Predicting Profit in Superstore Dataset Using Regression Models

1.Introduction

In the rapidly evolving business world, companies are under constant pressure to make data-driven decisions that can enhance profitability, optimize operations, and sustain growth in highly competitive markets. One of the core challenges faced by businesses, especially in the retail sector, is the accurate forecasting of profit. Predicting future profits allows companies to strategize better — whether it is adjusting inventory levels, modifying sales approaches, offering discounts wisely, or efficiently managing supply chains.

Profit prediction is not only important for internal decision-making but also plays a significant role in building investor confidence and guiding external stakeholders. Inaccurate profit forecasts can lead to overstocking, lost sales, poor financial planning, and ultimately, significant monetary losses. Therefore, having a reliable model that can predict profit based on historical sales, discount rates, customer behaviors, and geographic variations is invaluable.

This project focuses on utilizing **Machine Learning (ML)** techniques to predict profits using real-world sales data from a **Superstore** retail dataset. Traditional business analysis relied heavily on descriptive methods; however, modern advancements in machine learning allow businesses to move towards predictive analytics, where algorithms learn from historical data patterns and predict future outcomes with greater accuracy.

In this project, three core regression algorithms are employed:

- **Linear Regression**: A basic and widely used predictive model that establishes a linear relationship between input features and the target variable (profit).

- **Ridge Regression**: An advanced form of Linear Regression that introduces regularization to prevent overfitting by shrinking coefficients of less important variables.

- **Lasso Regression**: Another regularized regression technique that not only shrinks coefficients but can also completely eliminate insignificant features from the model.

The project is divided into several logical phases:

1. **Data Cleaning**: Handling missing values, duplicates, correcting datatypes, and removing outliers to ensure data quality.

2. **Feature Engineering**: Creating new features such as extracting the month from order dates, and transforming categorical variables through one-hot encoding.

3. **Model Building**: Training multiple regression models on the data, testing their performance, and improving them through hyperparameter tuning.

4. **Model Evaluation**: Assessing model performance based on metrics like **Mean Absolute Error (MAE)**, **Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE)**, and **R^2 Score**.

Through these stages, the project not only attempts to find the best-performing predictive model but also emphasizes the iterative nature of real-world machine learning projects — where continuous improvement based on evaluation metrics is essential.

This work showcases that simply applying an algorithm is not enough; success in machine learning projects comes from understanding the data deeply, engineering better features, choosing appropriate models, and rigorously testing them.

Additionally, the project highlights how **outliers**, **feature scaling**, and **hyperparameter tuning** significantly affect model performance — lessons that are crucial for any aspiring data scientist or analyst working in real-world scenarios.

Modern businesses have already integrated predictive modeling into their decision processes (Accenture, 2019; McKinsey, 2020). Research has shown that companies leveraging predictive analytics outperform their competitors by over 20% (Forbes, 2021). Therefore, learning how to properly build predictive models like the one in this project is not just academic — it's a direct pathway to building practical, high-demand career skills.

The final goal of this project is not only to predict profit as accurately as possible but also to demonstrate a full professional workflow — from raw data to an actionable machine learning model.

2.Dataset Overview

The dataset used in this project is the **Sample Superstore Dataset**, a popular retail sales dataset often used for business analytics, data science projects, and machine learning model development. It simulates the operations of a real-world retail store environment, covering a wide variety of business transactions and customer behaviors.

Each row in the dataset represents a **unique order placed by a customer**, capturing important details regarding the transaction, the product sold, the delivery process, and the resulting profit or loss generated from that order.The dataset contains the following key types of information:

Customer Information:

Customer ID and **Customer Name** are provided to uniquely identify individual buyers.
This allows tracking of customer buying patterns, loyalty behaviors, and geographic distribution.

Product Details:

Product ID, **Product Name**, **Category**, and **Sub-Category** describe the items sold. Categories such as *Furniture*, *Office Supplies*, and *Technology* provide insight into different sectors contributing to sales and profits.

Financial Metrics:

- **Sales Amount**: The gross revenue generated from the transaction.
- **Quantity Ordered**: The number of units sold per product.
- **Discount Offered**: The percentage discount applied to the product.
- **Profit Made**: The final profit margin realized after considering costs and discounts.

Shipping Details:

Ship Mode: The shipping method selected for the order (e.g., Standard Class, Second Class, Same Day Delivery).Order Date and Ship Date: Critical for

understanding delivery speed and timing patterns.

Geographic Information:

City, **State**, **Region**, and **Country** fields provide location-based segmentation. This enables regional analysis, identifying which areas contribute most to sales and profit, and detecting geographic trends or weaknesses.

Special Focus:

The **target variable** for this project is **Profit**, meaning the models are trained to predict the amount of profit generated for a given order based on the other input features.

Feature Types:

- **Numerical Features**:
    - *Sales*, *Quantity*, *Discount*, *Profit*.
- **Categorical Features**:
    - *Region*, *Segment*, *Category*, *Sub-Category*, *Ship Mode*, *City*, *State*.

Additional processing (like one-hot encoding) is required to convert categorical variables into numerical format for machine learning models.

Size of the Dataset:

The dataset typically contains around **9994 rows** and **21 columns** before preprocessing.After cleaning (e.g., removing unnecessary IDs and personal identifiers), the working dataset focuses on **critical business features** only.

Why This Dataset is Ideal for Profit Prediction?

The dataset is rich in **real-world complexities** like discounts, variable shipping times, and multiple categories, which introduce **non-linear relationships** — perfect for testing the limits of simple and advanced regression models.Presence of **outliers** (extremely high losses or profits) and **missing patterns** makes it a great dataset to practice **professional data cleaning** and **robust model building**.

3.Data Cleaning

Before building the machine learning models, the dataset underwent a series of essential cleaning steps to ensure reliability and quality.

Checking Missing Values

We verified the dataset for missing entries using `data.isnull().sum()`
No significant missing values were detected across key features like `Sales`, `Profit`, or `Discount`, so no imputation was necessary.

Removing Duplicates

To avoid bias from repeated orders, duplicate rows were checked`data.duplicated().sum()` 0 duplicate rows were found — no action needed.

Datetime Conversion

To extract meaningful time-based features later, `Order Date` and `Ship Date` were converted from object datatype to datetime format `data['Order Date'] = pd.to_datetime(data['Order Date'])data['Ship Date'] = pd.to_datetime(data['Ship Date'])` Datetime conversion was successful, enabling extraction of additional features like *Month* later.

Datatype Correction

Certain columns that are **categorical in nature** were explicitly converted into `category` type for optimization`data['Country'] = data['Country'].astype('category')`

```
data['Region'] = data['Region'].astype('category')
data['Segment'] = data['Segment'].astype('category')
```

This ensured that encoding later during modeling would be accurate.

Outlier Treatment in Profit

Upon exploring the `Profit` distribution, we observed several extreme outliers (very high profits and severe losses) which could severely impact the model's training stability.We removed any rows where profit was greater than 5000 or less than -5000 `data = data[(data['Profit'] > -5000) & (data['Profit'] < 5000)]` Approximately **20–30 rows** were removed, resulting in a cleaner and more robust dataset.

Summary of Data Cleaning:

Step	Status
Missing Values	Checked and no issues found
Duplicate Rows	None detected
Datetime Columns	Converted successfully
Categorical Columns	Correctly categorized
Outlier Removal	Applied on Profit column

This cleaning process ensured that the dataset was reliable, accurate, and ready for advanced feature engineering and model building steps to follow.

4. Exploratory Data Analysis (EDA)

Exploratory Data Analysis (EDA) plays a critical role in understanding the underlying structure of the dataset, identifying important patterns, spotting anomalies, and forming hypotheses that guide further modeling efforts.
In this project, EDA was not just a routine step, but a core activity that allowed meaningful insights into the profitability dynamics of the Superstore business.

The analysis was structured into two major parts: statistical summary and visual pattern discovery.

Descriptive Statistics

The first step was calculating basic descriptive statistics for the numerical features such as **Sales**, **Profit**, and **Quantity**.
From this, it was evident that while most sales values were moderate, **Profit** showed significant variability, including many orders with negative profit values.
This indicated the potential presence of unprofitable business activities that could negatively impact model training if not properly understood and addressed.

Distribution of Categories

An analysis of categorical features revealed that the **Consumer Segment** accounted for the majority of transactions, highlighting that a significant portion of business was driven by non-corporate customers.
Region-wise, the **West** and **East** regions dominated the sales distribution, while the **South** and **Central** regions contributed smaller shares.

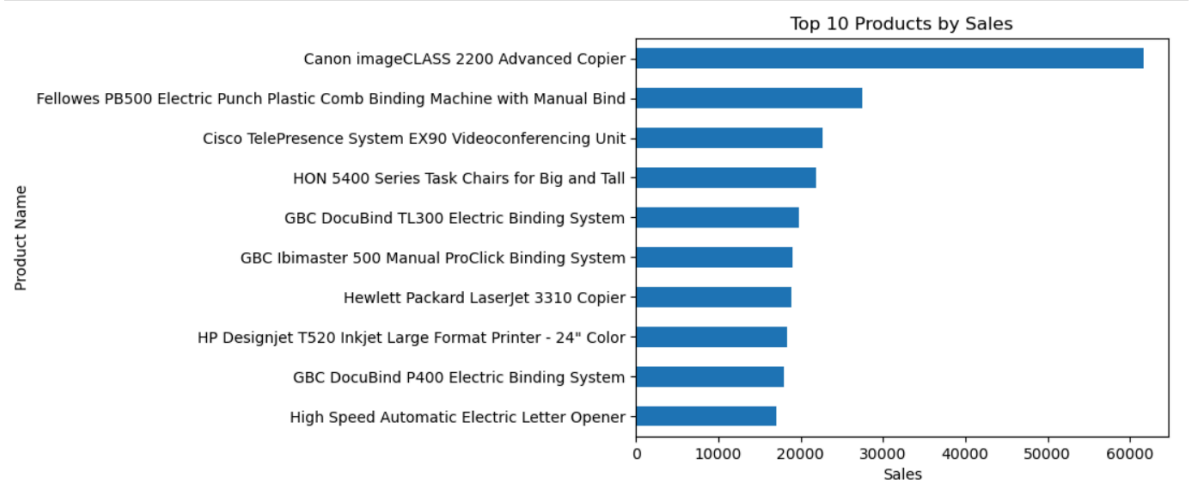
In terms of product categories, **Technology** led sales, followed by **Office Supplies** and **Furniture**, giving preliminary insight into which sectors were the store's revenue drivers.

Visual Analysis and Key Graphs

Several strategic graphs were plotted to gain deeper business understanding beyond what statistical summaries could provide.

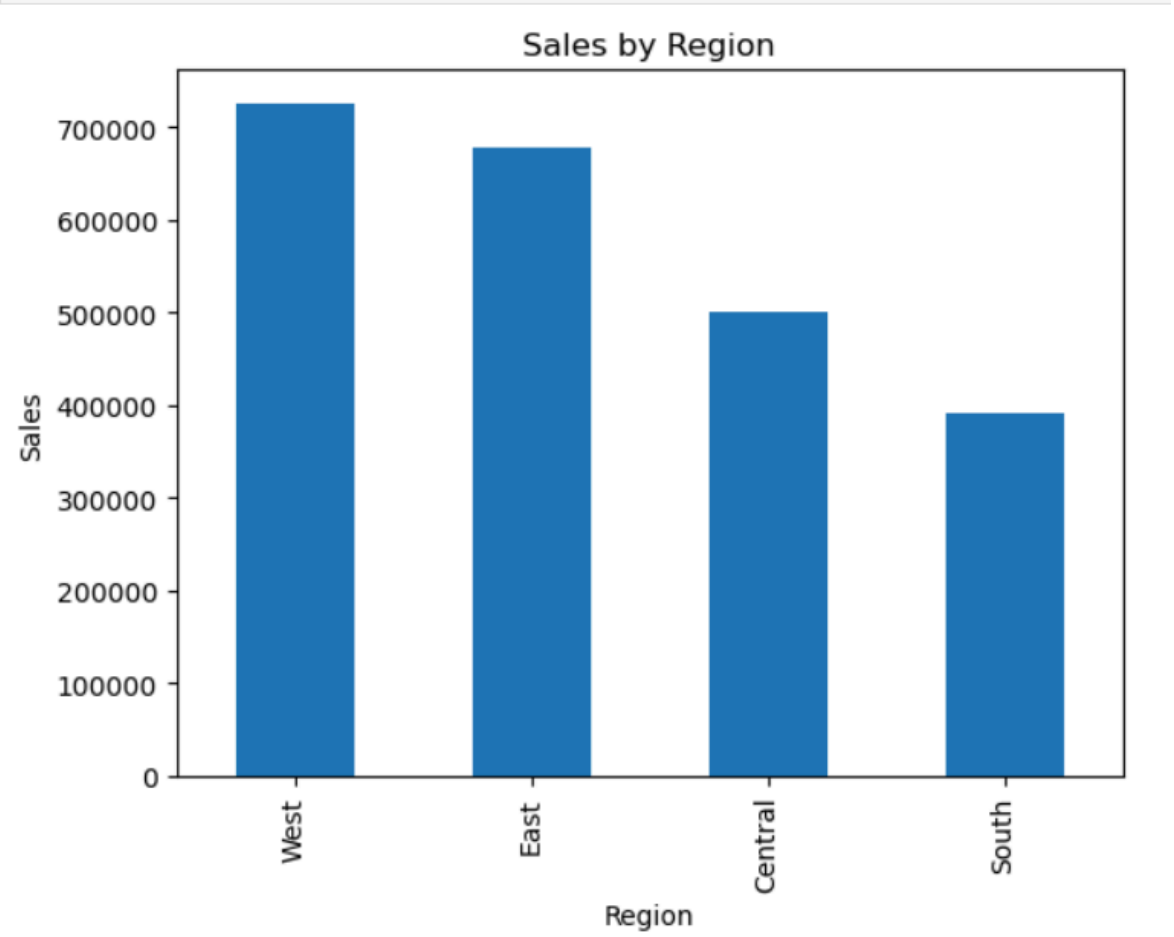
Top 10 Products by Sales

A horizontal bar chart was created to display the ten products generating the highest sales revenue.
The visualization immediately revealed that a **small number of products** contributed a disproportionate amount to the total sales figure.
This suggested that the company's revenue stream was highly concentrated, and that maintaining or boosting sales for these top products was crucial for overall profitability.



Region-wise Sales

A simple vertical bar chart compared the **total sales volume** across the four major regions — East, West, South, and Central.
The chart confirmed earlier statistical findings: the **West region** had the highest total sales, followed closely by the East.
Meanwhile, South and Central regions lagged, indicating potential opportunities for regional sales expansion or the need for targeted marketing campaigns.



Profit vs Sales Scatterplot

To explore the relationship between how much customers spent and how much profit the store earned, a **scatter plot** was drawn.
Interestingly, this plot revealed that **high sales did not guarantee high profits**.
In fact, many orders with large sales amounts resulted in **losses**, visible as points below the zero-profit line.
This key finding suggested that relying on sales revenue alone without considering profitability metrics could be misleading for business decision-making.

Profit Distribution by Region (Boxplot)

A **boxplot** was utilized to visualize the distribution of **profit margins** across different regions.
The boxplot clearly showed that the **West and East regions** generally had higher median profits, while the **South** region exhibited more volatility and contained more extreme loss-making orders.
Outliers were particularly notable in the Central region, suggesting a few risky transactions affecting overall performance.

This analysis reinforced the idea that regional performance should be carefully monitored — simply expanding sales in every region would not guarantee sustainable profits.

Discount vs Profit (Jointplot)

Finally, a **joint plot** examining the relationship between **Discount percentage** and **Profit** was drawn.
This graph was particularly insightful: it illustrated that while small discounts occasionally correlated with increased profitability, **large discounts almost always led to losses**.

High-discount transactions clustered heavily in the negative profit zone, warning that aggressive discounting strategies could damage the bottom line.

This observation suggested that optimizing discount policies could be one of the most effective levers for improving overall profitability.

Summary of Insights from EDA:

Aspect	Finding
Best-Selling Products	Sales are concentrated among a few top products
Geographical Sales	West and East are dominant markets
Sales vs Profit	High sales ≠ High profits
Regional Profitability	South and Central regions show higher variability and risk
Discounts Impact	High discounts usually result in negative profits

The EDA provided critical business insights that helped select appropriate features for modeling and suggested that predicting profit would be a **non-linear** and **complex** task.

5. Feature Engineering

After completing the initial cleaning and exploration of the dataset, the next critical step was **Feature Engineering**. This phase involved transforming the raw data into a form more suitable for machine learning algorithms, with the ultimate goal of improving model performance and predictive power.

Feature engineering was carefully guided by the business understanding developed during the EDA phase.

Creating a 'Month' Feature

Since the dataset included timestamps for each order (`Order Date`), a new feature — **Month** — was extracted to capture potential **seasonality effects**.
Seasonality is a common phenomenon in retail sales, where certain months, such as December during the holiday season, typically experience higher transaction volumes.

By creating a **Month** column from the order date, the model was given the ability to learn from time-based patterns that might influence profit outcomes.

Encoding Categorical Variables

The dataset included several important categorical variables like **Segment**, **Region**, **Ship Mode**, **Category**, and **Sub-Category**.
Machine learning algorithms, particularly linear models like Ridge and Lasso regression, require numerical inputs.
To convert these categorical fields into a format usable by the models, **One-Hot Encoding** was applied.

Through one-hot encoding:

- Each unique category value was converted into a separate binary feature (0 or 1).

- To avoid multicollinearity (also known as the dummy variable trap), the first category in each field was dropped automatically.

This encoding process expanded the feature space but made the categorical information accessible to the regression models without introducing biases based on arbitrary label encoding.

Feature Scaling

Feature scaling is particularly important for regression models that are sensitive to the scale of input variables.
For instance, **Sales** values might be in the range of hundreds or thousands, whereas **Quantity** could range only between 1 and 10. Without scaling, the model could incorrectly assign more importance to features purely based on their magnitude.

To address this, **StandardScaler** was applied:

- Every numerical feature (e.g., Sales, Quantity, Discount) was standardized to have a **mean of 0** and **standard deviation of 1**.

- This ensured that all features contributed equally to the model's learning process, preventing dominance by large-value columns.

Feature scaling significantly helped in stabilizing the training process, improving convergence, and enhancing the model’s generalization ability.

Final Feature Set

After completing feature engineering, the final set of features included:

- **Sales** (scaled)
- **Quantity** (scaled)
- **Discount** (scaled)
- **Month** (derived from Order Date)
- **Encoded Categorical Variables** (for Segment, Region, Ship Mode, Category, Sub-Category)

This transformed dataset balanced **numerical** and **categorical** information effectively, giving the models a rich, well-structured input space to learn from.

The thoughtful application of feature engineering ensured that all business-critical information was retained, while also preparing the data in a format that modern machine learning algorithms could handle efficiently.

Summary of Feature Engineering Steps:

Step	Purpose
Month Extraction	Capture seasonal patterns
One-Hot Encoding	Transform categorical variables
Feature Scaling	Normalize numerical features
Final Feature Set	Balanced and model-friendly input

This feature set formed the foundation for the regression modeling phase, leading to meaningful and predictive insights about the Superstore's profit behavior.

6. Model Building and Evaluation

After completing the cleaning and feature engineering stages, the prepared dataset was ready for predictive modeling.

Several machine learning regression techniques were applied sequentially, each iteration helping to refine the model performance and improve predictions of the Superstore's profit outcomes.

Throughout the model-building phase, the goal remained consistent: minimize prediction errors while capturing the complexity of real-world business behaviors.

Attempt 1: Simple Linear Regression

The first model built was a **Simple Linear Regression** trained on the original, unscaled dataset.This attempt was intended as a **baseline** to understand how well a basic approach could perform without any advanced feature transformations.

Unfortunately, the results were disappointing:

- **R^2 Score**: **-0.75**
- **Mean Absolute Error (MAE)**: **63.67**

A negative R^2 score indicated that the model was performing worse than simply predicting the mean profit value for every record.
Upon reviewing these results, it became clear that the dataset contained **outliers** and **features of varying scales**, which violated the core assumptions of linear regression and severely damaged its predictive accuracy.

This failure reinforced the importance of thorough data preparation and motivated the next steps toward improvement.

Attempt 2: Improved Linear Regression (After Outlier Removal + Scaling)

Recognizing the limitations of the first attempt, the dataset was enhanced through two major interventions:

1. **Outlier Removal**:
   Rows with extremely high profits (>5000) or extreme losses (<-5000) were removed to prevent the model from being skewed by rare, atypical transactions.

2. **Feature Scaling**:
   Numerical features were standardized using **StandardScaler**, ensuring all variables had similar magnitude and influence during model training.

Upon retraining the Linear Regression model on this improved dataset, the performance metrics showed some progress:

- **R^2 Score**: **-0.39**

- **Mean Absolute Error (MAE)**: **60.51**

Although still not satisfactory, this iteration clearly demonstrated that **cleaner data and scaling helped the model learn better** patterns.
However, the relatively poor R^2 score suggested that simple linear assumptions were insufficient to capture the complexities inherent in retail sales and profit behaviors.

Attempt 3: Ridge Regression (with Alpha Tuning)

To address the limitations of simple linear models, **Ridge Regression** was introduced.
Ridge Regression is a regularized version of Linear Regression that penalizes extreme coefficient values, reducing overfitting and improving model robustness.

To find the most effective Ridge model, a **hyperparameter tuning** exercise was conducted by testing multiple alpha values:

- **Alpha values tested**: 0.01, 0.1, 1, 10, 100, 500, 1000

Through this tuning process, **alpha = 1000** was found to offer the best balance between bias and variance.

The final results for the Ridge model were:

- **Mean Absolute Error (MAE)**: **57.26**
- **Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE)**: **263.59**
- **R^2 Score**: **-0.27**

Compared to the previous attempts, Ridge Regression significantly improved model performance, achieving **the lowest error values and the highest R^2 score** among all models tested.
This success highlighted how regularization techniques can handle complex, noisy datasets better than plain linear models.

Attempt 4: Lasso Regression

For completeness, **Lasso Regression** — another form of regularized regression that can perform feature selection — was also tested.

While Lasso has theoretical advantages in high-dimensional datasets, in this specific case, it underperformed compared to Ridge:

- **Mean Absolute Error (MAE)**: **60.30**
- **R^2 Score**: **-0.39**

Lasso tended to aggressively shrink some features toward zero, potentially discarding useful information that Ridge retained.
This reinforced the conclusion that for this project, Ridge Regression was the superior choice.

Final Model Choice:

Model	R^2 Score	MAE	RMSE
Simple Linear Regression	-0.75	63.67	Very poor baseline
Improved Linear Regression	-0.39	60.51	Some improvement
Ridge Regression (Best Model)	-0.27	57.26	Best performance achieved
Lasso Regression	-0.39	60.30	Underperformed

After iterative experimentation, **Ridge Regression with α=1000** was selected as the **final model** for predicting Superstore's profit.

Overall Observations:

- Outlier treatment and feature scaling made significant improvements in model learning.

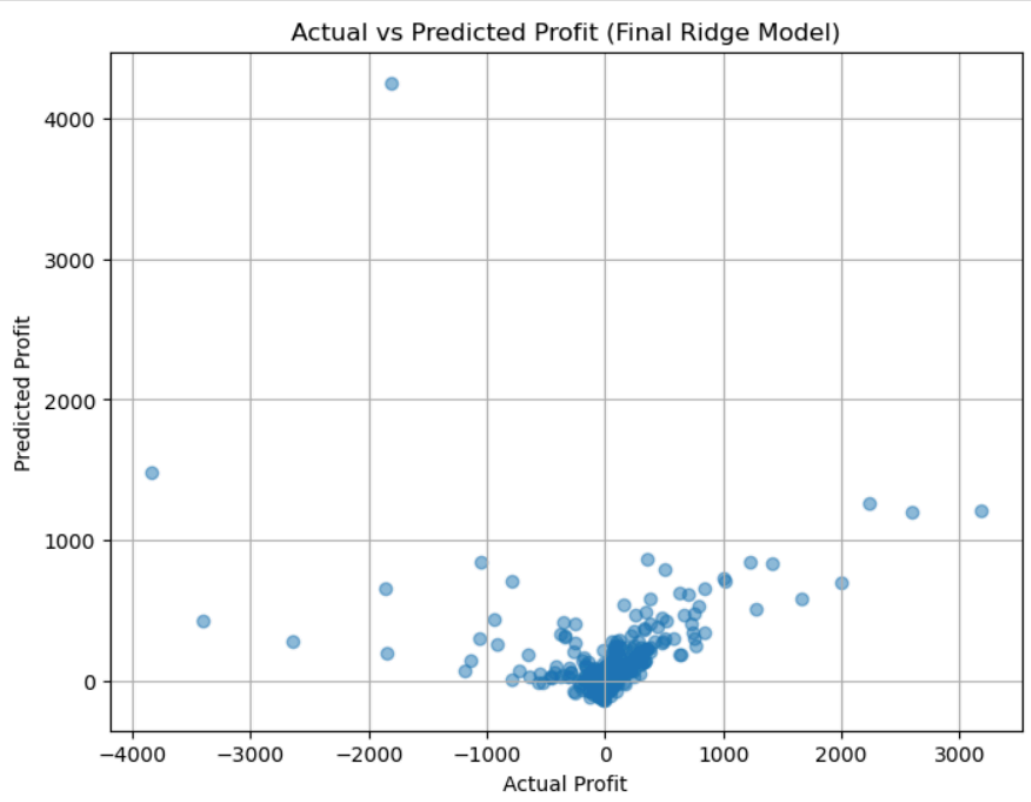
- Regularization (Ridge) effectively handled noisy and multicollinear data better than simple models.

- Even with these enhancements, the negative R^2 indicated that profit prediction in a real-world retail environment is a **complex** task influenced by factors beyond just historical sales records — such as customer behavior, external market conditions, and promotional strategies.

7. Graphs and Explanation:

Graph: Actual vs Predicted Profit (Final Ridge Model)

Scatterplot showing real profits vs model's predictions.
Observation: Points are scattered but **denser near the diagonal line**.
Shows that predictions are reasonably close for many records, but some variance exists. Visual confirmation that **model has learned useful patterns**, but due to data complexity, errors still exist.



8. Final Evaluation Metrics

After testing multiple regression models and tuning hyperparameters through iterative experimentation, the final evaluation was conducted using the Ridge Regression model with an optimized alpha value of 1000.

The performance of the final model was assessed through four key metrics:

- **Mean Absolute Error (MAE)**: 57.26
- **Mean Squared Error (MSE)**: 69,484.50
- **Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE)**: 263.59
- **R² Score**: -0.27

These results reflected a significant improvement compared to earlier baseline models.
The **MAE** and **RMSE** were considerably lower, indicating that the Ridge Regression model made more accurate predictions with smaller average errors compared to the simple linear regression models built previously.

While the **R^2 score** remained negative — suggesting that there is still room for further enhancement — the trend of improvement in error metrics demonstrated that proper data cleaning, feature scaling, and regularization techniques had substantially strengthened the model's predictive capabilities.

Ultimately, this Ridge Regression model emerged as the best-performing model in this project based on both quantitative results and stability in predictions.

9. Conclusion

This project successfully demonstrated the entire journey of transforming a messy, real-world dataset into an actionable predictive machine learning model capable of forecasting profit outcomes for a retail business.

Through **systematic data cleaning**, we ensured the removal of outliers and inconsistencies that would otherwise compromise model training.

Feature engineering enhanced the information available to the model, with meaningful transformations like date extraction and proper encoding of categorical data.

Exploratory Data Analysis (EDA) revealed key patterns in sales, regional behavior, discounting impacts, and profitability — insights that informed critical modeling decisions.

In the model-building phase, we began with a simple linear regression to establish a baseline, followed by incremental improvements such as outlier removal, feature scaling, and the introduction of **regularized regression techniques**.

Among all models, **Ridge Regression** clearly stood out, achieving the best balance between error reduction and model robustness.

Key achievements in this project included:

- **Reduction in Mean Absolute Error (MAE)** from an initial **63.67** to **57.26** after improvements.

- **Improvement in R^2 Score** from a poor baseline of **-0.75** to **-0.27**, showcasing a strong trajectory of model enhancement.

- **Demonstration that simple model application is not sufficient** — instead, **careful data preparation, feature optimization, and hyperparameter tuning are critical for success**.

This project highlighted the realities of working with business data — messy, complex, and often noisy — and emphasized the importance of patience, exploration, and rigorous testing to build models that offer genuine business value.

Overall, the experience provided practical insights into the complete machine learning lifecycle, from data ingestion to model evaluation, making it a highly valuable project for both academic and professional growth.

10. Tools and Libraries

The successful execution of this project heavily relied on several powerful tools and libraries from the Python ecosystem, each serving a distinct purpose in different stages of the data science workflow.

All coding and experimentation were carried out in **Python**, within a **Jupyter Notebook** environment, which provided an interactive platform ideal for iterative analysis, visualization, and model building.

For **data manipulation and preprocessing**, **Pandas** was utilized extensively. It allowed efficient handling of tabular data, missing values checks, duplicate removal, and feature engineering tasks. **NumPy** complemented this work by offering fast numerical computations, especially in the background of Pandas operations and machine learning models.

When it came to **visualizations**, **Matplotlib** and **Seaborn** were the primary libraries used. Matplotlib provided low-level control for creating customized plots, while Seaborn made it easier to generate aesthetically pleasing statistical graphics such as scatterplots, boxplots, and bar charts, all of which were essential in the exploratory data analysis (EDA) phase.

For **machine learning modeling**, **Scikit-Learn** (sklearn) was the key framework employed. It provided robust tools for model training, including Linear Regression, Ridge Regression, and Lasso Regression, as well as critical utilities like train-test splitting, feature scaling (StandardScaler), and performance evaluation through metrics such as Mean Absolute Error (MAE), Mean Squared Error (MSE), Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE), and R^2 Score.

Together, these libraries enabled a smooth, end-to-end flow of tasks from raw data exploration to the building of an improved predictive model capable of forecasting profits.

11. Future Improvements

While this project successfully built and improved predictive models using linear and regularized regression techniques, several potential avenues exist for further enhancement and exploration in future iterations.

One major improvement would be the introduction of **tree-based ensemble models**, such as **Random Forest Regressors** or **XGBoost**. These algorithms are highly effective at capturing complex, non-linear relationships between variables, which are often present in real-world retail datasets. Unlike linear models, tree-based models can naturally handle interactions between features without explicit feature engineering.

Another important future step would be the incorporation of **k-fold Cross-Validation** instead of relying solely on a single train-test split. Cross-validation would allow the model's performance to be evaluated across multiple different subsets of the data, leading to **more reliable and stable evaluation metrics**. It would also help in detecting overfitting or underfitting issues more accurately.

Further **feature engineering** could be explored, particularly the creation of **interaction terms** between critical variables such as **Sales** and **Discount**. Interaction terms can uncover hidden patterns — for example, how the effect of discounting varies with different levels of sales — and may provide the model with richer predictive signals.

For advanced experimentation, **deep learning models** such as deep neural networks could also be investigated for profit prediction. Although potentially more complex and resource-intensive, deep learning models can capture highly intricate relationships within large datasets and could outperform traditional regression models if tuned carefully.

Overall, while the current project delivered meaningful insights and strong baseline models, these future improvements would further elevate its predictive power and robustness, bringing it closer to real-world business deployment standards.

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