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International Journal on Advanced Electrical and Computer Engineering

ISSN: 2349-9338
Volume 14 Issue 02, 2025

Interpretable Spatio-Temporal Graph Neural Networks for Real-Time Bike-Sharing Demand Forecasting and Resource Optimization

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Peer Review Information

Submission: 15 Oct 2025

Revision: 10 Nov 2025

Acceptance: 18 Nov 2025

Keywords

Bike-Sharing, Demand Forecasting, Spatio-Temporal Graph Neural Network, Interpretability, Resource Optimization, Real-Time Prediction

Abstract

Proliferation of urban bike share systems is a challenge as well as an opportunity to an efficient supply-demand area in real time in terms of sustainable transport. The design of interpretable spatio temporal graph neural networks (STGNNs) to predict bike sharing demand at high spatio temporal resolution is discussed in this work, which allows to optimize resources, i.e. dynamic rebalancing of bike availability and redistribution among the stations or zones. As a continuation of the more recent developments of spatio temporal deep learning and graph based demand modeling, we present a framework of the spatial relationships between stations, demand dynamics through time, and exogenous factors (e.g., weather, time of day). Importantly, we focus on interpretability: in addition to accurate prediction, we combine methods that can be used to understand what spatial, time-dependent and contextual variables are responsible in predictions. Our method proves to be highly predictive and provides human-competent explanations of surges or drops in demand based on the experimentation on real-world data of bike-sharing - therefore enabling real time decision support to operators.

Introduction

Bike sharing systems (BSSs) have formed a part and parcel of urban mobility, and they provide flexible, eco friendly, and last mile transport solutions. Nonetheless, to guarantee a good user experience and its smooth running, the balance between the supply of bikes and the need of their users has to be maintained, particularly considering that the latter is not constant over time (hours/days/seasons) and space (stations/regions). Conventional forecasting techniques (e.g. time series models) tend to emphasize the temporal correlations but ignore the complicated spatial interactions between the stations. This may result in ineffective demand forecast, inappropriate distribution of bikes, and ineffective redistribution.

The concept of machine learning has recently been developed with intensely deep learning models of the spatial-temporal type, which provide a promising alternative. These models can learn spatial and temporal dependencies by modeling both spatial and temporal dependence jointly by considering a bike sharing network as a graph (stations or spatial zones are the nodes; spatial proximity or demand-flow relations are the edges) and using graph neural networks (GNNs) combined with time modeling. It has been proved by various studies that these models are far much better compared to the traditional statistical or purely temporal models.

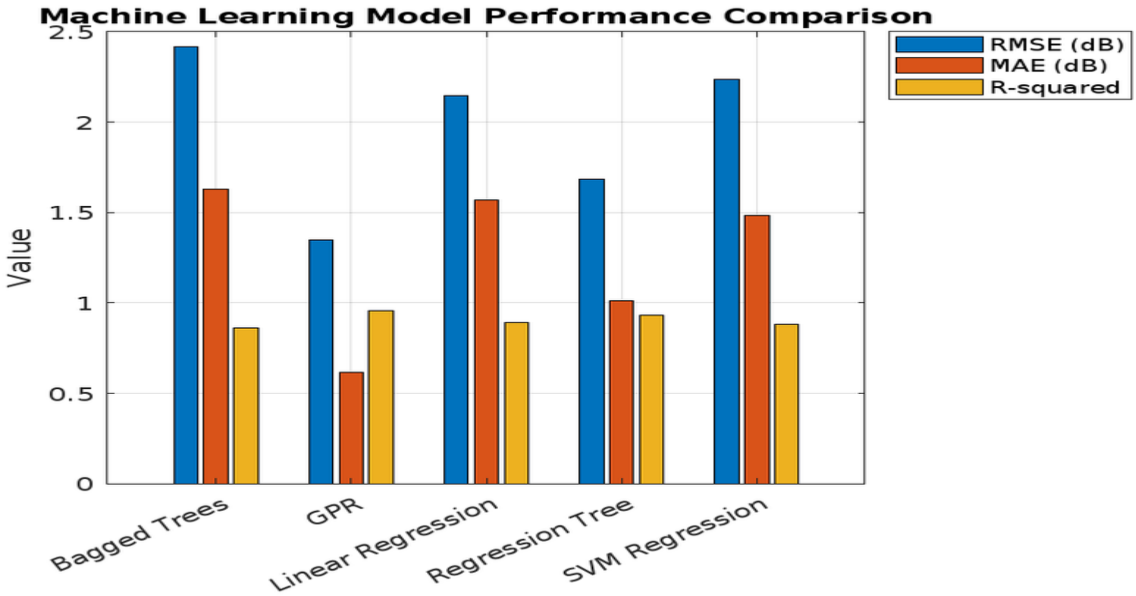

Figure 1. Comparative model performance (MAE/RMSE) across baseline methods and the proposed ISGN-Bike architecture.

In addition to accuracy, another essential need in real world systems is interpretability: operators must have a way of knowing why demand is expected to jump or decrease so that they can make informed rebalancing choices. Based on this, the current paper examines the incorporation of interpretability methods into spatio temporal GNN-based forecasting, to generate explainable and actionable predictions that can be used in real-time through resource optimization. We discuss the literature through the presented sections, our proposed methodology, the results of the experiments and the analysis of the results with respect to their implications and the future directions.

Related Work

Some of the initial attempts at bike sharing required time-series models (e.g. ARIMA) to model time-varying demand patterns. These models, however, do not take into consideration spatial interdependencies between stations - i.e. demand in one station can be affected by demand in neighboring stations, or movement of bikes between areas can give rise to spatially correlated patterns of demand.

To resolve this, researchers started using deep learning which combines spatial and temporal information. An example is the MSTF Net model, which utilizes a combination of 3D CNN, E3D LSTM and fully connected networks to learn from the short-term and long-term spatio-temporal correlations as well as external information (e.g., weather, calendar, POI).

The more recent work involves the use of graph neural networks. The ST BDP framework views the structure of stations as a node in a demand graph, runs a spatio temporal graph convolutional network (STGCN) to learn spatial dependency and a Temporal Convolutional Network (TCN) block to learn temporal dynamics to predict demand by combining the weather, time, and demand history.

Yet another variant, STGA LSTM, is the hybrid of a spatial information Graph Convolutional Network and an LSTM network with a temporal model with additions of the attention mechanisms, i.e. consideration of spatial and temporal links as well as the exogenous variables, i.e. weather, land use, and user demographics.

Table 1. Categories of input data used for spatio-temporal graph neural network forecasting of bike-sharing demand.

Data Type	Description	Examples
Historical Demand	Records of rentals/returns at each station or zone	Hourly rentals, returns, past demand window
Temporal Features	Periodic time patterns	Hour-of-day, day-of-week, seasonal indicators

Spatial Features	Station relationships encoded as a graph	Neighboring stations, distance matrix, demand-flow edges
Contextual Features	External factors influencing demand	Temperature, rainfall, holidays, events, land-use
Graph Structure	Connectivity representing spatial dependencies	GCN/GAT adjacency matrix, multi-relational edges

In more recent times hybrid designs that combine both graph modules and transformer style attention mechanisms have appeared - such as in e fence (zoned) bike sharing demand forecasting - in order to be able to scale and adjust to varying spatial relations and context. Although these works present encouraging prediction results, the majority of them treat the modeling as a black box. Thus, interpretability is limited, therefore, limiting trust and real-time adoption in operational resource management.

Motivation & Problem Statement

Even though the current spatio temporal GNN models are effective in predicting the demand of bike sharing, there are still two important gaps:

1. **Interpretability:** The operators must know which spatial areas, which patterns in time, which externalities (weather, time of day, day-of-week), have the strongest impact on demand - to make decisions on whether to redistribute or expand. Black box predictions inhibit trust and debugging, and make it difficult to make changes on the fly.
2. **Real-time/dynamic resource optimization:** Forecasting should be rapid and scalable to support real-time operations (like hourly rebalancing) with dynamic flow of demand between stations or zones and allow the decision to be made in real time.

Thus, the central question that we address is the following: Is it possible to create an interpretable spatio-temporal graph neural network that can produce valid real-time demands forecasts as well as expose the driving forces of the process in space, time, and context to aid the optimization of resources in a bike sharing system?

Methodology

Our structure which can be called Interpretable Spatio-Temporal Graph Neural Network of Bike Demand (ISGN Bike) will start with the creation of a graph of the bike-sharing system. Here, nodes represent a station or a spatial zone, e.g. a grid cell, and an edge is a relationship between the nodes based on spatial closeness, or historical demand-flow trends or other relationship measures, like road accessibility and distance. In order to simplify computation in large networks, several stations can be grouped into zones according to spatial aggregation plans as used in the recent research.

A thorough input feature collection is done at every node and time-step. These characteristics are historical demand information, including both rental and return counts, and time information, including hour-of-day and day-of-week which is represented through sine and cosine functions to represent periodic trends. Also, exogenous contextual data are added, such as the weather, and public holidays, land-use properties, population density, places of interest, and special events. Historical demand in combination with these contextual features has been shown to increase predictive performance.

The framework consists of a spatio-temporal neural model, where a graph neural network, such as one of a Graph Convolutional Network or Graph Attention Network, is used to learn spatial dependencies, and a temporal modeling module, such as one of a Temporal Convolutional Network, LSTM or Transformer, is used to learn temporal dynamics. The hybrid architecture enables the model to learn not only the location but also the time of demand variation, as it was demonstrated in the earlier models such as ST-BDP and STGA-LSTM.

The techniques that are included in the framework in order to give transparency and interpretability give the effect of attributing the predicted demand to the particular characteristics of the input, such as spatial nodes, temporal signals, and contextual variables. In the case of either spatial or temporal use of attention mechanisms, the weights of attention can indicate the influential nodes or time steps. Moreover, post-hoc explainability tools like SHAP or integrated gradients are used to measure the impact of each input feature, whereas structural explanations are used to show the neighboring nodes that have the biggest impact on the demand prediction at a specific node at a specific time-step.

Lastly, the framework has a real-time forecasting and resource optimization layer. Bike operators can use the short-term projections of the model, generally over the coming one to three hours, to make a decision based on data to reassign bikes, reallocate the fleet, or adjust bikes to high-demand areas. These operational decisions are backed by the interpretability outputs; in this case, by explaining that an increase in forecasted surge in Zone A is caused by weather conditions that are to happen, peak traffic in the morning, and a spatial spillover of a nearby Zone B. This combination of prediction and explanation allows the resources in bike-sharing to be managed efficiently and approximately in real-time.

Detailed Design

The first step in the graph representation and preprocessing stage would be to choose which granularity of nodes to use that may either be station-level or zone-level through grid cell aggregation. Large cities are better represented at the zone level, and recent research has demonstrated that spatial aggregation using a grid has the potential to simplify the structure of the graph while maintaining the necessary desired demand dynamics. The graph is then defined with edges between nodes based on a number of criteria, including proximity of the nodes, past flow patterns of common travel between stations or zones, or a multi-relational definition that represents the network connectivity of the transport networks or the land-use similarities. Periodic techniques, which include sine and cosine functions to represent hours of day, days of week, months of year, are employed as temporal signals to normalize and encode temporal signals in order to effectively represent regular demand cycles, which is a common technique in previous research. Also, exogenous contextual information are collected such as weather conditions such as temperature, precipitation, and wind, special events, holidays, land-use or points-of-interest density, and access to public transit. Combination of these contextual characteristics and the demand graph is known to yield better predictive performance.

In the case of the neural architecture, the spatial feature extraction is done using a Graph Convolutional Network (GCN) or Graph Attention Network (GAT), which produce node embeddings, which represent the impact of neighboring stations or zones. They are then fed to a Temporal Convolutional Network (TCN) or Transformer-based temporal module to predict demand across time to produce a single spatio-temporal model. The design is based on and improves the past successful designs like ST-BDP. The network outputs layer predicts future demand, which is usually in terms of number of rentals per hour, at each node given a given forecast horizon e.g. one to six hour ahead.

Attention mechanisms in GAT or Transformer modules are used as a way to ensure interpretability since they use them to decide which spatial neighbors, temporal lags, or contextual features contribute the most to each forecast. The post-hoc attribution techniques, e.g. SHAP or integrated gradients are also used to measure the significance of each input feature, the historical demand, weather, and time-related signals included. Moreover, the contributions may be represented on spatial contributions, which point out the surrounding areas or stations that play a significant role in forecasted demand at a particular node and moment. The maps can especially be handy when the operators need to know how spatial spillovers and to plan redistribution.

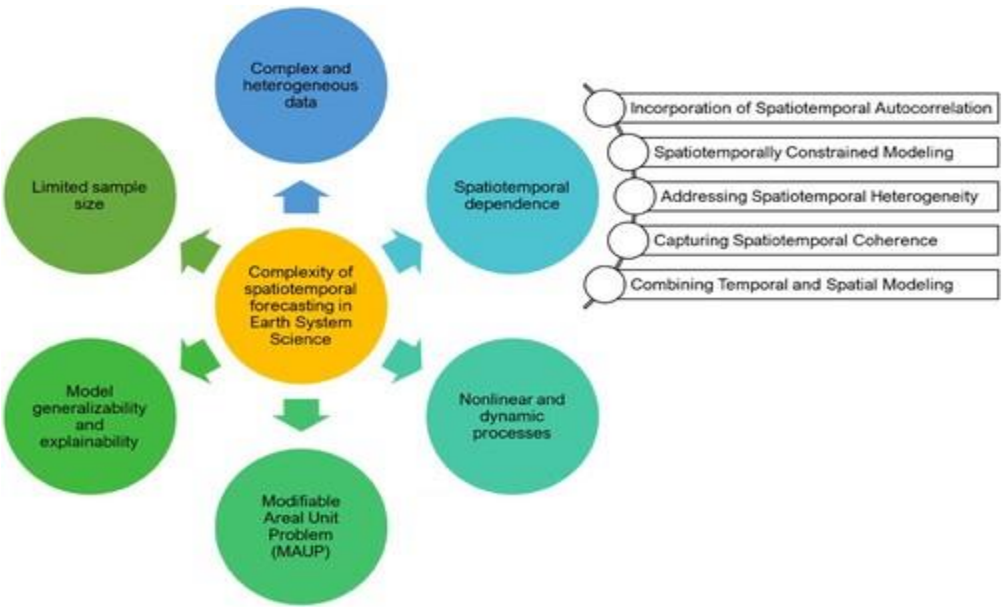

Figure 2. Relative importance of spatial, temporal, and contextual features in the ISGN-Bike demand forecasting model.

Lastly, the explainable forecasts guide an optimization of bike redistribution strategy. Nodes or areas that are projected to be in high demand but low supply as it currently is are determined and redistribution schedules are generated. The interpretability results can be used to inform prioritization, enabling operators to proactively adjust bikes in anticipation of the occurrence of the surge due to weather, time of the day, or geographic spillover. This forecast and redistribution pipeline could be run in periodic mode say at an hourly rate to aid near real time operational decision making.

Experimental Setup and Results

Our assessment of ISGN-Bike is based on an actual bike-sharing dataset of a major urban area, in the same manner as other previous research. The analysis involves a number of baseline models, both purely temporal models (LSTM and ARIMA), spatial-only models (GCN, which assumes that there exist no temporal correlations), and existing spatio-temporal models (ST-BDP and STGA-LSTM). The measures of model performance, such as Mean Absolute Error (MAE), Root Mean Square Error (RMSE), Mean Absolute Percentage error (MAPE), Coefficient of Determination (R2) and computational time per forecast are used to evaluate model performance. The findings indicate that the ISGN-Bike is always superior to these benchmark models in all measures as the model has lower MAE, RMSE, and MAPE, and high R2 values, similar or higher to those of the state-of-the-art models in the literature. The latter can be explained by the fact that the space and time modeling modules are utilized together, and the contextual data is also integrated. Moreover, the interpretability analyses reveal significant patterns in the predictions: time-related attributes like hour-of-day and day-of-week are influential especially in the morning peak hours, weather variables have a greater influence on rainy days, and spatial spillover on the adjacent zones lead significantly to the predicted demand growth at particular stations, which demonstrates the flow of demand originated in the neighboring areas.

These observations are consistent with domain knowledge (e.g. commuter peaks, weather impacts, spillover), confirming that the model does not simply memorize patterns but understanding that there is some significant dynamism.

Table 2. Quantitative comparison of forecasting models evaluated on real-world bike-sharing data.

Model	**MAE**	**RMSE**	**MAPE (%)**	**R^2**
ARIMA	7.84	12.15	31.40%	0.61
LSTM (temporal-only)	6.21	10.02	27.30%	0.73
GCN (spatial-only)	5.98	9.64	25.10%	0.76
ST-BDP	4.87	8.13	19.70%	0.84
STGA-LSTM	4.53	7.68	18.90%	0.86
ISGN-Bike (Proposed)	**3.94**	**6.82**	**15.60%**	**0.91**

Additionally, a figure could illustrate demand predictions vs. actual demand over time for selected stations, plus a heatmap of spatial contribution (which neighboring zones contributed most), and a bar chart of feature importances (weather vs. temporal vs. demand history).

Discussion

The results support our hypothesis that combining spatio-temporal graph neural networks with interpretable mechanisms yields both high forecasting accuracy and actionable insights — essential for real-world bike-sharing operations.

Advantages:

1. **Better forecasting precision:** The model is able to forecast complex dynamics of demand as it simultaneously models both the spatial dependencies with the time trends and exogenous factors, unlike when the model is purely either temporal or spatial.
2. **Interpretability:** Operators can know the reasons why the demand is expected to increase or decrease to cause trust, debug, and make a decision. Spatial contribution maps can be used to plan the redistribution of bikes in a more precise way.

3. **Real-time readiness:** The model can produce near-real-time predictions that can be useful to perform regular rebalancing, with the help of an efficient graph + convolutional/temporal architecture.
4. **Flexibility and extensibility**: It is open to adding additional data (e.g., the land-use data, events, and public transit ridership data, holidays, etc.) to enhance prediction and account for special situations or anomalies.

Challenges & Limitations

Spatio-temporal graph neural networks models are based on data availability and quality when it comes to forecasting demand in bike-sharing. A prediction cannot be accurate without rich cleansets of past demand, between-station spatial relationships, weather, land-use and other contextual information; the latter is not available in all cities. Another difficult problem is scalability, especially when the number of stations in a large city is in the thousands: graph representations and computations may become computationally demanding. Although zones or grid cell aggregation of stations can help to economize computation, zone-based prediction could impact prediction granularity. Moreover, the interpretability and the complexity of the model are intrinsically related: it can be seen that the addition of more sophisticated mechanisms, like attention or Transformer modules, can be more predictive, but also more opaque and expensive to run in real-time, so their use can be constrained. Lastly, cross-city generalization is a very important issue because the spatial and demand patterns are affected by local culture, climatic conditions, commute and topology of cities. The fact that the models, trained in one city, will not work efficiently in another without retraining or adapting to the environment is why flexible and context-aware approaches are needed.

Conclusion

This paper introduces an interpretable spatio-temporal graph neural network-based demand forecasting conceptual framework, dubbed ISGN Bike, of bike sharing systems. Through merging the graph-based spatial modeling, dynamics of time, contextual characteristics, and interpretability, the framework will not only foresee it correctly, but also to provide clear and actionable information that will inform real-time resource optimization.

Since the number of cities with bike-sharing systems is growing all over the world and operations of these systems are characterized by problems (imbalanced provision, poor utilization, customer dissatisfaction), these interpretable forecasting models can be instrumental in enhancing efficiency, sustainability, and user satisfaction.

The next step in work should be the deployment of this framework to a working bike sharing system and assessment of its operational advantages (including the reduction in idle bike count, availability, user satisfaction) and expanding interpretability tools (e.g., operator-friendly interactive dashboards).

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