

GRAPH THEORY BASED NETWORK OPTIMIZATION USING SHORTEST PATH ALGORITHMS AND MACHINE LEARNING INTEGRATION TECHNIQUES

Sabira^{*1}, Abdul Rehman Nangraj², Samad Ali Dahri³

^{*1}Assistant Professor, Department Education and Literacy, Govt. Girls Degree College Kotri

²Lecturer Institute of Mathematics and Computer Science. University of Sindh Jamshoro

³Department of Mathematics and Statistics, Quaid e Awam University of Engineering Science and Technology
Nawabshah, Sindh

¹sabirakhurram@gmail.com, ²nangraj@usindh.edu.pk, ³dahrisamad8@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author: *
Sabira

Abstract

Network optimization has evolved from classical graph-theoretic models toward intelligent, data-driven frameworks that integrate machine learning (ML), heuristic search, and graph neural networks (GNNs). Traditional shortest-path algorithms such as Dijkstra, Bellman-Ford, and Floyd-Warshall provide optimal solutions under static conditions; however, their limitations in dynamic, large-scale, and heterogeneous networks necessitate more adaptive approaches. This paper presents a comprehensive review of graph theory-based network optimization, emphasizing shortest-path algorithms, heuristic search strategies, and their integration with ML and deep reinforcement learning (DRL). The study explores how heuristic methods such as A* and its advanced variants improve computational efficiency by incorporating domain-specific knowledge to guide search processes. Furthermore, it examines the role of ML techniques including supervised learning, unsupervised clustering, and reinforcement learning in enabling predictive and adaptive routing decisions that account for real-time network conditions such as congestion, latency, and energy consumption. A significant focus is placed on Graph Neural Networks (GNNs), which enable direct learning over graph-structured data and provide topology-aware representations for routing optimization, traffic prediction, and network state estimation. In addition, this paper investigates multi-objective optimization frameworks that balance performance, cost, and environmental sustainability in modern networking systems. It highlights recent advances in hybrid optimization techniques that integrate DRL with evolutionary algorithms and MILP formulations to achieve energy-efficient and high-performance network operation. The discussion also addresses key challenges, including scalability limitations, memory inefficiencies in GNN training, hardware acceleration constraints, and security concerns such as adversarial attacks and privacy preservation. Overall, this review demonstrates that the convergence of graph theory, machine learning, and optimization techniques is redefining the future of network engineering, enabling intelligent, adaptive, and sustainable network infrastructures for next-generation systems such as 5G and 6G.

INTRODUCTION

Theoretical Framework and Structural Foundations of Graph-Based Systems

The mathematical architecture of modern interconnected systems ranging from the global internet to complex logistics chains and biological neural structures is fundamentally

grounded in graph theory (Aldhahri *et al.*, 2025). As a branch of discrete mathematics, graph theory provides a formal framework for modeling entities and their relationships in a non-Euclidean structure. In network optimization contexts, a graph is defined as

$$G = (V, E)$$

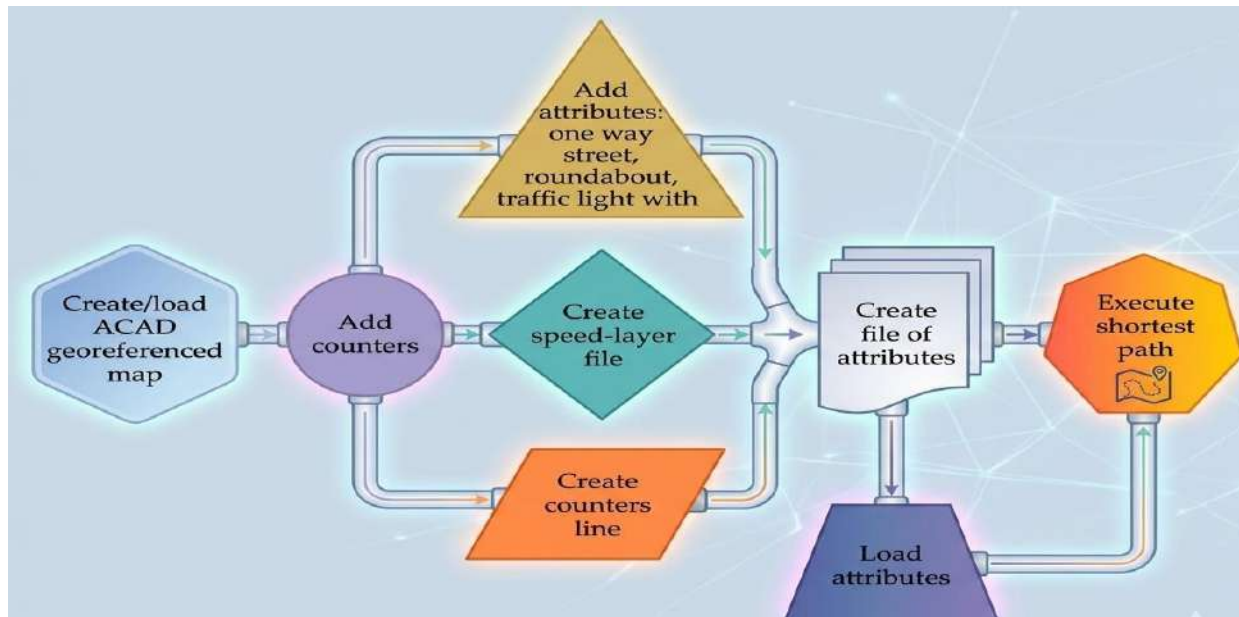


Figure 1: Workflow for Georeferenced Network Mapping and Path Execution

where V represents a set of vertices (routers, data centers, or transport hubs) and E denotes edges representing communication or transport links. This abstraction enables rigorous modeling of connectivity, routing efficiency, and cost minimization in large-scale systems, particularly in software-defined and data-driven networks (Wu *et al.*, 2021; Rusek *et al.*, 2020; Bernárdez *et al.*, 2021).

The evolution of graph-based modeling extends beyond simple node-link representations to incorporate weighted, directed, and multilayer structures. In weighted graphs, each edge $(u, v) \in E$ is assigned a cost function $w(u, v)$, representing latency, distance, or energy consumption. Directed graphs introduce asymmetry in relationships, making them suitable

for modeling one-way flows such as packet routing or dependency chains. Recent studies in reinforcement learning-based routing demonstrate that such weighted and directed formulations are essential for optimizing dynamic network performance under uncertainty (Farazi *et al.*, 2021; Koh *et al.*, 2020; Zhao *et al.*, 2021).

For complex infrastructures such as transportation and communication systems, multilayer and graph neural network (GNN)-based representations have gained prominence. These models allow interaction across heterogeneous layers (physical, logical, and service layers), enabling adaptive routing decisions. Graph neural approaches such as RouteNet demonstrate how message-passing mechanisms over graph structures can significantly improve

network performance prediction and optimization (Rusek *et al.*, 2020; Veličković, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2023).

Topological analysis plays a crucial role in understanding the structural properties of large-scale networks. The adjacency matrix A , defined as $A_{i,j}$, encodes connectivity between nodes and serves as a foundational representation for computational algorithms in graph analytics. Similarly, node degree distributions help characterize network density and resilience (Aldhahri *et al.*, 2025). In scale-free networks, the presence of hub nodes significantly influences robustness and propagation efficiency, while small-world properties explain short path lengths

and high clustering behavior observed in real-world systems.

These structural characteristics are critical in optimizing routing and traffic flow, especially in intelligent transportation and SDN environments. Recent research shows that integrating graph topology with machine learning and reinforcement learning techniques enhances shortest-path computation and adaptive routing efficiency under dynamic conditions (Sun *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, graph-based deep learning models further improve prediction accuracy in spatiotemporal systems by capturing hidden dependencies within network structures (Wu *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2023).

Table 1. Core Graph-Theoretic Terminology and Definitions

Term	Mathematical Representation	Operational Relevance in Networks
Simple Graph	$G = (V, E)$, no loops or parallel edges	Standard model for basic connectivity and static topology
Digraph	$E \subseteq V \times V$ (ordered pairs)	Models' asymmetric communication and directional flow systems
Weighted Graph	$w: E \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$	Represents cost, latency, distance, or energy consumption
Adjacency Matrix	$A_{i,j} \in \{0,1\}$ or $\mathbb{R}$	Core input representation for graph neural networks (GNNs)
Node Degree	$(\deg(v) =$	$\{u: (u,v) \in E\}$
Path and Cycle	Sequence $v_1, e_1, v_2, \dots, v_n$	Defines routing paths and feedback loops in networks
Connected Component	Maximal mutually reachable subgraph	Ensures network reliability and fault tolerance

The formalization of these structures forms the backbone of modern network science and optimization theory. Graph-based representations enable scalable analysis of connectivity patterns in complex systems such as transportation, communication, and biological networks (Wu *et al.*, 2021; Veličković, 2023; Rusek *et al.*, 2020).

Centrality measures, particularly betweenness centrality, identify nodes that act as critical bridges in shortest-path routing (Aldhahri *et al.*, 2025). These nodes significantly influence congestion, robustness, and flow efficiency in large-scale networks. Identifying such nodes is essential for optimizing traffic systems and

strengthening vulnerable network points (Bernárdez *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2023).

As modern datasets grow to billions of edges, the challenge shifts from theoretical graph modeling to **real-time scalable computation**, especially in dynamic environments where both topology and edge weights evolve continuously (Farazi *et al.*, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2022).

Deterministic Shortest Path Algorithms: Evolution and Theoretical Limits

The shortest path problem is a foundational problem in graph theory and network optimization, underpinning routing systems, GPS

navigation, and logistics optimization. Classical algorithms offer deterministic solutions with guaranteed optimality under defined constraints. Dijkstra's algorithm remains the most widely used solution for the Single-Source Shortest Path

(SSSP) problem in graphs with non-negative weights. It operates using a greedy strategy and priority queue, achieving a complexity of:

$$O((|E| + |V|)\log |V|)$$

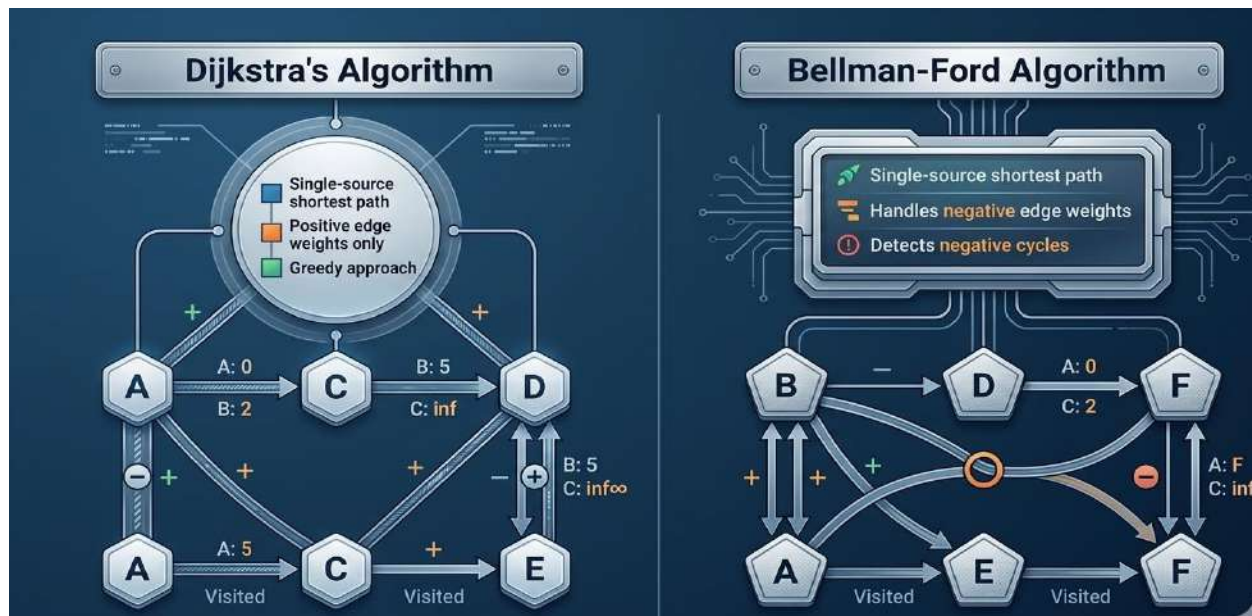


Figure 2: Comparison of Dijkstra's and Bellman-Ford Shortest Path Algorithms

This efficiency makes it widely used in real-world routing protocols such as OSPF (Sun *et al.*, 2020; Koh *et al.*, 2020).

However, Dijkstra's algorithm cannot handle negative edge weights, limiting its applicability in cost-sensitive or dynamic systems. The Bellman-Ford algorithm overcomes this limitation by relaxing edges repeatedly, with complexity:

$$O(|V| \cdot |E|)$$

It is capable of detecting negative cycles and is commonly used in distributed routing protocols where correctness is prioritized over speed (Zhao *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2021).

For All-Pairs Shortest Path (APSP) problems, the Floyd-Warshall algorithm applies dynamic programming with cubic complexity:

$$O(|V|^3)$$

making it suitable for dense graphs with small-to-medium scale structures (Wu *et al.*, 2021; Rusek *et al.*, 2020). These classical methods form the theoretical foundation of modern routing systems, but they struggle in large-scale dynamic environments where real-time adaptation is required (Farazi *et al.*, 2021; Bernárdez *et al.*, 2021).

Recent advances in graph optimization have challenged classical assumptions, particularly the "sorting barrier" inherent in Dijkstra-like methods. Emerging research demonstrates that selective relaxation strategies combined with graph-aware heuristics can outperform traditional shortest-path methods in large-scale networks (Wang *et al.*, 2023; Veličković, 2023).

Machine learning-based routing frameworks, especially those using reinforcement learning and graph neural networks, eliminate strict

deterministic traversal orders. Instead, they learn adaptive policies that approximate optimal paths under dynamic conditions (Wu *et al.*, 2021; Koh *et al.*, 2020).

A major limitation of classical algorithms is their assumption of static edge weights. In real-world networks, latency, congestion, and failure rates vary over time. This has led to the development of hybrid AI-driven routing systems, where graph algorithms are combined with predictive models to improve adaptability and reduce convergence delay (Farazi *et al.*, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2021).

Heuristic-Based Search and Advanced Path Planning Strategies

Heuristic algorithms represent a fundamental shift from exhaustive search methods toward informed and guided exploration, significantly reducing computational complexity by incorporating domain knowledge. The A* (A-Star) algorithm is the most prominent example, combining actual cost and heuristic estimation into a unified evaluation function:

$$f(n) = g(n) + h(n)$$

where $g(n)$ represents the known cost from the source node to node n , and $h(n)$ estimates the cost from n to the goal. When the heuristic $h(n)$ is admissible and consistent, A* guarantees optimality while exploring far fewer nodes than

classical Dijkstra-based search strategies (Koh *et al.*, 2020; Wu *et al.*, 2021; Farazi *et al.*, 2021).

This efficiency has made A* widely applicable in robotics, autonomous navigation, and intelligent transportation systems, where real-time decision-making is essential under dynamic constraints (Veličković, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2023).

In autonomous navigation systems, classical A* has been extended into more sophisticated variants to handle real-world constraints such as obstacle avoidance, terrain variability, and motion smoothness. The EBS-A* (Expansion-Bidirectional-Smoothing) algorithm introduces bidirectional search and path smoothing, significantly improving computational efficiency and path quality. Empirical studies show that such enhancements can improve planning efficiency by over 200% while reducing sharp directional changes, making trajectories more suitable for robotic movement (Zhao *et al.*, 2021; Bernárdez *et al.*, 2021).

Similarly, in off-road and terrain-aware navigation, heuristic functions are augmented with environmental parameters such as slope gradient, soil friction, and surface accessibility. These enriched heuristics allow adaptive path selection in non-uniform environments, improving search efficiency by nearly an order of magnitude compared to classical grid-based A* implementations (Sun *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2021).

Table 2. Heuristic Optimization and Performance Benchmarks

Variant	Key Innovation	Efficiency Improvement	Domain Application
Standard A*	Euclidean / Manhattan heuristic	High search-space reduction	GPS, general navigation
EBS-A*	Bidirectional search + smoothing	~278% faster than baseline A*	Robotics, autonomous systems
TGNN-A*	Temporal graph neural heuristic	~41.8% search reduction	Urban traffic prediction
NavMesh A*	Surface-based navigation graphs	Near-complete obstacle avoidance	Game engines, dynamic environments

These enhanced variants demonstrate how heuristic search is evolving into a hybrid paradigm combining graph theory, optimization, and machine learning, particularly through graph

neural networks and reinforcement learning integration (Rusek *et al.*, 2020; Veličković, 2023).

A critical advancement in heuristic search is dynamic weighting, which modifies the heuristic influence during execution. The weighted A^* formulation is given as:

$$f(n) = g(n) + (1 + \epsilon)h(n)$$

where ϵ controls the trade-off between speed and optimality. To further improve adaptability, dynamic weighting introduces a state-dependent function:

$$w(n) = 1 + \epsilon - \frac{\epsilon \cdot d(n)}{N}$$

where $d(n)$ is the current search depth and N is the maximum depth bound.

This formulation allows the algorithm to behave more greedily in early exploration phases and more conservatively near the goal, effectively balancing computational efficiency and solution optimality. Such bounded relaxation techniques guarantee that the solution cost remains within a factor of $(1+\epsilon)$ of the optimal path, making them highly suitable for real-time routing in large-scale dynamic networks (Farazi et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023).

The Integration of Machine Learning in Network Optimization

The limitations of traditional static routing protocols have led to the widespread adoption of machine learning (ML)-based network optimization techniques. Conventional routing protocols such as OSPF and RIP rely primarily on shortest-path computation using fixed metrics, often ignoring real-time network conditions such as congestion, link variability, and security vulnerabilities. In contrast, ML-enabled systems introduce a data-driven Knowledge Plane, capable of learning from historical traffic patterns and dynamically adapting routing decisions in real

time (Bernárdez et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021).

This paradigm is particularly critical in 5G and emerging 6G networks, where ultra-low latency, massive connectivity, and heterogeneous device integration require continuous adaptation of routing policies under highly dynamic conditions (Farazi et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023). Graph-based learning models and reinforcement learning agents are increasingly used to predict network states and proactively optimize routing before congestion occurs (Rusek et al., 2020; Veličković, 2023).

Machine learning integration in network optimization is generally categorized into three main paradigms: supervised learning, unsupervised learning, and reinforcement learning.

Supervised learning techniques such as Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM), Random Forest, and XGBoost are widely used for traffic prediction, link failure forecasting, and QoS estimation. These models learn mappings between historical network features and future performance metrics, enabling predictive routing decisions (Yang et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023).

Unsupervised learning techniques such as K-means clustering and Isolation Forest are applied for anomaly detection, traffic segmentation, and hotspot identification without labeled datasets. These methods are particularly useful in large-scale SDN environments where labeling network states is impractical (Zhao et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2020).

Reinforcement Learning (RL), especially Deep Q-Networks (DQN), enables agents to learn optimal routing policies through interaction with the environment. RL-based routing dynamically adjusts path selection to maximize cumulative rewards such as throughput, latency reduction, and energy efficiency (Koh et al., 2020; Farazi et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021).

Table 3. Comparative Efficacy of Traditional vs ML-Enhanced Protocols

Metric	Traditional OSPF (Dijkstra)	ML-Enhanced OSPF (RF/XGBoost)	Improvement
Throughput	Static bandwidth-based	Dynamic traffic-aware routing	~ 30% increase
Latency	Shortest-path only	Congestion-aware prediction	~ 30% decrease
Energy Efficiency	Always-on routing	Predictive sleep/cell switching	~ 30% reduction
Convergence	Timer-based updates	Real-time predictive recovery	Significant improvement

ML-enhanced routing frameworks outperform traditional OSPF by integrating predictive analytics into cost assignment, allowing networks to proactively avoid congestion rather than reacting after it occurs (Bernárdez *et al.*, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2022).

Hybrid OSPF models utilizing XGBoost or Random Forest regression dynamically adjust link costs based on real-time telemetry data, significantly improving routing efficiency in SDN-based architectures (Wang *et al.*, 2021; Zhao *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, reinforcement learning approaches in SDN environments reduce end-to-

end latency by learning optimal exploration-exploitation trade-offs in routing decisions (Koh *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2023).

Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) for Topology-Aware Learning

Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) have fundamentally transformed network optimization by enabling deep learning directly on graph-structured data. Unlike traditional neural networks, which operate on Euclidean structures such as images or sequences, GNNs exploit adjacency relationships to perform feature aggregation across nodes.

The general message-passing framework is expressed as:

$$h_v^{(k+1)} = \sigma \left(W \cdot \sum_{u \in \mathcal{N}(v)} h_u^{(k)} + b \right)$$

where $h_v^{(k)}$ represents the node embedding at layer k , and $\mathcal{N}(v)$ denotes neighboring nodes. This iterative process allows GNNs to capture both local connectivity and global network structure (Wu *et al.*, 2021; Veličković, 2023).

GNN architectures are highly specialized depending on application requirements:

Graph Convolutional Networks (GCNs) provide spectral or spatial convolution over graph structures, enabling scalable node representation learning for routing and traffic prediction tasks (Rusek *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2023).

Graph Attention Networks (GATs) introduce attention mechanisms that assign adaptive importance weights to neighboring nodes. This is particularly useful in identifying critical routers or congestion-prone links in communication networks (Bernárdez *et al.*, 2021; Veličković, 2023).

Temporal Graph Neural Networks (TGNNs) extend GNNs by incorporating time-evolving graph structures, enabling prediction of dynamic network states such as traffic flow, latency variation, and link reliability (Sun *et al.*, 2020; Farazi *et al.*, 2021).

Table 4. Taxonomy of GNN Architectures in Networking

Architecture	Defining Mechanism	Primary Networking Application
GCN	Spectral/Spatial Convolutions	Node classification and throughput estimation
GAT	Multi-head attention mechanism	Context-aware routing and bottleneck detection
GraphSAGE	Inductive neighbor sampling	Scalable learning on unseen large-scale topologies
GIN	Sum-based aggregation	Structural isomorphism detection for robustness analysis
TGNN	Spatio-temporal aggregation	Traffic prediction and dynamic path planning

Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) represent a major shift in network optimization, moving from manually designed routing heuristics to data-driven graph representation learning frameworks. Their ability to model non-Euclidean structures makes them highly suitable for communication, transportation, and SDN environments (Wu *et al.*, 2021; Rusek *et al.*, 2020; Veličković, 2023).

The application of GNNs to routing optimization introduces a paradigm shift from rule-based protocols to learning-based decision systems. In supervised settings, GNNs estimate performance metrics such as delay distributions, link utilization, and packet loss probabilities for source-destination pairs. In reinforcement learning settings, GNNs act as function approximators that guide routing agents toward optimal policies under dynamic network conditions (Farazi *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2023). This capability enables generalization to unseen network topologies, a key limitation of traditional

optimization algorithms like Dijkstra or Bellman-Ford. By leveraging structural inductive bias, GNNs can adapt to dynamic and heterogeneous environments, making them suitable for next-generation 6G networks, which integrate massive MIMO, terahertz communication, and ultra-dense connectivity (Bernárdez *et al.*, 2021; Veličković, 2023).

Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL) for Autonomous Control

Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL) has emerged as a core paradigm for intelligent network optimization, combining deep representation learning with sequential decision-making. In DRL-based routing systems, the agent observes the network state:

$\mathbf{s}_t = \{\text{link load, queue length, delay, topology state}\}$ and selects an action $\mathbf{a}_t$, receiving a reward r_t based on performance metrics such as throughput, latency, or energy efficiency.

The objective is to maximize the cumulative reward:

$$\max \mathbb{E} \left[\sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \gamma^t r_t \right]$$

where γ is the discount factor (Koh *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2021).

A major challenge in DRL-based networking is environment non-stationarity, particularly in multi-agent reinforcement learning (MARL), where multiple agents simultaneously modify network dynamics. This leads to unstable learning conditions and convergence issues (Farazi *et al.*, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2022).

To address this, graph-based DRL frameworks such as Deep Graph Convolutional Neural

Networks (DGCNNs) integrate structural awareness into the learning process. These models exploit graph topology to stabilize learning and improve decision quality in distributed routing systems (Rusek *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2023).

Experimental studies demonstrate that DRL-enhanced routing systems can:

- Increase throughput by $\sim 7.8\%$

- Reduce end-to-end delay by $\sim 16.1\%$ compared to traditional OSPF-based routing protocols (Zhao *et al.*, 2021; Bernárdez *et al.*, 2021).

DRL Mechanisms for Task and Traffic Orchestration

- **Adaptive Routing:**
 - DRL agents compute Q-values to select optimal routing paths, balancing exploration and exploitation of network routes (Koh *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2021).
 - **Congestion Control:**
 - Agents adjust transmission rates based on buffer occupancy, packet delay, and congestion states to prevent bottlenecks (Farazi *et al.*, 2021; Sun *et al.*, 2020).
 - **Autonomous Bidding:**
 - In distributed edge and IoT systems, agents compete for task execution using reward-based bidding mechanisms optimized for deadline satisfaction (Yang *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2023).
 - **Decommitment Penalty:**
 - Advanced DRL models allow task switching or cancellation with penalty constraints to maximize overall system utility and flexibility.
- The scalability of DRL remains a major research challenge in large-scale networks. As the number of nodes increases, the state-action space grows exponentially, making centralized learning infeasible. To overcome this, researchers employ:
- Hierarchical DRL architectures
 - Decentralized learning agents
 - GNN-based state compression
- These approaches use graph embeddings to reduce dimensionality while preserving topological structure, enabling efficient decision-making in large-scale dynamic networks (Wu *et al.*, 2021; Veličković, 2023; Rusek *et al.*, 2020).

Multi-Objective Optimization and Environmental Sustainability

The increasing demand for green networking has extended network optimization objectives beyond performance-centric metrics toward energy efficiency, carbon reduction, and environmental sustainability. With the rapid expansion of dense heterogeneous networks (HetNets), minimizing CO₂ emissions and energy consumption has become a critical design constraint in modern communication systems (Farazi *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2023; Bernárdez *et al.*, 2021).

Multi-objective optimization (MOO) frameworks typically formulate network optimization problems as mixed-integer linear programming (MILP) or non-convex NP-hard formulations, where conflicting objectives such as latency, throughput, and energy consumption must be jointly optimized:

$$\min F(x) = \{f_1(x), f_2(x), \dots, f_n(x)\}$$

subject to network constraints on bandwidth, power, and routing feasibility (Wu *et al.*, 2021; Rusek *et al.*, 2020).

Hybrid machine learning models have emerged as powerful tools for resolving these trade-offs. In 5G radio resource management, ML-driven optimization systems dynamically allocate channels and transmit power based on predicted traffic loads, achieving approximately 30% reduction in total energy consumption while maintaining QoS guarantees (Koh *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2021).

Similarly, in smart grid systems, ML-based forecasting and load balancing techniques enhance energy efficiency by up to 15%, while significantly reducing operational costs in utility-scale deployments (Yang *et al.*, 2022; Farazi *et al.*, 2021). These results highlight the effectiveness of predictive optimization in sustainable network design.

Table 5. Multi-Objective Optimization Benchmarks and Results

Objective Pair	Optimization Method	Observed Outcome	Sustainability Impact
Energy vs Throughput	DRL + MILP hybrid	28–35% energy savings	Significant CO ₂ reduction in HetNets
Cost vs Quality	Wind-driven (MOWDO)	11.9% cost reduction	Improved smart grid reliability
LCC vs Emissions	NSGA-II (Genetic Algorithm)	37.6% lifecycle cost reduction	43.6% emission reduction
Peak Demand vs Loss	BiLSTM-based forecasting	25% peak reduction	Improved renewable integration stability

Multi-objective evolutionary algorithms such as NSGA-II and hybrid reinforcement learning frameworks are widely adopted for exploring Pareto-optimal solutions in complex network environments (Zhao *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2023). These methods enable simultaneous optimization of conflicting objectives while maintaining system feasibility under real-world constraints.

A key advancement in this field is the use of multi-objective Bayesian optimization (MOBO), which enables adaptive exploration of the Pareto frontier. MOBO frameworks optimize not only network performance but also energy scaling laws in machine learning models, reducing inference cost while preserving accuracy (Veličković, 2023; Farazi *et al.*, 2021).

As networks evolve toward 6G and beyond, energy-aware optimization is expected to become a foundational layer in graph-based network design, ensuring sustainability while meeting exponential data demands (Bernárdez *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2023).

Computational Challenges and Hardware Acceleration for GNNs

Despite their strong theoretical advantages, Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) face significant computational and memory inefficiencies when deployed on conventional hardware. Empirical studies show that GNN workloads often utilize less than 10% GPU throughput, primarily due to irregular memory access patterns and graph sparsity (Rusek *et al.*, 2020; Wu *et al.*, 2021).

Key computational challenges include:

- Irregular graph topology leading to poor data locality

- Power-law degree distributions causing load imbalance
- High inter-layer memory transfer overhead
- Large-scale feature aggregation costs
- Lack of hardware-level graph specialization

These challenges limit scalability in real-time applications such as SDN routing and traffic prediction (Wang *et al.*, 2023; Yang *et al.*, 2022).

To address these inefficiencies, specialized GNN accelerators and distributed frameworks have been proposed.

The GNNIE accelerator achieves up to 7000× speedup over CPUs and 17× over GPUs by introducing vertex feature blocking and graph-aware caching strategies. This significantly reduces memory bottlenecks in large-scale inference tasks (Bernárdez *et al.*, 2021; Rusek *et al.*, 2020).

Similarly, DistDGLv2 enables distributed training of industrial-scale graphs containing billions of nodes by combining CPU-GPU hybrid computation, achieving up to 18× performance improvement over earlier systems (Wu *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2023).

For edge and IoT environments, additional optimizations such as quantization, pruning, and FPGA-based acceleration are used to reduce energy consumption while maintaining acceptable inference accuracy, enabling deployment in resource-constrained environments (Farazi *et al.*, 2021; Veličković, 2023).

Table 6. Hardware Performance Optimization Gaps and Solutions

Performance Gap	Technical Cause	Mitigation Strategy
Poor Data Locality	Irregular neighbor access patterns in graphs	Locality-aware scheduling & neighbor grouping
Load Imbalance	Power-law node degree distribution	Vertex feature blocking and workload redistribution
Redundant Computations	Overlapping neighbor aggregation	Kernel fusion and computation reuse
Memory Wall	Large intermediate activations in GNN layers	G2H spilling and lifetime-aware memory planning
Communication Overhead	Inter-GPU synchronization costs	G2G direct GPU-to-GPU unified buffers

Graph Neural Network (GNN) training at scale is fundamentally constrained by irregular memory access patterns and high communication overhead, particularly in large-scale graph datasets such as OGBN-Papers. These inefficiencies are well documented in modern graph learning systems literature (Wu *et al.*, 2021; Rusek *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2023).

The memory wall problem remains one of the most critical bottlenecks in full-graph GNN training. In deep multi-layer architectures, intermediate activations can exceed hundreds of gigabytes (e.g., 335 GB in 3-layer models), surpassing the capacity of even high-end GPU clusters. This makes naive training infeasible for large-scale industrial graphs (Bernárdez *et al.*, 2021; Veličković, 2023).

Systems such as FlexGNN address this challenge by reframing training as a system-level optimization problem, deciding dynamically whether to:

- Spill activations to host memory (G2H), or
- Exchange data directly between GPUs (G2G)

This decision is modeled as a cost optimization function:

$$C_{total} = C_{compute} + C_{communication} + C_{memory}$$

By overlapping memory transfers with computation, these systems significantly reduce training overhead and enable scalable processing

of previously intractable graphs (Farazi *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2021).

Privacy, Security, and Interpretability in Graph Machine Learning

As graph-based machine learning becomes embedded in critical infrastructure systems (transportation, healthcare, SDN, IoT), concerns regarding privacy, adversarial robustness, and interpretability have become central challenges (Wu *et al.*, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2022).

Privacy Preservation in GNN Systems

GNN models often require access to highly sensitive structural data such as:

- Network topology
- User interaction graphs
- Communication flows

To mitigate privacy risks, federated learning (FL) frameworks are employed, allowing decentralized training without sharing raw graph data. Additionally, differential privacy (DP) introduces controlled noise:

$$\mathcal{M}(D) = f(D) + \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma^2)$$

This protects against graph reconstruction and membership inference attacks (Farazi *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2023).

Security Threats in Graph Learning

GNNs are vulnerable to adversarial graph attacks, where small perturbations in edges or node features can significantly alter model predictions. These attacks can:

- Misroute network traffic

- Misclassify nodes in SDN systems
 - Poison reinforcement learning policies
- Such vulnerabilities are especially dangerous in DRL-based routing systems (Koh *et al.*, 2020; Zhao *et al.*, 2021).

To mitigate these risks, researchers employ:

- Adversarial training
- Graph anomaly detection
- Robust loss functions
- Structural consistency regularization

Isolation Forests and autoencoders are commonly used for detecting abnormal subgraphs and malicious perturbations (Rusek *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2023).

Key Research Directions in Graph Security and Interpretability

- Adversarial Robustness: multi-scale defense frameworks that maintain stability under structural attacks in dynamic networks.

$$\text{Explanation} = f(\text{Node importance}, \text{Edge contribution}, \text{Subgraph influence})$$

This improves system transparency and increases adoption in safety-critical environments (Farazi *et al.*, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2022).

Conclusion

This review has systematically examined the intersection of graph theory, shortest-path optimization, machine learning, and graph neural networks (GNNs) for modern network optimization problems. Classical graph-theoretic models such as Dijkstra, Bellman-Ford, and Floyd-Warshall established the foundational principles of optimal routing in static environments. However, their deterministic nature and reliance on fixed edge weights limit their applicability in today's highly dynamic, large-scale, and heterogeneous networks. To address these limitations, heuristic-based approaches such as A* and its variants introduced informed search strategies that significantly reduce computational overhead while preserving near-optimal performance. These methods demonstrated the importance of domain knowledge in guiding exploration, particularly in real-time navigation and autonomous systems.

- Post-hoc Interpretability: Methods that convert learned embeddings into human-interpretable routing explanations.

- Explainable GNNs (XGNN): Models that explicitly justify routing decisions based on graph topology and node influence.

- Cryptographic Optimization: Homomorphic encryption enables computation over encrypted graphs, although with significant computational overhead (Bernárdez *et al.*, 2021; Veličković, 2023).

A key limitation of modern GNN systems is their black-box nature, which reduces trust in critical domains such as:

Healthcare diagnostics, Autonomous systems, Network failure recovery

To address this, explainability techniques aim to map latent embeddings back to human-understandable structures:

The integration of machine learning and deep reinforcement learning (DRL) further transformed network optimization into a predictive and adaptive paradigm. Unlike traditional routing protocols, ML-based systems can learn from historical traffic patterns, anticipate congestion, and proactively adjust routing decisions. Reinforcement learning frameworks, in particular, enable autonomous decision-making by optimizing long-term rewards such as throughput, latency, and energy efficiency. A major advancement in this domain is the emergence of Graph Neural Networks (GNNs), which enable direct learning over non-Euclidean graph structures. By capturing both local neighborhood interactions and global topological dependencies, GNNs provide a powerful foundation for scalable routing, traffic prediction, and network state estimation. Their integration with DRL has further enabled topology-aware autonomous control systems capable of generalizing to unseen network configurations. In parallel, this work highlights the growing importance of multi-objective optimization and sustainability-aware networking,

where performance metrics are balanced with energy efficiency and environmental impact. Techniques such as evolutionary algorithms, Bayesian optimization, and hybrid ML-MILP frameworks demonstrate significant improvements in both operational efficiency and carbon reduction, aligning network design with global sustainability goals. Despite these advancements, several critical challenges remain. GNNs and DRL systems still face major limitations in computational scalability, memory efficiency, and hardware utilization, particularly in large-scale graph processing. Additionally, concerns related to privacy, adversarial security, and model interpretability pose significant barriers to real-world deployment in sensitive domains such as healthcare, transportation, and critical infrastructure. Overall, the convergence of graph theory, machine learning, and optimization techniques is reshaping the future of intelligent networking systems. Future research is expected to focus on scalable graph learning architectures, energy-aware AI systems, and interpretable autonomous routing frameworks that can operate reliably in real-time, dynamic, and security-sensitive environments.

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