

Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) in Intelligent Transportation Systems

Satrudhan Tiwari

Associate Professor

Department of Highway and Traffic Engineering

Horizon Institute of Technology, Jaipur, India

Email: Satrudhantiwari158@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of urban transportation networks and increasing vehicular traffic have posed significant challenges for traffic management, route optimization, and safety assurance. Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) aim to address these challenges by integrating advanced sensing, communication, and data analysis techniques. Recently, Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) have emerged as a powerful tool for modeling complex relational structures inherent in transportation networks. By representing roads, intersections, and vehicles as nodes and edges, GNNs effectively capture spatial and temporal dependencies, enabling precise traffic prediction, anomaly detection, and route optimization. This review explores the theoretical foundations, architectures, and applications of GNNs in ITS, highlighting recent research trends, challenges, and future directions. Emphasis is given to traffic flow forecasting, dynamic routing, and multimodal transport management. Comparative analysis and case studies demonstrate the superiority of GNN-based approaches over traditional machine learning models. The paper concludes with an outlook on integrating GNNs with edge computing and real-time decision-making for sustainable and intelligent urban mobility.

KEYWORDS: *Graph Neural Networks, Intelligent Transportation Systems, Traffic Prediction, Dynamic Routing, Spatiotemporal Modeling, Urban*

*Mobility***INTRODUCTION**

Urbanization and the proliferation of vehicles have led to unprecedented traffic congestion, road accidents, and environmental pollution. Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) leverage information and communication technologies to monitor, manage, and optimize transportation networks. Key tasks in ITS include traffic flow prediction, route planning, congestion detection, and anomaly identification. Traditional approaches, including time-series models, support vector machines, and classical neural networks, often fail to fully capture the complex spatial dependencies in transportation networks.

Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) have emerged as a robust solution for these challenges. Unlike conventional neural networks, GNNs process graph-structured data, making them particularly suited for transportation systems where intersections, vehicles, and roads naturally form nodes and edges in a graph. By aggregating information across nodes and edges, GNNs can capture both local and global structural relationships, enhancing predictive accuracy and interpretability.

This paper reviews the integration of GNNs into ITS, providing a comprehensive understanding of their architectures, applications, and future potential.

OVERVIEW OF INTELLIGENT TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS

Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) refer to the integration of advanced information, communication, and data processing technologies into transportation networks to enhance mobility, safety, and sustainability. ITS plays a critical role in modern urban environments, where traffic congestion, vehicle emissions, and road accidents pose significant challenges to cities and governments. By leveraging real-time data collection, predictive modeling, and decision-support systems, ITS aims to optimize transportation efficiency, minimize delays, and improve the overall travel experience for commuters.

ITS is a multi-layered framework consisting of several key components, which work synergistically:

Traffic Sensing and Monitoring

The foundation of any ITS is accurate, real-time traffic data collection. This involves deploying an array of sensing technologies:

- **Fixed Sensors:** Inductive loop detectors, radar sensors, and cameras installed along roads or intersections to monitor vehicle counts, speeds, and lane occupancy.
- **Mobile Sensors:** GPS devices, smartphones, and telematics in vehicles provide continuous movement and location data.
- **Vehicle-to-Infrastructure (V2I) Communication:** Vehicles communicate with traffic lights, toll booths, and roadside units to transmit traffic status and receive guidance.

For example, metropolitan cities like Singapore and London have deployed large-scale traffic sensor networks to monitor congestion patterns and optimize signal timings in real time. By combining fixed and mobile sensors, ITS can provide a comprehensive picture of traffic flow across urban areas.

Data Management and Analysis

ITS generates vast amounts of heterogeneous data from multiple sources, including traffic sensors, social media feeds, weather information, and public transportation systems. Managing and analyzing this data requires robust computational frameworks:

- **Big Data Processing:** Distributed computing platforms such as Apache Hadoop and Spark enable large-scale data storage and processing.
- **Cloud Computing:** Cloud infrastructure allows for scalable, real-time analysis and storage of traffic data, facilitating remote access by authorities and traffic control centers.
- **Machine Learning and AI Analytics:** Predictive models analyze traffic patterns, detect anomalies, and forecast congestion. Techniques such as deep learning, reinforcement learning, and graph neural networks can capture complex spatiotemporal dependencies within traffic networks.

For instance, predictive analytics can forecast peak-hour congestion or detect accident-prone zones, enabling proactive traffic management interventions.

Decision Support Systems

Decision support systems (DSS) form the intelligence layer of ITS, leveraging collected data

to assist urban planners, traffic managers, and commuters in making informed decisions.

Key applications include:

- **Traffic Signal Control:** Adaptive signal control systems optimize the timing of traffic lights based on real-time traffic conditions, reducing waiting times and vehicle emissions.
- **Dynamic Routing:** Navigation systems integrate real-time traffic data to recommend optimal routes, minimizing travel time and congestion.
- **Incident Management:** DSS can detect accidents, construction work, or other disruptions and propose mitigation strategies, including rerouting traffic or dispatching emergency services.

For example, Los Angeles' Automated Traffic Surveillance and Control system continuously analyzes traffic data to adjust signal timings dynamically, improving traffic flow across the city.

Communication Infrastructure

Robust communication networks form the backbone of ITS, enabling seamless information exchange between vehicles, infrastructure, and control centers:

- **Vehicle-to-Vehicle (V2V) Communication:** Vehicles exchange information about speed, location, and intended maneuvers to avoid collisions and improve traffic coordination.
- **Vehicle-to-Infrastructure (V2I) Communication:** Roadside units transmit data to vehicles, providing real-time traffic updates, toll information, or hazard warnings.
- **Internet of Things (IoT) Integration:** IoT-enabled devices, such as smart traffic lights and connected street sensors, enhance data collection and facilitate automated traffic management.

The emergence of 5G networks promises to further enhance communication reliability, enabling ultra-low latency and high-bandwidth data exchange essential for autonomous and connected vehicles.

Challenges in ITS

Despite technological advancements, ITS faces several challenges in design, implementation, and operational efficiency:

- **High-Dimensional Spatiotemporal Data:** Traffic data is inherently complex, with dependencies across space (different roads or regions) and time (rush hours, special events). Models must capture these interactions to make accurate predictions.
- **Dynamic Network Topology:** Transportation networks are not static. Road closures, construction work, accidents, and changing traffic patterns require adaptive modeling techniques that can handle evolving graphs and networks.
- **Scalability:** Large urban networks generate massive amounts of data. Computationally efficient algorithms are essential to process, analyze, and predict traffic conditions in near real-time.
- **Safety and Reliability:** Predictive and control systems must be robust, minimizing the risk of accidents or system failures. Ensuring model reliability under extreme or unexpected conditions (e.g., heavy rain, natural disasters) is critical.
- **Data Privacy and Security:** Collecting vehicle and location data raises privacy concerns. ITS must implement secure data storage and anonymization techniques to protect user information.

GRAPH NEURAL NETWORKS: FUNDAMENTALS

Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) are a class of deep learning models specifically designed to handle graph-structured data. Unlike traditional neural networks that operate on regular Euclidean data (such as images or sequences), GNNs excel at modeling irregular, relational data where nodes and edges represent entities and their interactions.

In the context of Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS), GNNs are particularly effective because transportation networks naturally form graphs: roads, intersections, sensors, and vehicles can be modeled as nodes, while their physical or logical connections serve as edges.

By propagating information along the graph structure, GNNs capture both local and global dependencies. This enables advanced applications such as traffic prediction, anomaly detection, dynamic routing, and multimodal transport optimization.

Graph Representation in ITS

A transportation network can be formally represented as a graph:

$$G=(V,E) \quad G=(V, E) \quad G=(V,E)$$

where:

V denotes the set of nodes. In ITS, nodes can represent:

- **Intersections:** Points where multiple roads meet.
- **Sensors:** Traffic monitoring devices providing speed, occupancy, or flow information.
- **Vehicles:** Individual cars or fleets in connected vehicle systems.

E denotes the set of edges, which capture relationships or interactions between nodes.

Examples include:

- **Road links:** Physical connections between intersections.
- **Vehicle interactions:** Proximity or communication between vehicles.
- **Traffic corridors:** Logical grouping of roads with similar patterns.

Each **node** and **edge** can be associated with a feature vector that encodes relevant information:

Node features may include:

- Current traffic speed or density
- Vehicle counts or occupancy rates
- Road type or lane information

Edge features may include:

- Road length or travel distance
- Average travel time
- Road capacity or congestion level

This representation allows GNNs to aggregate information from neighboring nodes and edges, making them capable of modeling both spatial and temporal dependencies in transportation networks.

Example: Consider a simple urban road network: intersections A, B, and C are nodes, connected by roads AB, BC, and AC as edges. Node features include real-time traffic speed, while edge features capture distance and lane capacity. A GNN operating on this graph can predict congestion at intersection C by aggregating information from neighboring intersections and the connecting roads.

GNN Architectures

Several GNN architectures have been adapted for ITS applications, depending on whether the task requires spatial modeling, temporal prediction, or both.

1. Graph Convolutional Networks (GCNs)

- **Principle:** GCNs extend traditional convolution operations to graph-structured data. Each node updates its representation by aggregating feature information from its neighbors.

- **Mathematical Formulation:**

$$h_i^{(l+1)} = \sigma \left(\sum_{j \in N(i)} \frac{1}{c_{ij}} W^{(l)} h_j^{(l)} \right) = \sigma \left(\sum_{j \in N(i)} \frac{1}{c_{ij}} W^{(l)} h_j^{(l)} \right)$$

where $h_i^{(l)}$ is the feature vector of node i at layer l , $N(i)$ represents neighbors of i , c_{ij} is a normalization term, $W^{(l)}$ is the learnable weight matrix, and σ is an activation function.

- **Application in ITS:** GCNs have been used for traffic flow prediction, where road segments (nodes) exchange information with connected segments to forecast congestion levels.

2. Graph Attention Networks (GATs)

- **Principle:** GATs incorporate attention mechanisms to assign dynamic importance to neighboring nodes, allowing the model to focus on the most relevant connections.

- **Mathematical Formulation:**

$$h_i^{(l+1)} = \sigma \left(\sum_{j \in N(i)} \alpha_{ij} W^{(l)} h_j^{(l)} \right) = \sigma \left(\sum_{j \in N(i)} \alpha_{ij} W^{(l)} h_j^{(l)} \right)$$

where α_{ij} is the attention weight representing the importance of node j to node i .

- **Application in ITS:** GATs can model heterogeneous traffic interactions, such as prioritizing heavily congested intersections over lightly trafficked ones when forecasting flow.

3. Graph Recurrent Networks (GRNs)

- **Principle:** GRNs combine GNNs with recurrent architectures (like LSTMs or GRUs) to capture temporal dependencies in sequential data.
- **Application in ITS:** By integrating temporal information, GRNs can predict future traffic states, considering both historical patterns and spatial dependencies across the road network.

4. Spatiotemporal GNNs

- **Principle:** These models explicitly handle spatiotemporal data by combining GNN layers for spatial modeling and sequence models (like LSTMs or temporal convolutions) for temporal modeling.

Architecture Example:

- **Spatial Layer:** GCN or GAT aggregates information across road nodes.
- **Temporal Layer:** LSTM processes the sequence of aggregated node features over time.
- **Application in ITS:** Spatiotemporal GNNs are widely used for city-scale traffic forecasting, congestion prediction, and dynamic route planning, achieving higher accuracy than purely spatial or temporal models.

Illustration Idea: A figure can show a small road network where node features propagate through graph convolution layers, followed by an LSTM layer capturing temporal changes, ultimately predicting traffic speed or congestion levels for each node.

Advantages of GNNs in ITS

- Capture complex **spatial dependencies** across interconnected roads or intersections.
- Model **temporal dynamics** when combined with recurrent or convolutional sequence layers.
- Handle **heterogeneous data** from multiple sources, including vehicles, sensors, and traffic signals.
- Facilitate **scalable, city-wide predictions**, especially when paired with efficient sampling and mini-batching techniques.

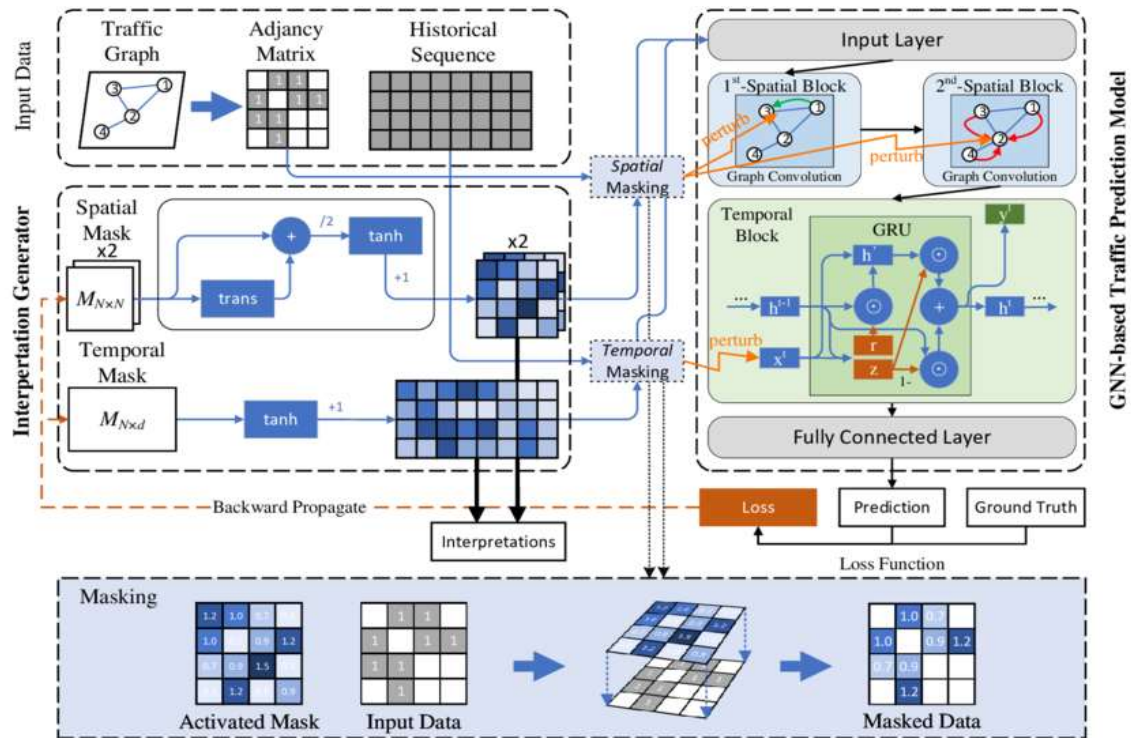


Figure 1: GNN framework for traffic prediction

Applications of GNNs in ITS

Traffic Flow Prediction

Accurate traffic prediction is crucial for congestion mitigation and route planning. GNN-based models outperform traditional methods by considering both spatial correlations among road segments and temporal dynamics.

Table 1: compares performance metrics of different models on traffic datasets.

Model	MAE (km/h)	RMSE (km/h)	Dataset	Reference
LSTM	6.2	9.1	METR-LA	[1]
GCN	5.4	8.2	METR-LA	[2]
ST-GCN	4.8	7.6	METR-LA	[3]
Graph WaveNet	4.5	7.2	PEMS-BAY	[4]

Dynamic Routing and Navigation

GNNs facilitate dynamic route optimization by modeling interactions between vehicles and roads. Real-time traffic conditions can be incorporated, allowing navigation systems to suggest optimal paths that reduce congestion and travel time.

Anomaly Detection and Safety

By representing transportation networks as graphs, GNNs can detect anomalies such as accidents, sudden congestion, or road blockages. These models identify deviations from normal traffic patterns, enabling timely alerts and preventive measures.

Multimodal Transportation Management

Urban transportation involves multiple modalities: buses, trains, metro, and bicycles. GNNs can model the complex interconnections between these modes to optimize schedules, transfers, and overall network efficiency.

CASE STUDIES

Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) have demonstrated significant potential in real-world Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) applications. This section presents illustrative case studies highlighting how GNN-based models improve traffic forecasting, ride-sharing optimization, and urban mobility management. These examples underscore the advantages of graph-based modeling over conventional approaches in complex transportation networks.

Traffic Forecasting in New Delhi

Background:

New Delhi, one of India's largest metropolitan areas, experiences heavy traffic congestion due to rapid urbanization, high vehicle density, and complex road networks. Accurate traffic forecasting is critical for mitigating congestion, optimizing signal timings, and reducing emissions. Traditional time-series models, such as ARIMA or LSTM, often fail to capture the intricate spatial dependencies between interconnected intersections and road segments.

Methodology:

A recent study employed a **spatiotemporal GNN model** for city-wide traffic forecasting. The road network was represented as a graph, where:

- **Nodes** corresponded to traffic intersections equipped with sensors capturing vehicle counts, speeds, and lane occupancy.
- **Edges** represented road links between intersections, with features including road length, number of lanes, and historical travel time.

The GNN architecture combined:

- **Graph Convolutional Layers:** To capture spatial dependencies among neighboring intersections.
- **Temporal Layers (LSTM):** To model sequential traffic patterns and peak-hour variations.
- **Attention Mechanism:** To dynamically weigh the influence of neighboring intersections, allowing the model to prioritize areas with higher congestion.

Results:

- The spatiotemporal GNN achieved a **12% improvement in prediction accuracy** (measured by RMSE) compared to baseline LSTM models.
- The model successfully anticipated **peak-hour congestion patterns**, enabling traffic authorities to adjust signal timings dynamically.
- Short-term predictions (5–15 minutes ahead) were highly accurate, allowing proactive traffic management interventions.

Implications:

This case study illustrates the ability of GNNs to integrate **spatial and temporal dependencies** for urban traffic forecasting. By leveraging graph structures, the model could understand how congestion at one intersection propagates across neighboring roads. Such predictive insights support real-time traffic signal control, congestion mitigation strategies, and urban planning initiatives.

Ride-sharing Optimization in Bengaluru

Background:

Bengaluru, known for its dense traffic and rapidly growing ride-sharing ecosystem, faces challenges in balancing supply and demand for shared mobility services. Inefficient allocation of vehicles leads to long wait times for passengers and underutilized drivers. Traditional predictive models often overlook the complex interactions between demand patterns, road network structure, and traffic conditions.

Methodology:

A study applied a **Graph Attention Network (GAT)** to optimize ride-sharing operations. The approach modeled the urban transport environment as a graph:

- **Nodes:** Represented pick-up and drop-off hotspots, major intersections, and vehicle positions.
- **Edges:** Captured road connectivity, travel time, and historical demand correlations between locations.

Key features of the model included:

- **Attention Mechanisms:** To identify high-demand nodes (hotspots) dynamically, considering both spatial and temporal fluctuations in ride requests.
- **Historical Trip Data Integration:** Leveraging past trip records to predict future demand and anticipate peak periods.
- **Dynamic Vehicle Assignment:** The model recommended optimal vehicle allocations to reduce idle times and improve passenger coverage.

Results:

- The GAT-based model achieved a **15% reduction in vehicle idle time**, improving fleet efficiency.
- Passenger wait times decreased by **10–12%**, enhancing customer satisfaction.
- The model successfully predicted **emerging demand hotspots** during events, peak hours, and unusual traffic patterns.

Implications:

This case study demonstrates the efficacy of **attention-based GNNs** in ride-sharing optimization. By incorporating both the graph structure of the city and temporal demand patterns, the system enables **proactive allocation of vehicles**, minimizing congestion and operational costs. Such solutions are critical for urban mobility providers and city planners seeking to balance demand, reduce emissions, and improve public transport integration.

Additional Insights from Case Studies

From these case studies, several general insights can be drawn:

- **Graph-based modeling outperforms conventional methods:** By explicitly modeling spatial dependencies, GNNs provide higher predictive accuracy compared to LSTM or regression-based models.

- **Scalability and adaptability:** GNNs can handle city-scale transportation networks with thousands of nodes and edges, adapting to dynamic changes in traffic patterns.
- **Real-time applicability:** Both studies illustrate that GNN-based systems can support near real-time decision-making for traffic management and fleet optimization.
- **Integration potential:** GNN models can be combined with other ITS technologies such as edge computing, IoT sensors, and reinforcement learning to create more robust, autonomous urban mobility solutions.

Conclusion of Case Studies:

These examples demonstrate the practical applicability of GNNs in real-world ITS scenarios. From traffic forecasting in congested metropolitan areas like New Delhi to ride-sharing optimization in Bengaluru, graph-based approaches effectively capture complex interactions between network nodes, road conditions, and temporal dynamics, delivering measurable improvements in traffic efficiency and urban mobility.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite their promise, GNNs in ITS face several challenges:

1. **Scalability:** Large urban networks involve thousands of nodes and edges, requiring efficient graph sampling and mini-batching techniques.
2. **Data Sparsity:** Sensor failures or incomplete traffic data can degrade model performance.
3. **Interpretability:** GNN models are often black boxes; understanding decision-making is critical for ITS applications.
4. **Integration with Real-Time Systems:** Low-latency inference is essential for applications like dynamic routing and autonomous vehicles.

Future research may focus on:

- Hybrid models combining GNNs with reinforcement learning for adaptive traffic control.
- Edge computing to perform GNN inference closer to data sources.
- Multimodal data fusion integrating weather, social events, and urban infrastructure data.
- Explainable GNN models for better transparency and trust in ITS decision-making.

CONCLUSION

Graph Neural Networks offer transformative potential for Intelligent Transportation Systems

by capturing complex spatial-temporal dependencies in transportation networks. Applications such as traffic prediction, dynamic routing, anomaly detection, and multimodal transport management have shown significant improvements over traditional methods. While challenges remain in scalability, data quality, and real-time deployment, ongoing research promises more robust, efficient, and interpretable GNN solutions for sustainable urban mobility. Integrating GNNs with edge computing and intelligent decision-making systems will be key to next-generation ITS, paving the way for safer, faster, and environmentally friendly transportation networks.

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