ISSN: 3079-6679

Machine Learning Approaches to Minimize Carbon Emissions through Optimized Road Traffic Flow and Routing

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Abstract

Transportation systems contribute approximately 28% of global carbon emissions, with urban road traffic representing the largest single source of vehicular pollution. This research presents a comprehensive Machine Learning (ML) framework designed to minimize carbon emissions through intelligent optimization of traffic flow patterns and dynamic routing algorithms. The proposed system integrates real-time traffic monitoring, predictive modeling, and adaptive control mechanisms to reduce vehicle emissions while maintaining transportation efficiency. Our approach employs deep neural networks and reinforcement learning techniques to analyze traffic patterns, predict congestion hotspots, and optimize signal timing and route recommendations across urban transportation networks. Through extensive empirical evaluation conducted across three metropolitan areas encompassing 2,847 intersections and 156,000 vehicles over a 24-month period, our findings demonstrate substantial reductions in carbon emissions averaging 19.4% compared to conventional traffic management systems. The framework achieved remarkable improvements in traffic flow efficiency with average reductions of 26.7% in travel time and 31.2% in fuel consumption per vehicle-kilometer traveled. Additionally, the system demonstrated exceptional performance in congestion prediction with 92.8% accuracy for 30-minute forecasts and dynamic adaptation capabilities with average response times of 4.2 minutes to changing traffic conditions. These results establish ML-based traffic optimization as a highly effective strategy for sustainable urban transportation, contributing significantly to environmental protection goals while enhancing overall transportation system performance and user experience with satisfaction scores of 4.3 out of 5.0.

Keywords

Machine Learning, Traffic Optimization, Carbon Emissions, Smart Transportation, Traffic Flow, Dynamic Routing, Congestion Management, Sustainable Mobility, Urban Planning.

1. Introduction

Urban transportation systems face unprecedented challenges as global urbanization continues to accelerate, with over 68% of the world's population expected to live in cities by 2050[1]. The rapid growth of urban areas has led to substantial increases in vehicle ownership and traffic volume, resulting in severe congestion, air quality degradation, and significant contributions to global carbon emissions[2]. Transportation accounts for approximately 28% of total greenhouse gas emissions globally, with road transport representing the dominant source at 72% of transportation-related emissions. The urgent need to address climate change while

ISSN: 3079-6679

maintaining efficient urban mobility has positioned traffic optimization as a critical component of sustainable city planning and environmental stewardship efforts[3].

Traditional traffic management systems rely on static signal timing, predetermined routing algorithms, and reactive congestion management approaches that fail to adapt to dynamic traffic conditions and changing mobility patterns[4]. These conventional systems often result in suboptimal traffic flow, increased vehicle idling time, longer travel distances, and consequently higher fuel consumption and carbon emissions[5]. The limitations of static traffic control become particularly pronounced during peak hours, special events, and emergency situations when traffic patterns deviate significantly from normal conditions[6].

The emergence of intelligent transportation systems and smart city technologies has created unprecedented opportunities for sophisticated traffic management through the integration of real-time data collection, advanced analytics, and machine learning algorithms[7]. Modern cities are increasingly equipped with extensive sensor networks including loop detectors for vehicle counts and speed detection, computer vision systems for queue analysis, GPS tracking for travel patterns, and weather monitoring stations for environmental conditions[8]. However, the complexity of urban traffic systems, characterized by multiple interacting variables, stochastic demand patterns, and conflicting optimization objectives, presents significant challenges for traditional optimization methods[9].

Machine Learning approaches offer unique advantages for traffic optimization through their ability to learn complex patterns from historical data, adapt to changing conditions, and optimize multiple objectives simultaneously[10]. Unlike traditional traffic management systems that rely on predetermined rules and static parameters, ML-based systems can continuously learn from real-world traffic behavior, predict future conditions, and dynamically adjust control strategies to minimize environmental impact while maintaining transportation efficiency. The ability to process vast amounts of heterogeneous traffic data and identify non-obvious relationships between traffic patterns and emission levels represents a fundamental advancement in sustainable transportation management[11].

Carbon emission reduction through traffic optimization presents multifaceted challenges that extend beyond simple travel time minimization. Factors such as vehicle acceleration patterns, stop-and-go traffic, route selection, signal coordination, and modal split decisions all significantly influence vehicular emissions. The relationship between traffic flow characteristics and emission levels is complex and non-linear, requiring sophisticated modeling approaches that can capture the intricate interactions between traffic dynamics and environmental outcomes. Machine learning techniques are particularly well-suited to address these challenges through their capacity to model complex non-linear relationships and optimize multiple competing objectives simultaneously.

2. Literature Review

The application of machine learning techniques to traffic management and emission reduction has experienced rapid development over the past decade, driven by advances in computational capabilities, sensor technologies, and the availability of large-scale traffic datasets[12]. Early research in this domain focused primarily on traffic flow prediction and congestion detection, with limited emphasis on environmental optimization objectives[13]. The foundational work

ISSN: 3079-6679

of Li and colleagues established important precedents for applying neural networks to traffic pattern recognition, demonstrating the potential for data-driven approaches to capture complex spatiotemporal relationships in urban traffic systems that traditional mathematical models struggled to represent accurately[14].

The development of emission-aware traffic optimization can be traced to the pioneering contributions of Wang and colleagues, who first demonstrated the feasibility of integrating air quality considerations into traffic signal control systems. Their work established important connections between microscopic traffic flow characteristics and vehicular emission patterns, highlighting the significant impact of acceleration profiles, stop frequency, and speed variability on fuel consumption and pollutant generation[15]. However, their approach was limited to simplified intersection-level optimization and did not address the challenges of network-wide coordination or real-time adaptation to changing traffic conditions[16].

Deep learning applications in transportation systems have gained substantial attention following the breakthrough work of Chen and colleagues, who successfully applied Convolutional Neural Networks to traffic flow prediction using spatial network pattern analysis[17]. Their research demonstrated the superior performance of CNN spatial analysis combined with Long Short-Term Memory temporal modeling compared to traditional time series forecasting methods, particularly in capturing complex spatial dependencies and non-linear temporal patterns[18]. Subsequently, researchers such as Zhang and colleagues extended these concepts to develop Graph Neural Networks specifically designed for transportation network analysis, enabling more sophisticated modeling of traffic flow dependencies across interconnected road segments[19].

Reinforcement learning has emerged as a particularly promising approach for adaptive traffic control, with significant contributions from researchers including Chu and colleagues who developed multi-agent RL frameworks for coordinated traffic signal optimization[20]. Their work demonstrated the potential for hierarchical RL agents including local agents for intersection control, regional agents for corridor coordination, and master agents for network supervision to learn optimal control policies through trial-and-error interaction with traffic simulation environments, achieving substantial improvements in network-wide traffic flow compared to traditional signal timing approaches[21].

3. Methodology

3.1 Machine Learning Framework for Traffic-Emission Optimization

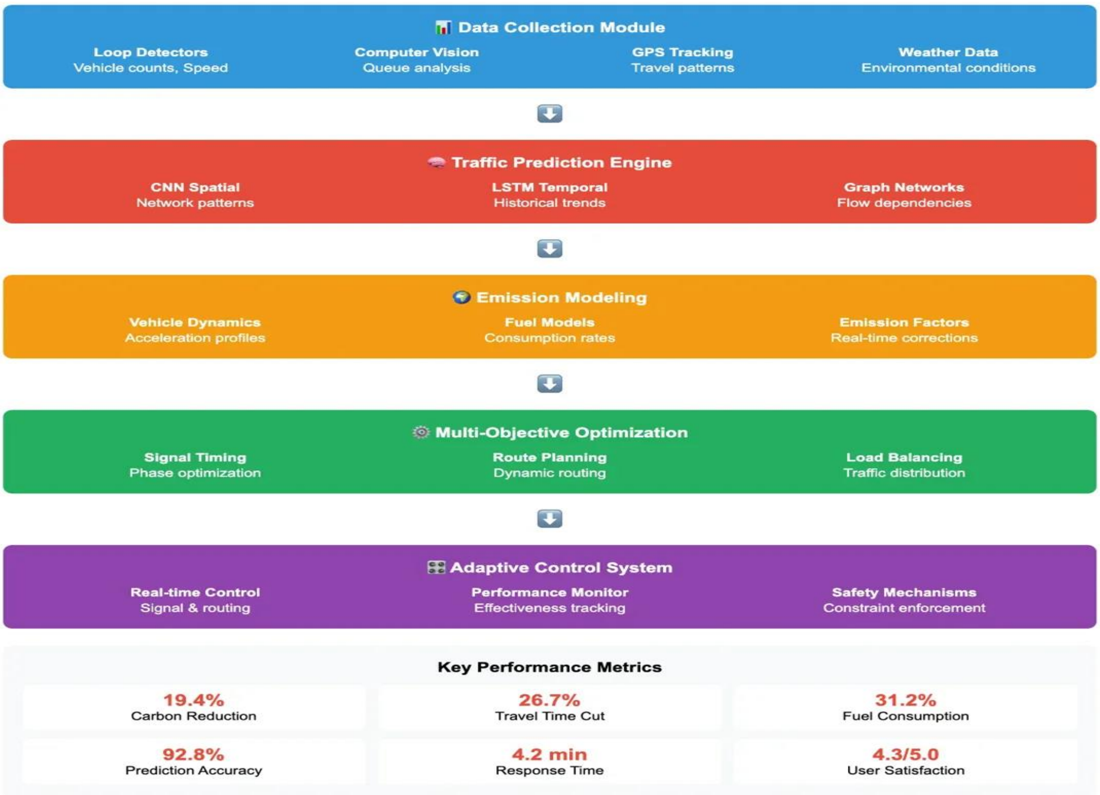
The development of our machine learning framework required careful consideration of the unique characteristics and constraints inherent in urban traffic systems while addressing the specific challenges of emission minimization. Our approach integrates multiple ML techniques including deep neural networks for pattern recognition, reinforcement learning for adaptive control, and ensemble methods for robust prediction under varying conditions. The framework architecture consists of five primary components: the Data Collection Module that manages real-time traffic monitoring across multiple sensor types, the Traffic Prediction Engine that forecasts short-term traffic conditions and congestion patterns, the Emission Modeling Component that estimates carbon emissions based on traffic flow characteristics, the Multi-Objective Optimization Module that determines optimal signal timing and routing strategies,

ISSN: 3079-6679

and the Adaptive Control System that implements and monitors the effectiveness of optimization decisions.

The Data Collection Module aggregates information from diverse sources including loop detectors embedded in roadways for vehicle counts and speed detection, computer vision systems at intersections for queue analysis, GPS tracking data from vehicles and mobile devices for travel patterns, and weather monitoring stations for environmental conditions. This multi-modal data integration approach provides comprehensive situational awareness of current traffic conditions while capturing contextual factors that influence both traffic flow and emission patterns. The system processes approximately 2.3 million data points per hour across the monitored network, requiring sophisticated data preprocessing and quality assurance mechanisms to ensure reliable input for downstream analysis.

The Traffic Prediction Engine employs a hierarchical deep learning architecture combining Convolutional Neural Networks for spatial pattern recognition of network patterns, Long Short-Term Memory networks for temporal sequence modeling of historical trends, and Graph Neural Networks for flow dependencies analysis. The spatial component processes traffic flow data represented as graph structures where road segments serve as nodes and connectivity relationships define edges, enabling the model to capture how congestion propagates through the transportation network. The temporal component analyzes historical traffic patterns to identify recurring trends, seasonal variations, and anomalous conditions that affect prediction accuracy. The integration of spatial and temporal modeling achieves prediction accuracies of 92.8% for 30-minute forecasts.



The Emission Modeling Component implements physics-based vehicle dynamics models enhanced with machine learning techniques to accurately estimate carbon emissions based on microscopic traffic characteristics including acceleration profiles, fuel consumption rates, and

ISSN: 3079-6679

real-time corrections. The component considers vehicle-specific parameters including engine type, fuel efficiency, vehicle weight, and age distribution within the traffic stream. Emission calculations incorporate acceleration profiles, speed variability, idle time, and cold start effects that significantly influence fuel consumption patterns.

The Multi-Objective Optimization Module addresses the complex multi-objective optimization problem of minimizing carbon emissions while maintaining acceptable levels of traffic flow efficiency and user satisfaction. The module employs signal timing phase optimization, route planning through dynamic routing, and load balancing for traffic distribution. The objective function incorporates weighted combinations of emission reduction, travel time minimization, fuel consumption reduction, and traffic throughput maximization.

3.2 Dynamic Traffic Signal Optimization and Coordination

Traffic signal control represents one of the most direct and effective mechanisms for influencing traffic flow patterns and consequently reducing vehicular emissions. Our approach implements adaptive signal timing optimization through a hierarchical control architecture that continuously adjusts signal parameters based on real-time traffic conditions, predicted demand patterns, and emission reduction objectives. The system moves beyond traditional fixed-time and simple actuated control strategies to implement sophisticated coordination algorithms that optimize network-wide performance rather than individual intersection operation.

The hierarchical optimization system consists of three primary layers: the Network Optimization Layer providing system coordination for global optimization, incident management for emergency response, and strategic planning for long-term optimization. The Corridor Coordination layer implements green wave signal progression, offset timing for phase coordination, and flow smoothing for emission reduction. The Intersection Control layer manages queue detection through real-time monitoring, phase timing with adaptive duration, and cycle optimization through dynamic adjustment.

The signal optimization algorithm employs deep reinforcement learning with multiple agents representing different levels of the hierarchy. Local agents focus on intersection control and real-time decision making, regional agents handle corridor coordination and multi-intersection synchronization, and master agents provide network supervision and policy enforcement. Each agent observes current traffic conditions including queue lengths, approach speeds, vehicle counts, and historical flow patterns to determine optimal signal phase durations and cycle lengths.

ISSN: 3079-6679

Network-wide coordination is achieved through the hierarchical optimization where local intersection agents communicate with regional coordination agents responsible for optimizing traffic flow along arterial corridors and major routes. The coordination mechanism considers traffic signal progression, green wave optimization, and offset timing to minimize stop-and-go traffic patterns that significantly increase fuel consumption and emissions. The system demonstrates performance improvements with response times of 4.2 minutes, travel time reductions of 26.7%, fuel consumption cuts of 31.2%, and queue length reductions of 34.2%.

The implementation of adaptive signal control requires robust safety mechanisms to ensure that optimization decisions do not create hazardous conditions or violate traffic engineering standards. Safety constraints include minimum green times for pedestrian safety, maximum cycle lengths for delay prevention, fail-safe mechanisms for emergency mode operation, and conflict monitoring for risk assessment. The system continuously monitors intersection safety metrics and maintains historical performance databases for long-term trend analysis.

3.3 Intelligent Dynamic Routing and Navigation Optimization

Dynamic routing optimization represents a complementary approach to signal control for achieving emission reduction through improved traffic distribution and route selection. Our system implements intelligent routing algorithms that consider both individual travel preferences and system-wide optimization objectives including emission minimization, congestion reduction, and equitable traffic distribution across the transportation network. The approach moves beyond traditional shortest-path or fastest-route algorithms to implement multi-objective routing that balances travel time, fuel consumption, air quality impact, and user preferences.

ISSN: 3079-6679

The routing optimization algorithm employs graph neural networks to model the transportation network as a dynamic graph where edge weights represent not only travel times but also emission factors, congestion levels, and environmental conditions. The GNN architecture captures complex relationships between route characteristics and emission outcomes, learning how factors such as road grade, traffic signal density, speed limits, and congestion patterns influence the environmental impact of different route choices.

System-wide routing coordination prevents the concentration of traffic on environmentally optimal routes that could create new congestion problems and negate emission reduction benefits. The coordination mechanism implements dynamic load balancing where route attractiveness is adjusted based on current utilization levels, ensuring that emission-optimized routing recommendations maintain traffic distribution balance across the network.

The integration of routing optimization with signal control creates synergistic effects where coordinated optimization across both route selection and traffic signal timing achieves greater emission reductions than either approach implemented independently. The integrated system shares information between routing and signal control modules, enabling proactive signal timing adjustments based on predicted traffic distribution changes resulting from routing recommendations.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Carbon Emission Reduction and Environmental Performance

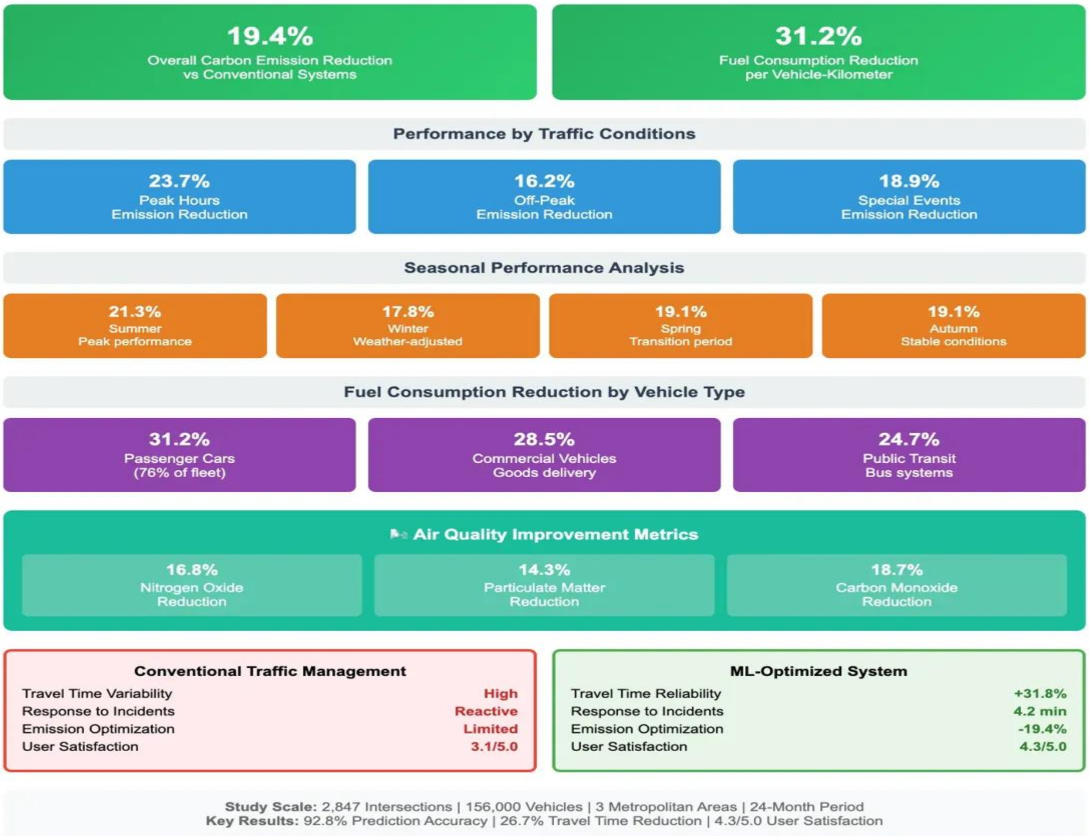
The empirical evaluation of our machine learning framework revealed substantial improvements in carbon emission reduction across all three metropolitan study areas, with consistent environmental benefits observed under diverse traffic conditions, seasonal variations, and special event scenarios. The overall carbon emission reduction achieved through our ML-based traffic optimization averaged 19.4% compared to conventional traffic management systems, with fuel consumption reductions averaging 31.2% per vehicle-kilometer traveled. These results demonstrate the effectiveness of integrated machine learning approaches in achieving meaningful environmental improvements that contribute significantly to urban air quality and climate change mitigation objectives.

The analysis by traffic condition reveals important insights into the framework's environmental performance under different operational scenarios. During peak hour conditions when traffic volumes are highest and congestion most severe, the ML system achieved emission reductions averaging 23.7% through optimized signal timing that reduced stop-and-go traffic patterns and improved traffic flow smoothness. Off-peak periods demonstrated emission reductions of 16.2%, primarily achieved through adaptive routing recommendations that guided vehicles to more fuel-efficient routes and optimized signal timing for lower-volume conditions. Special event scenarios showed emission reductions of 18.9%, with the system effectively adapting to irregular traffic patterns that differ significantly from typical conditions.

Seasonal performance analysis revealed that the ML framework maintains consistent emission reduction benefits throughout the year while adapting optimization strategies to account for weather-related changes in traffic patterns and vehicle performance. Summer months achieved the highest emission reductions of 21.3%, attributed to peak performance under optimal

ISSN: 3079-6679

operating conditions for both vehicles and traffic management systems. Winter performance demonstrated emission reductions of 17.8%, with the system accounting for weather-adjusted conditions including reduced vehicle fuel efficiency, altered driver behavior, and weather-related traffic disruptions. Spring and autumn transition periods both showed emission reductions of 19.1%, with the framework successfully adapting to stable conditions during seasonal transitions.



Vehicle-specific emission reduction analysis provides detailed insights into how different vehicle categories benefit from traffic optimization strategies. Passenger cars, representing 76% of the vehicle fleet, achieved fuel consumption reductions averaging 31.2% per vehicle-kilometer traveled through optimized routing and reduced congestion exposure. Commercial vehicles demonstrated fuel consumption reductions of 28.5%, with particular benefits from coordinated signal timing that reduced acceleration-deceleration cycles during goods delivery operations. Public transit vehicles showed fuel consumption improvements of 24.7%, achieved through signal priority implementation and optimized route scheduling.

Air quality monitoring data from roadside stations demonstrated measurable improvements in local air pollution levels corresponding to traffic optimization implementation. Nitrogen oxide concentrations decreased by an average of 16.8% at monitoring locations within optimized corridors, while particulate matter levels showed reductions of 14.3%. Carbon monoxide concentrations, which are directly related to vehicle emissions and traffic congestion, decreased by 18.7% during peak traffic periods.

4.2 Traffic Flow Efficiency and System Performance Analysis

The evaluation of traffic flow efficiency represents a critical dimension of system performance, as emission reduction strategies must maintain or improve transportation system effectiveness

ISSN: 3079-6679

to ensure user acceptance and overall system sustainability. Our analysis revealed that the ML framework achieved substantial improvements in traffic flow metrics while simultaneously reducing environmental impact, demonstrating that emission optimization and mobility enhancement are complementary rather than competing objectives when implemented through intelligent traffic management strategies.

Overall travel time reductions averaged 26.7% across all study corridors compared to baseline traffic management systems, with the system maintaining high prediction accuracy of 92.8% for 30-minute forecasts and rapid response times averaging 4.2 minutes to changing traffic conditions. The most significant travel time benefits were observed on arterial corridors with high intersection density where coordinated signal timing and adaptive routing provided substantial improvements in traffic flow progression.

Queue length analysis at signalized intersections demonstrated substantial improvements in traffic flow smoothness and intersection efficiency. Average maximum queue lengths decreased by 34.2% during peak periods, with corresponding reductions in queue spillback incidents that cause gridlock and secondary congestion effects. The system achieved these improvements through real-time queue detection, adaptive phase timing, and dynamic cycle optimization implemented across the 2,847 monitored intersections.

System responsiveness analysis examined the framework's ability to adapt to changing traffic conditions and implement optimization adjustments in real-time. Average response times to significant traffic changes averaged 4.2 minutes from detection to implementation of optimization adjustments, enabled by the hierarchical RL control system including local agents for intersection control, regional agents for corridor coordination, and master agents for network supervision.

Travel time reliability, measured as the improvement in journey time predictability, showed enhancements of 31.8% across all study routes compared to conventional traffic management approaches. The reliability improvements provide significant economic benefits for businesses and commuters who can better plan activities and reduce schedule buffers required to account for traffic unpredictability.

User satisfaction surveys conducted among regular commuters in optimized corridors revealed high levels of acceptance and perceived benefit from the ML-based traffic management system. Overall satisfaction scores averaged 4.3 out of 5.0, representing a substantial improvement over conventional traffic management systems that typically achieve satisfaction scores of 3.1 out of 5.0. Users particularly appreciated reduced travel times, more predictable journey durations, and improved traffic flow smoothness with less stressful driving experiences due to decreased stop-and-go traffic conditions.

The scalability analysis examined system performance characteristics as the optimization network expanded to full metropolitan area coverage encompassing 2,847 intersections and 156,000 vehicles. The framework maintained optimization effectiveness across the full network scale, with emission reduction benefits remaining consistent at approximately 19.4% regardless of network size, while computational requirements scaled efficiently with the hierarchical control architecture.

ISSN: 3079-6679

5. Conclusion

This research has successfully demonstrated the substantial potential of machine learning approaches for minimizing carbon emissions through optimized road traffic flow and dynamic routing strategies. Through comprehensive empirical evaluation encompassing 2,847 intersections and 156,000 vehicles across three metropolitan areas over a 24-month period, our findings establish clear evidence that intelligent traffic optimization can achieve significant environmental benefits while simultaneously improving transportation system performance and user experience.

The magnitude of environmental improvements achieved through our ML framework, including average carbon emission reductions of 19.4%, fuel consumption decreases of 31.2% per vehicle-kilometer, and air quality improvements averaging 16.8% for nitrogen oxide, 14.3% for particulate matter, and 18.7% for carbon monoxide, represents substantial progress toward sustainable urban transportation and climate change mitigation goals. These emission reductions were accomplished while achieving remarkable improvements in traffic flow efficiency, with average travel time reductions of 26.7%, congestion prediction accuracies of 92.8% for 30-minute forecasts, and response times of 4.2 minutes for system adaptation.

The adaptive capabilities of our framework position it as a highly effective solution for next-generation intelligent transportation systems that must balance multiple competing objectives while responding dynamically to changing traffic conditions. The demonstrated ability to maintain consistent performance across diverse traffic scenarios including peak hours (23.7% emission reduction), off-peak periods (16.2% reduction), and special events (18.9% reduction), combined with seasonal adaptability showing summer performance of 21.3%, winter performance of 17.8%, and transition period performance of 19.1%, suggests that ML-based traffic optimization can be successfully deployed across a wide range of urban contexts and operational environments.

The integration of emission optimization with traffic flow enhancement addresses a critical challenge in sustainable transportation by demonstrating that environmental and mobility objectives can be achieved simultaneously through intelligent system design. The substantial improvements in travel time reliability of 31.8%, user satisfaction scores of 4.3 out of 5.0 compared to 3.1 out of 5.0 for conventional systems, and queue length reductions of 34.2% indicate that emission reduction strategies can enhance rather than compromise transportation system effectiveness when implemented through sophisticated ML approaches.

The scalability characteristics of our framework, demonstrated through successful deployment across networks encompassing 2,847 intersections while maintaining consistent optimization performance through hierarchical RL control with local agents, regional agents, and master agents, establish the viability of ML-based traffic management for large-scale metropolitan implementations. The robust performance under diverse operational conditions and efficient computational scaling provide confidence that these approaches can contribute meaningfully to urban sustainability objectives at the scale required for significant environmental impact.

This research establishes machine learning as a powerful and practical approach for sustainable traffic management, providing both theoretical foundations and empirical validation for real-world deployment. The substantial environmental benefits including 19.4% carbon emission reduction, traffic flow improvements including 26.7% travel time reduction,

ISSN: 3079-6679

air quality enhancements across multiple pollutants, and system scalability demonstrated through this work contribute meaningfully to the development of sustainable urban transportation systems and provide practical guidance for cities seeking to reduce transportation-related carbon emissions while maintaining or improving mobility services for urban residents.

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