

Understanding the Evolution of Vancouver's Business Landscape

UBC MDS Capstone Project Final Report

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Executive Summary

With a rising demand for future social services planning in Vancouver, the goal of this project is to provide data-driven strategies for individual businesses, as well as, a broader understanding of resource allocations across neighbourhoods. To achieve this, we used a wide range of machine learning methodologies to (1) develop a model to predict whether a business will renew its licence and (2) provide a geospatial summary of the business licence history and the constructed model. The predictive Light-GBM model constructed had a final accuracy of 0.58 and a recall of 0.57 (non-renewed licences). Our data pipeline has been designed with efficiency and flexibility for synthesizing diverse datasets. Thus, despite its limitations in regards to predictive capabilities, the final data product serves as a solid foundation for understanding Vancouver’s evolving business landscape.

Introduction

Strategic urban planning provides a framework for achieving socio-economic objectives driven by actionable and sustainable development. Centralized city plans serve to reach these objectives through the coordination of efforts from the government, the private sector, and the community. Importantly, by planning and anticipating a community’s future needs, city leaders are better able to allocate municipal spending, mitigate potential risks, and capitalize on opportunities.

Developing an effective strategic plan requires a critical assessment of a diverse set of factors, including budgetary constraints, local demand for social services, accessibility, employment, and housing. Accessible public data portals (e.g., Vancouver Open Data), in conjunction with data science techniques, represent one approach to address these demands. In particular, developing an understanding of how Vancouver’s business landscape has evolved over time can provide insight into how to efficiently allocate the city’s resources and services.

All businesses operating in the city of Vancouver must have a valid business licence which is required to be renewed every calendar year. As such, the collective set of business licences represents a yearly snapshot of the entire Vancouver business landscape. The renewal of business licences provides information regarding the spatial distribution, the temporal trends, and the volatility of businesses across Vancouver’s neighbourhoods. While licence renewal takes place on the individual business scale, it is influenced by broader regional factors, such as the proximity to public transport, the demographics of the neighbourhood, and the national economic health.

This project focuses on developing insight into Vancouver’s business landscape which can be leveraged by policy-makers, planners, business owners, and others to improve efficiency. To achieve this we have established two main research objectives. (1) We will generate a machine learning model to predict whether a business will renew its licence (BR), given a set of underlying factors. Given a reasonable set of factors drawn from public data, we can also begin to interpret the model output to provide (2) a broader geospatial summary of the evolution of Vancouver’s business landscape.

Data Science Methods

Descriptions and Justifications

With an understanding of the business context, one crucial initial step was to transform the unstructured chronological licence data into a machine-interpretable form, making it more convenient to perform a variety of downstream analytics. A research unit in this project is one unique business, identified by name and location. We further split these individual businesses into train, validation, and test sets ([02_split_licence.R](#)). To better answer the question of whether a business will renew its licence next year, annual observations of each business is lagged one year ahead so that next year’s application status can be used as the response variable ([03_clean_licence.py](#)).

Synthesizing information across various datasets is another important step shared by both research questions. As shown in Figure 1, each Vancouver neighbourhood resembles a microecosystem with its own census characteristics that are changing constantly. To extract valuable information from social variables, such as age group and transportation mode distributions, we have examined a total of 96 sub-categories of such variables in each census year. During this process of data integration, we have faced numerous challenges in cleaning data entry errors. Thus, we have implemented various techniques such as regex and written functions in automated scripts ([05_clean_census.py](#)) to improve data consistency and pipeline reproducibility.

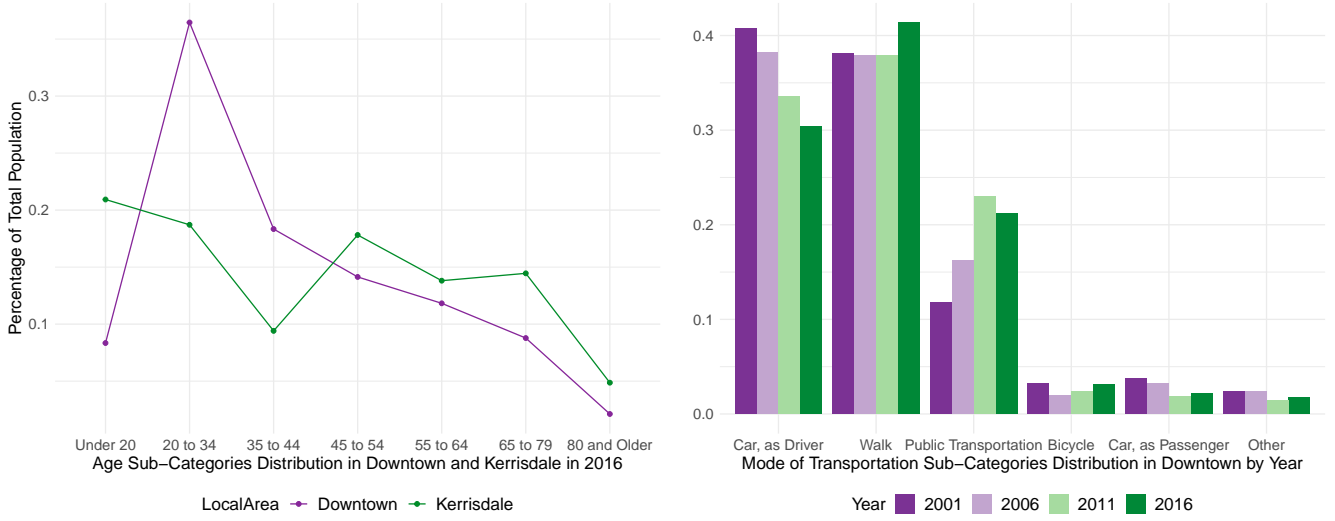


Figure 1: Example Census Variables

There are more renewed licences than not renewed ones in the dataset, which means that we have class imbalance problem. Therefore, instead of focusing just on getting high accuracy, we were more concerned about recall score. This is because the recall score of the minority class measures the number of predicted non-renewed licences (BNR) compared to actual BNR. By avoiding situations of high accuracy but low recall, we tried to be conservative about making a false sense of success for business owners.

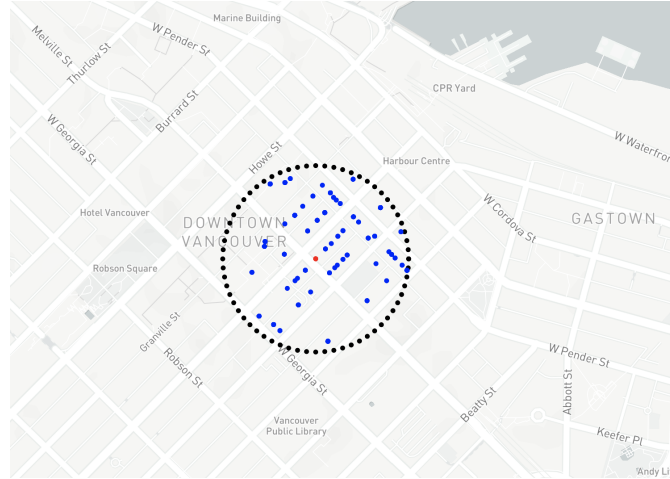


Figure 2: Nearby Similar Businesses

The fact that this project by nature involves both temporal and spatial dimensions requires better representation of the available data being passed to the algorithm ([07_feature_engineering.py](#)). To enrich geo-spatial configuration around businesses, we have constructed two pieces of additional information from coordinates: counts of nearby parking spaces and similar businesses (Figure 2). Instead of appending total parking counts in an entire neighbourhood, each business now has a unique count of nearby parking spaces within an adjustable threshold of 150 meters. Number of nearby similar businesses is meaningful to incorporate spatial correlations such as clustering. However, the current algorithm takes a very long time to run so results have been saved to files.

As shown in Figure 2, count of businesses decreases rapidly for businesses that are relatively new, but the curve starts to become more flatten as number of years survived increases. An indicator of whether a business has survived for more than five years or not can be a strong predictor of renewal probability. One last feature engineering is to uncover the chain business information for an issued licence, by counting the number of times the same name has occurred. There are limitations in the current method used for this feature simply because it is time consuming to

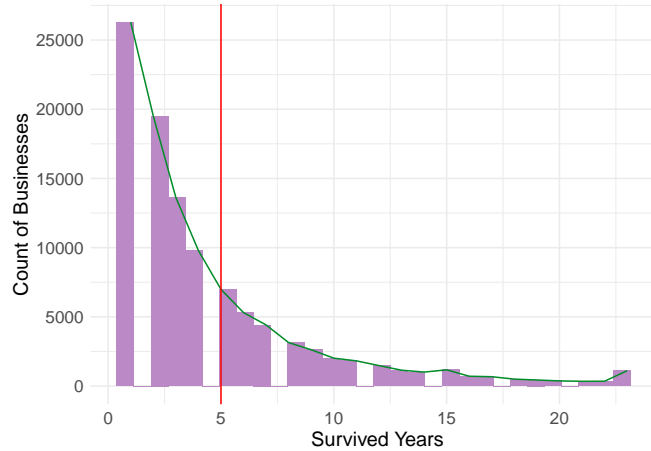


Figure 3: Number of Years Businesses have Survived

go through all chain businesses and make sure their names are spelled the same. However, this feature does capture the cases when a business had opened up at a different location many years ago.

Table 1: Example Features

Feature	Source	Class	Notes
history	Feature engineering	Binary	More than 5 years or not
chain	Feature engineering	Numeric	Number of times a business name has occurred
number of employees	Business licence	Numeric	Missing values filled by median
health services	Business licence	Categorical	One-hot encoded from business type
full time	Census	Numeric	Percentage of total neighbourhood population
number of nearby businesses	Feature engineering	Numeric	Geo-spatial configuration

Possible future improvements

There are several things that can be improved for the data science techniques. The first one is the way to deal with missing values. Missing values were fit using the median value of that predictor. A more rigorous approach that imputes missing values is to use co-variates such as year of renewal to predict the missing values. However, this method may also introduce added uncertainty since it requires additional model.

The second improvement is how to convert characters like business type into input acceptable by machine learning models. The method implemented is one-hot encoding which outputs the same numerical representation to the same business name. However, this method loses the similarity between business type. For example, restaurants are more similar to cafes than gasoline stations. That information is lost after one hot encoding. Thus, one improvement is to use natural language processing techniques that will keep such relationships after converted into numerical representation. Training a natural language techniques will takes time to train and tune thus it is not implemented due to time limit.

The third improvement is to explore more predictive models. There are many factors that will affect business survival like global economic factors, local policies, the district demographic. Those factors are likely to interact with each other in subtle ways that are not captured by current tree-based model. Neural network is a powerful predictive tool to model complex relationships. For this project, it is important to interpret the model to find out important predictors which is harder to achieve for a neural network.

Data Product and Results

The final data product consists of a fully-reproducible machine learning model pipeline and a visualization dashboard with the model embedded. The entire pipeline along with usage instructions and commands required to host the Dash dashboard are documented in the project's private GitHub repository. Currently the dashboard is only available to be viewed locally, but it can be easily deployed to Heroku or other cloud servers if public sharing is needed in the future.

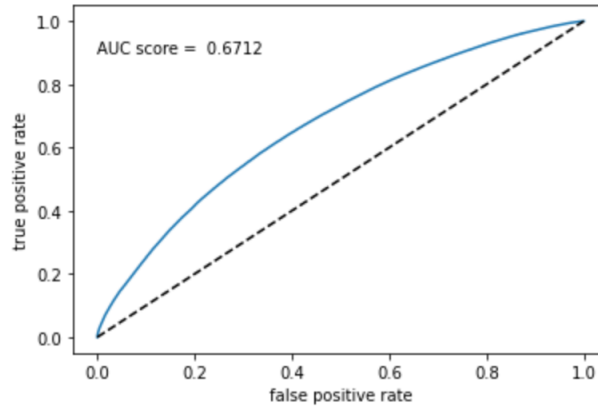


Figure 4: model performance

Dashboard Overview

An integrated data product is desired to reflect the reality that predictive modelling of landscape evolution is a sophisticated task that cannot be well explained alone by a model. Cities are dynamic living organisms and associated datasets often contain both temporal and spatial dimensions. Entrepreneurial activities and demographics of neighbourhoods that are being fed into our pipeline are actual tangible components of Vancouver that are constantly evolving at different paces. In order to aid the collaboration and communication among different stakeholders in city planning or business decision making, it is intuitive to visualize these factors on top of Vancouver's physical structure.

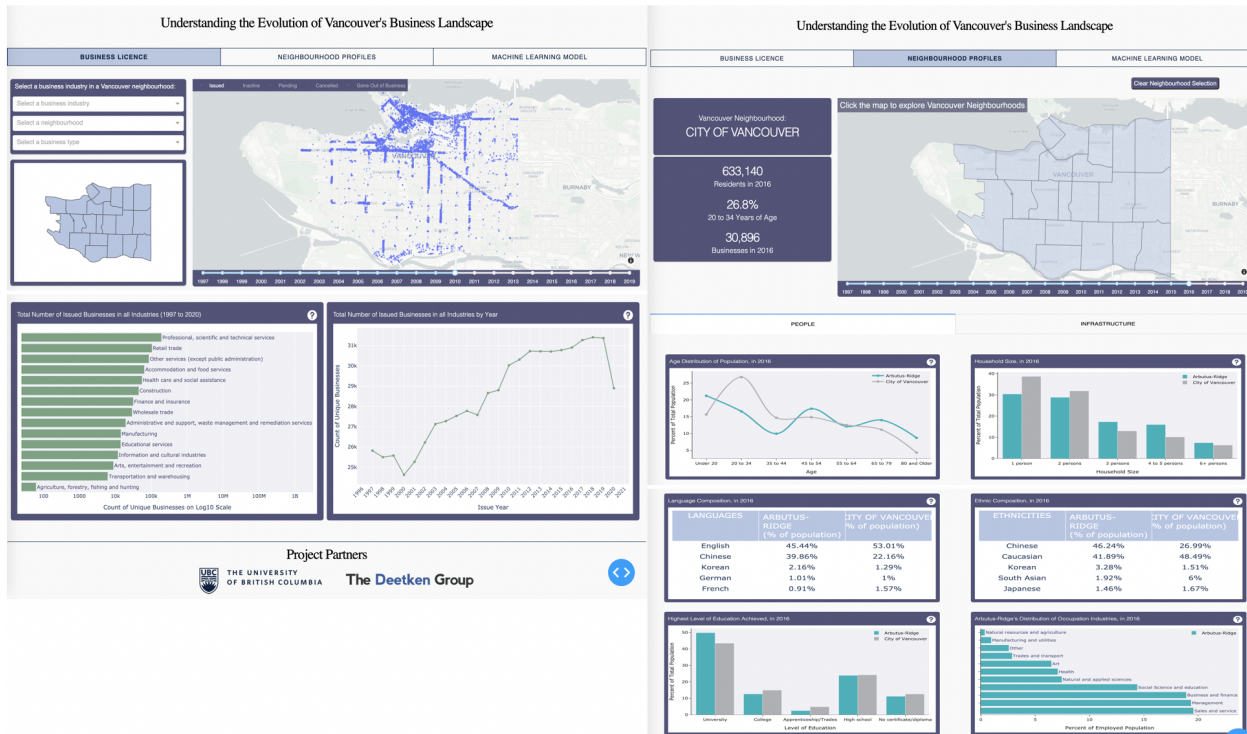


Figure 5: Dashboard Overview

The first and second tabs of the dashboard focus on providing a holistic view of Vancouver's business landscape and demographics with descriptive charts and map of the city. The third machine learning model tab allows users to select levels of available variables for a specific business. Instead of just computing the renewal probability in the background, modelling performance and outcomes are visualized on a map to incorporate the geospatial dimension.

The design of this visualization solution is intended to draw conclusions from the city’s past and present data for better forecast into the future. With this in mind, we have also added a slider bar to each of the maps to present the temporal dimension of the data.

Suppose June is a city planner working for the City of Vancouver. She noticed that quite a few auto repair stores failed to renew their license this year in Marpole and Mount Pleasant. In order to devise an intervention for future zoning designation planning, she wants to be able to explore the business licence dataset alongside some social factors.

When June logs on to the dashboard, on the first tab she can select the auto repair business type in the top left user control panel. The main scatter map plots all issued licences in a given year and distinguishes renewal statuses by different colours. June indeed sees that red dots, or gone out of business ones, concentrate in the two neighbourhoods. She then selects Marpole which triggers zoom in on the map, and filters data for the bar and line charts. When June navigates to the bar chart, she finds out that auto repair is a major business component of Marpole. However, the line chart shows that the increase in the number of issued unique businesses has been slowing down and the map shows that physical distribution of the stores has been shifting towards another major intersection.

June hypothesizes that this might be caused by some underlying changes in demographics and switches to the second tab which provides more detailed neighbourhood profiles. By clicking on the choropleth, she is able to select Mount Pleasant and view a summary statistics of census data. Among the two tabs in the bottom section: people and infrastructure, June decides to investigate individual factors under people characteristics. Mount Pleasant has more people at age 45 or below than average City of Vancouver and more small household sizes. By selecting a different census year, she might find out that the composition has changed significantly in recent years.

Pros and Cons of the Product

As discussed earlier, modelling of any dynamic component of a city requires aggregating data from socio-economic, environmental, and cultural perspectives. These datasets are collected to serve for various purposes and are thus often multi-dimensional on different scales. During the course of this project, we have encountered multiple types of data, such as chronological data entries, national surveys, and geojson shape files. Therefore, we have designed our pipeline to efficiently unify data from various sources and build configurations around specific time points or geo-locations, while allowing flexibility in adding new attributes of a city.

The fact that the dashboard is closely related to the model pipeline provides users an interface to explore available features, instead of reading off a plain feature importance ranking. Our visualizations are built to present the datasets and showcase the model in a clean and interactive way, allowing users to hypothesize scenarios and draw conclusions that suit their needs. However, since all visualizations are built around variables used in the model and given that our model lacks deterministic predictors, the amount of information users can learn from the data product is limited. For example, our city planner June might also be interested in the effect from the broader economy as well as other indicators such as crime rates and traffic information.

Possible Improvements

One feature that we want to implement is a SQL database. In the future, there will be more datasets added for predictions so the size of the datasets will grow. For example, instead of the census information for each local area, one could use census results at postal code level which will provide more precise demographic information. There are some datasets like the budget information for the business improvement area which we didn’t include because it is in pdf format, transit data and data unique to individual businesses like their rent. We couldn’t add all data due to time limit but our pipeline makes it convenient to add in data that is in similar format with the existing datasets. Thus, it will be more efficient to query and update data using a database. Moreover, datasets used in this project could also be used for other projects.

Another potential improvement for data products is to include a video demo that could show new users how they can interact with the dashboard. We didn’t implement this because the dashboard will continue to evolve and features might change places so that it would be better to include this demo when the dashboard reaches the version to be shared with the public.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The dashboard along with the machine learning models provide a tool for people to explore the business survival in different local areas. It shows the change of distribution of different business types in each district so it can aid the decision on municipal spending. Moreover, the machine learning algorithm can predict the probability of a certain business surviving in an area that can help the business owner by letting them know the risk before they invest their time and money.

The major limitation faced by our model is the poor accuracy and recall scores, which makes it unsuitable for reliably predicting whether a business will renew its licence. Currently, our model lacks deterministic factors specific to individual businesses; however, we have designed our pipeline to efficiently unify data from a variety of sources, allowing flexibility in adding new attributes. As such, our model pipeline and associated geospatial visualization serve as a great basis for understanding the evolution of Vancouver’s business landscape which Deetken can utilize and further enhancing through the incorporation of additional datasets.

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