

HindRec: Aligning User Preferences for Recommendation via Hindsight Fine-tuning

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ABSTRACT

Given a user’s historical interaction sequence, the recommendation model strives to understand the user’s preferences and predict potential candidate items. Presently, the surging popularity of large language models (LLMs) has birthed an array of generative recommendation systems. However, the unfortunate drawback of merging LLMs into recommendation systems is that it cannot capture the true preferences of users (i.e., likes and dislikes).

In this paper, we venture to combine alignment techniques in LLMs to align interest preferences. Specifically, this paper first proposes the application of hindsight fine-tuning in generative recommendation model—referred to as HindRec—which includes three components: prompt construction, recommendation via LLM and hindsight fine-tuning. By constructing training data in the form of hindsight feedback, we fine-tune a LLM via a three-stage strategy to fully utilize positive and negative instances to align user preferences. Wide-ranging experimental corroboration of our HindRec has yielded truly significant outcomes.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Information systems → Recommendation Systems.

KEYWORDS

Recommendation Systems, Large Language Models, Chain of Hindsight

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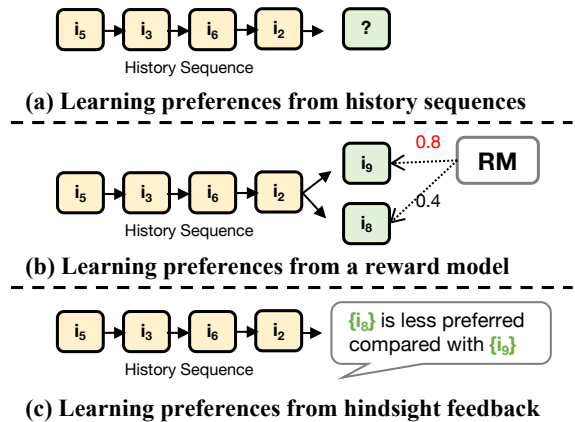


Figure 1: Illustration of several preference learning strategies, a) from history interaction sequences, b) from a reward model, c) from hindsight feedback.

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1 INTRODUCTION

With the growing prominence of applications like TikTok and Temu, recommendation systems have garnered significant attention due to their robust capability to discern user preferences [13, 33]. From a scholarly perspective, taking into account a user’s historical interaction sequence, a recommendation model endeavors to comprehend the user’s preferences and predict potential candidate items [26–28], as depicted in Fig. 1(a).

The advancement of computer technology has consistently propelled this domain, with every technical innovation infusing it with fresh vigour, especially in aspects such as neural networks, graph learning, attention mechanism, and Transformer [1, 6–8, 12]. Recently, the technological maelstrom predominantly centers around large language models (LLMs), like ChatGPT, LLaMA [24], etc., which boast impressive generative capacities [18, 31, 32], thus instigating the emergence of generative recommendation systems such as Chat-REC [5]. Recommendation systems based on LLMs utilize LLMs to augment data, comprehend item content, and engage users via natural language, amongst other functions [12, 15]. Regrettably, the integration of LLMs into recommendation

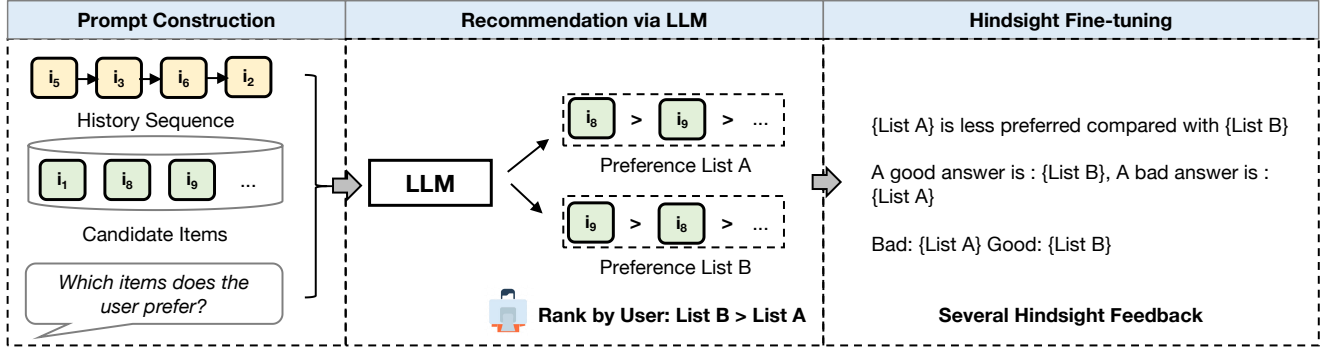


Figure 2: The overview of HindRec for recommendation, which consists of three components: a prompt construction module, a recommendation module via LLM, and a hindsight fine-tuning module.

systems cannot capture the true preferences of users (i.e., likes and **dislikes**); in other words, LLMs learn possible likes but ignoring dislikes, which are one of the most commonly used negative samples in recommendation systems.

Furthermore, “alignment” may be the most fitting solution (i.e. RLHF) for recommendation systems among LLM-related technologies, evident in preference capture. Alignment techniques focus on align human morality to allow LLMs to generate less harmful responses [34]. In fact, both human ethical preferences and user interest preferences fall under the category of “preferences”. Thus, this technology can be seamlessly utilized to align users’ “preferences”, especially to distinguish between liked and disliked items. As shown in Fig. 1(b), the trained reward model (RM) can be employed to partially rank potential items. Unfortunately, the exploration and integration of alignment techniques in the realm of recommendation systems still remain untouched by researchers.

Currently, a succession of alignment strategies are being introduced (e.g. PPO [22], DPO [20]), among which, chain of hindsight (CoH) [14, 35] has piqued our interest. Chain of hindsight eliminates the need for training an additional reward model, and instead, leverages the human capacity to derive insights from “ex post facto experiences”. This involves transforming all user feedback into input sequences dedicated to direct fine-tuning, as opposed to restricting it to the learning of partially ordered pairs. As depicted in Fig. 1(c), the model is expected to yield both good and bad outcomes simultaneously to facilitate alignment, thereby ensuring a solid grasp of both positive and negative data. This technique align with the user’s interest preferences more comprehensively from likes and dislikes.

Therefore, this paper introduces for the first time the utilization of various alignment strategies, such as PPO, DPO and CoH, in recommendation systems. Notably, the hindsight fine-tuning approach, which we have named HindRec, demonstrated the highest level of effectiveness. A general overview is illustrated in Fig. 2. Our HindRec comprises three components aptly named: Prompt Construction, Recommendation via LLM, and Hindsight Fine-tuning. Initially, the Prompt Construction integrates the user’s historical sequence, candidate items, and textual prompts, to answer questions like “Which items is the user likely to prefer?”. Subsequently, a LLM module is utilized to execute the

recommendation process; by resampling the generated outcomes of the LLM numerous times, a series of ranked lists are derived. These lists are then sorted based on real user interactions. Finally, these sorted lists are transformed into several hindsight feedback forms, which are used to fine-tune the LLM module via a three-stage strategy. The three-stage strategy can gradually enable our model to learn to recommend items, distinguish simple positive-negative pairs, and distinguish hard pairs. Comprehensive experiments on two datasets validate that our proposed HindRec delivers exceptionally noteworthy results.

The main contributions of this work are summarized as follows:

- To the best of our knowledge, this is the first work that incorporates the chain of hindsight of alignment technique to address recommendation systems.
- We customize a generative recommendation model, HindRec, based on the large language model to capture user interest preferences.
- Extensive experiments are conducted on two real-world datasets, which demonstrate the effectiveness of our method.

2 OUR PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

The overall framework of HindRec is illustrated in Fig. 2. In general, it comprises three key components: 1) a prompt construction module, which serves to construct a sentence as input to a LLM, such as the historical sequence, candidate items, and textual prompts; and 2) a recommendation module via a LLM, which leverages the benefits of LLMs to offer more suitable items for users; 3) a hindsight fine-tuning module, which aims to train the LLM via the chain of hindsight.

2.1 Problem Formulation

Let $u_{(\cdot)}$ denotes a user whose historical interaction sequence is $I = \{i_5, i_3, i_6, i_2, \dots\}$, where $i_{(\cdot)}$ represents different items. Formally, the goal of our HindRec is to predict the user’s next interaction based on the historical sequence, as the ground truth is like i_9 .

2.2 Prompt Construction

To enable large language models (i.e. LLaMA) to generate recommended items, a comprehensive prompt P will be constructed in

this section. The prompt P will consist of historical sequences I , candidate items C , and textual prompts, and will be formalized in the following format.

Task Instruction: Recommend 5 other items based on user's history from the candidate list, in list form, and the most likely item should be ranked at the top.

Input: The user has interacted with the following items in sequence, ("Pink Floyd - The Wall", "Canadian Bacon", ...). The candidate items available for selection are: ("The Blues Brothers", "Platoon", ...). Which items is the user likely to prefer?

Output List A#: ["Down by Law", "Almost Famous", "Full Metal Jacket", ...].

Output List B#: ["Almost Famous", "Platoon", "Down by Law", ...].

Output List C#: ["The Blues Brothers", "Platoon", "Almost Famous", ...].

Among them, all historical items I will be replaced by their item names to enhance semantics. Following PALR [30], we use a small parameter model similar to it as the retrieval module to obtain candidate items C , the number of which is m_1 . Notably, multiple outputs are generated by sampling at m_2 different temperatures, as we perform alignment techniques to capture user preferences.

2.3 Recommendation via LLM

The prompt P acquired in the preceding section will be fed into LLaMA [24, 25] to anticipate potential items recommendation. In actuality, there are several viable prediction formats available [3, 4, 29], including pointwise for scoring, pairwise for comparison, and listwise for predicting sequence. In this paper, we ultimately opted for the listwise format for two reasons. Firstly, listwise is better suited for the long-range sequence generation of LLMs. Secondly, experimental results in Section 3.3 demonstrate the superiority of this approach over the other two options.

Input of Pointwise: ... The candidate items available for selection are: ("The Blues Brothers").

Output of Pointwise: Based on the above information, the user is predicted to score 3.

Input of Pairwise: ... The candidate items available for selection are: ("The Blues Brothers", "Platoon").

Output of Pairwise: The user prefers "The Blues Brothers" over "Platoon".

Input of Listwise: ... The candidate items available for selection are: ("The Blues Brothers", "Platoon", "Almost Famous").

Output of Listwise: The user's preference sequence is, ["The Blues Brothers", "Platoon", "Almost Famous", ...]

2.4 Hindsight Fine-tuning

At present, most of the LLM-based methods only learn the users' likes, but neglect the negative samples of dislikes. In this section, we suggest employing the chain of hindsight [14, 35], an alignment

technique that functions as a substitute for reinforcement learning, to align user interest preferences¹.

Specifically, we collect multiple prediction results from the LLaMA (e.g. List A, List B, etc.) at varying temperature coefficients, and generate partial order pairs by comparing them with the ground truth. The List B that exhibits the highest similarity to the actual interaction is deemed as superior data. Using this approach, we developed a range of hindsight data formats for fine-tuning LLaMA, the number of which is m_3 . Notably, the listwise data in section 2.3, along with the simple and hard samples mentioned above, will undergo training in three stages, progressing from easy to complex.

{List A} is less preferred compared with {List B}
 A good answer is : {List B}, A bad answer is : {List A}
 Bad: {List A} Good: {List B}

During the training phase, the model is expected to generate both positive and negative outcomes, with only the tokens enclosed within "{"." being considered for loss calculation, i.e. the log likelihood of token autoregressively: $\log p(\mathbf{x}) = \log \prod_{i=1}^n p(x_i | \mathbf{x}_{<i})$, where $\mathbf{x} = [x_1, \dots, x_n]$ represents input tokens. This approach enables the model to encounter numerous negative examples. During the inference phase, the model is only required to produce positive tokens.

3 EXPERIMENTS

3.1 Experimental Settings

3.1.1 Datasets. We experiment with two datasets: Amazon Beauty and Movielens-1M. The Amazon Beauty² is a subset of the Amazon review datasets, comprising a comprehensive collection of user-item interactions on Amazon from May 1996 to July 2014. The Movielens-1M dataset³ is a widely used benchmark dataset, consisting of one million movie ratings.

For dataset preprocessing, we adhere to standard practices. Numeric ratings and reviews are converted to "1", while all other values are converted to "0". Next, we eliminate duplicate interactions for each user and sort their historical items based on the time step of the interaction to generate the user's interaction sequence. In the case of the Beauty dataset, we obtained a total of 20,381 users, 11,145 items, and 196,492 interactions. Similarly, the Movielens-1M dataset yielded 5,892 users, 3,148 items, and 994,259 interactions.

3.1.2 Evaluation Metric. We evaluate the performance using two metrics [11]: hit rate (HR) and normalized discounted cumulative gain (NDCG). Among them, HR emphasizes the existence of positive items, while NDCG takes into account the ranking position information.

3.1.3 Implementation Details. All experiments are implemented on a server equipped with A100 GPUs. During training, the adam optimizer [10] is used to minimize our loss. Additionally, We employ a leave-one-out approach to assess the effectiveness of our proposed scheme and each baseline. Specifically, for each user, we designate the last interacted item as the test data and the previous historical

¹The experimental results of PPO and DPO can be found in Section 3.3

²https://cseweb.ucsd.edu/~jmcauley/datasets/amazon_v2/

³<http://files.grouplens.org/datasets/movielens/ml-1m.zip>

Table 1: Performance comparison of various baselines on Amazon Beauty dataset.

Method	Amazon Beauty					
	H@3	H@5	H@10	N@3	N@5	N@10
BPR-MF	0.0134	0.0232	0.0299	0.0110	0.0188	0.0194
NCF	0.0141	0.0246	0.0293	0.0137	0.0192	0.0202
GRU4Rec	0.0120	0.0215	0.0234	0.0105	0.0179	0.0191
Caser	0.0147	0.0251	0.0282	0.0125	0.0186	0.0210
SASRec	0.0257	0.0288	0.0417	0.0232	0.0237	0.0283
PALR	0.0684	0.0724	0.0781	0.0632	0.0694	0.0726
RecRanker	0.0715	0.0748	0.0806	0.0696	0.0730	0.0755
RankVicuna	0.0823	0.0854	0.0941	0.0748	0.0766	0.0808
HindRec	0.0985	0.1005	0.1074	0.0913	0.0958	0.1011

Table 2: Performance comparison of various baselines on Movielens-1M dataset.

Method	Movielens-1M					
	H@3	H@5	H@10	N@3	N@5	N@10
BPR-MF	0.0245	0.0401	0.0540	0.0173	0.0245	0.0361
NCF	0.0266	0.0437	0.0519	0.0190	0.0252	0.0448
GRU4Rec	0.0141	0.0228	0.0414	0.0106	0.0144	0.0272
Caser	0.0283	0.0435	0.0525	0.0208	0.0264	0.0507
SASRec	0.0267	0.0503	0.0568	0.0169	0.0261	0.0496
PALR	0.0793	0.0939	0.1014	0.0676	0.0802	0.0976
RecRanker	0.0899	0.1002	0.1105	0.0783	0.0911	0.1025
RankVicuna	0.0923	0.1055	0.1201	0.0855	0.0969	0.1094
HindRec	0.1049	0.1195	0.1314	0.0983	0.1085	0.1176

items as the validation data, while the remaining items are utilized for model training.

3.2 Overall Performance

To compare our solution with competitors, traditional algorithms, and generative methods are considered as baselines. Among them, traditional algorithms, BPR-MF [21], NCF [7], GRU4Rec [8], Caser [23], SASRec [9], are varied techniques for creating personalized recommendations based on different algorithms and methods, like matrix factorization, GRUs, CNN, etc. Meanwhile, generative methods, PALR [30], RecRanker [16], RankVicuna [19] are directly predict items via LLMs.

The results are presented in Table 1 and Table 2, we have the following observations: 1) the performance of generative models via LLM surpasses that of most other methods, thereby demonstrating the superiority of larger models. Additionally, the input format of prompts plays a crucial role, and different strategies can elicit varying abilities of LLMs. 2) the fine-tuned model outperforms direct API calls, and almost all trained models reflect this outcome. This highlights the significance of customized models in comprehending user behavior. 3) our HindRec outperforms all other methods on both datasets, indicating the value of leveraging alignment frameworks and human feedback to capture user preferences.

3.3 Ablation Study

We implement ablation study from the following aspects, 1) variants of recommendation strategy; 2) variants of training strategy; 3) variants of LLM module. First of all, “Pointwise”, “Pairwise” and “Listwise” denote the three recommendation strategies. As

Table 3: Ablation study of several variants on Amazon Beauty dataset.

Method	Amazon Beauty					
	H@3	H@5	H@10	N@3	N@5	N@10
Pointwise	0.0753	0.0874	0.0898	0.0734	0.0877	0.0883
Pairwise	0.0853	0.0921	0.0957	0.0814	0.0903	0.0943
Listwise	0.0985	0.1005	0.1074	0.0913	0.0958	0.1011
PPO	0.0811	0.0873	0.0883	0.0775	0.0817	0.0866
DPO	0.0910	0.971	0.0985	0.0869	0.0912	0.0960
Vicuna-7B	0.0924	0.0994	0.1002	0.0904	0.0942	0.0985
Qwen-14B	0.0963	0.0997	0.1064	0.0909	0.0945	0.1002
LLaMA-13B	0.0985	0.1005	0.1074	0.0913	0.0958	0.1011

Table 4: Ablation study of several variants on Movielens-1M dataset.

Method	Movielens-1M					
	H@3	H@5	H@10	N@3	N@5	N@10
Pointwise	0.0852	0.0940	0.1184	0.0842	0.0917	0.0945
Pairwise	0.0924	0.1053	0.1230	0.0879	0.0965	0.1030
Listwise	0.1049	0.1195	0.1314	0.0983	0.1085	0.1176
PPO	0.0880	0.0905	0.1089	0.0813	0.0885	0.0918
DPO	0.0983	0.1014	0.1203	0.0922	0.1001	0.1075
Vicuna-7B	0.0969	0.1035	0.1268	0.0954	0.1043	0.1105
Qwen-14B	0.0953	0.1016	0.1258	0.0944	0.1030	0.1083
LLaMA-13B	0.1049	0.1195	0.1314	0.0983	0.1085	0.1176

mentioned in Section 2.3, where “Pointwise” for scoring, “Pairwise” for comparison, and “Listwise” for predicting sequence. Thereafter, for training strategy, PPO [17] and DPO [20] are adopted to train our model. Finally, for variants of LLM module, different symbols represent the use of different base models [2, 24, 25] for training.

As presented in Table 3 and Table 4, we have the following observations: 1) “Pointwise” performs worse than “Pairwise”, which illustrates the instability of directly predicting scores. And “Pairwise” is not as good as “Listwise”, which shows that Listwise may be a more suitable strategy for recommendation systems. 2) After employing PPO and DPO, the model’s efficacy has reached a remarkably high level, indicating the affirmative impact of alignment technology on the recommendation system. 3) Different base models have an impact on the final results. LLMs with larger parameters and better understanding capabilities will have better recommendation results under the same amount of training data.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we aim to introduce the chain of hindsight, an alignment technique that replaces reinforcement learning, into recommendation systems to capture interest preferences. Specifically, we sample the output of the LLM at varying temperatures, construct hindsight training data that includes positive and negative examples, and finally fine-tune the LLM. Our experimental results demonstrate the effectiveness of our HindRec.

In the future, we intend to extend our work by incorporating more human feedback. This is a natural line of exploration: given the efficacy of limited human annotation, what benefits might be derived from gathering a greater volume of human feedback?

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