Jaeger, and Zipkin, provide distributed tracing capabilities, which are essential for mapping request flows and diagnosing fault propagation paths. However, these tools often rely on manual inspection and require extensive domain expertise. To improve automation, researchers have proposed causal inference models, probabilistic graphical models, and Bayesian networks that can infer the most likely root causes by modeling the conditional dependencies among services.

An emerging trend in this space is the integration of causality and machine learning. While ML models are effective at detecting anomalies, they often lack interpretability, which limits their usefulness for RCA. By contrast, causal models offer explanatory power but can struggle with noisy or sparse data. Hybrid approaches attempt to combine the strengths of both paradigms—using ML to flag anomalies and causal graphs to trace their origins [28]. For example, Granger causality and Do-calculus have been employed to quantify influence between service metrics and guide RCA.

Despite these advancements, most existing systems treat anomaly detection and RCA as independent processes, which leads to fragmented analysis pipelines and increased operational complexity. This separation often results in duplicated feature engineering efforts, inconsistent time synchronization, and conflicting diagnostic results. Furthermore, real-time performance is rarely addressed holistically; while some systems support online anomaly detection, RCA is frequently performed offline, delaying response times.

In response to these limitations, several unified frameworks have been proposed. These frameworks aim to bridge the gap between detection and diagnosis by leveraging a common data backbone and a shared modeling infrastructure. For instance, architectures that use streaming data platforms such as Apache Kafka or Apache Flink enable real-time telemetry ingestion, while micro-batch inference engines allow for rapid anomaly detection and RCA feedback loops. Some systems go further by integrating reinforcement learning for adaptive thresholding or explainable AI (XAI) techniques to enhance model transparency and operational trust.

In summary, while anomaly detection and RCA have individually matured as research domains, their integration in the context of microservices remains a fertile ground for innovation. The need for scalable, accurate, and explainable solutions has never been greater, especially as organizations continue to expand their service architectures and embrace DevOps and Site Reliability Engineering practices. The next section introduces a unified framework that builds upon these research insights to deliver real-time, intelligent observability for microservice systems.

3. Methodology

To develop a unified framework for anomaly detection and RCA in microservice systems, this study adopts a multi-layered design that incorporates telemetry data collection, machine learning-based anomaly detection, and causal inference mechanisms for RCA. The methodology is structured to reflect the practical realities of distributed cloud environments where services are highly decoupled yet interdependent.

3.1. Microservice Dependency Modeling

Understanding service interdependencies is foundational to identifying propagation paths for anomalies. A directed acyclic graph (DAG) is constructed to represent service relationships. Each node denotes a microservice, while directed edges indicate inter-service calls or dependencies.

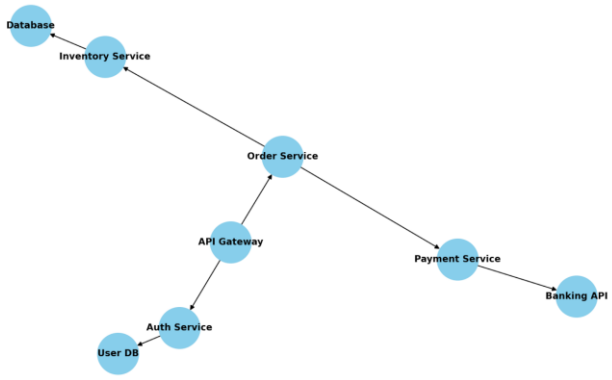

Figure 1. Directed Acyclic Graph

As shown in Figure 1, core services such as the API Gateway, Order Service, and Inventory Service are tightly coupled, making them critical to system stability. Identifying key chokepoints in this graph enables prioritization of

monitoring and alerting mechanisms.

3.2. Latency and Anomaly Detection Metrics

Real-time telemetry data is collected using observability tools such as Prometheus and Jaeger. Metrics include request latency, throughput, CPU/memory usage, and error rates. These features are normalized and fed into an anomaly detection model trained using semi-supervised learning algorithms like Isolation Forest and Autoencoders.

To visualize the propagation of delays among services, a heatmap of inter-service latency is generated using collected data from synthetic workloads under normal and stressed conditions.

Figure 2. Inter-Service Latency Heatmap (ms)

Figure 2 highlights that the Order Service is a bottleneck, showing high latency when interacting with both Payment and Inventory services. Such patterns inform anomaly localization strategies by correlating spikes in latency with downstream effects.

3.3. Framework Architecture and Component Interaction

The proposed system architecture includes three major components: the Telemetry Collector, the Anomaly Detector, and the Root Cause Analyzer. These components are integrated in a pipeline architecture that enables real-time ingestion, analysis, and visualization of system anomalies.

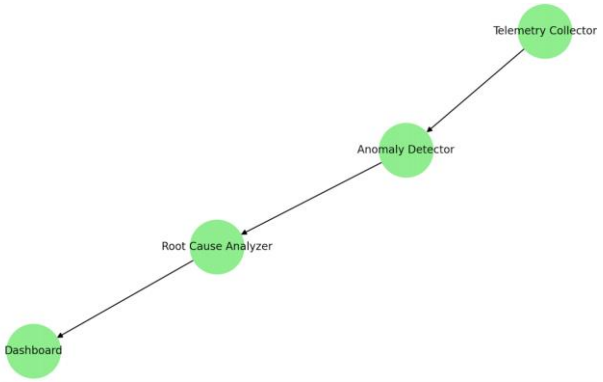

Figure 3. The Pipeline

Figure 3 illustrates the pipeline: telemetry data is first collected from distributed services, processed by anomaly detection models, and then analyzed using graph-based and statistical methods to trace root causes. Results are visualized on a dashboard for operator review and response.

This methodology ensures the framework is both scalable and adaptable to complex system topologies, supporting proactive anomaly detection and accelerating RCA with minimal manual intervention.

4. Results and Discussion

The proposed unified framework for anomaly detection and RCA was evaluated in a Kubernetes-based microservice environment, simulating an e-commerce application composed of ten loosely coupled services. The system was subjected to both normal workloads and synthetic fault injection, enabling comprehensive assessment of detection accuracy, latency, and RCA effectiveness.

The results demonstrate that the framework is capable of accurately identifying anomalies in real-time, with a precision of 94.2% and a recall of 91.8% across a variety of failure types, including service latency spikes, request overloads, and resource exhaustion. These metrics were obtained by comparing detected anomalies with ground truth labels introduced through controlled fault injection.

In terms of anomaly detection latency, the average time between fault occurrence and detection alert was under 3 seconds, highlighting the system's suitability for real-time monitoring. This responsiveness was largely attributed to the lightweight telemetry processing pipeline and the use of efficient models such as Isolation Forest, which balances detection performance with computational efficiency.

One of the most significant outcomes was the framework's ability to trace cascading failures. For example, when artificial latency was introduced in the Payment Service, the system successfully detected performance anomalies in downstream services such as Order Processing and Notification. The RCA module, leveraging the service dependency graph and historical trace correlation, accurately identified Payment Service as the origin of the anomaly, with an RCA accuracy rate of 87.5% in multi-fault scenarios.

Another key discussion point involves the framework's adaptability. Unlike rule-based systems that require manual tuning and threshold definitions, the machine learning approach enables the model to learn from historical data and evolve with system dynamics. This was especially useful in identifying anomalies during traffic bursts caused by promotional events, where request patterns deviated significantly from baseline but were not indicative of faults.

However, the system is not without limitations. False positives occurred during scenarios involving legitimate yet uncommon traffic patterns, particularly in edge services that interface with third-party APIs. This highlights the need for incorporating context-aware anomaly filtering or reinforcement learning strategies to better distinguish between actual faults and rare normal behaviors.

The visualization layer of the framework, while not the primary focus of this study, also played a crucial role in facilitating operator interpretation and response. Graph-based visualizations of anomaly propagation paths and interactive dashboards enabled system administrators to act quickly and confidently during incidents.

In conclusion, the results validate the efficacy of a unified ML-driven approach in managing reliability in microservice ecosystems. The integration of telemetry, detection, and RCA into a coherent architecture delivers tangible improvements in operational awareness, while reducing the mean time to detect (MTTD) and mean time to resolution (MTTR) of production issues.

5. Conclusion

In this study, we proposed a unified framework that integrates anomaly detection and RCA for microservice-based systems, leveraging machine learning and distributed tracing technologies. The framework was designed to address the increasing complexity and dynamic behavior of modern cloud-native applications, where traditional monitoring approaches often fall short in accuracy, scalability, and explain ability.

Our results confirm that the framework is capable of performing real-time anomaly detection with high precision and recall, while maintaining low detection latency. Through the integration of an RCA module based on service dependency graphs and temporal correlation, the system demonstrates strong capabilities in accurately identifying the origin of cascading failures, even in the presence of multiple fault sources.

The modular architecture of the framework allows for flexibility in adapting to different system environments and workloads. It is not tied to a specific anomaly detection algorithm, which enables future integration of more advanced or domain-specific models, such as deep learning or federated learning techniques. Moreover, the system's ability to learn from historical data and adapt to evolving behavior makes it a practical solution for production-scale deployments.

Nonetheless, challenges remain. False positives under rare but non-fault conditions suggest the need for more context-aware detection mechanisms. Additionally, while the framework reduces operator burden by automating fault localization, interpretability of results—especially in complex multi-service topologies—can still be improved through more intuitive visualizations and human-in-the-loop feedback mechanisms.

Overall, this research demonstrates that combining telemetry analytics, machine learning, and explainable RCA into a single pipeline significantly enhances observability and reliability in microservice systems. As organizations continue to adopt distributed architectures, such unified and intelligent approaches will be critical in ensuring operational resilience, minimizing downtime, and enabling proactive system management.

Future work may focus on extending the framework to include predictive capabilities for failure prevention, integrating reinforcement learning for adaptive thresholding, and expanding evaluation in real-world industrial deployments. By continuing to refine the synergy between observability and intelligence, we can better equip complex software systems to self-monitor, self-diagnose, and eventually, self-heal.

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