Discriminating fluvial fans and deltas: Channel network morphometrics reflect distinct formative processes

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Abstract

Recent recognition of a new type of fluvial system – fluvial fans – introduces a fan-shaped channel network that appears similar to that of river-dominated deltas. Deltas form where rivers enter lakes and oceans, while fluvial fans are terrestrial landforms. However, fluvial fans can reach the shorelines of oceans or lakes, and in such cases the distinction between fluvial fan and river-dominated delta channel networks becomes ambiguous. We currently lack fundamental understanding of these two landforms' morphometric differences, despite their high socioeconomic significance, vulnerability to natural hazards, and key differences in how these landforms respond to global climate change and urbanization. Here we review the relevant conceptual differences in delta and fluvial fan network morphodynamics, propose a set of quantitative morphometric criteria to distinguish fluvial fan and delta channel networks, and test these criteria on 40 deltas and 40 fluvial fans from across the world. This initial attempt to contrast and distinguish deltas and fluvial fans based on their channel network morphometrics demonstrates that quantifying channel network angles (mean of 73.8° for deltas and 55.0° for fluvial fans) and trends in normalized channel widths and lengths provide efficient criteria, but some ambiguities remain that need to be resolved in future work. This research advances our mechanistic understanding of fluvial fan and delta channel networks and the recognition of modern and ancient landforms on Earth and other planetary bodies, such as Mars and Saturn's moon Titan.

Plain Language Summary

Fluvial fans are a newly recognized type of river system that look like river deltas, especially when they reach lakes or oceans. This study explores how to tell them apart by measuring the size and layout of channels in these fan-shaped landforms. Understanding these differences helps to predict how these landforms respond to climate change and urbanization, and to identify them on Mars and other planetary bodies.

1. Introduction

River deltas are depositional landforms that form where rivers enter lakes or oceans. They are home to over half a billion people, host abundant and biodiverse ecosystems, and function as both economic and agricultural hubs (Saito et al., 2007; Tejedor et al., 2015). The form and function of deltas is intimately linked to the evolving structure of their channel networks that determine how deltas distribute sediment and nutrients (Passalacqua, 2017; Pearson et al., 2020; Tejedor et al., 2017). Delta channel network morphology results from an intricate balance between sediment erosion and deposition from river, tide, and wave energy fluxes. River fluxes create distributary channels and islands, tides roughen the shoreline and widen the channels, and waves smooth the shoreline and decrease the number of distributary channels (Broaddus et al., 2022; Galloway, 1975; Nienhuis et al., 2015, 2018; Paniagua-Arroyave & Nienhuis, 2024; Vulis et al., 2023). Deltas dominated by river energy fluxes (river-dominated deltas) (Broaddus et al., 2022; Galloway, 1975; Nienhuis et al., 2015, 2018; Paniagua-Arroyave & Nienhuis, 2024; Vulis et al., 2023) characteristically form fan-shaped landforms with complex distributary channel networks (Fig. 1). In these deltas, channel network topology is defined by mouth bar deposition and consequent distributary channel bifurcation (Bates, 1953; Edmonds & Slingerland, 2007; Wright, 1977). To specifically refer to these deltaic processes, we define "bifurcations" as a process related to mouth bar deposition and consequent channel branching.

Fluvial fans are another type of fan-shaped landform with channel networks that share morphological similarities with the river-dominated delta channel networks (Fig. 2). Fluvial fans are a relatively newly acknowledged type of fluvial landform (Ventra & Clarke, 2018; Weissman et al., 2010), which forms via river avulsions or "channel jumps" across low-gradient floodplains (Chakraborty et al., 2010; Martin & Edmonds, 2023; North & Warwick, 2007). Rivers have been traditionally regarded as sediment transfer or bypass zones in source-to-sink systems (Allen, 2008; Fielding et al., 2012), whereas fluvial fans are net depositional and build significant stratigraphic thicknesses (Chakraborty et al., 2010; Moscariello, 2018; Weissmann et al., 2015). Fluvial fans are also called "wet" fluvial-dominated alluvial fans (Schumm, 1977), megafans (Singh et al., 1993), or distributive fluvial systems (DFS) (Weissman et al., 2010). Fluvial fans are distinct landforms from alluvial fans – which form by a combination of gravitational and streamflow processes, feature steep gradients (typically 2–12°), and have a relatively small radius typically less than 10 km (Blair & McPherson, 1994; Moscariello, 2018). Fluvial fans form some of the largest terrestrial landforms on Earth (10^3–10^5 km^2 in surface area) (Horton & Decelles, 2001; Leier et al., 2005) and have low gradients (typically 0.03–0.001°) (Brooke et al., 2022). Fluvial fans are abundant across Earth, and they form in diverse climatic and tectonic settings (Hartley et al., 2010; Ventra & Clarke, 2018; Weissmann et al., 2010).

Like deltas, fluvial fans are home to hundreds of millions of people, and these highly dynamic landforms are critical for their livelihood – supporting agriculture, fisheries, and freshwater access. For example, the Kosi fluvial fan experiences catastrophic river floods that lead to large numbers of casualties and displaced populations (Sinha, 2009; Syvitski & Brakenridge, 2013). While fluvial fans are terrestrial landforms, they can reach the shorelines of oceans (Fig. 2b) or lakes (Figs. 2a, 2d and 2i). In such cases the distinction between fluvial fan and river-dominated delta channel networks becomes ambiguous, while wave- and tide-dominated deltas have distinctly recognizable morphologies (Broaddus et al., 2022; Galloway, 1975; Nienhuis et al., 2015; 2018; Paniagua-Arroyave & Nienhuis, 2024; Vulis et al., 2023). We currently lack quantitative morphometric criteria for distinguishing river-dominated delta and fluvial fan channel networks, despite their socioeconomic significance, key differences in their natural hazard vulnerabilities, and in how they respond to global change. Deltas are global change hotspots highly vulnerable to urbanization and climate change, which can aggravate coastal hazards and cause sea level rise (Giosan et al., 2014; Syvitski et al., 2009), and reduce sediment supply due to river damming and artificial levees, causing the drowning of deltas (Blum & Roberts, 2009; Giosan et al., 2014; Nienhuis et al., 2020; Paola et al., 2011; Syvitski et al., 2009).

Numerous fan-shaped landforms with channel networks have also been identified on other planetary bodies such as Mars (Malin & Edgett, 2015; Ori et al., 2000; Wood, 2006) and Saturn's moon Titan (Radebaugh et al., 2018; Wall et al., 2010; Witek & Czechowski, 2015). Deltas on planetary bodies are important indicators of paleo-shorelines and have been utilized to reconstruct the shorelines and water levels of ancient lakes and oceans on Mars (Di Achille & Hynek, 2010). However, Martian paleo-ocean shoreline reconstructions have so far yielded mixed results (De Toffoli et al., 2021). This discrepancy could perhaps arise because shoreline-bound deltas have not been effectively distinguished from fluvial fans on Mars, which may form thousands of kilometers inland from shorelines (Bramble et al., 2019; Limaye et al., 2023; Tebolt & Goudge, 2022). Deltas also offer attractive targets for mission sites in search of life due to their habitability and high biosignature preservation potential, as exemplified by the selection of Jezero Crater for NASA's *Perseverance* rover, *Ingenuity* helicopter, and future Mars Sample Return mission (Farley et al., 2020). Distinguishing deltaic and fluvial fan paleo-channel networks on other planetary bodies is even more ambiguous, especially if the lakes and oceans are no longer present.

Over time, the accumulation of biogenic and sedimentary materials distributed via channel networks contributes to the construction of stratigraphy. Fluvial fans and deltas are net depositional systems, as both are characterized by spatially diminishing water surface slopes that reduce sediment transport capacity, thereby producing spatiotemporal convergence and deposition of sediment (Ganti et al., 2014). Consequently, in addition to their socioeconomic significance, both landforms significantly contribute to the stratigraphic record, and their deposits can be used to decipher past environmental conditions. High

deposition rates in fluvial fans and deltas promote the preservation of environmental change signals in the sedimentary record (Trampush & Hajek, 2017). Similar to modern river-dominated deltas and fluvial fans, we lack morphometric criteria to distinguish these two fan-shaped channel networks in the sedimentary record, such as in seismic datasets.

This study is motivated by developing quantitative morphometric distinction criteria for fluvial fan and river-dominated delta channel networks. Prior work has established quantitative morphological criteria for describing deltaic channel networks and linked these characteristics to theory (Chen et al., 2021; Coffey & Shaw, 2017; Edmonds et al., 2011; Edmonds & Slingerland, 2007; Fagherazzi et al., 2015; Ke et al., 2019; Passalacqua, 2017; Pearson et al., 2020; Tejedor et al., 2015, 2017). However, there are no existing quantitative criteria to characterize fluvial fan channel networks or to differentiate the two landforms. To develop such criteria, we review the relevant conceptual differences in delta and fluvial fan network morphodynamics, propose quantitative morphometric criteria to distinguish fluvial fan and delta channel networks, and test these criteria on 40 deltas and 40 fluvial fans (Supplementary Data) from across the globe (Fig. 3). We test the robustness of the approach by analyzing differences in channel network morphometrics concerning the size and gradient of the systems, hydroclimate conditions, lake versus ocean terminations and tide versus wave influences in deltas, and channel morphology in fluvial fans. We assess how effectively the proposed methods distinguish fluvial fans from river-dominated deltas and examine why this distinction matters under global change. This work serves to improve our mechanistic understanding of fluvial fan and delta evolution, and their accurate recognition on Earth, other planetary bodies, and in the sedimentary record.

2. Delta and Fluvial Fan Channel Network Morphodynamics

The nature of channel networks is dependent on distinct morphodynamic processes responsible for their formation (Edmonds & Slingerland, 2007; Fagherazzi et al., 2015; Tejedor et al., 2015). Below we analyze differences in delta and fluvial fan morphodynamics and review existing morphometric criteria for quantifying deltaic distributary channel networks. Our review is not comprehensive; rather, it focuses on the specific processes that govern the formation of the morphometric characteristics that we can then use for distinction of these two landforms, namely channel network angles, and downstream changes in channel widths and lengths. There are other important characteristics of deltaic channel networks, linked to water and sediment discharge distribution, entropy, and connectivity (Chen et al., 2021; Ke et al., 2019; Passalacqua, 2017; Pearson et al., 2020; Tejedor et al., 2015, 2017). These aspects are not considered in this review, because they are outside the scope of this study that seeks to distinguish deltaic and fluvial fan channel networks using easily applicable morphometric criteria that can be used for both deltaic and fluvial fan networks.

We use the terms bifurcation and avulsion as *processes* rather than a geomorphological feature of channel splitting. *Bifurcation* is the process of channel splitting driven by mouth bar formation (Edmonds & Slingerland, 2007). *Avulsions* are channel "jumps", where a channel changes its course due to channel superelevation or a more favorable (steeper) gradient at channel flanks (Gearon et al., 2024; Jones & Schumm, 1999; Slingerland & Smith, 2004). Partial avulsions split channels; however, the process is distinct from *bifurcation* around a mouth bar.

2.1 River Deltas

Deltas (Fig. 1) form only where a river enters a standing body of water. Here, the transport capacity of the turbulent jet decreases, and the "parent" stream jet flow experiences both lateral and bed friction, causing the flow to decelerate and rapidly expand laterally (Bates, 1953; Edmonds & Slingerland, 2007; Jerolmack & Swenson, 2007; Wright, 1977). As a result, the transport capacity of the turbulent jet decreases and sediment is deposited as a mouth bar basinward of the river mouth (Edmonds & Slingerland, 2007). The process of mouth bar deposition and growth eventually leads to the bifurcation, or downstream branching of a single (parent) channel into two daughter channels (Axelsson, 1967; Coffey & Shaw, 2017; Edmonds & Slingerland, 2007) (Fig. 4a). These daughter channels are separated by an island or shallow bay where sediment transport is significantly reduced or nonexistent, and flow is unchannelized (Coffey & Shaw, 2017). Mouth bar deposition and resultant channel bifurcation repeat multiple times, leading to the seaward advancement of the shoreline and the construction of a delta distributary channel network (Edmonds & Slingerland, 2007; Olariu & Bhattacharya, 2006) (Fig. 4a).

Deltas also experience channel avulsions at the lobe-level (Slingerland & Smith, 2004). These deltaic avulsions occur within a region of high-water surface slope variability caused by backwater hydrodynamics that are characterized by spatial flow deceleration and deposition during low flows, and flow acceleration and bed scour with high flows (Brooke et al., 2022; Chatanantavet et al., 2012; Chatanantavet & Lamb, 2014). As the backwater zone sets the location for avulsion in deltas (Chatanantavet et al., 2012), they are strongly controlled by hydrodynamics in their receiving basin, like bifurcations. As a result, the delta lobe size is generally consistent and the lobe avulsion node migrates downstream commensurate with shoreline progradation (Ganti et al., 2014), as influenced by flood frequency, sediment supply, or sea-level rise (Brooke et al., 2022). These avulsions episodically rearrange the depocenter at the delta lobe scale, whereas the substantially more frequent bifurcations generate the topology of the delta distributary channel networks (Bentley et al., 2016; Edmonds & Slingerland, 2007).

Resultant delta channel networks have a specific angle at which distributary channels bifurcate (Fig. 4a) (Coffey & Shaw, 2017), because a channel bifurcation will grow toward an equilibrium angle of 72° to maximize flux at the two channel tips (Coffey & Shaw, 2017; Devauchelle et al., 2012; Ke et al., 2019; Mahon et al., 2024). First described in tributary networks, this theoretical angle arises from diffusive

groundwater flow (Devauchelle et al., 2012). Testing of this concept reports bifurcation angles of 70.4° ± 2.6° (n = 9) in natural deltas (Coffey & Shaw, 2017), and 68.3° ± 8.7° (n = 21) (Coffey & Shaw, 2017) and 74.1° ± 7.7° (n = 13) (Federici & Paola, 2003) in experimental deltas.

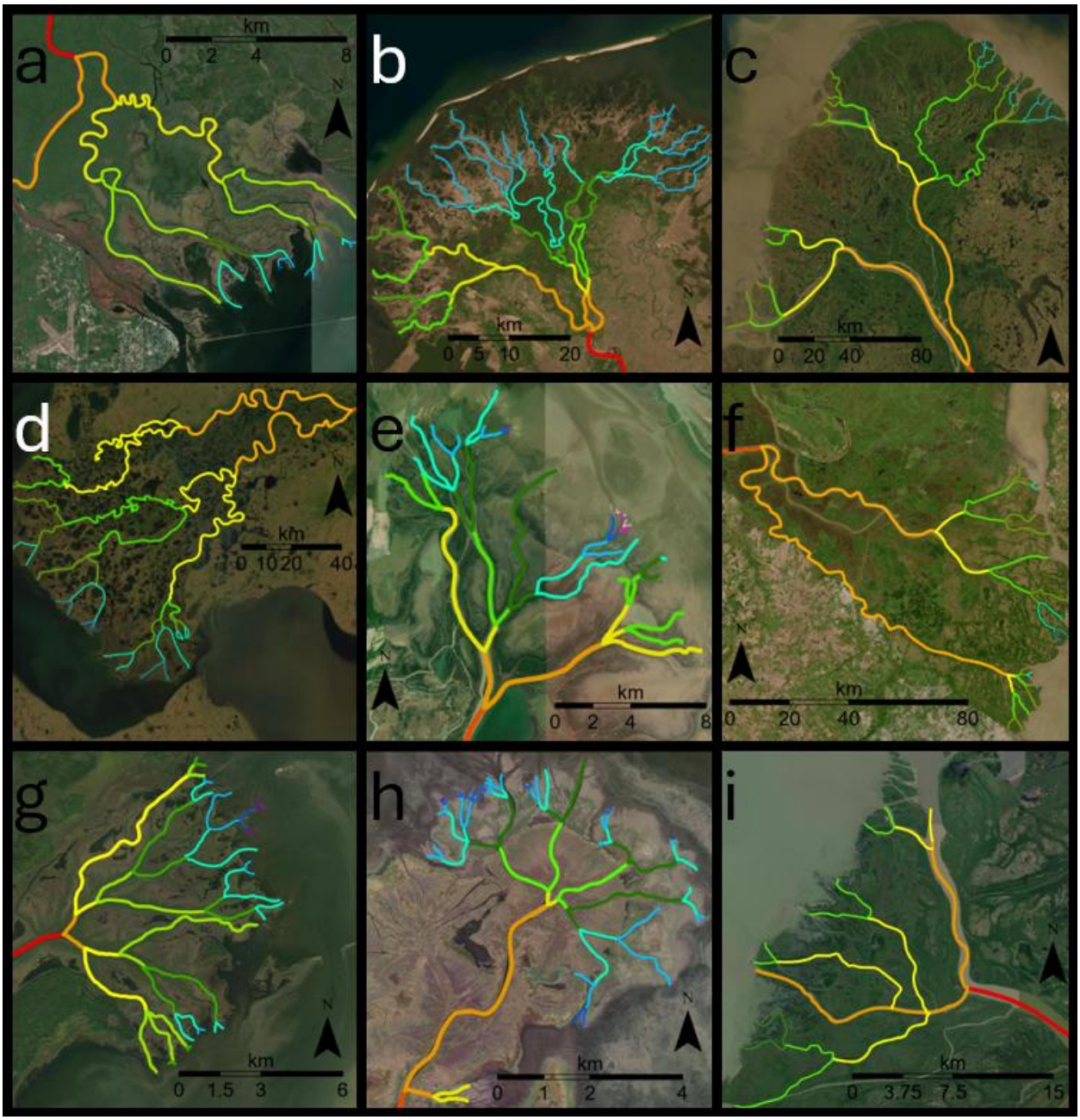

Figure 1: Examples of delta channel networks: (a) Apalachicola, (b) Selenga, (c) Yukon, (d) Kobuk, (e) Poyang Lake, (f) Parana (g) Saskatchewan, (h) Mamawi lake, (i) Slave deltas. The colors indicate channel hierarchy (see Methods). Base imagery from Esri's World Imagery basemap (© Esri, Maxar, Earthstar Geographics, and the GIS User Community).

Deltaic channel networks tend to consistently self-organize (Edmonds et al., 2011; Fagherazzi, 2008) and exhibit a theoretical fractal pattern of decreasing channel widths and lengths associated with increasing bifurcation order (Edmonds et al., 2011; Edmonds & Slingerland, 2007; Hariharan et al., 2022;

Seybold et al., 2017; Wolinsky et al., 2010) (Fig. 4a). Edmonds & Slingerland, (2007) show that channel width trends align with hydraulic geometric scaling: as the discharge of a parent channel divides into the discharge for two resultant daughter channels, the daughter channel dimensions decrease as they scale with bankfull discharge. Channel lengths decrease downstream with each successive bifurcation because the jet momentum flux and consequent average grain transport distance decrease downstream, causing new mouth bar deposition and accompanying bifurcations to occur closer to the previous bifurcation node for a given channel (Edmonds & Slingerland, 2007) (Figs. 4a and 5a).

The nature of delta channel networks is further affected by waves and tides (Broaddus et al., 2022; Geleynse et al., 2011; Jerolmack & Swenson, 2007) where the relative strength of river, wave, and tide processes determines whether deltas are river, wave, or tide dominated (Galloway, 1975; Nienhuis et al., 2015, 2018; Paniagua-Arroyave & Nienhuis, 2024; Vulis et al., 2023). Since wave- and tide-*dominated* deltas exhibit distinct morphologies from river-dominated delta and fluvial fan channel networks, they are not considered in this study (See Methods for more information on classification).

2.2 Fluvial Fans

In contrast to deltas where bifurcations and avulsions are strongly controlled by hydrodynamics near a receiving basin of standing water (Brooke et al., 2022; Chatanantavet et al., 2012; Ganti et al., 2014), fluvial fan river avulsions are driven by a topographic slope break (Ganti et al., 2014; Martin & Edmonds, 2023). Increased likelihood of avulsions at the fan apex is a consequence of the gradient reduction that triggers in-channel sediment aggradation (Parker et al., 1998). These avulsions result from high channel bed aggradation rates that are considerably higher than on the surrounding floodplains (Pizzuto, 1987). This process causes river channel superelevation which ultimately triggers river avulsions near the fan apex (Bryant et al., 1995; Gearon et al., 2024; Mohrig et al., 2000). Since this slope break controls the location of the fluvial fan's apex, the avulsion node is thus topographically pinned (Ganti et al., 2014) at this abrupt change in gradient, unlike in deltas (Brooke et al., 2022). Partial or full avulsions do occur further downfan, involving local gradient or discharge decreases, or crevassing processes (Assine, 2005; Chakraborty et al., 2010; Donselaar et al., 2013; Gearon et al., 2024) (Fig. 2).

Fluvial fan channel networks result through repeated nodal style avulsions that typically shift the primary river to different regions of the fan (Slingerland & Smith, 2004). These avulsions superimpose new channel positions on paleo-channel locations and can split channels by partial avulsions and crevasses. This generates apparent channel "bifurcations" (North & Warwick, 2007) (Fig. 4b). However, as a process, these are not bifurcations related to mouth bar deposition but rather generated by avulsions. Fluvial fan channel networks are predominantly paleo-channel networks rather than active channel

networks like in deltas (Chakraborty et al., 2010; North & Warwick, 2007). Multiple channels can actively transmit discharge at partial avulsions, such as during major river floods.

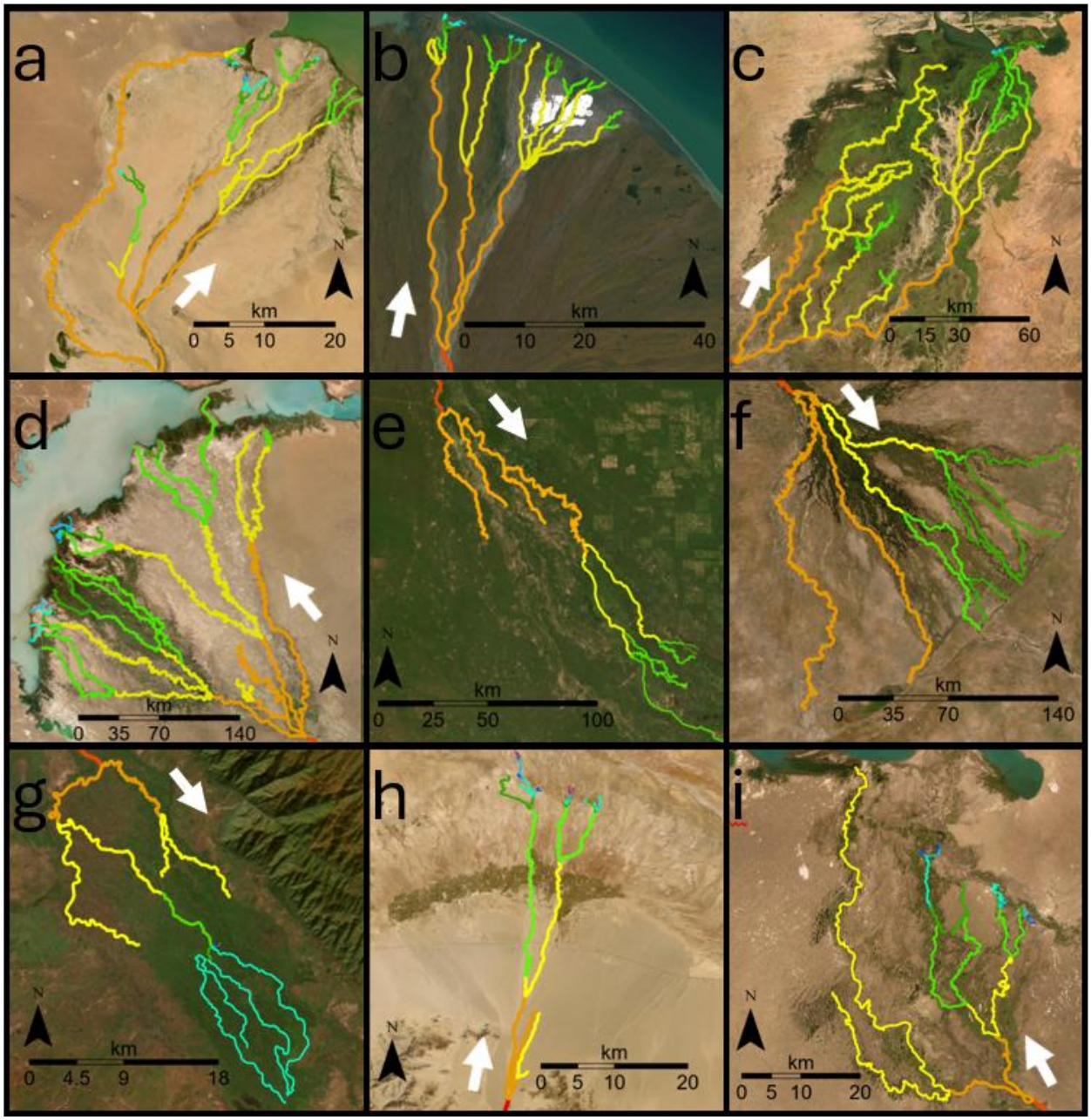

Figure 2: Examples of fluvial fan channel networks: (a) Dzavhan Gol, (b) Kongakut, (c) Niger, (d) Ili, (e) Pilcomayo, (f) Okavango, (g) Shire, (h) Nomon He, and (i) Aksu fans. The colors indicate channel hierarchy (see Methods), and white arrows indicates downfan direction. Base imagery from Esri's World Imagery basemap (© Esri, Maxar, Earthstar Geographics, and the GIS User Community).

Downfan decreases in channel width have been well documented in modern and ancient fluvial fans (Davidson et al., 2013; Kelly & Olsen, 1993; Nichols, 1987; Nichols & Fisher, 2007; Owen et al., 2015; Wang & Plink-Björklund, 2019; Weissman et al., 2010), linked to discharge losses to floodplain processes, infiltration into the loose sediments of the fan, and evapotranspiration (Davidson et al., 2013;

Hartley et al., 2010; Horton & Decelles, 2001; Weissman et al., 2010). However, some fluvial fan channels have also been shown to widen downstream, possibly due to changes in channel planform or aspect ratio, discharge contribution from groundwater, or discharge capture from adjacent rivers (Chakraborty et al., 2010; Davidson et al., 2013). Fluvial fan channel networks have been studied for qualitative descriptions of channel planform morphology (Davidson et al., 2013; Hartley et al., 2010; Weissman et al., 2010) and scaling relationships (Davidson et al., 2013; Davidson & Hartley, 2014). Modeling establishes a relationship between the fluvial fan shape and avulsion dynamics, like avulsion trigger period and abandoned channel dynamics (Edmonds et al., 2022; Martin & Edmonds, 2023).

Fluvial fans are distinct landforms from alluvial fans that feature steep gradients (typically 2–12°), have a relatively small radial distance typically less than 10 kilometers, and lack channel networks (Blair & McPherson, 1994; Moscariello, 2018). Although surface channels may occur on alluvial fans, these are transient features formed by surface erosion, and do not construct alluvial fans, which form by a combination of gravitational and sheet flood processes (Blair & McPherson, 1994; Moscariello, 2018). Thus, alluvial fans are not considered here as they are distinct from fluvial fan channel networks that form by river avulsions.

2.3 Morphometric Criteria for Recognition of Delta and Fluvial Fan Channel Networks

Based on the above differences in delta and fluvial fan morphodynamics, we hypothesize that the morphometric differences in their channel networks can be quantified. Based on prior work, we expect river-dominated delta channel networks to display downstream decreasing channel widths and lengths with increasing bifurcation order (Edmonds & Slingerland, 2007; Seybold et al., 2007; Wolinsky et al., 2010), and have an average channel network angle of approximately 72° (Coffey & Shaw, 2017). These metrics should differ in fluvial fans, because the channel networks are built by avulsions rather than bifurcations. However, delta networks also experience avulsions, and we expect some overlap in the network angles. Below, we test these morphometric criteria on 40 river-dominated delta and 40 fluvial fan channel networks (Fig. 3).

3. Dataset and Methods

Although automated channel mapping tools like ChannelExtractor in TopoToolbox (Schwanghart & Kuhn, 2010) and Rivamap (Isikdogan et al., 2017) exist, these methods rely on either terrain-based flow routing or the detection of active surface water, typically based on spectral characteristics, to delineate river channels. However, fluvial fan channel networks are predominantly composed of paleo-channels that lack both clear topographic expression and surface water signatures. Both delta and fluvial fan channels can also be only a few meters wide, often falling below the spatial resolution of commonly available DEMs and remote sensing imagery. In such settings, the coarse resolution and smoothing of

subtle terrain in DEMs, especially in low-relief environments, further limit the effectiveness of automated extraction. As a result, we are constrained to manual digitization, as described below.

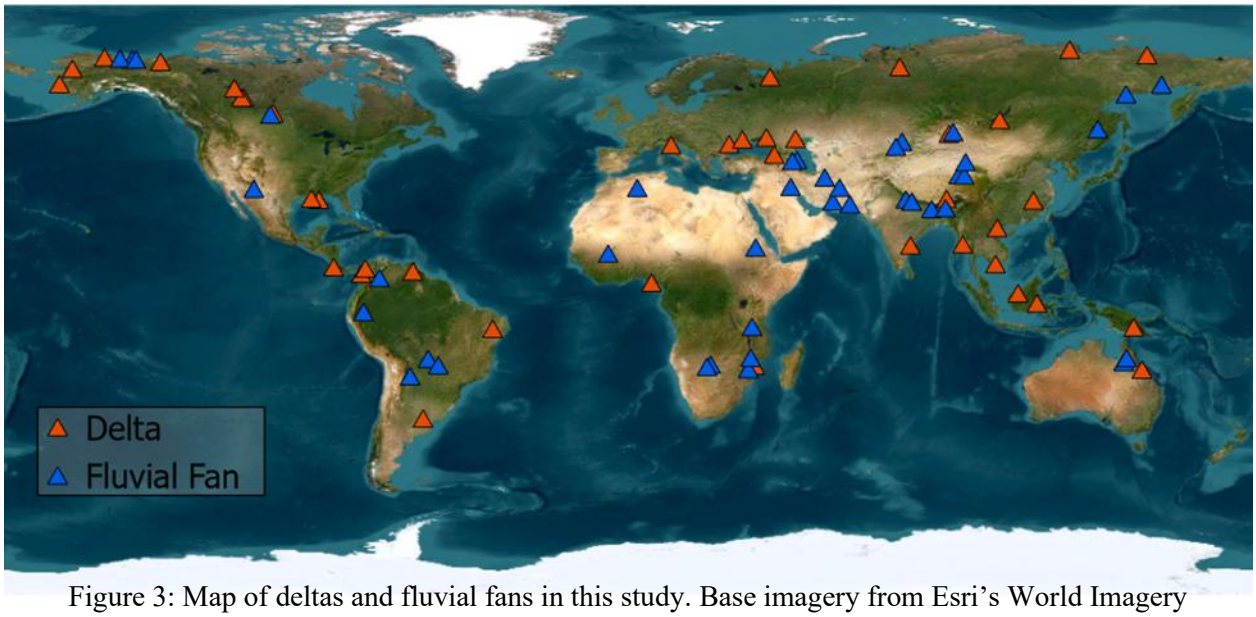

Figure 3: Map of deltas and fluvial fans in this study. Base imagery from Esri's World Imagery basemap (© Esri, Maxar, Earthstar Geographics, and the GIS User Community).

3.1 Channel Order

To establish channel order in networks, we follow (Dong et al., 2016). Their method follows a simple rule: bifurcations produce downstream increasing channel order through channels that branch. To be considered a channel of a higher order, the resultant channels must not merge downstream. When a first-order channel bifurcates, two second-order channels develop downstream of this bifurcation. When these two channels subsequently bifurcate, two new pairs of third-order channels form, and so on (Figs. 4a and 4b). All channels from the first instance of branching up to and include those that enter a body of water or terminate on land are measured. Identification of bifurcation nodes follows Edmonds et al., (2011), such that the first-order bifurcation for a river channel is the first bifurcation that the channel undergoes (Fig. 4a). Although these methods were developed for deltaic channel networks, here we adapt them for fluvial fan networks also (Figs. 4c and 4d). We do not map or measure channels that loop or rejoin downstream, or channels of non-fluvial origin, such as tidal channels or inlets (Smart, 1971; Tejedor et al., 2015) that are not connected to the fluvial distributary channels. We also omit local avulsions on fluvial fans, which generate channels that typically merge downfan (Slingerland & Smith, 2004). Paleo-channels on fluvial fans were recorded where possible. Paleo-channels resembled active channels that exhibit little to no discharge when we mapped the channel networks. We included paleo-channel measurements in fluvial fans because they are ubiquitous in fluvial fans (Hartley et al., 2010), and many of these channels do carry discharge if reactivated during major flood events.

3.2 Channel Length and Width Measurements

Channel length and width measurements follow Edmonds & Slingerland (2007), where channel length is measured as the distance between two bifurcation nodes in deltas (Fig. 4a). We adopt this methodology also to fluvial fans to measure channel lengths between avulsion nodes (Fig. 4c). The average width of a channel segment is recorded from three separate width measurements: one immediately after a node (w_i), one immediately before the next node (w_f), and one halfway between these two points at the midpoint of the channel segment (w_h) (Figs. 4a and 4c). Channel width measurements were not performed in locations where a channel has locally split into multiple branches that join downstream. In deltas, channel width measurements were recorded based on the width of water present in the channel, as observed in the satellite imagery. For fluvial fans, paleo-channel width measurements were based on the bankfull width, defined by clearly visible channel banks or vegetation boundaries. All channel width measurements were normalized using the initial first-order channel width, following the methodology of Edmonds & Slingerland, (2007). Consequently, the normalized channel width value for first-order channels is always equal to one. First-order channel lengths were measured between the last occurrence of tributary channels and the first channel splitting node and contain no significant value for our study. All channel length measurements (l) were also normalized using the first order channel width measurements according to existing methodologies (Edmonds & Slingerland, 2007; Jerolmack, 2009). As such, the normalized first order channel length values merely reflects our selected methodologies rather than an attributable morphological characteristic.

3.3 Network Angle Measurements

To quantify network angles, we adopt the methodology of Coffey & Shaw, (2017) developed for measuring channel bifurcation angles, which determines the angles of mouth bars formed at the end of an upstream channel. In this methodology, the final channel width directly upstream of a bifurcation (w_f) is set as the length for two limbs of an angle that follows the mouth bar-water contact to measure a bifurcation angle (θ_n) (Coffey & Shaw, 2017) (Fig. 4b). The same methodology is adapted here for fluvial fans (Fig. 4d). In some river deltas, tidal processes cause bifurcation of a channel into three channels instead of two; these are referred to as trifurcations (Leonardi et al., 2013), furcation (Shaw et al., 2018) or polyfurcations (Chamberlain et al., 2018), and a few such measurements are included in the dataset in the very distal portions of deltas where tidal influence is significant. We do not measure angles where channels loop or rejoin downstream of avulsions or bifurcations. In essence, we focus on the morphology of branching channel networks and measure the visible angles between channels or paleo-channels independent of their origin (Fig. 4b and 4d).

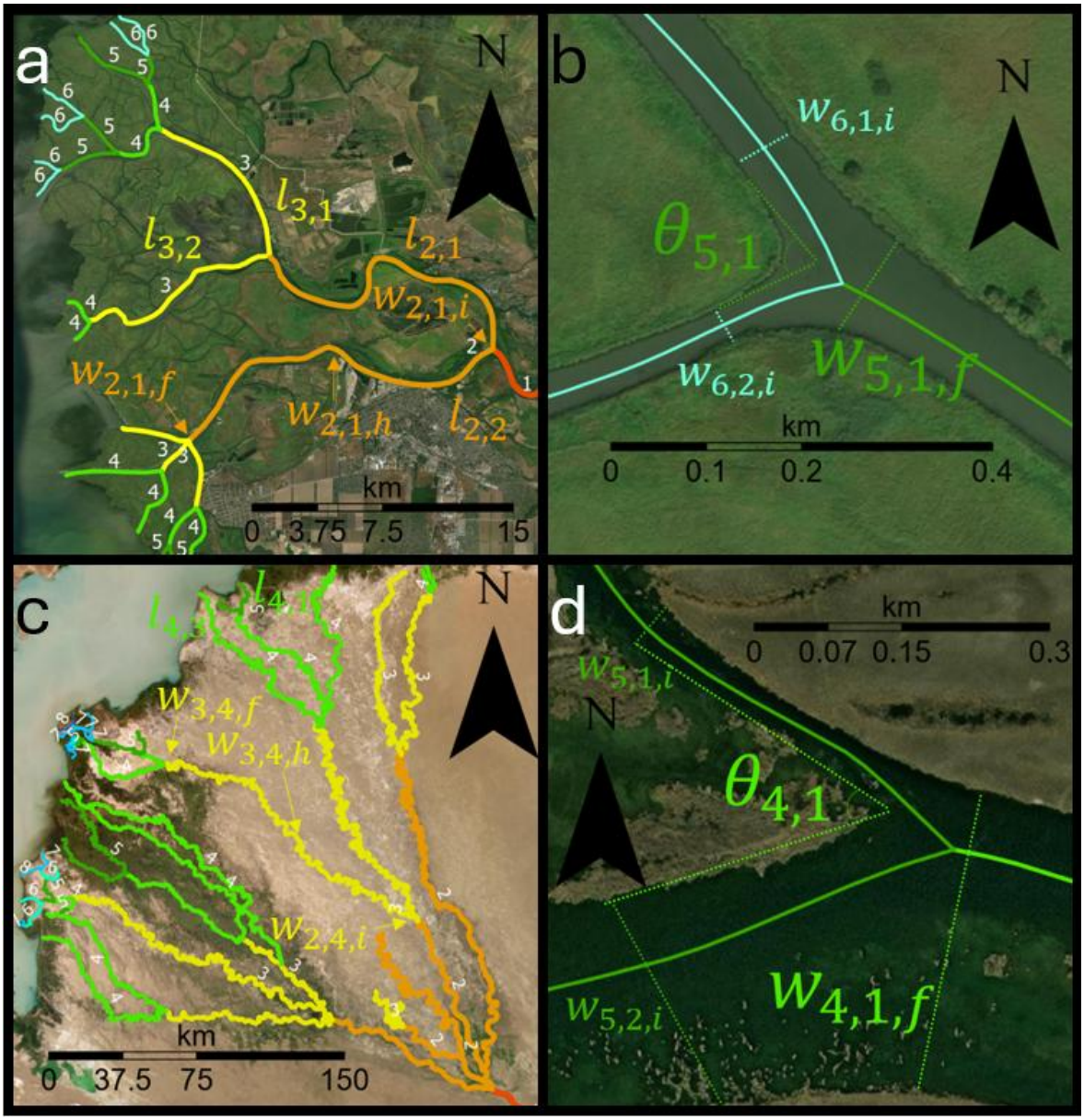

Figure 4: Illustration of (a) channel order, length, and width and (b) bifurcation angle measurements in deltas (Don delta). Illustration of (c) channel order, length, and width and (d) divergence/crossover angle measurement (Ili fan). Arrows point to locations of w_i = initial channel width, w_h = midpoint channel width, w_f = final width measurements. The w_f is set as the length of two limbs that track along the edges of the mouth bar. θ_n corresponds to the bifurcation or divergence/crossover order. Base imagery from Esri's World Imagery basemap (© Esri, Maxar, Earthstar Geographics, and the GIS User Community).

3.4 Global Delta and Fluvial Fan Channel Network Database

To test the applicability of the proposed criteria, we selected 40 river-dominated deltas and 40 fluvial fans (Fig. 3 and Supplementary Data) to be mapped using composite satellite data (ESRI, 2025). These landforms were selected from a diverse range of hydroclimatic, topographic, and basinal conditions from across the world (Fig. 3). Only river-dominated deltas are included in the dataset, because wave-and

tide-dominated delta morphology is distinct from that of fluvial fans. All deltas have been identified as such by prior work (Broaddus et al., 2022; Galloway, 1975; Hartley et al., 2010; Leier et al., 2005; Nienhuis et al., 2015, 2018; Vulis et al., 2023), and display active discharge based on satellite imagery. The river dominance of deltas and the presence of tide- or wave-influence was determined using the established principles of process-based delta classification (Broaddus et al., 2022; Galloway, 1975; Nienhuis et al., 2015, 2018; Paniagua-Arroyave and Nienhuis 2024; Vulis et al., 2023). However, categorical discrepancies exist between these different classification approaches. To clarify our terminology, we define "dominated" versus "influenced" deltas as follows. Wave-dominated deltas (e.g. São Francisco, Eel) are characterized by strandplanes and a complete absence of bifurcations; these deltas are excluded from our study. Wave-influenced deltas still possess morphological features such as strandplains, but exhibit clear, measurable channel bifurcations and are included in our study. Similarly, tide-dominated deltas (e.g. Fly, Yangtze) have a limited number of channels that widen substantially seaward, whereas tide-influenced deltas such as the Yukon (Fig. 1c) exhibit channel widening only in the most distal channels (Xu & Plink-Björklund, 2023). In practice, we combine these parameters with established classifications (Broaddus et al., 2022; Galloway, 1975; Nienhuis et al., 2015, 2018; Paniagua-Arroyave & Nienhuis, 2024; Vulis et al., 2023) to categorize the deltas in our study. Please refer to the Supplementary Data for information regarding our classification of each delta. We test the effects of tide- and wave-influence on the morphometric criteria by comparative analyses.

Fluvial fans were located using their apex coordinates from the global fluvial fan database of Hartley et al., (2010). This database also includes data on fluvial fan length, gradient, termination style (e.g. axial, contributory, lacustrine, marine, playa, desert/dune, and wetland). Termination styles refer to the environment where the fluvial fan terminates: for instance, a contributory-termination style denotes that the landform channels switch from distributary to contributory at the toe of the fan, while axial fans are classified when the main channel forms a confluence with an axial fluvial system (Hartley et al., 2010). We also subdivided delta termination styles in lakes and oceans. To test the robustness of our methodology, we analyze whether the landform size, gradient, termination style, or wave- and tide-influence in deltas affect the results.

3.5 Mapping with ArcGIS Pro

Delta and fluvial fan channel networks were mapped using ArcGIS Pro software (Version 3.2.1) (Fig. 1, 2, and 4). Two feature classes were created: one for deltas and one for fluvial fans. Each delta or fluvial fan landform was then individually mapped as a shapefile layer under the corresponding feature class. The shapefiles for channel networks were created as polyline features, which allow users to manually trace individual river channel segments while automatically recording line lengths. Channel widths and angles were measured using the line and angle measurement tools in ArcGIS Pro. All data was

recorded in the attribute table for each landform. This data was organized into Excel documents and subsequently converted to Python- and Pandas- readable CSV files (Supplementary Data).

One limitation of our methodology is uncertainty regarding the timing of satellite image acquisition relative to precipitation events. Precipitation increases channel discharge, thereby increasing measured channel widths, particularly for fluvial fans in arid environments. Such events can also reactivate partial avulsions and crevasses, which can potentially increase the apparent number of channels. However, none of the selected systems exhibited observable seasonal or large-scale discharge changes across their channel networks attributable to different timings in data collection. Additionally, because this study relies on values normalized to the initial channel width, the effects of seasonal variability on channel width measurements are minimized.

3.6 Code and Statistics

Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests were first applied to determine whether the data are normally distributed. Levene's test was used to test differences in variances of populations that do not exhibit a normal distribution (Trauth, 2006). Independent samples or Welch's t-test were then applied to test for a difference in means for populations with similar and dissimilar variances, respectively, while one-sample t-tests were used to test comparisons of a subgroup against the overall population mean (Trauth, 2006). For this study, a p-value less than 0.05 (5% significance level) suggests that the two population distributions, variances, or means are not similar. Data confidence intervals were calculated according to Mendenhall et al., (2012). Data analysis and visualization were performed using Python. Open-source data visualization libraries Matplotlib (Hunter, 2007), NumPy (Harris et al., 2020), SciPy (Virtanen et al., 2020), and Seaborn (Waskom, 2021) were utilized.

4. Results

4.1 Delta and Fluvial Fan Channel Network Angles

The mean channel network angle (θ_d) in deltas is 73.8° with a 95th percentile confidence interval of ± 1.9° (n = 528) (Fig. 5a). The mean channel network angle (θ_f) in fluvial fans is 55.0° ± 2.0° (n = 520) (Fig. 5b). The delta and fluvial fan network angle populations are not normally distributed according to both Kolmogorov-Smirnov (KS) and Shapiro-Wilk (SW) tests, with p-values less than 0.05. Levene's test for statistical difference in variances also results in a p-value less than 0.05, suggesting population variances are statistically different. A subsequent independent sample t-test suggests the means of delta

and fluvial fan angle populations are statistically different, with a p-value less than 0.05. All statistical results are recorded in Supplementary Table 1 in the Supplementary Information.

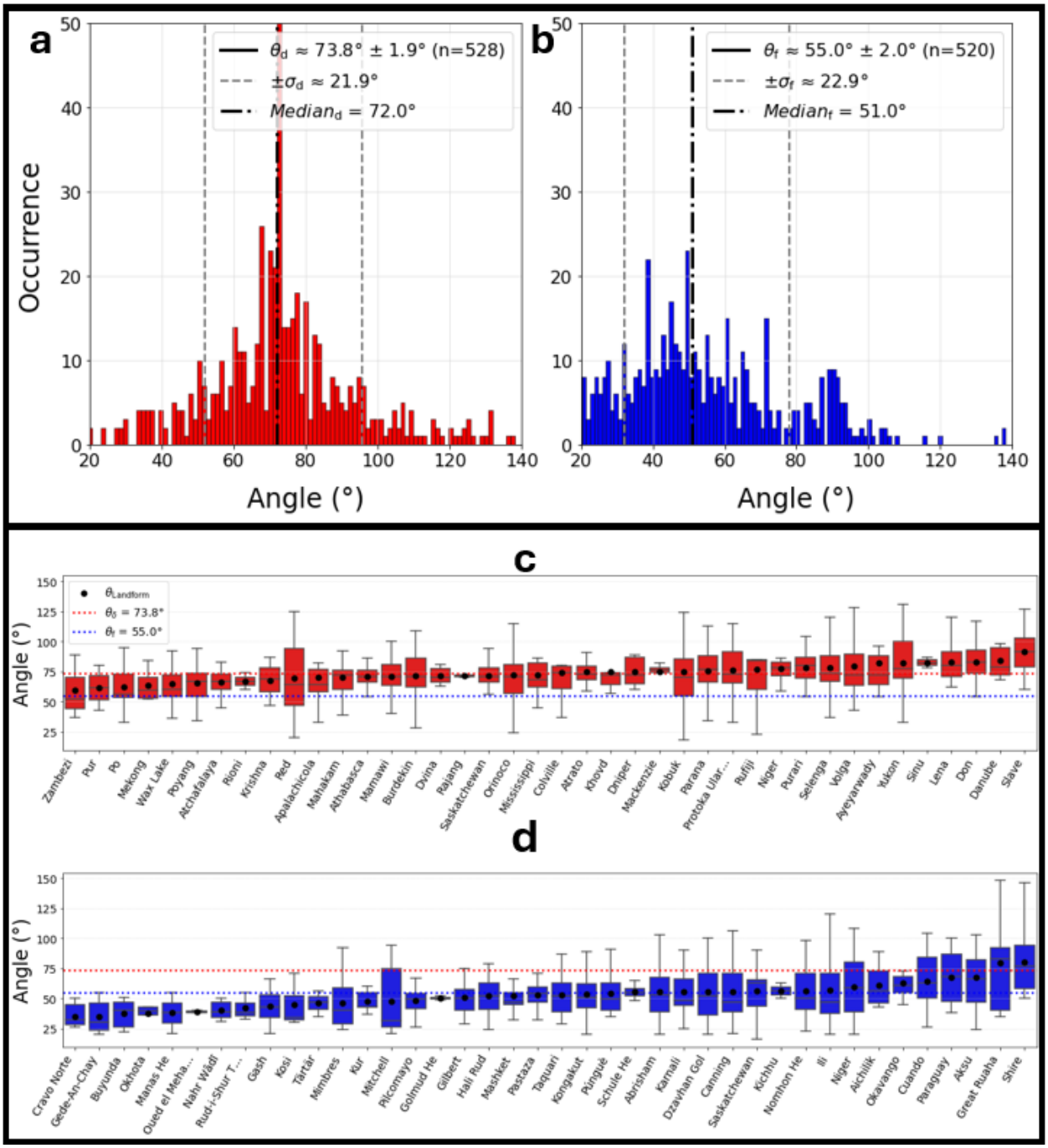

Figure 5: Histograms depicting distributions of (a) delta angles with mean delta angle (θ_d), its standard deviation (σ_d) and median and (b) fluvial fan angles with mean fan angle (θ_f), its standard deviation (σ_f), and median displayed. Box-and-whisker plot displaying the mean angle for each delta (c) and fluvial fan (d) landform ($\theta_{Landform}$).

We also reviewed the mean network angle of each individual delta and fluvial fan ($\theta_{Landform}$) (Figs. 5c and 5d), and these analyses reveal some overlap. All fluvial fans have mean angle values less than 60°, except for six landforms, or 15% of fluvial fans in this study. Four of these landforms have mean angles larger than 60° (60.8°, 63.2°, 67.7°, 67.9°), and two larger than the delta mean of 73.7° (79.6°, 80.1°). All individual deltas have mean network angles larger than 60°, except for one delta (59.3°). There are also three deltas with mean angles around 60° (61.5°, 62.4°, 63.3°).

The distribution of delta angles grouped by order (Fig. 6a) yields no strong trends for mean angle in deltas. Seventh and tenth order channels have slightly lower mean angle values at 65° and 67°, but these higher-order groups have low sample sizes (n = 3; n = 8) (Fig. 6a). The distribution of fluvial fan angles grouped by order does yield a trend: the mean angle for first- through third-order channels (θ_1, θ_2, and θ_3 in Fig. 6b) is between 47 – 50° and increases to 61 – 63° for fourth- through eight-order channels, and to 66° for ninth-order angles (n = 6) (θ_4 – θ_9 in Fig. 6b). In contrast to the unimodal distribution of delta angles, the distribution of higher-order fluvial fan angles is bimodal, with a dominant peak near 50° and a secondary peak around 80 – 100° (Fig. 6b).

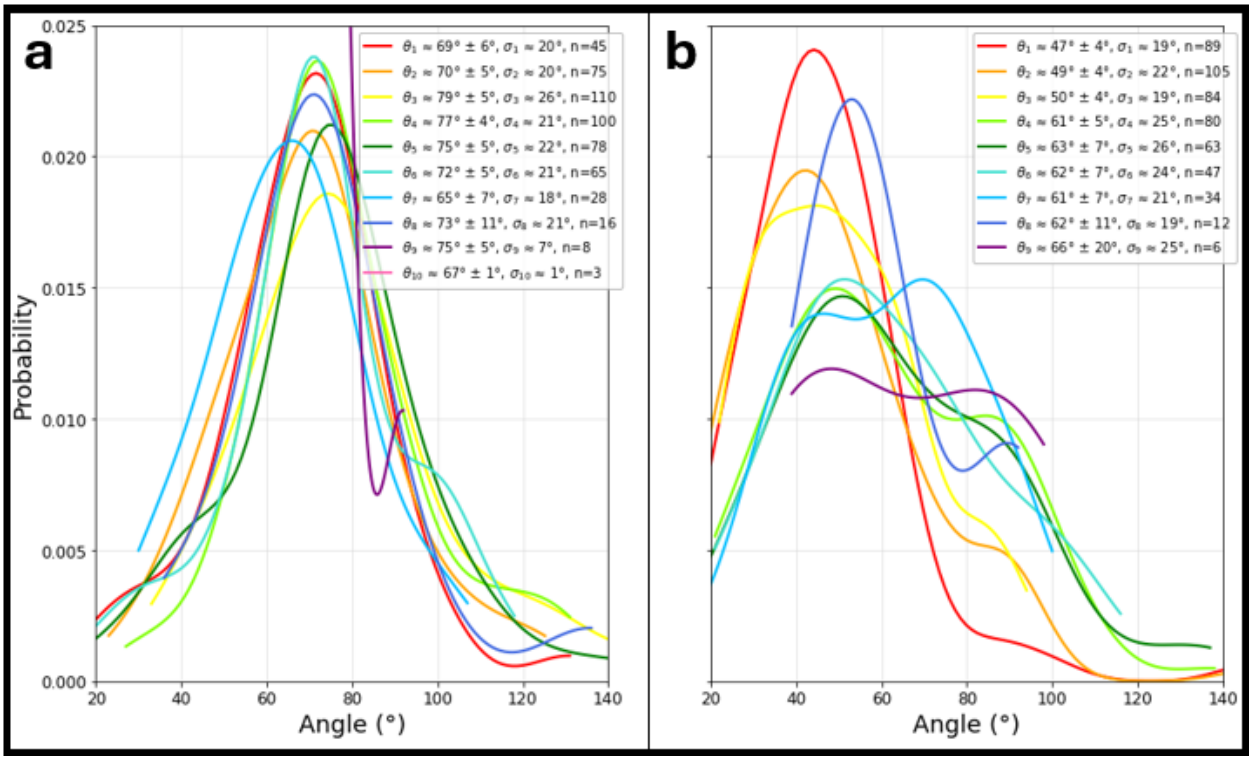

Figure 6: Distribution of (a) delta bifurcation angles, and (b) fluvial fan divergence/crossover angles grouped by order (θ_n) with the 95th percent confidence interval. (σ_n) = denotes standard deviation. n denotes sample size.

All deltas in this analysis are river-dominated deltas, however some are tide- or wave-influenced (See Section 3.4 and Supplementary Data). Grouping deltas by process regime shows that the mean bifurcation

angle for the 19 river-dominated deltas (θ_R = 73.4° ± 2.2°, n = 375), for the 16 tide-influenced deltas (θ_t = 75.6° ± 3.9°, n = 139), and for the 5 wave-influenced deltas (θ_w = 67.1° ± 10.1°, n = 14) (Fig. 7a). The river-dominated and tide-influenced delta angle means are not statistically different from the mean angle for the whole delta population (Supplementary Table 1). The wave-influenced delta angles were omitted from this statistical analysis due to a small sample size (n = 14 < 30).

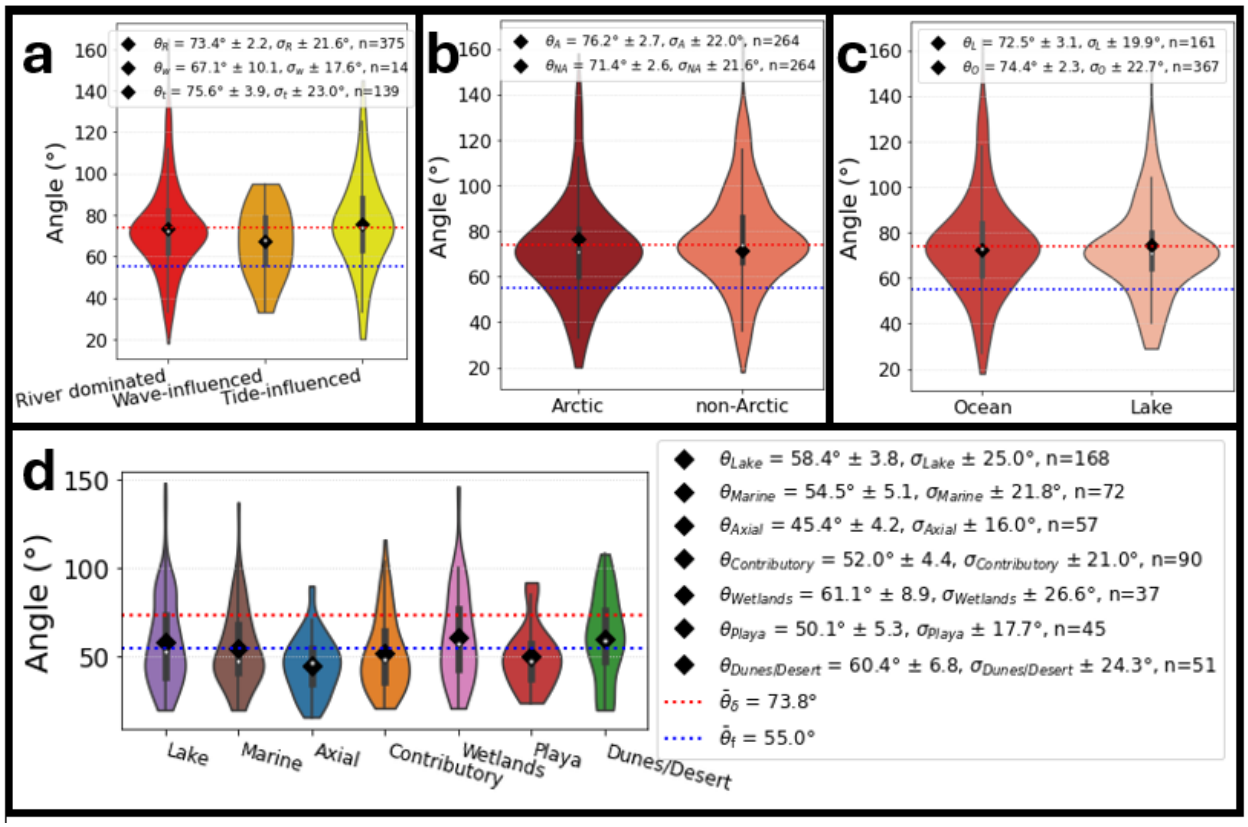

Figure 7: Violin plots depicting angle distributions for (a) delta process regime: river dominated (θ_R), wave-influenced (θ_w), and tide-influenced (θ_t), (b) deltas in non-Arctic (θ_{NA}) and Arctic (θ_A) climates, (c) ocean terminated deltas (θ_O) and lake terminating deltas (θ_L), and (d) fluvial fan termination styles. All mean angle values have a corresponding 95th percent confidence intervals, standard deviation (σ), and sample count (n).

Many delta angle measurements in this dataset come from Arctic deltas. The comparison between Arctic and non-Arctic deltas shows that Arctic deltas have a larger mean angle (θ_A = 76.2° ± 2.7°, n = 264) than non-Arctic deltas (θ_{NA} = 71.4° ± 2.6°, n = 264) (Fig. 7b). There is a statistically significant difference in means between Arctic and non-Arctic deltas (Supplementary Table 1). Grouping deltas by termination style (Fig. 7c) shows that lake-terminating deltas have slightly smaller mean angles than those that terminate in oceans (θ_L = 72.5° ± 3.1°, n = 161 versus θ_O = 74.4° ± 2.3°, n = 367), but these differences are not statistically significant compared to the whole delta population (Supplementary Table 1).

Grouping fluvial fans by their termination style shows some differences (Fig. 7d), where the mean

angles vary from a low of $\theta_{Axial} = 45.4° \pm 4.2°$ (n = 57) for axial-terminating fluvial fans to $\theta_{wetlands} = 61.1° \pm 8.9°$ (n = 37) for wetland-terminating fans (Fig. 7d). All fluvial fan termination types, except for axial-terminating fans, exhibit population means that are statistically similar to the overall fluvial fan population (Supplementary Table 1). However, each termination style is represented by only 4 to 6 landforms, limiting the statistical power of comparisons and generalizations, despite the relatively robust measurement numbers in wetland (n = 37), playa (n = 45), dunes/desert (n = 51), and axial-terminating fans (n = 57). There also appears to be some discrepancies in Hartley et al., (2010)'s assignment of termination types, such as referring to playa fans as lacustrine or ocean fans as contributory. We also tested whether landform size (Supplementary Fig. 1) and gradient (Supplementary Fig. 2) affect the channel network angles, and these analyses yield no trends, supporting the robustness of our methodology.

4.2 Channel Lengths and Widths

Normalized channel length and width measurements reveal morphological differences between fluvial fan and delta channels. Both landform types show non-linear decreases in these values with increasing channel order (Fig. 8). Statistical analyses confirm that the overall means for normalized channel length and width differ significantly between fluvial fans and deltas (Supplementary Table 1). Fluvial fan channels are generally an order of magnitude longer than delta channels, with a mean normalized length of 147.09 compared to 17.18 for deltas (Figs. 8a and 8c). In contrast, delta channels tend to be slightly wider, with a mean normalized width of 0.40 compared to 0.26 for fluvial fans (Figs. 8b and 8d).

Comparing the normalized dimensions by channel order (Fig. 9) reveals additional trends. The normalized channel widths of lower-order fluvial fan channels (orders 1–5) are significantly longer, and the channel shortening rate is higher compared to deltas (Fig. 9a). The normalized lengths become very similar in orders 7–8, then diverge again for the higher orders where the fluvial fan channel lengths are somewhat longer, but the channel shortening rates are higher in deltas. Normalized channel widths show significant differences for orders 2–8, but not for 9–11. Only a few landforms have channels with orders exceeding 9. Fluvial fan narrowing rates are very high from order 1 and 2, and very low in orders 7–10 (Fig. 9b). The narrowing rates are more uniform in deltas.

When comparing individual deltas by process regime, both tide- and wave-influenced deltas have significantly higher mean normalized channel widths relative to the overall delta population (Supplementary Fig. 3 and Supplementary Table 1).

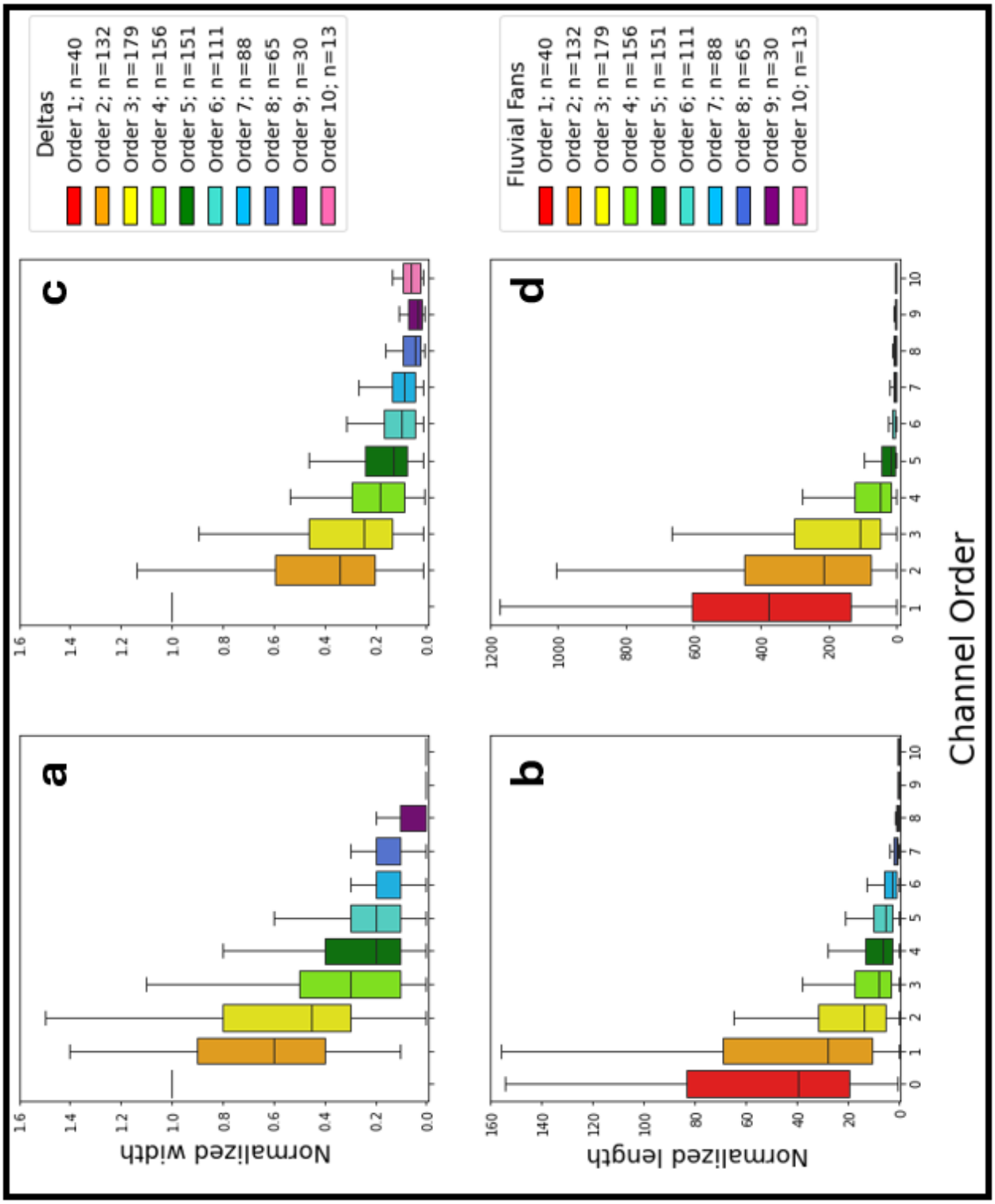

Figure 8: Box and whisker plots illustrating normalized delta channel widths (a) and lengths (b) and normalized fluvial fan channel widths (c) and length (d), plotted by channel order. Note the siognificant difference in normalzied channel length scales for subplots b and d.

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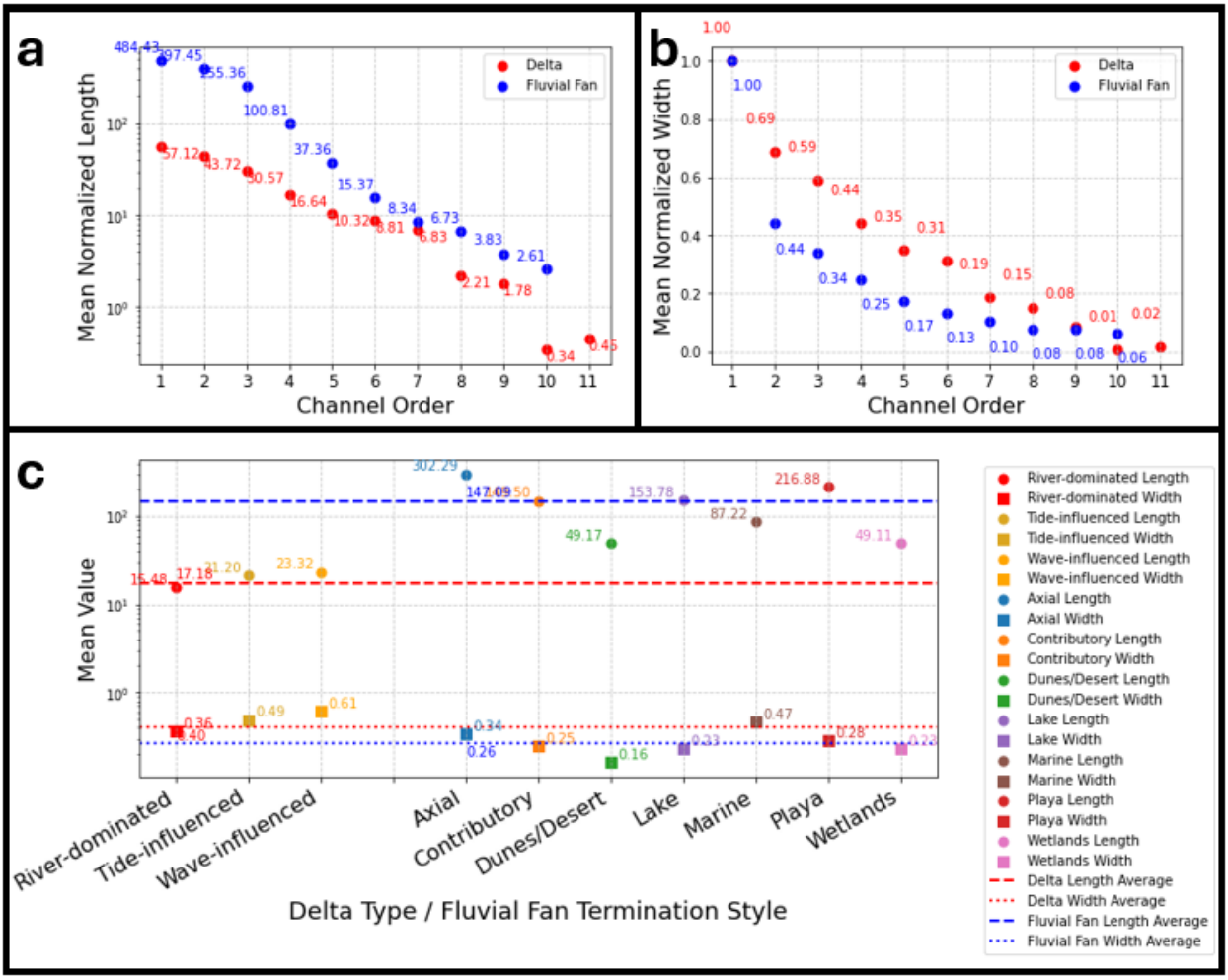

Figure 9: Mean normalized delta and fluvial fan channel (a) lengths by order and (b) width values by order. (c) Mean channel length and width values for different types of deltas and fluvial fan termination styles.

Comparison by fluvial fan termination styles shows that axial- and playa-terminating fans exhibit longer mean normalized channel lengths compared to the whole fluvial fan population, whereas dunes/desert-, marine-, and wetland-terminating fans have shorter mean lengths (Supplementary Fig. 3 and Supplementary Table 1). Contributory- and lake-terminating fans do not differ significantly from the overall mean. Regarding normalized channel widths, axial- and marine-terminating fans have wider channels, while dunes/desert-terminating fans are narrower. Normalized width values for contributory-, lake-, playa-, and wetland-terminating fan channels show no difference from the overall population mean (Supplementary Fig. 3 and Supplementary Table 1). Statistical analyses of channel length and width were not conducted for different fluvial fan termination styles due to insufficient sample sizes ($n < 30$) in most categories.

5. Discussion

5.1 Effectiveness of Morphometric Criteria in Distinguishing Deltas and Fluvial Fans

The mean channel network angles are distinctly different in deltas and fluvial fans by 20°, and this statistically significant difference is a useful criterion in distinguishing these two landform types. While some overlaps exist at the landform level, these cases are relatively limited, where 15% of fluvial fans in this dataset have a mean angle larger than 60° (Fig. 5d) and 10% of deltas have a mean angle less than 64° (Fig. 5c). These findings support the utility of mean branching angles as a distinguishing metric between deltas and fluvial fans. However, some degree of uncertainty remains, and additional criteria are necessary for more robust distinction.

An additional criterion is the distribution of mean angles by channel order, where fluvial fans have increased mean angles and a bimodal distribution in orders 4–8 (Fig. 6). Other supportive criteria may be the differences in values and distributions of the normalized channel lengths and widths (Figs. 8 and 9), but the low sample numbers do not allow us to test these criteria by individual landforms. A useful criterion would be to link channel narrowing with the bifurcation and avulsion nodes. In deltas, the downstream channel narrowing occurs in a stepwise manner at the bifurcation nodes, whereas in fluvial fans this decrease should be gradual and not linked to the node positions where full avulsions occur. Our data was collected in a manner that does not permit these analyses.

A potential source of overlap in the delta and fluvial fan channel network mean angles is that not all measured angles in deltas are bifurcation angles, as deltas also experience avulsions (e.g., Fig. 1e). A closer inspection of the four deltas with low mean network angles reveals that each contains very few measurements ($n = 3$, $n = 4$, $n = 6$, $n = 7$). In these cases, the limited sample size allows the rarer avulsion angles to affect the mean values more strongly. Also, fluvial fans that terminate in a lake or ocean may have terminal channels that form due to mouth bar deposition and channel bifurcation. However, we do not believe these instances affect our results since we do not see that lake- or marine-terminating fans exhibit higher mean angles (Fig. 7d).

Examining fluvial fans with high mean angles shows that these are low-gradient wetland fans, where the avulsion angles tend to be wider as a function of avulsion mechanisms (see Discussion below). However, they may also suggest methodological limitations. While the local avulsion angles in low-gradient wetland fans are wide (measured the final channel width directly upstream of a bifurcation (w_f) as the length for two limbs of an angle), angles between the longer channel reaches are considerably narrower (Supplementary Fig. 4). This channel reach angle discrepancy is consistent with similar channel reach angle measurements from (Coffey & Shaw, 2017). We plan to further develop angle measurement methods to capture both the local and the reach-scale angles in future work. It is also important to discuss the limitations of the applied methodologies in the context of the results. Our channel network methodologies are designed for delta channel networks, and exclude channels that merge downstream,

480 which can exclude many potential measurements from fluvial fans in situations where their channels
481 merge downfan.
482 In summary, this initial attempt to distinguish deltas and fluvial fans demonstrates that quantifying
483 channel network angles, and trends in normalized channel widths and lengths provide efficient criteria.
484 However, we also show that sample sizes are important for accurate recognition of landforms, and
485 collecting a sufficient number of angle measurements ($n \gtrapprox 10$) can help account for the infrequent
486 avulsion in deltas or bifurcation in fluvial fans. While each metric is informative on its own, the
487 combination of branching angles, branching angle trends, and normalized channel lengths provides the
488 clearest distinction between deltas and fluvial fans.

489 **5.2 Processes that determine delta and fluvial fan channel network angles**

490 While the 72° mean bifurcation angle can be explained by flow patterns at channel tips well-
491 explained by diffusive processes (Coffey & Shaw, 2017), there is currently no established explanation for
492 the approximately 55° mean network angle in fluvial fans. In deltas, bifurcation as a process is the
493 product of sedimentation from turbulent jets that form at the mouths of rivers entering basins (Bates,
494 1953; Coffey & Shaw, 2017; Edmonds & Slingerland, 2007; Fagherazzi et al., 2015; Jerolmack &
495 Swenson, 2007; Wright, 1977). Once a mouth bar is formed, the flow through the distributary channel
496 bifurcations can be modeled as diffusive flow (Coffey & Shaw, 2017), and the resulting critical angle of
497 72° represents a stable morphology for the bifurcation as it grows in a diffusive groundwater field
498 (Devauchelle et al., 2012; Ke et al., 2019). The slightly larger network angles in Arctic deltas may reflect
499 environmental influences such as ice cover, permafrost, or limitations on overbank flow (Lauzon et al.,
500 2019; Piliouras et al., 2021; Walker, 1998).
501 River avulsions are set up by channel superelevation (Mohrig et al., 2000), or when the slope down
502 the flanks of the channel provides a steeper descent than the existing river channel (Slingerland & Smith,
503 1998; Törnqvist & Bridge, 2002). Avulsions result from channel bed aggradation that reduces the channel
504 capacity (Bryant et al., 1995). Once an avulsion is triggered and full or partial river flow exits the channel,
505 a new channel is generated by surface runoff erosion. Thus, the prevailing topographic gradient would
506 tend to keep the nearby flows more focused in a slope-parallel direction, resulting in narrower network
507 angles compared to bifurcations (Fig. 5b).
508 The contrast between diffusion-dominated and surface runoff erosion-dominated processes in shaping
509 delta versus fluvial fan channel network topology is further supported by tributary channel network
510 analyses that originally defined the critical angle of 72° (Devauchelle et al., 2012). Tributary channel
511 network analyses show that the mean tributary angle of 72° only occurs in humid catchments with high
512 groundwater recharge, where tributary networks are shaped by groundwater diffusion (Seybold et al.,

2017). In contrast, the mean tributary network angle is 45° in arid landscapes where surface runoff dominates (Seybold et al., 2017), or is even lower in the driest catchments (Seybold et al., 2018).

Fluvial fan gradient decreases progressively downstream (e.g. Chakraborty et al., 2010), such that higher gradients near the fan apex likely generate more acute angles, whereas the very low gradients near the toe of the fan would allow for wider angles. This trend likely explains the downstream increase in fluvial fan network angles and the emergence of the second, wider peak in higher order channels (Fig. 6b). Furthermore, avulsion mechanisms have been shown to change from channel superelevation in upstream river reaches, where river gradients are steeper, to gradient advantage in downstream low-gradient reaches (Gearon et al., 2024). In these low-gradient zones, crevassing processes can produce high-angle deviations with the angle values around 90° (Rahman et al., 2022). Avulsion angles above 100° have been measured in meandering rivers on low-gradient floodplains with vegetation (see Rahman et al., 2022). These effects may be important controls in the fluvial fan channel networks in low-gradient vegetated wetlands. Reitz & Jerolmack, (2012) show that abandoned paleo-channel reoccupation may control new avulsion positions, and paleo-channel density is highest in the narrower fan apex. Avulsion angles may also change over time due to evolving channel width ratios (Morais & Montanher, 2022), or may be affected by a critical angle or bend curvature (Yang, 2020). Future work targeting how avulsion morphology evolves downfan would provide important insight into the mechanisms driving the observed increase in angles downstream.

We thus conclude that the distinction between deltaic and fluvial fan channel network angles arises from the dominant formative processes: diffusive flow in deltas versus surface runoff erosion in fluvial fans. Furthermore, in fluvial fans, network angles appear to be negatively correlated with surface gradients, with lower gradients allowing for wider avulsion angles.

5.3 Ancient deltas and fluvial fans

Our proposed methodology could also be used to distinguish ancient fluvial fans and deltas, for instance in seismic datasets, where only delta channel network angles have been quantified before (Mahon et al., 2024). Our results confirm the prior modern data (Chakraborty et al., 2010) and recent modeling outcomes (Martin & Edmonds, 2023), and help to eliminate a discrepancy in plan-view versus cross-sectional fluvial fan facies models (Plink-Björklund, 2021). Namely, earlier work suggested bifurcations as a key mechanism driving fluvial fan formation (Friend, 1978; Kelly & Olsen, 1993; Weissman et al., 2010), probably due to downstream channel narrowing. However, this hypothesis contradicts the stratigraphic data that indicate that proximal fans consist of amalgamated channel deposits (Chakraborty et al., 2010; Kelly & Olsen, 1993; Nichols & Fisher, 2007; Singh et al., 1993; Weissman et al., 2013) – a pattern consistent with frequent avulsions (Chakraborty et al., 2010; Singh et al., 1993).

5.4 Sensitivity of Deltas and Fluvial Fans to Global Change

Deltas and fluvial fans differ significantly in their vulnerability to natural hazards and in their responses to global change. Deltas are highly vulnerable to coastal hazards and sea level rise (Giosan et al., 2014; Syvitski et al., 2009). Rising sea-levels will not only inundate deltaic distributary networks, but also cause a landward migration of the avulsion node corresponding with the landward shift of the backwater zone (Brooke et al., 2022; Chatanantavet et al., 2012; Ganti et al., 2014). This process reduces sediment delivery to shorelines, accelerating the effects of sea-level rise. However, changes in land use and changing precipitation patterns which increase sediment supply could complicate the picture by shifting delta avulsion sites seaward (Brooke et al., 2022). In contrast, fluvial fans are controlled by upstream morphodynamics, where the fan location (apex) is pinned by a steep topographic break (Brooke et al., 2022; Ganti et al., 2014; Martin & Edmonds, 2023). For coastal fans, sea-level rise and coastal erosion would affect the fan toes, however the avulsion node at the fan apex and sediment deposition across most of the fan surface would not be affected, making fluvial fans significantly less vulnerable to drowning.

Both deltas and fluvial fans are affected by reduced sediment supply due to river damming and artificial levees (Blum & Roberts, 2009; Giosan et al., 2014; Nienhuis et al., 2020; Paola et al., 2011; Syvitski et al., 2009). However, fluvial fans are highly sensitive to the water and sediment supply changes, such as changes in precipitation patterns (Assine et al., 2014; Hansford & Plink-Björklund, 2020; Leier et al., 2005). Increases in extreme precipitation cause a significant increase in avulsion frequency and crevassing splay formation (Morón et al., 2017), because large fluctuations in river discharge, such as during extreme precipitation events, are avulsion-triggering events (Jones & Schumm, 1999). Indeed, fluvial fans have been shown to be highly sensitive to such changes, where fluvial fan activation and deactivation cycles have been linked to millennial-scale changes in monsoon intensity or precipitation patterns (Assine et al., 2014; Fontana et al., 2014, Latrubesse et al., 2012).

6. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that river-dominated delta and fluvial fan channel networks can be distinguished using quantitative morphometric criteria derived from their channel network topology. Deltaic networks are primarily shaped by bifurcation processes, resulting in mean bifurcation angles of approximately 74°, consistent with diffusion-dominated growth. In contrast, fluvial fan topology is shaped by channel avulsions, producing narrower mean network angles near 55°, indicative of surface runoff processes. Fluvial fan network angles tend to widen downstream, likely due to decreasing gradients and avulsion style shifts, while delta angles remain relatively consistent, reflecting persistent bifurcation processes. Both channel networks display downstream reductions in channel length and width with increasing channel order, but the fluvial fan networks are characterized by significantly longer and somewhat narrower channels when normalized.

These differences not only support the use of network morphology as a diagnostic tool for identifying ancient fluvial fans and deltas in the stratigraphic record or other planetary bodies but also provide insights into their differing sensitivities to environmental change.

Code Availability

The Python code used for data analysis and figure generation was created and run in Jupyter Notebook version 6.4.8 (Anaconda distribution).

Data Availability

Morphological data collected in this study are available at https://github.com/lukegezovich/Delta-and-Fluvial-Fan-Networks.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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