

Temporal Augmented Graph Neural Networks for Session-Based Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

Session-based recommendation aims to predict the next item that is most likely to be clicked by an anonymous user, based on his/her clicking sequence within one visit. It becomes an essential function of many recommender systems since it protects privacy. However, as the accumulated session records keep increasing, it becomes challenging to model the user interests since they would drift when the time span is large. Efforts have been devoted to handling dynamic user interests by modeling all historical sessions at one time or conducting offline retraining regularly. These solutions are far from practical requirements in terms of efficiency and capturing timely user interests. To this end, we propose a memory-efficient framework - TASRec. It constructs a graph for each day to model the relations among items. Thus, the same item on different days could have different neighbors, corresponding to the drifting user interests. We design a tailored graph neural network to embed this dynamic graph of items and learn temporal augmented item representations. Based on this, we leverage a sequential neural architecture to predict the next item of a given sequence. Experiments on real-world datasets demonstrate that TASRec outperforms state-of-the-art session-based recommendation methods.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Information systems** → **Recommender systems; Retrieval models and ranking.**

KEYWORDS

Session-based recommendations; graph neural networks; dynamic user interests

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1 INTRODUCTION

The session-based recommendation attracts increasing attention since it helps online users protect their privacy [3, 5]. In various real-world recommender systems, such as YouTube, Netflix, Taobao, and JD.com, many users would prefer to not log in. In these scenarios, the historical shopping or watching record of each user is not available. Conventional recommendation methods could not directly be applied to learn the user interests based on interactions. Thus, session-based recommendation has been explored. Given a sequence of items clicked by an anonymous user within one visit, the goal is to predict the next item that this user would click within the same visit [15–17].

To perform session-based recommendations, existing methods mainly focus on two tasks, i.e., effectively capturing item dependencies in one session and mining collaborative signal to enrich sole session information. First, gated recurrent units have been adopted [5] to process short sequences because its superior performance than long short term memory [3]. Wu et al. [17] utilize graph gated neural network to further explore item dependencies among distant items in each session. Second, since user behaviors involved in the intra-session are limited, item relationships among inter-sessions are incorporated to better analyze user intents. Wang et al. [16] construct a global graph over all sessions to capture potential high order signal of items. Wang et al. [15] summarize a collaborative sequence representation by extracting useful features from neighbor sessions in the outer memory.

However, in practice, numerous historical session records have been accumulated, which are informative but challenging to model. It becomes expensive to load the entire historical sessions into the memory and train the model at one time. Also, the user interests would vary since the time span is large [3, 13]. A few recent efforts have been devoted to modeling these dynamic user interests. Mi and Faltings [9] propose to employ a large memory module to learn representations for all historical sessions. When making inferences for the new coming session, they search an inverted table to find existing k nearest neighbor sessions and compute an output distribution to predict the next item. This solution could successfully utilize long-term and short-term information. It works well when the time span is small, e.g., one or two weeks. However, as the time span becomes large, it would be infeasible to hold all session records in the memory. Qiu et al. [10] propose to use a Wasserstein reservoir to hold sampled worst predicted sequences and retrain the whole model after some time. This method could easily learn the new preferences of users by retraining on new coming data. However, such model updates still could not capture new item transitions in time. To preserve useful historical information, they slow

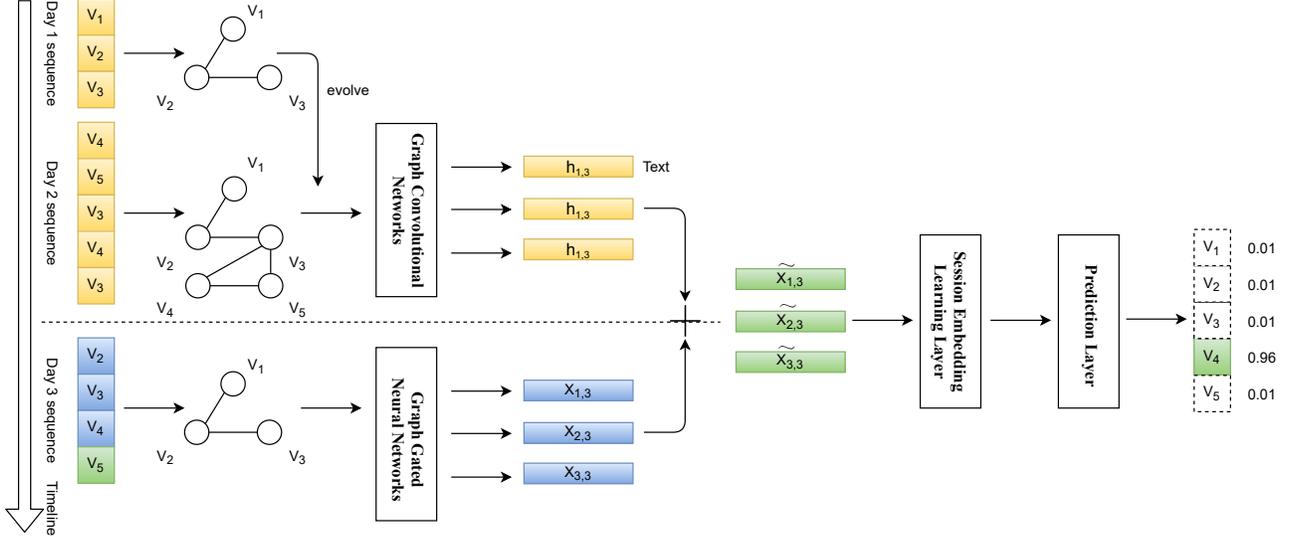


Figure 1: TASRec employs a dynamic graph to capture the drifting user interests in session-based recommendations

down the sampling speed as time goes by. It will overlook recent data. Thus, existing solutions can not satisfy the practical demands in efficiently and timely capturing drifting user interests.

In summary, there are three major challenges in handling session-based recommendations with long-duration and a large number of sessions. First, sessions are continuously growing. The memory could not hold all sessions. Second, the user interests might drift significantly. An appropriate model is needed to model the temporal information in the historical sessions. Third, the information contained in the new session needs to be modeled in time.

To tackle the above problems, we propose temporal augmented graph gated neural networks to extract helpful information from continuously coming sessions. In summary, our main contributions are described below.

- We propose a Temporal Augmented graph neural network for Session-based Recommendations (TASRec), to model the dynamic user interests within a long period.
- We build an efficient temporal graph that adds new edges from recent coming sessions to incorporate novel item transitions and decay old edge weights to filter outdated information. The shifting neighbors on a different day could help the model capture emerging user interests.
- We conduct experiments on real-world datasets and validate the effectiveness of TASRec.

2 TEMPORAL AUGMENTED RECOMMENDER SYSTEM - TASREC

Notations. Let \mathcal{I} represent the unique item set $\{i_1, i_2, \dots, i_m\}$ involved in all the sessions, where the cardinality size of I is denoted by $|\mathcal{I}|$. A session s of an anonymous user is represented by a sequence $[i_{1,t}, i_{2,t}, \dots, i_{l,t}]$, where $i_{1,t} \in \mathcal{I}$ represents item clicked by user within session s in day t . The sequence is ordered by clicked timestamps of the items and has length of l . Given such the session s , the objective of session-based recommender system is to predict top-N items most likely to be clicked next by the corresponding

user. In this paper, we represent item-to-item interactions in two levels: session graph and temporal graph. Let $G_s = (\mathcal{V}_s, E_s)$ denote the session graph, where $\mathcal{V}_s \subset \mathcal{I}$ is item nodes in session s and $E_s \in \mathbb{R}^{|\mathcal{V}_s| \times |\mathcal{V}_s|}$ is directed adjacency matrix. The matrix element $(i_{i-1,t}, i_{i,t})$ is defined by the occurrence of the edge divided by the outdegree of that edge's start node $i_{i-1,t}$ from the outgoing direction or the indegree of the end node $i_{i,t}$ from the incoming direction. Let $G_t = (\mathcal{V}_t, E_t)$ denotes the temporal graph utilized in day t , where $\mathcal{V}_t \subset \mathcal{I}$ contains items of sessions generated before day t and $E_t \in \mathbb{R}^{|\mathcal{V}_t| \times |\mathcal{V}_t|}$ is the undirected adjacency matrix. Each element in E_t is defined by the co-occurrence frequency of the corresponding two items, which will be illustrated in the following. And We present our TASRec framework in Figure 1.

2.1 Intra-session Modeling Layer

Following the previous common practice [16–18], we first use the standard graph gated neural networks (GGNN) on session graph G_s to capture the intra-session item interactions. Given session s in day t and the initial embedding layer X , we conduct GGNN on graph G_s to obtain the intra-session item embeddings: $[h_{1,t}, h_{2,t}, \dots, h_{l,t}]$, each one corresponding to item in session sequence $[i_{1,t}, i_{2,t}, \dots, i_{l,t}]$.

2.2 Temporal Modeling Layer

Considering recommendation task in session s of day t , the temporal modeling layer targets at learning the item interactions on graph G_t , which stores the historical session records before day t . To facilitate such the interaction modeling, we propose a simple yet effective way to compute the undirected adjacency matrix E_t on graph G_t . To be specific, for items i and j , we have edge weight $e'_{i,j}$ and $e'_{j,i}$ of 1 if user clicked item j after item i in any session of day $t' < t$; otherwise $e'_{i,j} = 0$. Considering all the previous days t' , i.e. $t' = 0, \dots, t-1$, element $e_{i,j}$ in matrix E_t is thus defined by:

$$e_{i,j} = \frac{e'_{i,j}}{2^{t-1}} + \frac{e'_{i,j}}{2^{t-2}} \dots + \frac{e'_{i,j}}{2^0}. \quad (1)$$

Motivated by the memory decay in reinforcement learning, we use an exponential denominator to re-scale the edge weights. That means the historical edge weight impact will become more smaller with the increasing of time discrepancy between previous day t' and current one t . It is notably pointed out that the defined computation on adjacency matrix E_t is simple and efficient. Since we apply an exponential decay with base of 2, in the next day, E_{t+1} could be simply computed by: $E_{t+1} = E(\{e_{i,j}^t\}) + E_t/2$, where $E(\{e_{i,j}^t\})$ represents the edge weight matrix newly obtained on day t .

Given adjacency matrix E_t on graph G_t , for session s in day t , we implement a multi-layer graph convolutional network (GCN) to learn the high-order item interactions. Specially, the graph convolution at the k -th layer is formally defined as:

$$x_{i,t}^k = \sigma\left(\frac{1}{\sum_{j \in \mathcal{N}_i^t} e_{i,j} + 1} \left(\sum_{j \in \mathcal{N}_i^t} e_{i,j} x_{j,t}^{k-1} + x_{i,t}^{k-1} \right) W_1\right). \quad (2)$$

$x_{i,t}^k \in \mathbb{R}^{1 \times d}$ denotes the learned embedding of item i at the k -th step of GCN. \mathcal{N}_i^t denote the temporal neighbor set connecting to item i in day t , where each neighbor j has edge weight $e_{i,j} \geq 1$. We remove those neighbors with edge weight $e_{i,j} < 1$ to avoid the overwhelming noisy information during neighbor aggregation in GCN. $W_1 \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$ is a trainable matrix in GCN. σ is the activation function LeakyReLU. The initial embedding $x_{i,t}^0$ is given by the i -row of embedding layer X . Notably, each layer of GCN will aggregate all the first-order neighbor embedding and that of the item itself. After K -layer iterations, the local structural information within K -hop and the self information are contained in each item.

Based on the series of item embeddings learned from the different layers in GCN, we use an average pooling to obtain the temporal item embedding and preserve the interaction information of different orders on graph G_t . Formally, for item i in the given session s , its temporal embedding is generated by:

$$x_{i,t} = \frac{1}{1+K} (x_{i,t}^0 + x_{i,t}^1 + \dots + x_{i,t}^K). \quad (3)$$

2.3 Session Embedding Learning Layer

This layer aims at obtaining embedding of the whole session s to facilitate the following recommendation prediction task. We first process both the intra-session and temporal item embeddings learned before, and then use attention mechanism to compute session embedding.

Normalization. To alleviate GNN-based model popularity-biased problem [2], we apply L2 normalization on the temporal item embedding as:

$$x_{i,t} = x_{i,t} / \|x_{i,t}\|_2, \quad (4)$$

where $\|\cdot\|_2$ denote the L2 norm of an embedding vector.

Item embedding combination. Given the intra-session and temporal item embeddings, we simply summarize them to obtain the final item embedding, and apply dropout to avoid overfitting:

$$\hat{x}_{i,t} = \text{Dropout}(x_{i,t} + h_{i,t}). \quad (5)$$

Session embedding. Considering the input session $s = [i_{1,t}, i_{2,t}, \dots, i_{l,t}]$ with length l , each of the final item representation is used as query to calculate attention score with the last item:

$$\beta_i = \phi(\hat{x}_{i,t} W_2 + \hat{x}_{l,t} W_3 + b) q, \quad \text{for } i = 1 \dots l. \quad (6)$$

$W_2, W_3 \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$ are attention matrices; $b \in \mathbb{R}^{1 \times d}$ is trainable bias; $q \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times 1}$ is a vector; and ϕ is sigmoid activation function. The session embedding is then given by the weighted average of its item embeddings:

$$s_t = \left[\left(\sum_{i=1}^l \beta_i \hat{x}_{i,t} \right) \parallel \hat{x}_{l,t} \right] W_4, \quad (7)$$

where \parallel denote the embedding concatenation, and $W_4 \in \mathbb{R}^{2d \times d}$ is trainable matrix.

2.4 Prediction Layer

Given session embedding s_t , the next clicking probabilities concerning all the candidate items are obtained by:

$$\hat{y} = \text{softmax}(s_t X^T). \quad (8)$$

Let $y \in \mathbb{R}^{1 \times I}$ denote the ground truth label vector about the next item. We treat the recommendation task as a classification problem, and train with cross-entropy loss as:

$$\mathcal{L}(y) = - \sum_{i=1}^{|I|} y_i \log(\hat{y}_i) + (1 - y_i) \log(1 - \hat{y}_i). \quad (9)$$

3 EXPERIMENTS

In this section, we conduct experiments over three benchmark datasets to answer several questions. First, how effective is TASRec compared with the state-of-the-art baselines? Second, how much does each component of TASRec contribute?

3.1 Experimental Setup

Datasets. We evaluate the proposed model on three popular session-based recommendation datasets including Diginetica¹, Retailrocket² and Aotm [8]. Diginetica is obtained from the CIKM Cup 2016, which records user behaviors from an E-commerce platform. Retailrocket is initially utilized for Kaggle competition, which comprises visitors' behavior data in 2015. Aotm is a music playlist dataset, which contains user's playing lists and music identifier.

Following previous experimental protocols [16] [7], we remove sessions with less than 2 interacted behaviors and delete items with less than 5 interactions for data preprocessing. Since the number of sessions between different days are unbalanced, we regard the sessions within 4, 10, and 3 successive days as one day sessions for Diginetica, Aotm, and Retailrocket datasets, respectively. In this way, we obtain 30, 36, and 46 day sessions for Diginetica, Aotm, and Retailrocket, respectively. To simulate the temporal training environment, we split data of first $\frac{5}{6}$ and last $\frac{1}{6}$ days into training and testing sets. For the training set, we use the last 20% remaining sessions for validation similar to [1]. Specifically, given a session record $s = \{i_1, i_2, \dots, i_t\}_{t=2}^l$, we generate a set of training samples $\{(i_1, \dots, i_{t-1}), i_t\}$, and the goal is to accurately predict the t^{th} item based on the previous ones.

Competitors. To validate the effectiveness of TASRec, we include two categories of baselines as follows. First, to validate the usefulness of capturing interest shifting within sessions, we include three

¹<http://www.cikmconference.org>

²<https://www.kaggle.com/retailrocket/ecommerce-dataset>

Table 1: Comparisons with other baseline methods

Method	Aotm			Diginetica			Retailrocket		
	Recall@20	Recall@50	NDCG@100	Recall@20	Recall@50	NDCG@100	Recall@10	Recall@20	NDCG@100
GRU4REC	1.70	3.64	1.32	28.90	40.02	15.66	17.41	23.11	12.75
SR-GNN	3.82	6.94	2.73	48.74	65.37	28.41	36.34	45.58	28.93
CSRM	<u>3.97</u>	<u>7.30</u>	<u>2.86</u>	48.88	<u>66.90</u>	28.34	37.43	<u>47.56</u>	28.43
LESSR	3.11	5.58	2.31	<u>49.59</u>	66.12	<u>29.03</u>	<u>37.97</u>	46.59	<u>29.84</u>
TASRec	4.42	7.71	3.08	50.39	67.27	29.48	39.08	48.16	30.36
Improv.	11.34%	5.62%	7.69%	1.61%	0.55%	1.55%	2.92%	1.26%	1.74%

Table 2: Ablation study results on Retailrocket dataset

Model	Recall@10	Recall@20	Recall@50	NDCG@100
TASRec-temp	36.73	46.65	58.40	27.55
TASRec-base	36.60	45.45	56.49	28.84
TASRec	39.08	48.16	59.48	30.36

standard static session models, GRU4REC [3], SR-GNN [17], and LESSR [1]. Second, to demonstrate the superiority of the proposed method over other temporal session model, we include a recent proposed model CSRM [15].

For our model, we implement it with Pytorch and the Adam optimizer is used to optimize the model, where the initial learning rate is set to 0.001 and will decay after two epochs. To avoid over-fitting problem, dropout [11] and weight regularization [4] techniques are also adopted. For all methods, we applied grid search method following [1] [12] to tune the hyper-parameters using validation set. Specifically, we search embedding dimension d from {50, 100, 150, 200} while the number of graph neural network layers K from 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. And the batch size is set to 128 for all models. The best results are reported in our experiments.

Evaluation Metrics. To evaluate the performance of all methods, we adopt two widely used evaluation metrics, i.e., Recall@ N and NDCG@ N (Normalized Discounted Cumulative Gain). In particular, Recall measures the predictive accuracy of top- N ranking list, while NDCG estimates the ranking order of the list.

3.2 Experimental Results

We first start to answer the first question proposed at the beginning of this section. Table 1 summarizes the results on three datasets in terms of Recall and NDCG values.

From the results, we have several observations. First, TASRec performs consistently better than other baselines across three datasets. It validates the effectiveness of the proposed method. Second, CSRM achieves generally better or comparable performance than three static methods (GRU4REC, SR-GNN, and LESSR), which demonstrates the usefulness to capture the interest shifting in session-based recommendation scenarios. However, CSRM is outperformed by our model in all cases. The primary reason is that our model explicitly utilizes a temporal modeling layer to capture user’s interest shifting while CSRM relies on the query quality to retrieve relevant items. This comparison indicates the effectiveness of our model in modeling user’s dynamic interests over time. Third, the

improvement between our model and the second best method decreases when the number of recalled items increases. It indicates that our model is capable of ranking the most likely clicked items in the top ranking list. These results validate the effectiveness of the proposed method.

3.3 Ablation study

We now start to investigate the second question, i.e., how much does each component of TASRec contribute. To this end, we introduce two variants, i.e., TASRec-temp and TASRec-base. TASRec-temp is obtained by excluding the intra-session modeling layer, which is used to validate the effectiveness of capturing intra-session sequential structures. TASRec-base is obtained by removing the temporal modeling layer, which is derived to validate the usefulness of capturing user’s interest shifts. The results on Retailrocket dataset are summarized in Table 2.

From the results in Table 2, we observe that TASRec achieves significantly better performance than its two variants. Specifically, the improvement between TASRec and TASRec-temp validates the effectiveness of modeling the sequential patterns within the session for session-based recommendations. The gap between TASRec and TASRec-base demonstrates the effectiveness of the proposed temporal modeling layer in capturing the dynamics of user interests over time.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we propose a novel memory-efficient framework, dubbed TASRec, for session-based recommendations when the number of available sessions is large. TASRec constructs a dynamic graph to preserve the item-to-item relationships over time, and then builds a tailored graph neural network to learn the temporal augmented item representations, which are fed into the standard sequential neural networks for effective recommendation. TASRec not only can capture the dynamics of user interests but also is memory efficient during the training. Empirical results on three real-world datasets demonstrate the effectiveness of TASRec compared with state-of-the-art baselines. Our future work is to explore user’s diverse interests [6, 14] for more accurate recommendation.

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