



# Variational Mode Decomposition Hybridized With Gradient Boost Regression for Seasonal Forecast of Residential Water Demand

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## Abstract

Climate variability highly influences water availability and demand in urban areas, but medium-term predictive models of residential water demand usually do not include climate variables. This study proposes a method to predict monthly residential water demand using temperature and precipitation, by combining a novel decomposition technique and gradient boost regression. The variational mode decomposition (VMD) was used to filter the water demand time series and remove the component associated with the socioeconomic characteristics of households. VMD was also used to extract the relevant signal from precipitation and maximum temperature series which could explain water demand. The results indicate that by filtering the water demand and climate signals we can obtain accurate predictions at least four months in advance. These results suggest that the climate information can be used to explain and predict residential water demand.

**Keywords** Water demand · Seasonal forecast · Gradient boosting · Variational mode decomposition

## 1 Introduction

A primary concern of climate change and variability is how they will affect water demand and availability in the next decade (Milly et al. 2008; Jiménez Cisneros et al. 2014). Spatial and temporal variability of precipitation and temperature might cause changes in the intensity and frequency of extreme events (Orlowsky and Seneviratne 2012). In urban systems, there is also the additional challenge of increasing urbanization and water use. Water resources planning should address accurate prediction of water demand, whether the

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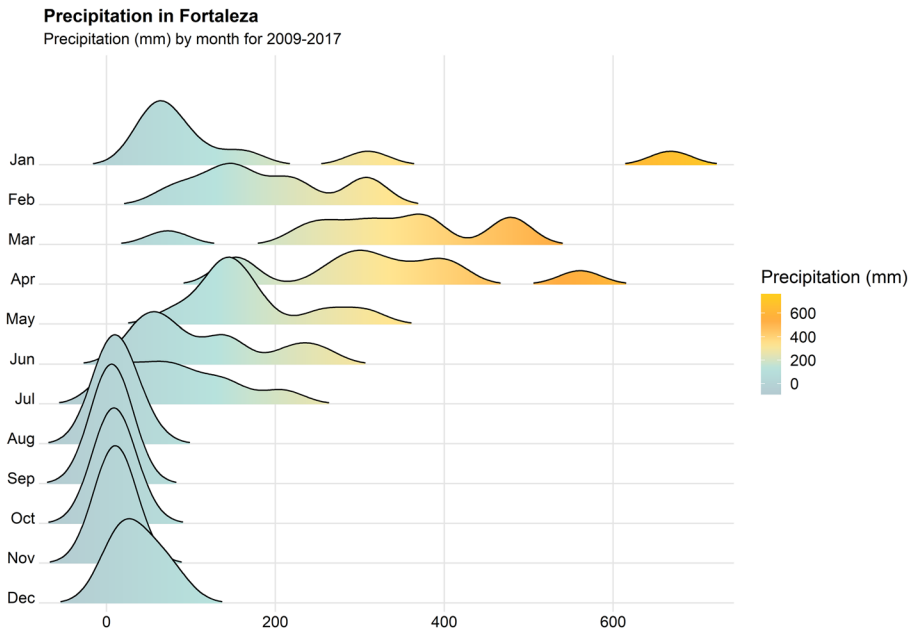
objective is to expand the capacity of the supply system or to implement water conservation measures (Olmstead 2014).

Accurate forecasting of residential water demand is of special importance for the decision-making process, as researchers have shown it to be correlated with climate (Maidment and Miaou 1986; House-Peters and Chang 2011; Adamowski et al. 2013; Chang et al. 2014). Specifically, it presents an inverse relationship with precipitation and a direct relationship with temperature (House-Peters and Chang 2011; Adamowski et al. 2013). Many other elements influence water demand patterns, such as demographic, social, and economic aspects of households (Chang et al. 2017; Chu and Quentin Grafton 2019; Villarin and Rodriguez-Galiano 2019; Lee and Derrible 2020; Carvalho et al. 2021). These variables are associated with water demand trends and are usually predicted with scenario-based simulations.

Past research has indicated that water demand is strongly dependent on past use (Duerr et al. 2018) and that it can be predicted only one month in advance. However, they also concluded that medium- and long-term forecasts could be improved by adding covariates. Short-term water demand forecasting, i.e. hourly to daily forecast, has been well explored. Lee and Derrible (2020) evaluated twelve statistical models for residential water demand prediction, including eight machine learning techniques; gradient boost regression outperformed all the models. In their study, two scenarios of data availability were compared, and the one with a higher number of socioeconomic and climate exogenous variables provided better predictions.

Several studies have explored climate influence on residential water demand (Adamowski et al. 2013; Parandvash and Chang 2016; Zubaidi et al. 2020; Rasifaghihi et al. 2020; Fiorillo et al. 2021). Parandvash and Chang (2016) used a structural time series regression model to assess the effect of climate change on per capita water consumption and projected an increase of up to 10% in the water demand of Portland, in the United States, for the 2035–2064 period. Adamowski et al. (2013) and Zubaidi et al. (2020) used decomposition techniques—wavelet transform and singular spectrum analysis, respectively—to detect interactions between climate and water demand. They found that decomposing time series into different components is a useful approach for filtering relevant information from exogenous variables. Haque et al. (2014) and Rasifaghihi et al. (2020) provided long-term probabilistic forecasts of urban water demand, considering future climate projections. Some authors have investigated the joint influence of weather and socioeconomic aspects of households on water consumption (Fiorillo et al. 2021).

To the best of our knowledge, the current models in the literature are not able to address the influence of climate on the medium-term forecast of water demand in dry regions. Our objectives are to (i) remove low-frequency variability and noisy signals from temperature and precipitation time series, (ii) extract the seasonal component of water demand, and (iii) design a model able to predict residential water demand up to 12 months in advance, considering the influence of precipitation and temperature variability. We do this by using an innovative approach that combines an intrinsic and adaptive decomposition method coupled with a regression machine learning model and use Fortaleza, Ceará – a region frequently affected by drought – as a case study. The variational mode decomposition (VMD) method used in this study was designed to concurrently estimate the components of a signal and properly deal with noise (Dragomiretskiy and Zosso 2014). VMD was applied to extract the seasonal component of water demand, removing the signals unrelated to climate variability, and relevant signals from



**Fig. 1** Monthly average precipitation in Fortaleza for the period between 2009 and 2017

temperature and precipitation time series. Gradient boost regression was employed to capture the relationship between filtered signals of water demand and climate, which is long known to be nonlinear (Maidment and Miaou 1986).

The study offers some important insights into tactical decisions on urban water supply planning. The predictive model can be coupled with seasonal climate forecasts to assess future water demand and to guide the decision-making process.

## 2 Study Area and Data

The city of Fortaleza was used as a case study for the proposed model. Fortaleza is in the Northeast region of Brazil and is the fifth most populated city of the country, with over 2.6 million inhabitants. The region suffers from high climate variability and recurrent droughts, directly affecting Fortaleza's water supply. The most recent drought lasted seven years, starting from 2012 until 2018 (Pontes Filho et al. 2020). The rainy season occurs between February and May (Fig. 1) and the maximum temperature ranges from 30 to 33 °C during the year (Fig. 2).

Monthly residential water demand data from 2009 to 2017 was provided by the Water and Wastewater Company of Ceará. Data was provided at the household level, in cubic meters per month, and it was averaged over the number of consumers. Precipitation and maximum temperature time series were obtained from a conventional meteorological station maintained by the Brazilian National Meteorology Institute.

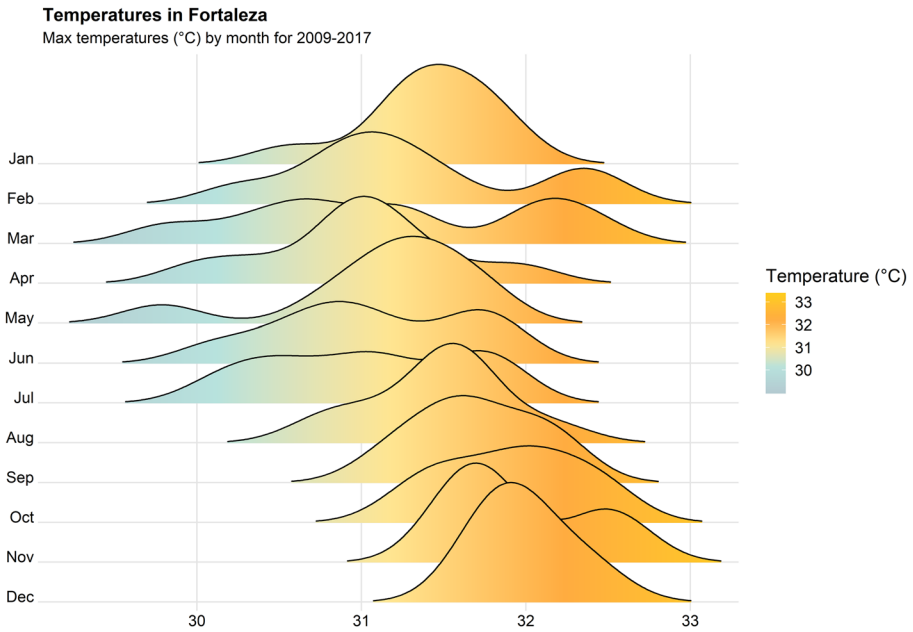


Fig. 2 Monthly maximum temperature in Fortaleza for the period between 2009 and 2017

### 3 Methods

#### 3.1 Variational Mode Decomposition

Signal decomposition is a useful approach for filtering and capturing information from time series. The empirical mode decomposition (EMD) (Huang et al. 1998) is a famous time–frequency analysis used to process nonstationary and nonlinear series. Although this technique is simple and robust, there are a few limitations, such as the mode mixing problem, due to intermittent signals and noise, and the endpoint effect (Gao et al. 2008). In addition, EMD lacks an appropriate mathematical theory basis. Some methods have been developed to solve these problems, such as the ensemble EMD (EEMD) (Wu and Huang, 2009), the complementary EEMD (Yeh et al. 2010), and the complete EEMD with adaptive noise (Torres et al. 2011). However, they were not able to address the mode mixing issue for all signals.

The variational mode decomposition is a non-recursive decomposition method developed by Dragomiretskiy and Zosso (2014) to properly address the sensitivity to noise and sampling of EMD. The VMD algorithm decomposes a signal into intrinsic mode functions (IMF), which are amplitude-modulated frequency-modulated signals. Each mode is assumed to be compact around its center frequencies and they are concurrently estimated. The constrained variational problem solved by VMD to decompose a time series is given by the following equation:

$$\min_{\{u_k\}, \{\omega_k\}} \left\{ \sum_k \|\partial_t \left[ \left( \delta(t) + \frac{j}{\pi t} * u_k(t) \right) e^{-j\omega_k t} \right] \right\|_2^2 \right\} s.t. \sum_k u_k = f \tag{1}$$

where  $\{u_k\}$  are the estimated modes, and  $\{\omega_k\}$  their center frequencies,  $k$  is the number of IMFs,  $\delta$  is the Dirac function,  $t$  is the time,  $j^2 = -1$  and  $*$  denotes convolution. For a complete description of the algorithm, see Dragomiretskiy and Zosso (2014).

VMD has three main parameters: the number  $k$  of IMFs, the quadratic penalty term  $\alpha$ , and the convergence tolerance  $\epsilon$ . To find the parameter  $k$ , we followed the approach suggested by Zuo et al. (2020), which is based on the observation of the center frequency of the last IMF. After defining an initial value for  $k$ , we look at the amplitude spectrum; if this decomposition mode presents the aliasing phenomenon,  $k$  is reduced by one and the analysis is repeated. A sensitivity analysis was performed to choose the best values for the quadratic penalty and the tolerance.

### 3.2 Gradient Boosting Regression

Gradient Boosting is a statistical model for function estimation based on a sequential ensemble of weak learners (Friedman 2001). In this method, the weak learner – usually a decision tree – is first used to predict an output variable  $y$  with a set of explanatory variables  $x$ . Then, the weak learner ( $g_n$ ) is used to predict the residuals of the initial model, and this procedure is repeated until the loss reaches a threshold or a maximum number of models is built ( $N$ ). Predictions are multiplied by a learning rate or shrinkage parameter  $\nu$  to slow down the procedure and to increase the number of weak learners in the model:

$$f_n(x) = \nu * g_n(x) \tag{2}$$

The learning rate can vary between 0 and 1 but usually ranges from 0.1 to 0.3 (or less). The predicted value is added to the output of the previous model:

$$F_n(x) = F_{n-1}(x) + f_n(x)$$

Loss is minimized following a functional gradient descent algorithm. For regression tasks, the usual loss function is the mean squared error:

$$L(f) = \frac{1}{2}(y - F(x))^2 \tag{3}$$

The gradient descent algorithm is used to optimize the parameters of the predictive model by finding the local minimum of the loss function:

$$f_n(x) = -\frac{\partial L(f)}{\partial F} \tag{4}$$

The main parameters of the gradient boosting model are: (i) the number of trees, which defines the number of iterations; (ii) the tree depth, which influences the complexity of the tree; (iii) the learning rate, and (iv) the minimum number of observations in a node to result in splitting. In this study, we set the learning rate to 0.1 and the number of observations per node to 10. We tested different combinations of the tree depth (1, 2, and 3) and the number of trees (50, 100, and 150). The model parameters were tuned using fivefold cross-validation: the combination of parameters that provide the best performance across the cross-validation results is chosen.

### 3.3 Hybrid VMD-GBR Model

To check the stationarity of the signals, the Augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF) test was performed. This test assumes a unit root for the univariate time series, i.e., it tests the null hypothesis that  $\alpha = 1$  in the following equation:

$$\Delta Y_t = c + \beta t + \alpha y_{t-1} + \phi_1 \Delta Y_{t-1} + \phi_2 \Delta Y_{t-2} + \dots + \phi_p \Delta Y_{t-p} + e_t \quad (5)$$

The inputs for the predictive model were selected using the mutual information (MI) between the signals of the weather variables and the filtered water demand and the partial autocorrelation function (PACF) plots of each decomposed signal of water demand. The PACF approach is commonly used for streamflow forecasting (Ali et al. 2020; Feng 2020). The confidence interval for the PACF corresponds to  $[-\frac{1.96}{\sqrt{n}}, \frac{1.96}{\sqrt{n}}]$ , where  $n$  is the length of the training set; the significant lags are the ones that fall out of this interval.

The MI metric accounts for the interactions between two random variables without assuming linearity or continuity. Basically, the larger the value of MI, the closest the relationship between the variables and the amount of information that one contains about the other. MI is based on the concept of Shannon entropy, which measures the uncertainty of a variable. The MI between two variables  $X$  and  $Y$  is expressed as:

$$I(Y;X) = \sum_{x \in X} \sum_{y \in Y} (x,y) \log \log \left( \frac{p(x,y)}{p(x)p(y)} \right) \quad (6)$$

The methodology of the VMD-GBR model can be summarized as follows:

**Step 1:** Decompose the water demand, precipitation, and maximum temperature time series into additive intrinsic mode functions using VMD. The parameter  $k$  is defined by observing the power spectrum of the last IMF of each decomposed signal, which should not present a center frequency alias (Zuo et al. 2020). The quadratic penalty term  $\alpha$  and the convergence tolerance  $\varepsilon$  are chosen with sensitivity analysis on model performance.

**Step 2:** Estimate the deterministic component of the signals of water demand using the Augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF) test and reconstruct the time series using only the remaining signals.

**Step 3:** Detect the most relevant IMFs of the weather variables by calculating the mutual information between each of them and the reconstructed signal of water demand. These will be inputs for the predictive model.

**Step 4:** In addition to the IMFs selected in the previous step, choose the lagged inputs for the predictive model by observing the partial autocorrelation function of the water demand IMFs. The IMF corresponding to the trend component is not included in this analysis.

**Step 5:** Normalize all data using the min–max normalization:

$$x_{norm} = \frac{x - \min(x)}{(x) - \min(x)} \quad (7)$$

**Step 6:** Split the dataset into training and testing (here, we used 80% for model training and 20% for testing). The input variables are the lagged IMFs of water demand and

the most relevant IMFs of weather variables. In this study, different combinations of the model parameters were tested, namely, the number of trees, the tree depth, shrinkage, and the number of observations in the terminal nodes. The parameters are tuned using fivefold cross-validation in the training dataset and the model performance is evaluated using the testing dataset.

### 3.3.1 Performance Assessment

Model performance was evaluated with three measures: R-squared, Mean Absolute Error (MAE), and Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE).

$$R^2 = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - \hat{y}_i)^2}{\sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - \bar{y})^2} \tag{8}$$

$$MAE = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n |\hat{y}_i - y_i|}{n} \tag{9}$$

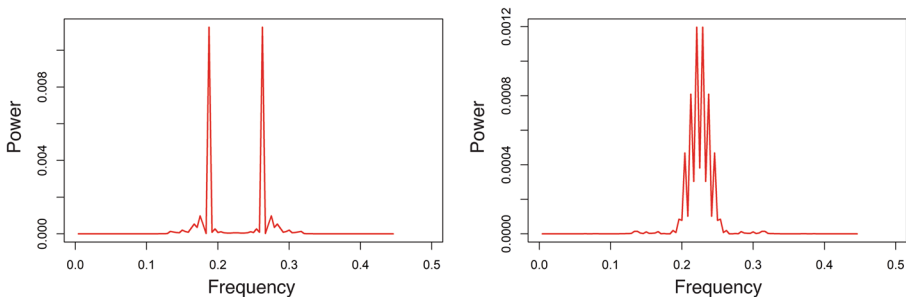
$$RMSE = \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n \frac{(\hat{y}_i - y_i)^2}{n}} \tag{10}$$

where  $y_i$  is the observed water demand at month  $i$ ,  $\hat{y}_i$  is the predicted water demand at month  $j$ , and  $n$  is the number of months in the prediction horizon.

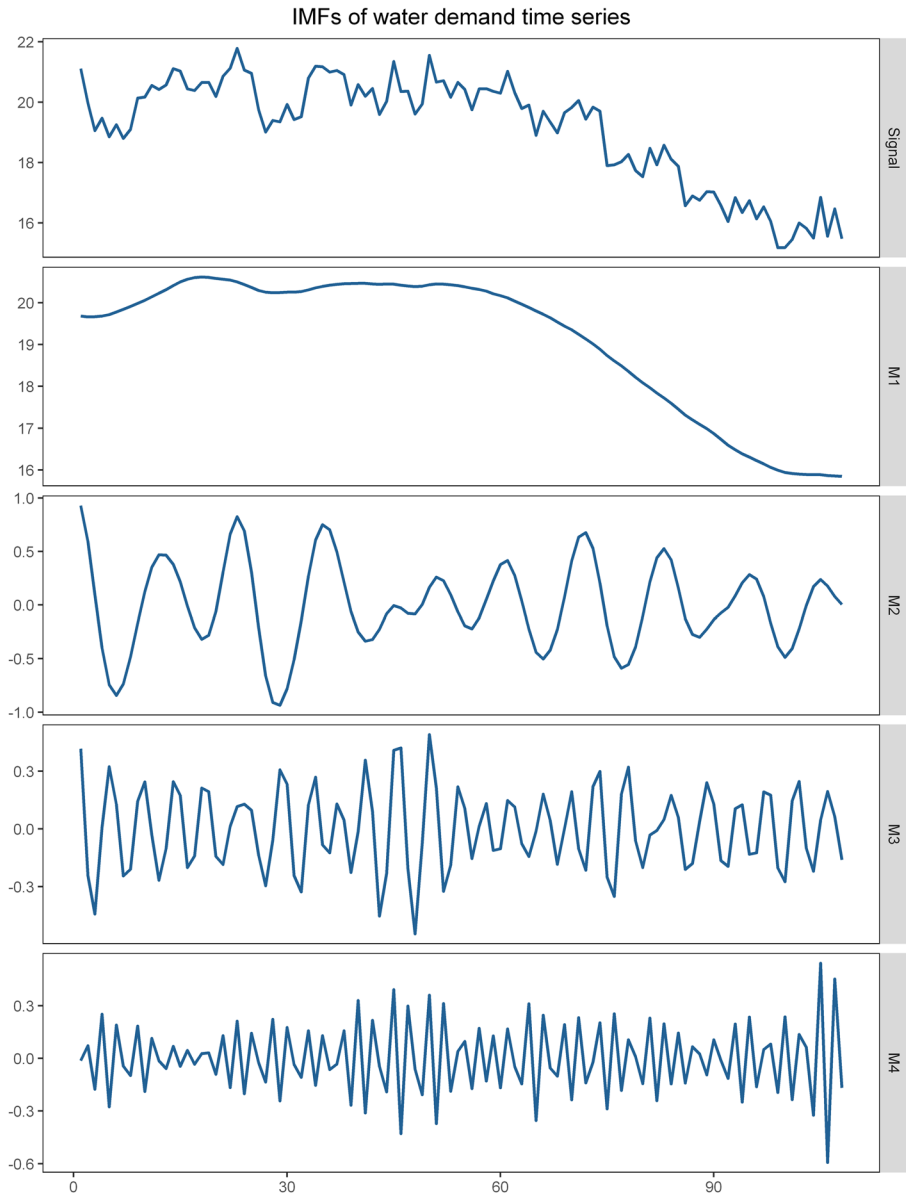
## 4 Results and Discussion

The residential water demand time series was decomposed into four signals to avoid the aliasing effect observed in the last IMF when  $k$  was set to five (Figs. 3 and 4). Following the same approach, the precipitation and maximum temperature time series were decomposed into three IMFs each (Figs. 5 and 6).

The MI metric indicated that the second IMF of both maximum temperature and precipitation were the ones to contain the most information on the water demand series (Table 1). The autocorrelation functions of these signals present a seasonal pattern



**Fig. 3** Power spectrum of IMFs 4 (left) and 5 (right) of water demand time series. The aliasing effect can be observed in the IMF5, where the center frequency overlap

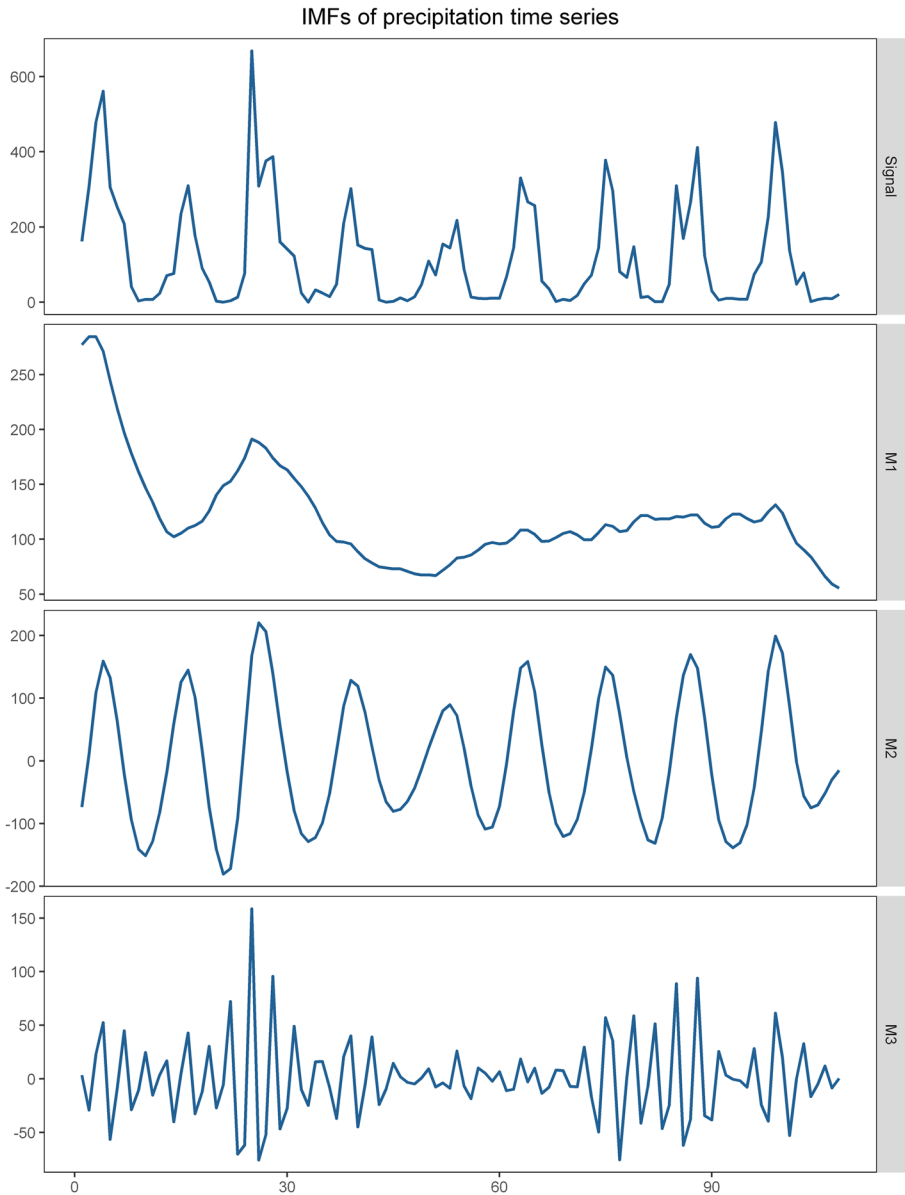


**Fig. 4** Original and decomposed signals of water demand time series

where the peaks and the troughs are six months apart, while the third IMF does not seem to have a seasonal pattern. This might indicate that the last IMF of each series contains noise and thus could not directly influence demand patterns, while the second corresponds to a periodic signal.

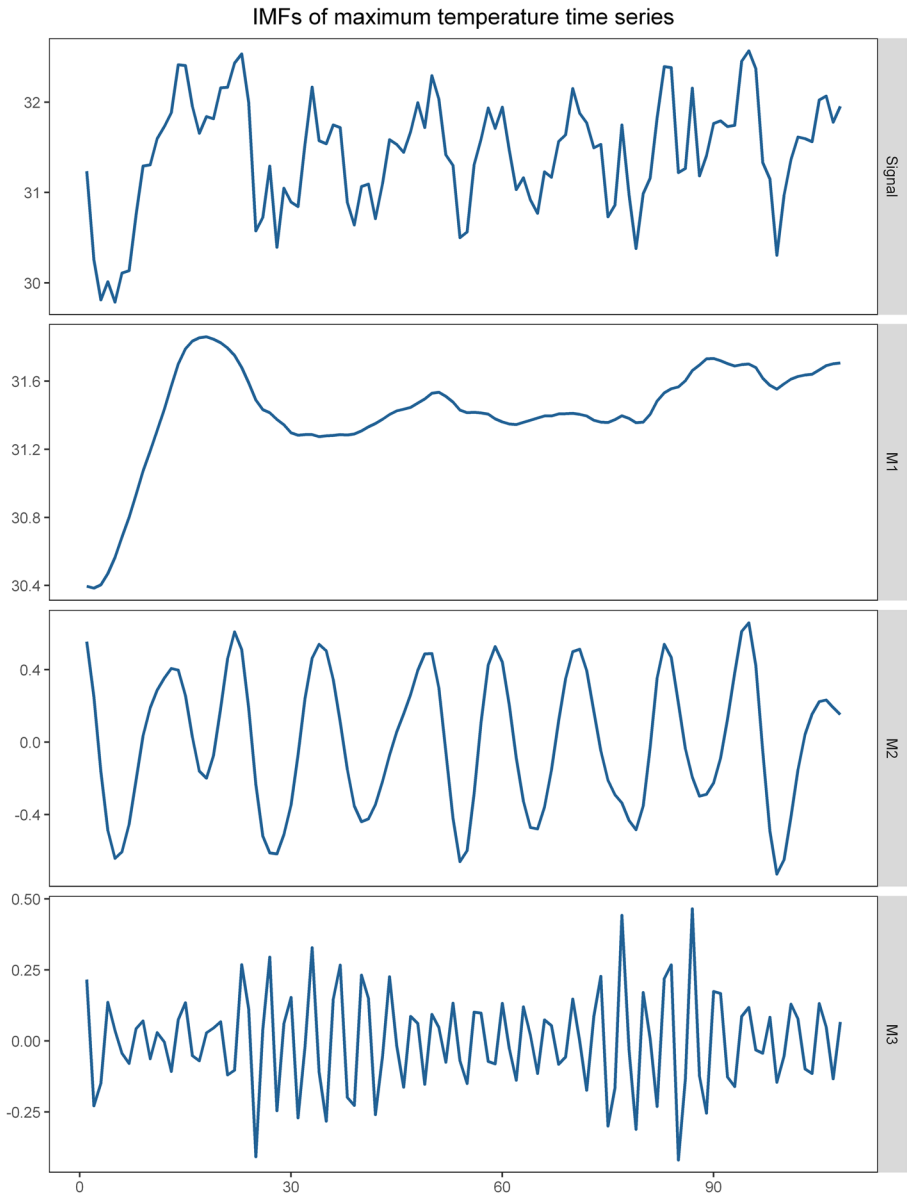
The second IMF of water demand decomposition corresponds to the trend component. The decreasing trend in residential water demand after 2015 could be associated





**Fig. 5** Original and decomposed signals of mean precipitation time series

with conservation attitudes. After the 2012–2018 drought, the local water company implemented a contingency tariff to encourage a reduction of at least 20% in consumption. Socioeconomic factors, such as income, water price, and household composition could also be associated with changes in water demand trends, as pointed out in previous studies (Parandvash and Chang 2016; Zubaidi et al. 2020). Demand-side measures and even mass media coverage of extreme events can also affect the behavior of this



**Fig. 6** Original and decomposed signals of maximum temperature time series

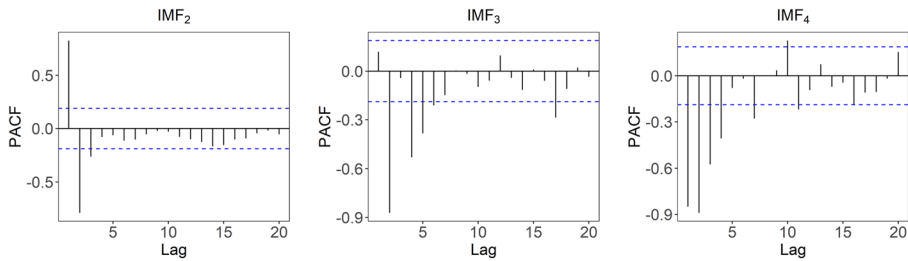
particular signal of water demand (Bolorinos et al. 2020). Modeling this component was beyond the scope of this study.

The additional relevant inputs were defined based on the PACF of the decomposed signals of water demand (Fig. 7). Previous water demand has a great influence on future consumption and climate variables alone would not be able to provide accurate predictions. The final dataset had 12 input variables.

**Table 1** Mutual information between each decomposed signal and filtered water demand time series

| Max Temperature  |                  |                  | Precipitation    |                  |                  |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| IMF <sub>1</sub> | IMF <sub>2</sub> | IMF <sub>3</sub> | IMF <sub>1</sub> | IMF <sub>2</sub> | IMF <sub>3</sub> |
| 0.07             | 0.22             | 0.06             | 0.07             | 0.11             | 0.05             |

A sensitivity analysis on the performance of the VMD-GBR model for 1-month ahead predictions indicated the most suitable values for the quadratic penalty term and the convergence tolerance, set to 10 and 10<sup>-5</sup>, respectively. Table 2 indicates the R<sup>2</sup> values for different combinations of both parameters. After defining these parameters, the model was tested for predictions with leading times varying between one and twelve months.

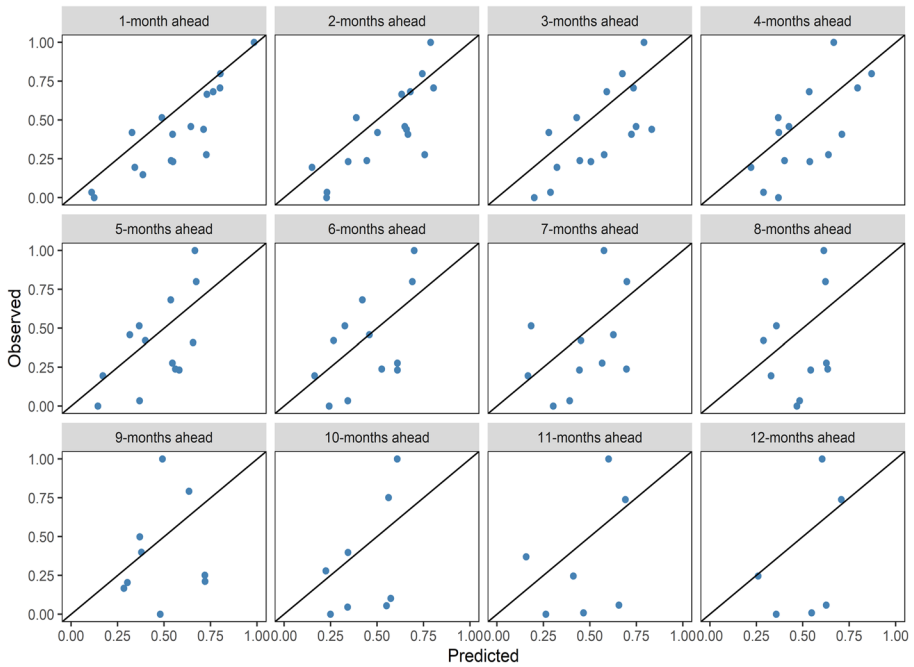


**Fig. 7** Partial autocorrelation plots of water demand IMFs

Figure 8 presents the scatter plots of the testing set for each leading time. As it would be expected, the performance is worse as the leading time increases, but the model presents accurate predictions for 1, 2, 3, and 4-months ahead of water demand. Table 3 shows the R<sup>2</sup>, RMSE, and MSE for each leading time. The VMD-GBR model successfully addresses climate variability in water demand prediction and reassures previous findings that residential consumption is driven by precipitation and temperature patterns (Adamowski et al. 2013; Parandvash and Chang 2016; Zubaidi et al. 2020).

**Table 2** R<sup>2</sup> for different combinations of VMD parameters

| $\alpha$ | $\epsilon$       |                  |                  |                  |                   |                   |       |
|----------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------|
|          | 10 <sup>-5</sup> | 10 <sup>-6</sup> | 10 <sup>-7</sup> | 10 <sup>-8</sup> | 10 <sup>-12</sup> | 10 <sup>-15</sup> | 0     |
| 10       | 0.719            | 0.714            | 0.705            | 0.705            | 0.705             | 0.705             | 0.705 |
| 20       | 0.680            | 0.697            | 0.697            | 0.697            | 0.697             | 0.697             | 0.697 |
| 50       | 0.711            | 0.700            | 0.700            | 0.700            | 0.700             | 0.711             | 0.700 |
| 100      | 0.675            | 0.675            | 0.675            | 0.675            | 0.675             | 0.675             | 0.675 |
| 200      | 0.710            | 0.710            | 0.710            | 0.710            | 0.710             | 0.710             | 0.717 |
| 500      | 0.323            | 0.323            | 0.323            | 0.323            | 0.323             | 0.323             | 0.323 |
| 600      | 0.307            | 0.307            | 0.307            | 0.307            | 0.307             | 0.307             | 0.307 |
| 700      | 0.276            | 0.276            | 0.276            | 0.276            | 0.276             | 0.276             | 0.276 |
| 800      | 0.282            | 0.283            | 0.283            | 0.283            | 0.283             | 0.283             | 0.283 |
| 900      | 0.273            | 0.273            | 0.273            | 0.273            | 0.273             | 0.273             | 0.273 |
| 1000     | 0.272            | 0.266            | 0.266            | 0.266            | 0.266             | 0.266             | 0.266 |
| 2000     | 0.192            | 0.185            | 0.185            | 0.185            | 0.185             | 0.185             | 0.185 |



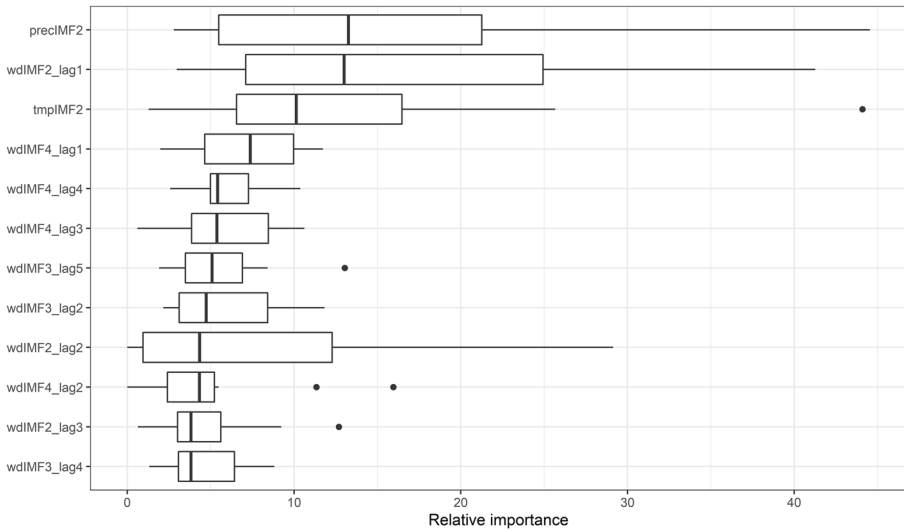
**Fig. 8** Scatter plots of the normalized fitted values of the VMD-GBR model and normalized observed data for the testing period for each leading time

The importance measure of the input variables provides insight into the influence of climate variables in the prediction (Fig. 9). Although there is a large variance in the mean average MSE of the IMFs of temperature (tmpIMF2) and precipitation (precIMF2), they are amongst the top-ranked variables. This result confirms the hypothesis that residential water demand is driven by climate patterns.

Different from the application area of other researches mentioned here (Parandvash and Chang 2016; Rasifaghihi et al. 2020; Fiorillo et al. 2021), Ceará has a significant interannual

**Table 3** Performance metrics for the VMD-GBR model predictions during the testing period for different leading times

| Lead time (months) | R <sup>2</sup> | RMSE  | MAE   |
|--------------------|----------------|-------|-------|
| 1                  | 0.719          | 0.197 | 0.158 |
| 2                  | 0.549          | 0.222 | 0.188 |
| 3                  | 0.463          | 0.226 | 0.199 |
| 4                  | 0.519          | 0.213 | 0.173 |
| 5                  | 0.388          | 0.230 | 0.192 |
| 6                  | 0.295          | 0.258 | 0.226 |
| 7                  | 0.354          | 0.258 | 0.230 |
| 8                  | 0.110          | 0.312 | 0.278 |
| 9                  | 0.233          | 0.277 | 0.233 |
| 10                 | 0.290          | 0.319 | 0.271 |
| 11                 | 0.337          | 0.324 | 0.271 |
| 12                 | 0.324          | 0.375 | 0.313 |



**Fig. 9** Boxplot of the increase in MSE obtained when each of the input variables was removed from the dataset, ranked according to the median value of its relative importance

variability of both precipitation and temperature, mainly due to the El Niño South Oscillation and the Interhemispheric Tropical Atlantic Gradient (Hastenrath and Heller 1977). The region also presents intraseasonal variations related to the Madden–Julian Oscillation (Vasconcelos Junior et al. 2018). Although widely studied, these phenomena have complex interactions with precipitation that are still not completely understood by the scientific community. Hence, forecasting models that can properly detect seasonal variability of climate variables and their relationship with water demand can be of great value for operational management decisions and the adjustment of demand-side strategies.

## 5 Conclusion

This study set out to design a predictive model of monthly residential water demand including climate variability. To do that, we applied a decomposition technique to remove the water demand component associated with socioeconomic and policy characteristics and a machine learning technique to create an autoregressive model. The methodology is applied in Fortaleza, Brazil, a region with an elevated interannual and intraseasonal climate variability.

The results show that applying VMD to filter the water demand signal is an effective approach for removing components that are not directly associated with climate variability. Although the trend component could be associated with a response to drought, that is somehow dependent on climate, the effective implementation of water conservation policies and the change of habits in the households are more related to socioeconomic factors. The VMD-GBR model is suitable for regions affected by extreme events or complex climate variability.

Maximum temperature and precipitation were significant predictors of water demand and including their seasonal components as exogenous variables of the model improved

accuracy. The model is appropriated for at least 4 months-ahead predictions, with an average RMSE of 0.193. The methods used in this study may be applied to medium-term planning of water supply systems and to guide operational and tactical decisions of water companies. The VMD-GBR approach can yet be coupled to seasonal climate forecast models and scenario-based predictions of the trend component of water demand. The findings are also useful to assess climate change impacts on future water demand, which could provide insight into policy design.

**Authors Contributions** All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Taís Maria Nunes Carvalho. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Taís Maria Nunes Carvalho and the review and editing was performed by Taís Maria Nunes Carvalho and Francisco de Assis de Souza Filho. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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**Data Availability** Some or all data and models that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

## Declarations

**Conflicts of Interest** The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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