

Online Learning Application Academic Year 2021 - 2022

Pricing & Social Influence

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Introduction

Nowadays one big problem of e-commerces is to allocate the best price to its products so that, the seller can maximize its revenue.

The main issue is that increasing the price of a product leads to less people interested in that product, thus increasing the price is not necessarily beneficial to the seller. In contrast decreasing the price will increase the number of people interested in the product, but the revenue will be of course sub-optimal.

In order to maximize the revenue we can analyze the demand curve of a given product, which is a graphical representation of the relationship between the price p_i of a good or service i and the quantity demanded $q_i(p_i)$ for a given period of time, and find the price \hat{p} such that:

$$\hat{p} = \arg\max_{p} (pq(p))$$

Unfortunately, in real world problems, the demand curve is not available, furthermore, we need to estimate this curve by interacting with the environment. One main problem of interacting with an unknown environment is that exploration costs a lot of money, so we want to find the best prices in the shortest amount of time to decrease the regret.

In order to do so, we can use reinforcement learning techniques such as Multi Armed Bandit (MAB) algorithms.

Practical example

In this project we want to study the case of a new e-commerce entering the market called ANS² that sells skateboarding clothes. More precisely, it is going to sell unisex t-shirts, hoodies, t-shirts, shoes and shirts.

For simplicity sake we can assume the website can sell an unlimited number of units without any storage cost whose goal is to minimize the cumulative regret while learning.

The web site of the vendor is structured as follows: in every webpage, a single product, called primary, is displayed together with its price. The user can add a number of units of this product to the cart. After the product has been added to the cart, two products, called secondary, are recommended. When displaying the secondary products, the price is hidden. Furthermore, the products are recommended in two slots, one above the other, thus providing more importance to the product displayed in the slot above. The website will propose only products that the customer has never seen before. If the user clicks on a secondary product, a new tab on the browser is opened and, in the loaded webpage, the clicked product is displayed as primary together with its price.

One main consideration we want to make is that the customer may buy different products during a visit, thus the price for a specific product may influence the total income generated by the customer. For instance, let us assume that a customer lands on the webpage displaying a t-shirt: if the price is too high, the probability to buy that product is lower, but not only, also the probability to see the secondary products is lower, so it will decrease the probability that a customer visits and buys new products. In conclusion, when we choose the price for a specific product we have also to consider the indirect reward it will generate.

1 Step: Environment

The main aim of the environment is to simulate a real-world scenario. To simulate all the components we divide the model into various classes.

- Environment class: It is the wrapper that manages the environment and all its functions. There are two specializations of this class created for some specific use cases (which are EnvironmentContextual and EnvironmentNonStationary).
- Simulator class: It manages the simulation of the customers' interactions.
- Customer class: It contains all the information that defines a type of customer.

1.1 Parameters

The environment has a lot of parameters and each of them has a direct and significant impact on the behavior of the model. Some of the parameters are specifics of the environment:

- customers_distribution is a list of 4 floating values, that sum to 1. It indicates the probability of each type of customer appearing.
- customer_per_day is the average number of customers in a day.
- variance_customers is the standard deviation of the number of customers in a day.
- products_graph is the graph that indicates which is the primary and secondary product.
- p_lambda is the probability of observing each slot. The first value is 1, while the second is a number smaller than 1.
- prices indicates the reward for each product and each price level. Therefore, it is a 4 x 5 matrix.

Additionally, some parameters are specifics of the customer:

- features is the pair of binary features. In our case the first feature is associated to gender, whereas the second one to the age (for simplicity young/old)
- alpha is the probability distribution of starting from each product.
- buy_distribution is the probability of buying products given a selected price and type of product.
- num_prods_distribution is a matrix containing for each pair (product, price) the hyper parameter controlling the amount of units the customer is likely to buy for that specific product. In this case we have decided to model the customer's behaviour with a geometric distribution, thus the hyper parameters are the inverse of the means of the associated geometric distributions. The main idea behind the geometric distribution is that is a discrete distribution and is monotonically decreasing: higher is the number of products bought, lower will be the probability to buy that amount of units.
- click_graph is the probability of clicking the product given a selected price and type of product.

1.2 Learner interaction

The main aim of the learner is to minimize the cumulative regret by selecting the best price levels. Therefore, at the beginning of each day, the learner select the price levels (which is the super arm), and then at the end of the day it will obtain a report containing all the information about the customer activities, i.e. number of times bought, number of products seen, number of customers.

1.3 Customer interaction

The customer interaction works in the following manner:

- 1. Depending on the alpha distribution a starting point is randomly chosen.
- 2. The customer opens the page and she will buy one or more products with a probability depending on buy_distribution. If she does not buy the simulation stops, otherwise the number of items bought is sampled from a geometrical distribution.
- 3. Then, with a probability that depends on λ and the click_graph, she explores a different product. However, if she has already seen this product, she will not open that page.

From step 3 to step 6 the main assumption is that we have different classes of customers interact with the website, and each of them has a different behaviour. For each step, we know the distribution of the customers and some characteristics of them (for instance the mean of the number of items a customer buys for a specific product), but the website is not able to identify the customer is interacting with it, thus we are not able to estimate the unknown parameters for each customer but only an aggregated estimate.

1.4 Selection of the super arm

Since we have to take in consideration also the indirect income generated by other products that are bought after buying the first product, we have to find the combination of prices such that maximizes the overall income considering the indirect margins, thus we have to solve a combinatorial problem to select the best super arm to play.

In order to do so, we have to compute the believed expected reward $\mathbb{E}[r_a]$ for each superarm a and choose the arm with the highest expected reward. We compute the expected reward as follows:

$$\mathbb{E}\left[r_a\right] = \sum_{i \in \mathscr{C}} r_{a,i} w_i$$

where \mathscr{C} is the set of indexes of customers, $r_{a,i}$ is the expected reward given the super arm a for customer i and w_i is the probability to see customer i.

1.4.1 Monte Carlo methods

A way to compute the expected reward for a given customer i is to use a Monte Carlo simulation. Monte Carlo methods, or Monte Carlo experiments, are a broad class of computational algorithms that rely on repeated random sampling to obtain numerical results. The underlying concept is to use randomness to solve problems that might be deterministic in principle.

Basically, we have 5 seeds (the products) and we run N simulations starting from each seed. A seed is a starting node in a graph, whose edges $e_{i,j}$ represent the probability of clicking product j given that product i has been bought, whereas each node has an activation threshold that coincides with the probability of buying that product.

The simulation works as follows:

- 1. Explore the simulation graph in a depth first search tree fashion. If a node has been already visited, it can not be reached anymore.
- 2. When selecting a node j, draw a sample x from a Bernoulli distribution $\mathcal{B}e(t_{i,p,j})$ where $t_{i,p,j}$ is the probability that customer i buys product j at price p. If $x < t_{i,p,j}$, activate node j, otherwise stop the branch.
 - We can keep track the number of times a node j has been activated with the variable Λ_j .
- 3. When expanding an active node i towards node j, draw a sample x from a Bernoulli distribution $\mathcal{B}e(e_{i,j})$. If $x < e_{i,j}$ move towards node j, otherwise stop the branch.

Once a node is activated we draw a sample n from the distribution of number of items bought for that node (product). Every time a product is bought, we update the number of times that product has been bought:

$$n_{a,p} = n_{a,p} + n$$

where $n_{a,p}$ is the current number of units bought for product p given the super arm a. Here the code for a single simulation:

Finally we compute the expected reward as:

$$r_{a,i} = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{p \in \mathscr{P}} \alpha_{i,p} a_p n_{a,p}$$

where \mathscr{P} is the set of indexes of the products, $\alpha_{i,p}$ is the probability for customer i to start from the seed p and a_p is the price selected for the product p. We can also compute the activation probability (probability that a specific item is bought) of each product as:

$$\pi_{p,i} = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{p \in \mathscr{P}} \alpha_{i,p} \Lambda_p$$

Thanks to the following theorem we have some theoretical guarantees on the accuracy of this method.

Theorem With probability of at least $1 - \delta$, the estimated activation probability of every node is subject to an additive error of $\pm \epsilon n$ when the number of repetitions is:

$$R = O(\frac{1}{\epsilon^2}log(\mid S \mid)log(\frac{1}{\delta}))$$

where S is the number of seeds (5) and n is the number of nodes in the graph (still 5).

In our case, if we want to have an additive error of $\epsilon n = 0.1$ ($\epsilon = 0.02$) with a probability of 90 % ($\delta = 0.1$), we need to run R = 1748, thus the number of simulations for each product for each customer is N = 350. In conclusion, this method is stochastic and very noisy, and to obtain a decent estimate we need to run a massive number of simulations which makes the simulation process astonishingly slow.

Given the size of the parameters for this problem, we can afford to compute the exact value for the expected value for a given arm in a reasonable time with a different approach.

1.4.2 Dynamic programming approach

To overcome the limitation of the Monte Carlo simulation we develop a dynamic programming solution that returns the expected number of items bought. This method has a time complexity of $\Theta(2^N NM)$, where N is the number of items and M is the number of types of customers, therefore, this solution is only feasible because the number of items is quite small.

2 Step: Optimization algorithm

Here we consider the case in wich all the parameters are known and the goal is to maximize the cumulative expected reward, following a greedy approach.

The algorithm works as follow:

- 1. set the prices of all the pruducts with the lowest one
- 2. collect the reward obtained by increasing, each time, the price of just one product of the original super arm
- 3. compare the five different configuration obtained with the first one. There could be two case
 - (a) there is an increase of the reward, so select the one that gave the maximum reward (the highest increase) as the best one and repeat the algorithm from point 2
 - (b) there is no increse (all the new configuration is worst than the previous one) and stop the algoritm
- 4. Return the actual best configuration.

For example:

The algorithm starts with the super arm with all the lowest prices for all the products: [00000] Then explore by pulling the five combination of super arm, found by increasing of just one one product at time:

[00100] [00001] [00010] [10000] [01000]

Now select the one with the highest reward, compare also with the original best one. In our case it was: [00001]

Update the new super arm as the best one and start again, looking at the new five configuration available:

[00002] [00101] [01001] [10001] [00011]

And so on, until no improvement is found.

2.1 Limitations

This type of learner do not directly consider the parameters of a Customer, it just interacts with the environment by selecting the arm to pull at each round and observing the reward gibven by the environment

Is guaranteed that the algorithm would not cycle, because it monotonically increases the prices (as well as the cumulative expected margin). On the other hand there is not guarantee that the algorithm will return the optimal price configuration.

2.2 Results

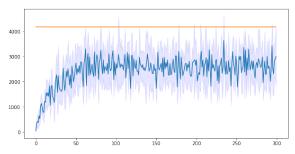


Figure 1: Reward

As said before here we can see that the algorithm converge to a solution that is not optimal, so return a reward that is lower than the best possible one (clairvoyant)

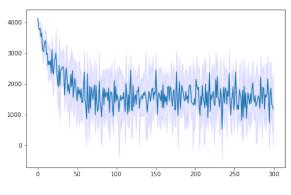


Figure 2: Regret

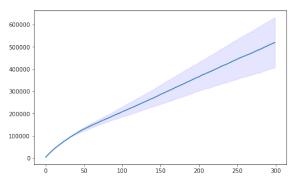


Figure 3: Cumulative regret

As expected the cumulative reward is linear (Figure 3) $\,$

3 Step: Optimization with uncertain conversion rates

The new scenario we have to consider is the one in which not all the parameters are known: here the conversion rates of the customers, the probability of him to buy a product with a specific price, are unknown. Also the features of our customers are unknown, so our web site is not able to distinguish one from another.

To solve the problem two bandit algorithm have been developed: UCB (Upper Confidence Bound) and TS (Thomson Sampling). Both select every day the super arm to pull by estimating the conversion rates, with their parameters. After that they run a montecarlo simulation for each combination of arms, in order to determine the best super arm (the one that returns the highest reward estimated).

The super arm selected is pulled in the environment to collect the actual reward and the learners parameters can be updated.

Since the learners are not able to distinguish the different types of customers, so initially the alphas values are uniformally distruibuted ([0.2, 0.2, 0.2, 0.2, 0.2]) and the number of products bought for each price are set all to 1. Addittionally the convertion rate estimated each round by the learner are set equally to all the customer (like considering all of them as one).

The number of daily interaction, customers that visit the e-commerce, is fixed to 100 and the time horizon, number of day of exploration each iteraction of the algorithm, to 300. The algorithms are also executed 5 rimes, that is the number of iteration.

3.1 UCB

Upper Confidence Bound is a deterministic algorithm that associated an upper confidence bound to every arm, providing an optimistic estimation of the reward. The steps are the following:

1. Initially the means and the upper confidence bounds of each arm (price) for each product are set to zero and infinite respectively

2. Estimate the conversio rates by the sum of the mean and the upper confidence bound of each arm

```
def estimate_conversion_rates(self):
    return self.means + self.upper_bounds
```

- 3. Select the super arm that return the highest reward from the MC simulation
- 4. Update the mean parameters of the arm pulled as:

$$mean[p, a] = \frac{mean[p, a] * seen[p, a] + bought[p]}{tot_seen[p, a]}$$
(1)

• mean[p,a] is the actual mean of the product **p** with price **a**

- seen[p,a] is the number of times the product **p** with price **a** has been seen since the day before
- bought[p] is the number of times the product **p** has been bought from day zero till now
- tot_seen[p,a] is the number of times the product \mathbf{p} with price \mathbf{a} has been seen from day zero till now (so is seen[p,a] plus the number of time this product has been seen this day)
- 5. Update the upper confidence bound parameters of the arm pulled as:

$$upper_bound[p, a] = \sqrt{\frac{2 * \log tot_samples}{seen[p, a]}}$$
 (2)

- tot_samples is the total number of times the product **p** has been seen till now
- seen[p,a] is the number of times the product \mathbf{p} with price \mathbf{a} has been seen till now
- 6. Repeat from step 2 until the end of the iteraction (300 days)

3.1.1 Results

Even if the algorithm converge to the optimal arm at the beguinning of the process, at some day it changes the choice of the super arm to pull. This happenes because each time an arm is pulled its bound is reduced, and so at some point the ones less selected will have an higher bound. A bigger bound leads to an higher convertion rate and that is the reason why it will try new super arms, that were not pulled from long time.

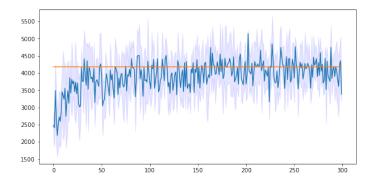


Figure 4: UCB Reward

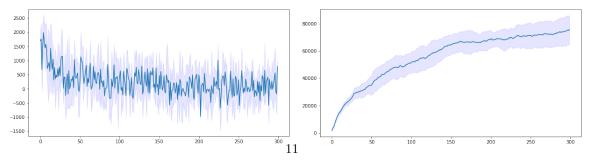


Figure 5: UCB Regret

Figure 6: UCB Cumulative regret

3.2 TS

Thomson Sampling is a stochastic algorithm that set a prior on the expected value for every arm, and selects the arm with the best sample, accordingli to the updated parameters. Those parameters are alled Beta parameters, for the distribution, and take account of the number of success (α) and of insuccess (β) . The sum of the two parameters is equal to the number of times the arm has been pulled.

The steps are the following:

1. Set all the α and β parameters equal to one.

$$\begin{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix} & \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix}$$

2. Estimate the conversion rate by drawing a sample from a Beta distribution with α and β parameters

- 3. Select the super arm that return the highest reward from the MC simulation
- 4. Update the α and β parameters:

```
\alpha[p, a] = \alpha[p, a] + bought[p]
```

$$\beta[p, a] = \beta[p, a] + seen[p] - bought[p]$$

- $\alpha[p,a]$ is the alpha parameter for the product **p** with the price **a**
- $\beta[p,a]$ is the beta parameter for the product **p** with the price **a**
- ullet bought[p] is the number of times the product ullet has been bought till now
- \bullet seen[p] is the number of times the product **p** has been visualized by the customers
- 5. Repeat from step 2 until the end of the iteraction (300 days)

3.2.1 Results

As we can see below the algorithm converge to the optimal super arm really quicly, so the regret goes to zero in the really first days. This is what expected when there is a prior information that influence the choice of an arm.

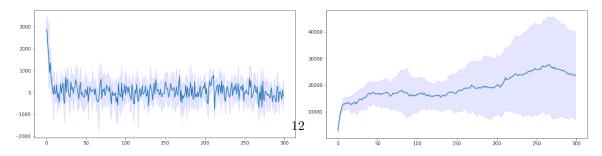


Figure 8: TS Regret

Figure 9: TS Cumulative regret

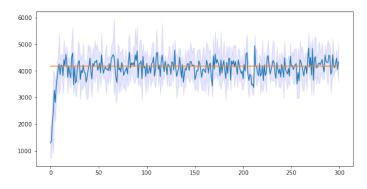


Figure 7: TS Reward

4 Step : Optimization with uncertain conversion rates, α ratios, and number of items sold per product

4.1 Results

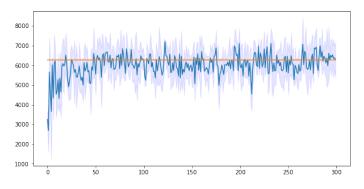


Figure 10: UCB Reward

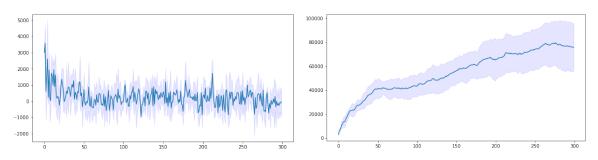


Figure 11: UCB Regret

Figure 12: UCB Cumulative regret

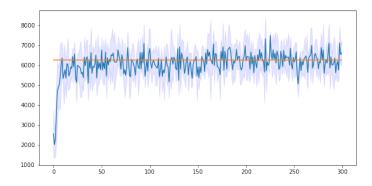


Figure 13: TS Reward

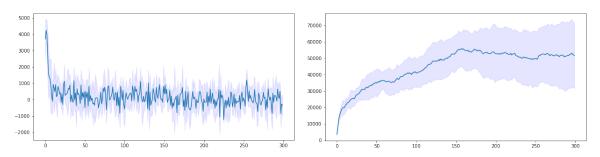


Figure 14: TS Regret

Figure 15: TS Cumulative regret

5 Step: Optimization with uncertain graph weights

5.1 Results

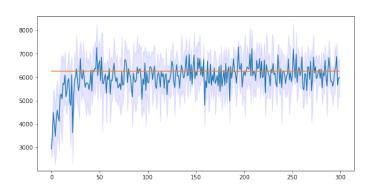


Figure 16: UCB Reward

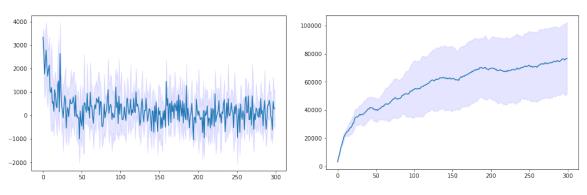
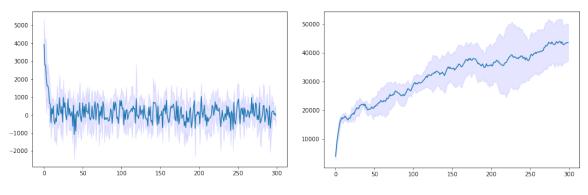


Figure 17: UCB Regret

Figure 18: UCB Cumulative regret



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Figure 20: TS Regret

Figure 21: TS Cumulative regret

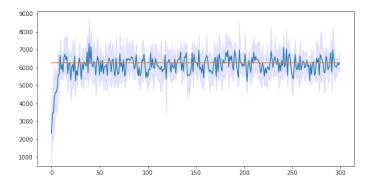


Figure 19: TS Reward

6 Step: Non-stationary demand curve

In this section we face the case in which the demand curves are unknown and can be subject to abrupt changes. More precisely, our proposed simulator present an abrupt change every 100 days involving the demand curves for each product for each customer. We use different approaches to face the same problem:

- UCB-1 algorithm with abrupt change detection.
- UCB-1 algorithm with sliding window.

6.1 Abrupt change detection

In this case, at the end of each day, the learner, before updating its arms, checks either the conversion rate has changed or not for each product for each price. The naivest way is to compute the conversion rate of the current day $\alpha_t(p, a)$ for product p given price a and compare it with the average of the conversion rates of the last days $\hat{\alpha}_{t-1}(p, a)$.

We set a threshold δ such that if :

$$\alpha_t(p, a) \not\in [\hat{\alpha}_{t-1}(p, a) - \delta, \hat{\alpha}_{t-1}(p, a) + \delta]$$

then that specific conversion rate has just changed. Due to the high noise that characterizes the realizations of the environment it is incredibly hard to understand why a realization might be out of the range.

In order to overcome this issue we propose a slightly advanced approach: instead of comparing the last conversion rate with the average of the last conversion rates, we say that the conversion rate for a specific product for a given price has changed if:

$$\hat{\alpha}_{t,t-\lambda}(p,a) \notin [\hat{\alpha}_{t-\lambda,1}(p,a) - \delta, \hat{\alpha}_{t-\lambda,1}(p,a) + \delta]$$

where $\hat{\alpha}_{t,t-\lambda}(p,a)$ is the average of the last λ conversion rates, whereas $\hat{\alpha}_{t-\lambda,1}(p,a)$ is the average of the first $t-\lambda$ conversion rates for that product p at price a. This method reveals to be more robust to the noise of the environment, but requires more days to detect an anomaly, nevertheless,

we can achieve great results setting λ to 5 as we can see from Figures Once a conversion rate has been spotted as changing, all the data related to that specific pair (price, arm) are dropped, since those data are no more relevant.

Here the code for the detection algorithm:

```
def change_detection_test(self, pulled_arm, report):
    conv_rate = report.get_conversion_rate()
    for product, arm in enumerate(pulled_arm):
        delta = 0.3
        mean1, mean2 = 0, 0
        if len(self.conv_rate_history[product][arm]) > 10:
            last_conv_rates =

    self.conv_rate_history[product][arm][-self.splitter:]

            last_conv_rates.append(conv_rate[product])
            mean1 =
            np.mean(self.conv_rate_history[product][arm][:-self.splitter])
            mean2 = np.mean(last_conv_rates)
        if self.t_arms[product, arm] > 11 and (mean1 < mean2 - delta or mean1
        → > mean2 + delta) and not np.isinf(
                self.upper_bounds[product, arm]):
            # detected an abrupt change
            self.t_arms[product, arm] = 0
            self.means[product, arm] = 0
            self.upper_bounds[product, arm] = np.inf
            self.seen[product, arm] = 0
            self.conv_rate_history[product][arm] = [conv_rate[product]]
```

6.2 Insights on abrupt change detection algorithm

Now we want to investigate and understand if under the assumption to already know all the conversion rates will change, we can improve the performance of the learner: when a change for a single pair (price, product) is detected, all the conversion rates are dropped. From Figures ??, ??, ?? we notice the two algorithms have comparable performances, thus, there is no reason to use a more specific algorithm as the one just introduced.

6.3 Sliding window

Finally we change the UCB-1 algorithm implementing the sliding window to keep track of the most relevant samples. The main idea behind this algorithm is the demand curves are currently smoothly changing, thus samples loose importance with the time.

In order to avoid old samples to affect the learner's performance, we use a sliding window of size σ : in other words we compute the estimated conversion rates and their upper bounds using only the last σ samples.

The drawback of sliding window is the learner has a short memory about the past, thus, if it is used on a stationary environment, it it will be outperformed by a stationary UCB-1 algorithm, since it will behave in a more exploratory way. Using a sliding window of size 50, we can see from Figures 22, 23, 24, the learner with the change detection algorithm outperforms the one using the sliding window. This should not surprise us for the following reasons:

- Our environment is characterized by three stationary phases. When a change occurs, it is abrupt instead of being smooth: sliding window has been thought to face the second scenario, thus it will be slower to converge.
- For the first 100 days, the environment is stationary, thus the sliding window struggle to converge since it is discarding the oldest samples, despite they are still useful.

6.4 Results

In this subsection we present the experimental results got interacting with a non stationary environment for 300 days and the number of daily customers is drawn every day from a Normal distribution $\mathcal{N}(300, 10)$.

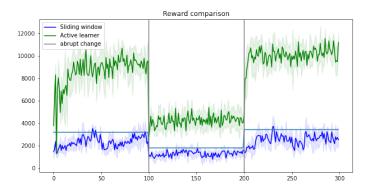


Figure 22: TODO: CAMBIARE IMMAGINI Reward comparison between Learner with change detection algorithm and Learner with sliding window

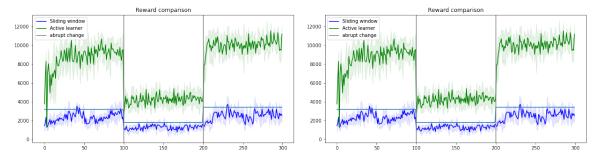


Figure 23: Regret comparison between Learner with change detection algorithm and Learner with sliding window

Figure 24: Cumulative regret comparison between Learner with change detection algorithm and Learner with sliding window

7 Step: Context generation

7.1 Results

7.1.1 UCB

7000

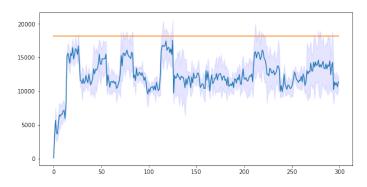


Figure 25: UCB Reward

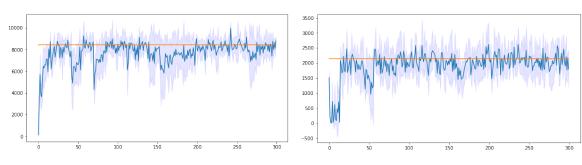


Figure 26: UCB Reward customer 1

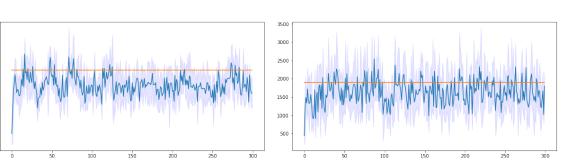


Figure 28: UCB Reward customer 3

Figure 29: UCB Reward customer 4

Figure 27: UCB Reward customer 2

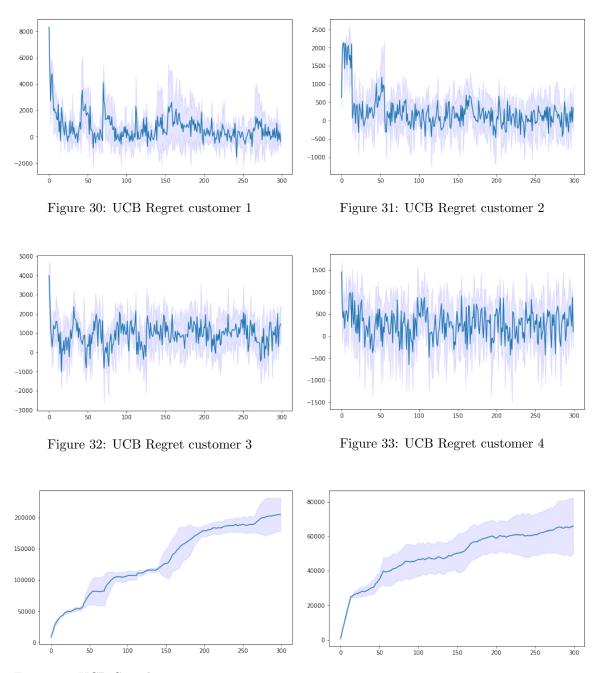


Figure 34: UCB Cumulative regret customer 1

Figure 35: UCB Cumulative regret customer $2\,$

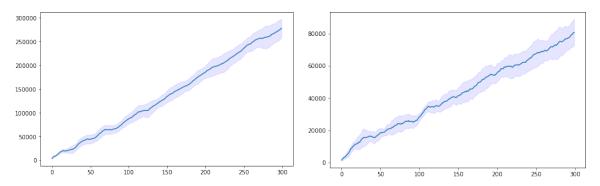


Figure 36: UCB Cumulative regret customer 3

Figure 37: UCB Cumulative regret customer 4

7.1.2 TS