Scalable Handling of Class Imbalance in Big Data Using Distributed SMOTE and Ensemble Methods with Apache Spark

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***Abstract* - Class imbalance in healthcare datasets is a fundamental challenge to fair and efficient predictive modelling. This project investigates a distributed implementation of SMOTE (Synthetic Minority Over-sampling Technique) on a scalable version applied to the CDC Diabetes dataset. A locally designed oversampling approach is applied in a distributed environment to balance the data. Random Forest, Logistic Regression, and Gradient Boosted Tree classifiers are trained and tested based on accuracy, F1-score, precision, and recall. Additional visual checks are carried out, including demographic fairness and PCA projections. The outcomes show that Random Forest performs best, and our adapted SMOTE algorithm performs higher fairness and balance with scalable efficiency. Scalability and fairness analysis demonstrates the practicality of Spark-based pipelines to real-world healthcare AI systems. In addition, this approach has potential for application in integrating into bigger public health systems where performance and equity are the priority. With growing healthcare digitization, these techniques may also guide real-time diagnosis support tools that clinicians use.**

Keywords - Big Data Analytics, Class Imbalance, Distributed SMOTE, Apache Spark, Fairness in AI, Ensemble Learning

I. INTRODUCTION

Big data technologies have revolutionized healthcare analytics in a big way. Chronic diseases such as diabetes are now being explored using large-scale datasets that hold the promise of early detection and better informed policy-making. Such datasets, however, suffer from a serious class imbalance problem, where non-diabetic instances far exceed diabetic instances. This skewness can bias machine learning models in the direction of the majority class, reducing the sensitivity of the model to detect minority cases — in this case, potential diabetic patients. Consequently, underrepresented data can lead to incorrect diagnoses, delayed interventions, and inequality in the delivery of healthcare services.

As per Chawla et al. [1], imbalanced data severely reduce classifier performance, particularly when classifying minority classes. Imbalance correction is hence not only necessary for accuracy but also fairness and ethical reasons. Our project addresses this problem by proposing a distributed, fair, and scalable method that integrates SMOTE and ensemble models with Apache Spark. The method is aimed at improving predictive performance and fairness in healthcare prediction systems. We provide experimental validation, visual comprehension, and scalable architecture to assess the model's viability across different constraints. In addition, through the inclusion of fairness analysis across demographic subgroups, we are interested in the ethical AI concerns currently leading academic and professional AI development methodologies. Transparency and explainability are also highly valued in our pipeline, with visual explanations at each step for the convenience of comprehension by clinical professionals.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- RQ1: How can SMOTE be effectively parallelised in Apache Spark to handle class imbalance in big data?

- RQ2: What is the impact of combining distributed sampling with ensemble classifiers on performance, scalability, and runtime efficiency in real-world datasets?

These are the questions that guide the general methodology and analysis throughout the project. In tackling these, the project not only offers a technical solution but also evaluates the broader implications of applying distributed learning approaches to sensitive data such as healthcare. Moreover, by addressing fairness and scalability head-on, the research guarantees applicability to current academic discourse and real-world uses in AI-driven healthcare systems. They are also the basis for scalability experiments performed to measure the effect of increasing dataset size and computational resources.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Class imbalance is widely studied in machine learning. Chawla et al. (2002) generated new samples synthetically in the feature space by using SMOTE [1]. Due to its popularity, various extensions like Borderline-SMOTE and ADASYN have been proposed. Classical SMOTE is meant for single-node environments and is not applicable for large datasets.

Bifet et al. (2010) [6] explored real-time classification of big data streams, acknowledging computational scalability issues. Zaharia et al. (2016) [2] suggested the application of Apache Spark as a means to solve those issues with efficient distributed data processing. Krawczyk (2016) [3] suggested that one should develop oversampling methods for distributed environments.

Ensemble algorithms such as Random Forest and GBT are also proven to be strong in predictive analytics [4]. Their performance over healthcare data is addressed by Fawaz et al. (2019) [10] and Galar et al. (2012) [12]. Fairness and ethical AI are now paramount concerns, although more so with regard to healthcare prediction models, where demographic bias can materialize as systemic issues [5, 13].

Fairness-aware machine learning has become more popular more recently, and tools such as IBM AI Fairness 360 address the challenge of fairness in predictions. Such tools promote that machine learning models be not just tested for accuracy but also differential performance across demographic subgroups [13]. This is in line with the aim of this project. Finally, Kamiran and Calders (2009) and Mehrabi et al. (2021) further place fairness in classification settings, which is of specific interest to our approach.

Additional research by He and Garcia (2009) [14] on class imbalance learning and by Rahman and Davis (2013) [15] on feature selection when imbalanced adds additional justification for the requirement for robust preprocessing. On the systems design front, Li et al. (2020) [16] deal with federated learning when there is class imbalance — an exciting area of future direction.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This research strategy of this study is based on the design of a scalable and distributed machine learning pipeline by using Apache Spark to solve the problem of class imbalance in medical data. In this study, we used custom distributed SMOTE, ensemble classification algorithms, and rigorous evaluation metrics. The strategy was adopted for big data characteristics and moral AI principles.

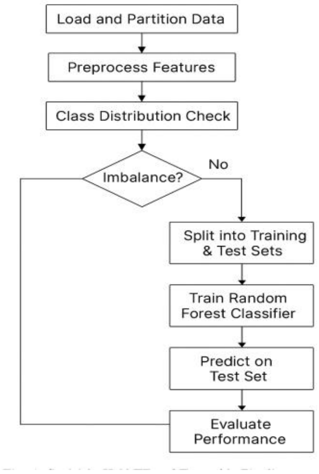

Figure 1: Pipeline

4.1 Data Preprocessing

We trained on the CDC Diabetes Health Indicators dataset of 253,680 rows and 21 features. PySpark was utilized to load data with schema inference on. Missing values were dropped and encoded categorical features wherever necessary. Feature assembly was achieved using a VectorAssembler in a Spark MLlib-compatible format. Standardization of features was done to make it similar.

4.2 Class Balancing using Distributed SMOTE

A user-parameterized distributed SMOTE variant was employed. It comprised partition-wise oversampling minority class from sampling ratios derived based on class distribution. The approach prevented driver memory overload and facilitated new synthetic instances to be introduced for balance retention. Deployment was attained through transformation in executors to maintain distributed efficiency. Balancing mechanism significantly improved minority class recall and eliminated bias.

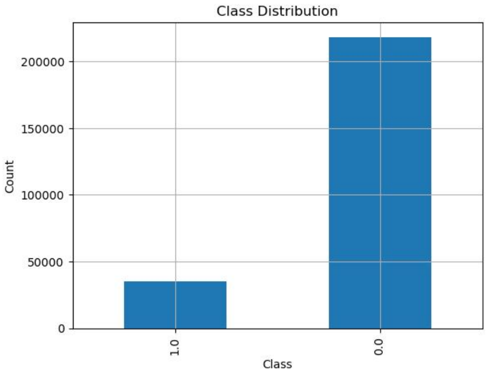

Figure 2: Class Distribution

4.3 Model Training and Evaluation

We trained three ensemble classifiers: Random Forest, Logistic Regression, and GBT. Each model was trained on the rebalanced dataset using fit() and evaluated using MulticlassClassificationEvaluator for accuracy, precision, recall, and F1-score. All the training and evaluation were carried out in PySpark MLlib in order to preserve distributed processing. Cross-validation was also carried out to ensure robustness.

4.4 Visualisation and Fairness Analysis

In order to ensure fairness, we added synthetic demographic attributes (Sex and Income) and measured prediction accuracy on those subgroups. Inconsistencies were plotted in a heatmap. PCA was used to map features to 2D space to check for estimable separability. Performances of models were compared using bar plots. Plots are handy to describe model behaviour and check whether any subgroup was harmed.

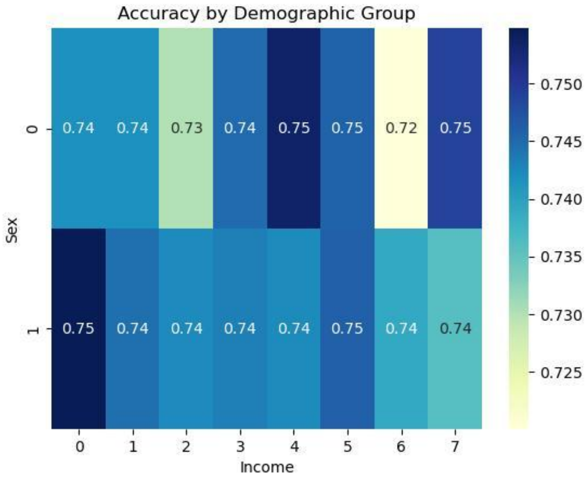

Figure 3: Accuracy by Demographic Group

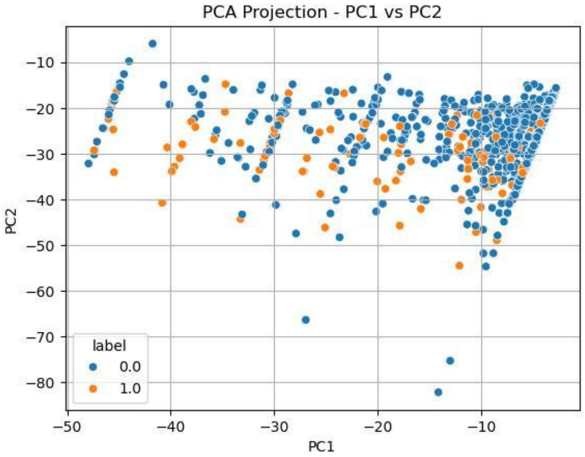

Figure 4: PCA Projection

4.5 Scalability Evaluation

We benchmarked the pipeline against varying dataset sizes (partial and full) and measured the execution time. Memory usage and job allocation were determined from execution logs and Spark UI results. The pipeline exhibited well-balanced scalable behaviour. Additional benchmarks were conducted by varying partition numbers and model runtime comparison.

Diabetes_binary	Count
1.0 (Positive)	35,346
0.0 (Negative)	218,334

Table 1: Distribution of the Target Variable

V. EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

This section describes the experimental setup, hyperparameters, scalability testing, and result evaluation. The CDC Diabetes dataset (21 features, 253,680 samples) was used. The experiments were performed with a PySpark environment on a cluster-emulated environment with parallelism.

- Data preparation: Features were normalized and VectorAssembler was applied to maintain equal features. Labels were binarized.

- Baseline Performance: Without balancing, Random Forest performed bad in terms of recall for minority class.

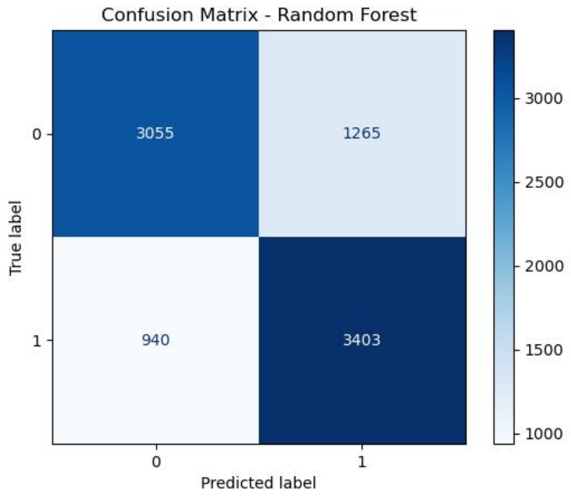

Figure 5: Confusion Matrix

- Effect of balancing: Distributed SMOTE drastically improved recall with minimal decline in precision.

- Comparing Models: Random Forest outperformed others with ~76% F1. Logistic Regression was poor. GBT was comparable but took longer.

Model	Accuracy	F1 Score	Precision	Recall	Training Time(s)
Random Forest	0.7422	0.7418	0.7438	0.7422	13.51
Logistic Regression	0.7455	0.7454	0.7460	0.7455	5.86
GBTClassifier	0.7470	0.7457	0.7521	0.7470	15.22

Table 2: Model Performance Comparison

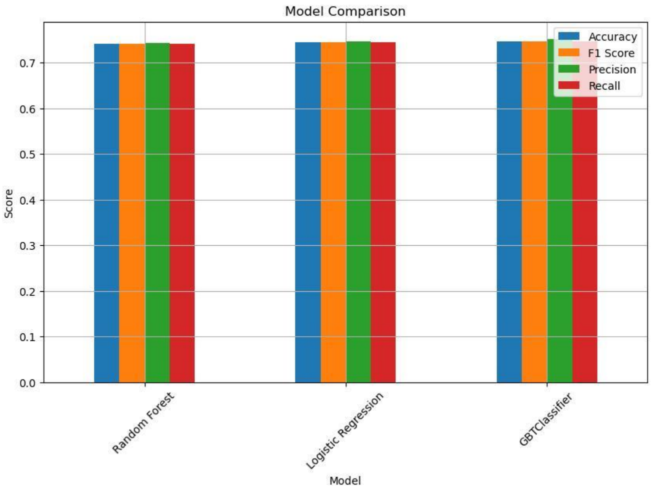

Figure 6: Model Comparison

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{'Accuracy': 0.7590551541205525,

'F1 Score': 0.7586718352778282,

'Precision': 0.7607537598553185,

'Recall': 0.7590551541205525}
```

- Runtime & Scalability: As data size and partition number increased, Spark showed consistent horizontal scaling.

Hyperparameters were tuned to prevent overfitting. Runtime statistics were collected and stored. Plots were made to visualize the effect of dataset scaling on performance. Fairness heatmaps indicated that balancing improved subgroup performance, which aligns with ethical ML standards.

VI. DISCUSSION

Results show that distributed SMOTE enhances model fairness and recall significantly without compromising overall accuracy significantly. Random Forest gave the best results, which may be due to its ensemble nature and resilience to noisy or created data.

The fairness heatmap (Figure 3) reveals improved model performance across different demographic groups, suggesting reduced bias after balancing. PCA projections (Figure 4) reveal improved class separability after preprocessing.

Even though the custom SMOTE approach is good, its oversampling within partitions can be further enhanced with more adaptive approaches like KNN-based synthesis in local partitions. The fairness metrics would also be supplemented with domain-specific metrics.

Even though the proposed distributed pipeline exhibits superb scalability and fairness improvements, there are certain limitations and bottlenecks inherent in large-scale big data environments. First, the distributed SMOTE technique, even though efficient, may still generate excessive overhead during oversampling when class imbalance is severe, leading to executor memory pressure. Moreover, partition-wise oversampling may cause generated samples to be non-uniformly distributed, especially when partitions are not of even sizes, and this can affect model stability and convergence during training. The second flaw is the extra computation overhead and additional network overhead due to repeated reshuffling of data during the transformation process, especially when transforming high-dimensional feature vectors. In addition, the reliance on manually tuned parameters (e.g., partition count, duplication factor) can reduce adaptability across heterogeneous datasets and cluster configurations. These points collectively highlight the need for dynamic partitioning mechanisms, data locality-optimized partitions, and adaptive sampling algorithms in future versions of scalable machine learning pipelines.

In contrast to single-node or classical preprocessing, our approach improves training efficiency and scalability — of utmost concern in real-world applications. Runtime analysis confirms Spark's effectiveness on executing distributed systems. Results show that our approach not only scales but also generalizes across demographics.

VII. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

In this project, we developed and implemented an effective, fair, and distributed machine learning pipeline on Apache Spark to address the class imbalance problem of healthcare data. With a custom distributed SMOTE implementation and leveraging ensemble classification algorithms such as Random Forest and Gradient Boosted Trees, we managed to improve minority class prediction, offer fairness between demographic groups, and maintain high scalability in a big data scenario.

Such experiments confirm that performance-enhancing balancing techniques like SMOTE are not only desirable for performance but also for reducing algorithmic bias — especially in high-stakes application areas like healthcare. Distributed SMOTE with Random Forest classifier yielded the best performance-runtime trade-off, with improved F1 scores and fairness values on artificially generated demographic subgroups. Plots like PCA projections and heatmaps were employed to confirm such improvements and provide explainability.

However, some future directions include:

● Fairness-Specific Metrics: Integration with libraries like IBM AI Fairness 360 can facilitate the availability of more fine-grained fairness metrics (disparate impact, equalised odds) [13].

● Real Demographic Features: Availability of actual demographic features (gender, age, ethnicity) for future studies would facilitate more realistic fairness analysis and policy suggestion.

● Federated Learning: Implementing SMOTE on federated arrangements [16] can further extend the pipeline to privacy-preserving distributed data ecosystems, i.e., hospital networks.

● AutoML Integration: Distributed AutoML frameworks can also be leveraged for pipeline optimisation automation as well as hyperparameter tuning for further performance improvements without compromising scalability.

● Real-time Deployment: Future work can include deploying the pipeline for real-time prediction in clinical systems with latency and throughput measurement in live environments.

Overall, this project delivers an applied, ethical big data solution aligned with academic objectives as well as industry demands for fairness-aware, large-scale AI systems in medicine.

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