Pre-training of Context-aware Item Representation for Next Basket Recommendation

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ABSTRACT

Next basket recommendation, which aims to predict the next a few items that a user most probably purchases given his historical transactions, plays a vital role in market basket analysis. From the viewpoint of item, an item could be purchased by different users together with different items, for different reasons. Therefore, an ideal recommender system should represent an item considering its transaction contexts. Existing state-of-the-art deep learning methods usually adopt the static item representations, which are invariant among all of the transactions and thus cannot achieve the full potentials of deep learning. Inspired by the pre-trained representations of BERT in natural language processing, we propose to conduct context-aware item representation for next basket recommendation, called Item Encoder Representations from Transformers (IERT). In the offline phase, IERT pre-trains deep item representations conditioning on their transaction contexts. In the online recommendation phase, the pre-trained model is further fine-tuned with an additional output layer. The output contextualized item embeddings are used to capture users’ sequential behaviors and general tastes to conduct recommendation. Experimental results on the Ta-Feng data set show that IERT outperforms the state-of-the-art baseline methods, which demonstrated the effectiveness of IERT in next basket representation.

KEYWORDS

Next basket recommendation, BERT model

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1 INTRODUCTION

Market basket analysis has been widely used in online shopping companies to help retailers understand the customers’ purchase behaviors. In real-world, a customer usually visits a store multiple times and purchase a set of items as a basket at each of his visit. Given his purchase records, how to predict the items a user probably buy in the next visit becomes a crucial task, called next basket recommendation [3, 7, 10].

In fact, an item is purchased in the next visit may because it matches the user’s general taste (i.e., what items a user is interested in), or because it matches the user’s sequential behaviors (i.e., purchasing one item is related to purchasing another). Existing methods for next basket recommendation focus on modeling these two factors. For example, the traditional collaborative filtering (CF)-based methods represent the users’ general tastes by factorizing the user-item matrix [5]. However, the users’ sequential transaction behaviors are overlooked. Pattern-based method [4] models the evolution of customer’s purchases considering the purchase frequency and the periodic changes. In recent years, deep neural networks have been applied to next basket recommendation. Hierarchical Representation Model (HRM) [10] applies nonlinear operations to model the interaction between sequential behavior and users’ general taste. Dynamic REcurrent bAsket Model (DREAM) [11] improves HRM by adopting RNN to model interactions among apart baskets. Attribute-aware Neural Attentive Model (ANAM) [1] further considers item attribute and utilizes attention mechanism to capture user’s evolving interests.

Though promising improvements have been observed, existing deep approaches still have limitations. All these neural network methods focus on representing the user’s general and transaction specific interests. The items, however, are simply represented with the fixed-length static vectors. In real recommendation phenomenon, a user may purchase an item together with different items for different intentions, which correspond to different aspects of the item. For example, a user would like to equip some accessories for his mobile phone when earphone is purchased together with usb-cable. In contrast, the user may also purchase a number of earphones with the intent to do wholesale business. It is obvious that these two intents reflect different aspects of earphone. To conduct better recommendation, the earphone representations in these two scenarios should also be changed accordingly. Existing deep methods make use of the invariant item representations among all of the transactions (i.e., usually looking up from the transformation matrix), and thus limit the further improvements of neural networks. In this paper, to address this issue and inspired by the success of Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers (BERT) model [2] in natural language processing (NLP), we propose to represent the items with a fine-tuning based transfer learning architecture. Specifically, in the offline pre-train phase, we first train the model to produce context-aware item representations using sequential transaction corpus. Then, in the online recommendation phase, we fine-tune the pre-trained parameters and the final
contextualized item representations can reflect both the user’s local tastes and her global sequential behaviors at the item level.

The proposed model, called Item Encoder Representations from Transformer (IERT), offers several advantages: (1) It produces context-aware item representations which is closer to the nature of next basket recommendation; (2) It employs a two-stage process to capture both the user general tastes from the pre-training and the sequential behaviors from the fine-tuning. Experiments on Ta-Feng showed the superiority of the proposed IERT over the state-of-the-art baselines, indicating the effectiveness of modeling the context-aware item representation in recommendation with pre-training and fine-tuning.

2 BERT

Our proposed model is inspired by the success of BERT in NLP, which aims to encode deep bidirectional language representations. In this section, we briefly introduce the training procedure of BERT, which is composed of the pre-training stage and the fine-tuning stage as illustrated in Figure 1.

Pre-training. BERT tries to learn a deep bidirectional language representation leveraging both left and right context. Specifically, given a document-level corpus $C = \{c_1, c_2, \cdots, c_N\}$ including $N$ tokens, the model first constructs input representation $c_n$ for each token $c_n$ by summing the corresponding token embedding $v_n$, segment embedding $v_n^{seg}$ (i.e., distinguish two sentences by adding embedding A and B for each token in different sentences), and position embedding $v_n^{pos}$ (i.e., indicate the order of the token in the sentence). Input representations are then fed into a set of Transformer blocks to obtain context-aware token representations. Each Transformer block is composed of a multi-head attention which is followed by a feed-forward layer to obtain an output representation.

The hidden states of the last Transformer block are taken as context-aware representations $h_n$ to conduct the pre-training based on two unsupervised prediction tasks: (1) The Masked Language Model (MLM) task, which allows the model to predict target masked word fusing the left and the right context. (2) The next sentence prediction task, which aims to determine the order of two sentences.

Fine-tuning. BERT adapts the parameters to a supervised target task. Suppose we are given a set of labeled data $L$ as the input, where each instance consists of a sequence of input tokens $x_1, \cdots, x_m$ and a label $y$. The inputs are first passed through the pre-trained model to obtain the last transformer block’s activation, which is used to make prediction. The model includes language model likelihood as an auxiliary objective to improve generalization of the supervised model by alleviating the bias on target task and accelerate convergence [8].

BERT has shown its effectiveness in a variety of NLP tasks including general language understanding, question answering, named entity recognition and grounded commonsense inference. In this paper, we propose to adapt the BERT model for the task of next basket recommendation.

3 CONTEXT-AWARE ITEM REPRESENTATION

We propose to adjust the representation mechanism in BERT to produce context-aware item representation and apply the modified one to next basket recommendation.

![Figure 1: BERT training procedure. (a) shows the pre-training process and Transformer architecture. (b) shows the fine-tuning process, which modifies the pre-trained parameters by supervised target task.](image-url)
To address the above issues, we propose to adapt the BERT for a set of users, we use B as the objective function becomes:

\( L(B) = L_1(B) + L_2(B). \) (4)

### Fine-tuning Stage

After pre-training the model with objective in Eq. (4), the model parameters are fine-tuned at each recommendation. That is, the output states of the last Transformer block are used as the context-aware item representations to explore both users’ sequential behaviors and general tastes.

Formally, given a user \( u \), an input instance of the fine-tune stage is a sequence of historical transactions \( B^u \) and a candidate item \( i \) which probably be purchased in the next visit. Instead of constructing a representation for each basket, IERT models the purchase records at the fine-grained item level. Therefore, the historical transactions of user \( u \) can be further presented as sequentially combining the items in each basket \( B^u = \{ t^u_{i1}, t^u_{i2}, \ldots, t^u_{ij} \} \).

The history transactions \( B^u \) and the predict item \( i \) can be packed together as a single sequence, separating with a special token (SEP). Then the sequence is fed into the same transformer model as in the pre-training stage. As a result, the output hidden states \( H = \{ h^u_{i1}, h^u_{i2}, \ldots, h^u_{ij} \} \) and \( h^u_i \) are token as context-aware representations for historical transactions items and the predict item.

Attention mechanism is employed to capture the global and the local sequential behaviors from fine-grained item level, through constructing the representation of historical transactions. For the predict item \( h^u_i \), the historical transaction is presented as:

\[
   v_B = \sum_{t=1}^{T} \sum_{j=1}^{\text{length}(h^u_i)} \alpha_{t,j} \cdot h^u_{t,j},
\]

where \( \alpha_{t,j} \) is defined as:

\[
   \alpha_{t,j} = \frac{\exp(W^{1 \times D}(h^u_i \odot h^u_{t,j}) + b^j)}{\sum_{t'=1}^{T} \sum_{j'=1}^{\text{length}(h^u_i)} \exp(W^{1 \times D}(h^u_i \odot h^u_{t',j'}) + b^j)}
\]

The index of user \( u \) is transformed to an latent vector through a lookup layer:

\[
   v_u = \text{LOOKUP}(Q^T, u),
\]

where \( Q \in \mathbb{R}^{D \times |U|} \) denotes the transformation matrix for lookup.

### Online recommendation

Given a user \( u \) and his historical transactions \( B^u \), the probability of an item \( i \) being purchased in the next visit is calculated by softmax function:

\[
   p(i \in B^u_{t+1} | u, B^u_t) = \frac{\exp(h_i^T \cdot (v_u \odot v_B))}{\sum_{i' \in B^u_t} \exp(h_i'^T \cdot (v_u \odot v_B))},
\]

where \( v_u \in \mathbb{R}^{D\times 1} \) is the context-vector of user \( u \), \( v_B \in \mathbb{R}^{D\times 1} \) is the context-aware transaction representation.

In the learning process of IERT, weighted cross-entropy is employed as the objective function:

\[
   L = \sum_{u \in U} \sum_{B^u_t \in B^u} \sum_{i \in B^u_t} (-m \cdot y_{ui} \cdot \log p_i - n \cdot (1 - y_{ui}) \cdot \log(1 - p_i)),
\]

where \( \delta(i_{t+1} | i_t) \) denotes the annotated label of whether \( i_{t+1} \) is the next basket of \( i_t \). In this work, we construct the basket pairs consecutively or apart with 50% chance respectively.

The overall pre-training loss is the sum of the masked item prediction likelihood and the next basket prediction likelihood:

\[
   L_2(B) = L_1(B) + L_2(B).
\]
where $p_i$ is the probability of an item $i$ purchased in the next visit and $y_i$ denotes the annotated label of item $i$, that is, $y_i = 1$ if it is purchased in the next visit, otherwise 0.

### 3.3 Differences from BERT

IERT is inspired by the BERT model in NLP. In that sense, it is similar to BERT and share a number of merits from BERT. However, it also has several striking differences from BERT:

First, in the pre-training stage, to learn context-aware representations and explore sentence relationships, BERT takes the order information of the words and the sentences into consideration. In next basket recommendation, however, the order among the transactions is important while the items in the same transaction were bought without strict order. Based on the observation, IERT modifies the pre-training objective so as to make the training focus on modeling the order information among transactions.

Second, in the fine-tuning stage, BERT usually receives a pair of sentences in order to explore relationships between them. IERT, however, aims to build intention-related transaction representations, and can only receive historical transactions before current time step.

Third, BERT usually leverages various large-scale datasets as the pre-training corpus because the same word in different datasets still holds the similar meaning. In next basket recommendation, however, the same item ID in different datasets could represent totally different items and the items are rarely overlapped. Thus, the context-aware item representation is a more challenging task than the word representation task in NLP.

### 4 EXPERIMENTS

#### Datasets

We tested the performances of IERT on Ta-Feng data. In Ta-Feng, each basket consists of the items purchased together by one user. The dataset contains 464,118 transactions belonging to 9,238 users and 7,793 items. All the items purchased by less than 10 users and users purchased less than 10 items in total were removed to eliminate the noise. In the experiments, the dataset was split into three non-overlapping sets. The last basket of each user is taken as testing set, the penultimate basket is reserved as a held-out validation set for tuning the parameters, and all the remaining baskets are taken as training set.

#### Experimental Setting

Following the practices in [2], the proposed IERT model was implemented as follows: the training was conducted with the batch size of 32 sequences for 40,000 steps where the original sequences were truncated such that the max number of items in the same basket is 100. Adam with learning rate of 0.00002 was utilized to conduct the optimization. As for the model size, BERT$_{BASE}$ structure according to [2] was chosen, where hidden size $H$, the number of Transformer blocks $L$ and the self-attention heads $A$ were set to 768, 12, and 12, respectively.

Several state-of-the-art next basket recommendation methods were chosen as the baselines, including conventional methods of TOP, NMF [6], and FPMC [9], and deep methods of HRM [10], DREAM [11], and ANAM [1]. To test the effectiveness of pre-training mechanism in the context-aware item representations, we compare our IERT with its simplified version which the pre-training stage was removed, denoted as “IERT (w/ pre-training)”. Evaluation metrics. Same as [1, 10, 11], the top K items (K=5) from the ranking list of all items were recommended to each user $u$. The performances were evaluated with the F1-score and Normalized Discounted Cumulative Gain (NDCG).

#### Results and analysis

Results are presented in Table 1 and bold-face indicates the highest number among all of the methods. We can see that the simplified version of our model, i.e., IERT (w/ pre-training), outperformed all of the baseline methods, showing the effectiveness of item-level interaction modeling by transformer encoder. The baseline methods utilize all items in the same transaction to build basket representation. It leads to semantic confusion when some individual items are purchased have nothing to do with others. For example, a user could put toothpaste in the same basket with beer and bread since it is sold at a discount.

The results in Table 1 also show IERT worked better than IERT (w/ pre-training), indicating the importance of the pre-training stage in IERT. Compared with the best baseline ANAM, IERT gained the improvements of 45.9% and 78.9% in terms of F1-score@5 and NDCG@5, respectively, indicating the effectiveness of context-aware item representations in next-basket recommendation.

### 5 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we propose to adapt the BERT model in NLP to improve the performances of next basket recommendation, through producing context-aware item representations. The model, referred to as IERT model, first pre-trains the model parameters on the historical purchase transactions and then fine-tunes the model during the online recommendation. Experimental results on publicly available dataset show that IERT outperformed the state-of-the-art baselines, indicating the effectiveness of context-aware item representations.

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