Prediction of Delay in Flights using ML Techniques: A Review

Isha Sharma

Asst. Prof. Isha Sharma, Bhopal

Department of CSE, TIT Bhopal

Sarika Gupta

Asst. Prof. Sarika Gupta,

Department of CSE, TIT Bhopal

Abstract

Flight delays are a persistent challenge for the aviation industry, affecting passengers, airlines, and airport operations worldwide. Predicting delays in advance can significantly improve resource management, enhance passenger satisfaction, and optimize airline operations. Machine Learning (ML) techniques, such as machine learning and deep learning, have emerged as promising tools for accurately predicting flight delays by analyzing vast datasets with complex patterns. This review provides a comprehensive examination of AI-based methods used in delay prediction, focusing on techniques like regression models, neural networks, decision trees, and ensemble learning approaches. The paper examines the integration of various data sources, including weather conditions, air traffic, flight schedules, and historical delay records, to improve prediction accuracy.

Keywords: Machine Learning, AI, Flight, Delay, Prediction.

Introduction

Flight delays are among the most significant challenges faced by the global aviation industry, disrupting the schedules of millions of passengers and causing substantial financial losses for airlines and related stakeholders [1]. The repercussions of delays extend beyond economic costs to environmental and operational inefficiencies, including increased fuel consumption, longer ground handling times, and passenger dissatisfaction. As air traffic continues to rise, the urgency to predict and mitigate flight delays has become a critical priority for stakeholders in the aviation ecosystem [2]. Traditional methods of predicting flight delays rely heavily on heuristic approaches and statistical models that often fail to capture the complexities and interdependencies inherent in the aviation system [3]. Factors contributing to delays include adverse weather conditions, air traffic congestion, mechanical failures, crew shortages, and operational constraints at airports. These factors interact dynamically, creating intricate patterns that are challenging to model using conventional techniques. Consequently, there is a growing interest in leveraging Machine Learning (ML) techniques to address this issue [4]. AI techniques, particularly machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL) models, offer a promising solution for analyzing large volumes of flight-related data and uncovering patterns that influence delays. These methods can process and integrate diverse data sources, such as meteorological data, flight schedules, historical delay records, airport operational metrics, and even social media trends, to provide more accurate and timely predictions [5]. For instance, supervised learning models such as decision trees, support vector machines (SVMs), and gradient boosting algorithms have been widely applied to classify and predict delays. Similarly, deep learning architectures, such as convolutional neural networks (CNNs) and recurrent neural networks (RNNs), are increasingly used to model complex temporal and spatial dependencies in the data [6]. For passengers, predictive systems can provide early notifications and alternative travel arrangements, improving customer satisfaction. For airlines, these systems can optimize crew scheduling, ground operations, and fuel management, resulting in significant cost savings [7]. Moreover, airport authorities can better manage runway utilization and gate assignments, reducing congestion and enhancing operational efficiency. Beyond these practical applications, AI-based delay prediction systems contribute to the broader goals of sustainability by minimizing fuel wastage and carbon emissions associated with unplanned delays [8]. This review aims to provide a detailed exploration of AI techniques applied to flight delay prediction, examining the current state of research and identifying trends, challenges, and opportunities. The paper begins by discussing the types of data commonly used in delay prediction and the preprocessing steps required to ensure model reliability. It then delves into various machine learning and deep learning approaches, comparing their performance, strengths, and limitations.

Special attention is given to hybrid models and ensemble learning techniques, which have demonstrated superior prediction accuracy in recent studies [9].

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

S. Addu et al. [1] with the rapid expansion of the aviation industry, air traffic has increased consider resulting in more frequent flight delays. These delays affect not only the economy but also have environmental consequences. Managing and regulating air traffic has therefore become increasingly complex. Delays can occur due to several factors as safety issues, technical malfunctions, unfavorable weather, airport congestion, and related conditions. To address these challenges, the study suggests the application of machine learning methods, including Random Forest, Decision Tree, Multilayer Perceptron (MLP), Naïve Bayes, and K-Nearest Neighbors (KNN). The primary aim of this research is to forecast aircraft delays, which play an important role in the economic performance of many countries.

B. T. L. S. S et al.,[2] a variety of machine learning and data analysis techniques in order identify abnormalities concealed within the data. To ensure a fair comparison, each model was trained and evaluated using the same dataset. Their performance was assessed using standard evaluation metrics as accuracy, precision, recall, and F1-score. Based on our analysis, the XGBoost model achieved the strongest overall performance in predicting flight delays. SVM also produced competitive results, while KNN showed moderate predictive capability. Although K-means clustering helped reveal underlying patterns in the data, it was less suitable as a primary predictive model because it is designed mainly for grouping rather than classification. The system is built using big data frameworks to ensure efficiency and scalability. Flight information is streamed through Apache Kafka and processed by machine learning models deployed within Apache Spark. This architecture enables the system to generate real-time predictions while handling large volumes of data effectively.

M. T. VO Et Al., [3] a flight delay is an unforeseen occurrence that may occur in the aviation industry specifically and the transportation industry in general. The ability of an airline to anticipate the potential of a flight delay or cancellation is critical for both the proactive scheduling of flights by the airline and the enhancement of the company's reputation among its customers. A real-time flight delay prediction system has been implemented, and this paper describes its findings. The system is designed using big data tools to ensure reliability and the ability to scale with increasing data volumes. Flight data is streamed via Apache Kafka and then processed by pre-trained machine learning models running on Apache Spark. This setup allows the system to deliver real-time delay predictions while efficiently managing high-throughput data streams.

R. A. Sugara et al.[4] A flight delay prediction is a framework, and the modeling process is carried out with the help of the algorithms Decision Tree, Random Forest, Gradient Boosted Tree, and XGBoost Tree. In addition to using and merging the data on meteorological characteristics, this research has also utilized and combined the data on airport operating flights. Many different sample strategies were used in order to prepare for the unbalanced class. Various sampling approaches—such as Synthetic Minority Over-sampling Technique (SMOTE), Random Oversampling (ROS), Random Under-Sampling (RUS), and hybrid combinations of over- and under-sampling—have been applied to address class imbalance. After processing and training, the outcome is a predictive model capable of forecasting the types of flight delays that are likely to occur.

M. Guimarães et al. [5] analyze the elements that contribute additively to the expected result for each decision horizon, and we use historical data on flights and passengers to forecast missed aircraft connections in the hub airport of an airline. Our data is high-dimensional, diverse, unbalanced, and noisy; additionally, the dataset lacks detailed information regarding passengers' arrival and departure times. To address modeling challenges, we apply techniques such as boosting algorithms, data balancing through Gaussian mixture models, and probabilistic encoding for categorical variables. Across all planning horizons, our models consistently achieve strong performance, with receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curves yielding area under the curve (AUC) values exceeding 0.93.

S. Sharan et al. [6], it seems that everyone is becoming more and more busy, which forces them to keep particularly close track of the time. Customers are often dissatisfied with the commercial aviation industry due in large part to the fact that flight delays are a common occurrence. Hence, accurate forecasting of flight delays is of critical importance to both the comfort of passengers and the reduction of the economic losses suffered by airlines. This study evaluates the

ability of various machine learning algorithms, including Random Forest, AdaBoost, and XGBoost classifiers, to handle the task of predicting the amount of time that a flight will be delayed. These algorithms take into account a number of factors, including flight schedules, weather conditions, and other factors that are responsible for flight delays.

C. Y. Yiu et al., [7] during the course of the last several years, the global civil aviation sector has seen a period of fast development. Airports are experiencing challenges related to saturation as a direct result of the increased demand for air travel. It is anticipated that there will be a lot of traffic and a lengthy line of people waiting to take off and land. As a result, the issue of having an increasing number of flight delays has been amplified by the physical limits. But if the delay continues to build up, it will be detrimental to both the operating efficiency and the reputation of the airport. It is also possible that there may be additional costs. In this study, many different methods of machine learning were used to forecast flight delays. These methods included the decision tree, the random forest, the k-nearest neighbor, the Naive Bayes algorithm, and artificial neural networks.

R. Hendricks et al. [8] the problem of uneven class distributions is an essential aspect of the classification problem. The number of flights that are really cancelled or delayed is rather low. Resampling the data using one or more of the available sampling methods is the standard approach used to correct the imbalance. Yet, resampling does not always equate to an imbalance ratio that results in the most accurate classifications. This study presents a methodical strategy for dealing with unbalanced data in order to solve classification difficulties, taking into consideration the preferences of airport planners. A wide variety of practicable imbalance ratios, in addition to a number of classification algorithms and sampling strategies, are taken into consideration here.

J. Huo et al., [9] Making accurate forecasts of flight delays via the use of machine learning approaches is the primary focus of this endeavor. Using data taken from the Hong Kong International Airport, the outcomes of various machine learning algorithms are compared with one another and subjected to an in-depth analysis. The aviation and insurance sectors might benefit significantly from the insights and suggestions that come from this investigation. By accurate prediction of flight delays, a better design of the airport system may be achieved.

M. Bardach et al. [10] to minimize delays, it is essential to consider this possibility. Changes in the environment and external occurrences, such as closed runways and airspace, need to be brought to the attention of those in charge of air traffic control as soon as possible so that appropriate adjustments may be made to flight plans and delays can be avoided. The technologies that are now used by air traffic control do not make adequate use of the vast amount of data that is accessible for the purpose of the early identification of impending congestion and, as a consequence, flight delays. As a result, flight plans are not altered quickly enough in air traffic circumstances that have a significant potential for delay. In the work that we are doing, our goal is to determine the risk class of an air traffic scenario by basing it on the anticipated cost of the delays and taking into account information about the circumstances of the environment and the events that occur outside of the scenario.

III. CHALLENGES

While Machine Learning (ML) has demonstrated significant potential in flight delay prediction, several challenges must be addressed to ensure the effectiveness, scalability, and reliability of AI-based systems. These challenges span across data-related issues, modeling complexities, operational constraints, and ethical considerations. Below is an in-depth discussion of these challenges:

1. Data-Related Challenges • Data Quality and Availability: The accuracy of AI models depends heavily on the quality and completeness of the data. Flight delay prediction requires integrating data from various sources, such as weather reports, air traffic information, and airline schedules. Incomplete, missing, or inaccurate data can degrade model performance. • Data Sparsity and Imbalance: Flight delay datasets often suffer from sparsity and imbalance, as the number of delayed flights is typically much smaller compared to on-time flights. This imbalance can bias AI models toward predicting non-delays, resulting in poor performance in predicting rare but critical delay events. • Real-Time Data Integration: Incorporating real-time data, such as sudden weather changes or unexpected air traffic congestion, is

challenging due to the dynamic and fast-changing nature of these inputs. Ensuring seamless data integration and processing in real-time remains a complex task.

2. Feature Selection and Engineering • High-Dimensional Data: Flight delay prediction involves a wide range of features, including time, weather, airport conditions, and operational metrics. Selecting the most relevant features and eliminating noise requires careful feature engineering, which can be time-consuming and computationally intensive. • Dynamic Dependencies: Flight delays are influenced by complex, interdependent factors that vary over time and location. Capturing these dependencies and representing them effectively in a model is challenging, especially for features like cascading delays from connecting flights.

3. Modeling and Algorithmic Challenges • Overfitting and Generalization: AI models, especially deep learning models, are prone to overfitting when trained on limited or noisy data. Balancing model complexity with the ability to generalize across different scenarios is a critical challenge. • Interpretability: Many AI techniques, particularly deep learning models, operate as "black boxes," making it difficult to interpret the reasons behind their predictions. This lack of interpretability hinders trust and adoption in critical domains like aviation, where explain ability is essential for operational decisions. • Computational Requirements: Training and deploying sophisticated AI models often require significant computational resources, which may not always be available, especially for smaller airlines or underfunded airports.

4. Operational and Deployment Challenges • Real-Time Predictions: Flight delay prediction systems must operate in real-time to provide timely insights for decision-making. Ensuring low-latency predictions while processing large volumes of data in real-time is a technical hurdle. • Scalability: AI systems must scale to handle predictions for a large number of flights across multiple airports and regions. Variability in data sources and operational procedures across locations adds to the complexity of scaling these systems. • Integration with Existing Systems: Implementing AI-based delay prediction systems alongside legacy systems in airports and airlines requires significant effort and investment. Compatibility issues and resistance to change may hinder smooth adoption.

IV. PROPOSED STRATEGY

The overall quality and effectiveness of a prediction model for flight delays depend on several factors, including the quality and quantity of the data used, the choice of features, the selection of appropriate machine learning algorithms, and the evaluation metrics employed. Here's a general review of the prediction of delay in flights using machine learning techniques: Data Quality: The quality and reliability of the input data play a crucial role in the accuracy of the predictions. Factors such as missing data, inconsistencies, or errors can impact the model's performance. It is essential to ensure that the dataset is comprehensive, up-to-date, and contains relevant information, such as historical flight data, weather conditions, airport congestion, and aircraft information. Feature Selection: Effective feature engineering is critical to capture the important aspects that contribute to flight delays. Features like departure/arrival time, airline, airport, weather conditions, previous delays, and holidays can be relevant indicators. The selection of features should be based on domain knowledge and an understanding of the factors that influence flight delays. Algorithm Selection: Various machine learning algorithms can be employed for flight delay prediction, including decision trees, random forests, and support vector machines (SVM), gradient boosting, and neural networks. The choice of algorithm depends on the specific characteristics of the data, the size of the dataset, and the trade-off between accuracy and computational complexity. Ensemble methods, such as random forests or gradient boosting, often yield good results due to their ability to handle complex relationships and handle noise in the data. Model Evaluation: Evaluating the performance of the prediction model is crucial to assessing its accuracy and generalization ability. Common evaluation metrics include accuracy, precision, recall, F1 score, and area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (AUC-ROC). Additionally, techniques like cross-validation and train-test splits can help estimate the model's performance on unseen data. Interpretability: While accuracy is important, the interpretability of the model is also significant, especially in critical applications such as aviation. It is crucial to understand how the model arrives at its predictions and identify the key features driving the predictions. Decision tree-based algorithms provide interpretability through feature importance rankings, while complex models like neural networks may offer less interpretability.

V. CONCLUSION

Predicting flight delays using AI techniques holds immense potential to transform the aviation industry by improving operational efficiency, enhancing passenger satisfaction, and reducing financial losses. By leveraging advanced machine learning and deep learning models, stakeholders can analyze complex datasets and accurately forecast delays, enabling proactive decision-making. However, challenges such as data quality, feature selection, real-time integration, and model interpretability must be addressed to ensure reliability and scalability. Overcoming these hurdles will require collaborative efforts from researchers, industry experts, and policymakers to create robust, transparent, and ethically sound AI-driven systems. With continuous advancements in AI and data processing technologies, flight delay prediction systems are poised to play a pivotal role in shaping the future of aviation.

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