

Time-Bin-Based Neighbourhood Algorithm for Temporal Effects in Recommendation Systems

Sercan AYGUN, Mustafa KATIPOGLU*

Abstract: Recommender systems are used in various applications to boost the prediction accuracy of user preferences. The recent developments in recommendation frameworks support precise user decisions on any item depending on the actions of logged users. Although the existing algorithms exhibit good performance, some temporal aspects of user data require attention. This study introduces a new algorithm that utilises the users' temporal effects by extracting time-bins as recent rating timelines. After error-function-based analyses for the optimal time-bins, the time-bin-based algorithm is employed to filter the best neighbours. Analyses show that the optimal time-bin size is 41 for the MovieLens dataset while 48 for the Netflix Prize dataset. Therefore, considering the cold start problem, a flexible time-bin approach is also proposed. The time-bin-based algorithm offers improvements of 7,44% (MovieLens) and 5,36% (Netflix) for the *Matthews correlation* coefficient and increases the balanced accuracy by 3,78% (MovieLens) and 2,06% (Netflix). Negative predictive value and specificity reveal high percentages for most rating classes, similar to the state-of-the-art approach. Finally, the standard accuracy metric demonstrates an improvement of 1,86% for MovieLens and 2,36% for the Netflix dataset.

Keywords: collaborative filtering; interest drift; temporal features; temporal recommendation systems; time-bin-based similarity

1 INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of a multitude of new applications, consumers find themselves stuck amongst numerous choices. The abundance of options offered by these applications creates confusion and makes it difficult to find relevant items. Recommendation systems (RSs) aim to provide the finest suggestions for each user. Recent efforts have demonstrated the success of the currently used architectures; however, the inclusion of temporal actions from system users can be a tool that improves efficiency.

Collaborative filtering (CF) is a commonly used RS implementation technique in the literature [1-3]. From the application perspective, movie-based RS is a favourite research subject in CF [4-6]. Since the development of scientific movie datasets, such as MovieLens [7, 8] and Netflix Prize [9], more studies are investigating this research topic. Using the aggregation of other users and their preferences, the collaboration sources further information for item rating prediction. The selection of neighbours is determined using the similarity weights between users [10]; this selection procedure can be enhanced using prior knowledge regarding temporal actions. Users who interact with an application may alter their preferences over time; thus, the concept of temporal drift is observed [11]. Studies related to temporal dynamics demonstrated that different types of time-related effects can occur, including complicated forms of concept drift [12-14]. Individual user preferences and actions may decay or increase with time. The temporal diversity of recommendations is an essential factor that affects the RS efficiency [15]. A review related to temporal RS stated that the current studies focusing on temporal drift indicate short-term and long-term effects of temporal features [16].

In this study, we focused on movie RSs and contributed to the temporal analysis of user activity using the aforementioned scientific movie datasets. We revealed the possible temporal drift of a user-in-test by retrieving the time information depending on the rating activities of users. Accordingly, we obtained the time-bin of users, which starts from the rating date of item-in-test and finishes at a time up to when the last ε number of rating

actions was held. Time-bin patches were also derived from neighbour nominees, i.e., other users, who were then sorted with some constraints, as explained via an algorithm in the following sections. By evaluating the temporal locality of movie-based RS, the variable time-bin patches for prospective neighbours were tested. Thus, we provide a method that determines same-sized and different-sized drifting patches, namely time-bins, of neighbouring users whose temporal rating activity is compared with the user-in-test. We monitored the proposed method using several performance metrics, such as accuracy, balanced accuracy, sensitivity, negative predictive value (NPV), and the *Matthews correlation* coefficient (MCC). A detailed analysis of each movie rating class is given in plots.

This article is organised as follows: Section 2 presents the basic concepts of RS, including the performance metrics. Section 3 is devoted to the proposed approach, and the time-bin-based algorithm details are given in that section. In Section 4, we perform experiments to validate our approach compared to the standard neighbourhood selection. Finally, we present conclusions in Section 5.

2 BACKGROUND

In this section, the conventional similarity equation is given with the prediction formula used in this study. Then, to compare the traditional method and our approach, the well-known performance metrics used in the literature are introduced.

When making predictions with neighbourhood-based user-user CF methods, the most crucial concept involves measuring correlations, i.e., in-between user similarities. There are various similarity measures used in RSs, such as Pearson similarity, cosine similarity, Jaccard similarity, Spearman's rank correlation, and Kendall's tau correlation [17]. Among these, the Pearson Correlation Coefficient (PCC) is a widely utilised similarity measurement [18].

In this research, we used PCC as given in Eq. (1), where it is denoted by ρ_{uv} . The active user, namely user-in-test, is denoted by u and the prospective neighbours are denoted by v . Moreover, r_{ui} denotes the rating of user u

for item i ; the average rating for user u and neighbour v is denoted by μ_u and μ_v , respectively. I_{uv} represents the commonly rated items by users u and v .

$$\rho_{uv} = \frac{\sum_{i \in I_{uv}} [(r_{ui} - \mu_u) \times (r_{vi} - \mu_v)]}{\sqrt{\sum_{i \in I_{uv}} (r_{ui} - \mu_u)^2} \times \sqrt{\sum_{i \in I_{uv}} (r_{vi} - \mu_v)^2}} \quad (1)$$

After the correlation calculation, the next important step involves deciding the number of neighbours, denoted by k . Generally, any clustering method can be utilised but the top- k nearest neighbour is a commonly used approach [19]. The neighbour nominees are sorted based on their correlation coefficients, and top- k of them are marked as neighbours. The size of k can be experimentally determined because the system becomes saturated after a certain threshold.

After obtaining the nearest neighbours in user-user CF and their correlations with the active user, predictions are made using the weighted average formula in Eq. (2).

$$p_{ui} = \mu_u + \frac{\sum_{v=1}^k \rho_{uv} \times (r_{vi} - \mu_v)}{\sum_{v=1}^k \rho_{uv}} \quad (2)$$

Following the prediction calculation, evaluation metrics should be utilised to measure the effectiveness of the algorithm. Tab. 1 lists the performance metrics used in the experimental test phase of our research. Root mean squared error (RMSE) was utilised in global time-bin analyses, whose details are provided in the next section. Accuracy, balanced accuracy, specificity, and negative predictive value were employed for rating-based detailed monitoring at the end of this paper. Eventually, the compound metric, i.e., MCC, is visited for final remarks. The *compound* keyword here underlines the built-in structure of *Matthews correlation* because it holds the geometric mean of two sub-metrics, namely, informedness (INF) and markedness (MRK).

Table 1 Evaluation metrics used in this study

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Root Mean Squared Error | $\sqrt{\frac{1}{ Test\ Set } \sum_{(u, i) \in Test\ Set} (\widehat{p}_{ui} - p_{ui})^2}$ \widehat{p}_{ui} : actual rating value, p_{ui} : predicted rating value |
| Accuracy | Rating Matches / (TP + TN + FP + FN) |
| Balanced Accuracy | [(TP / (TP + FN)) + (TN / (TN + FP))] / 2 |
| Specificity | TN / (TN + FP) |
| Negative Predictive Value | TN / (TN + FN) |
| Matthews Correlation | $\frac{TP \times TN - FP \times FN}{\sqrt{(TP + FP) \times (TP + FN) \times (TN + FP) \times (TN + FN)}}$ |

TP : True Positives, TN: True Negatives, FP: False Positives, FN: False Negatives

$$Matthews\ Correlation = \pm \sqrt{INF \times MRK}; INF = \frac{TP}{TP + FN} + \frac{TN}{TN + FP} - 1$$

$$and\ MRK = \frac{TP}{TP + FP} + \frac{TN}{TN + FN} - 1$$

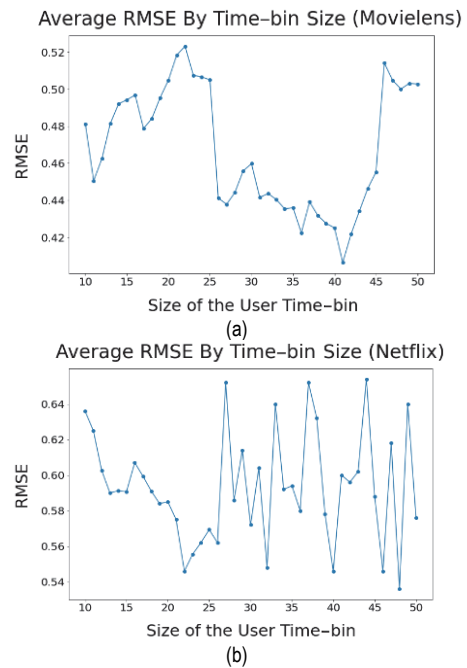


Figure 1 Average RMSE as the time-bin size changes for (a) Movie Lens, (b) Netflix datasets

Tab. 1 presents metrics considering the confusion matrix elements, i.e., true positive (TP), false positive (FP), true negative (TN), and false negative (FN). When evaluating the metrics, we treat each rating prediction as a multi-class problem. In other words, we utilise the one-rating-against-all-ratings approach with multi-class evaluations [20]. Assuming $1 \leq n \leq m$, where m is the total number of rating classes, TP denotes the C_n classification of all C_n actual instances and TN denotes all non C_n instances that are not predicted as C_n . Moreover, FP represents the C_n predictions despite belonging to non C_n instances. Finally, FN denotes all C_n instances that are not classified as C_n . It should be noted that there is an essential difference between the datasets used in our analyses in terms of rating classes. The Netflix dataset contains five rating classes, starting from 1 to 5, while the MovieLens dataset has increments with 0,5 as half-stars in the ratings. For this essential difference, we considered rating-wise observations for the predictions.

3 PROPOSED APPROACH

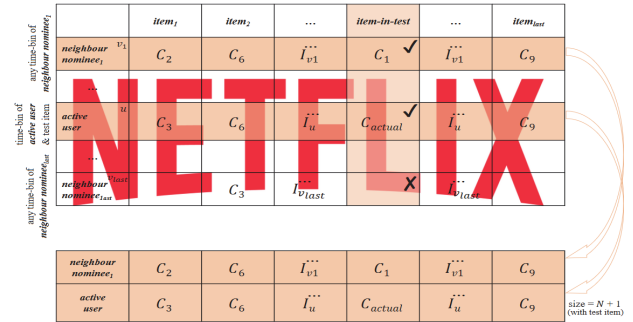
In this section, the proposed approach is introduced. The first step involves analysing user rating history throughout the datasets. Therefore, it is important to detect the globally suitable time-bin over the dataset. This pre-analysis technique attempts to find the optimal time-bin size that is valid globally for all users. The optimality is determined by the RMSE induced by the time-bin size, as shown in Fig. 1. The time-bin size, taking the number of rated movies as a parameter, can be defined throughout a user timeline. A time-bin is determined by starting after the rated item-in-test and going back to the last N rating actions. The decision of N is statistically handled by an enumeration, i.e., $N \leftarrow \{1 \dots \varepsilon\}$. For each item, the active user time-bin size is parametrically tested to contribute the best global N . This generalised temporal phenomenon, N , depends on the dataset and pre-analysis via ε parameter.

In this work, bulk tests were performed to decide the static N value. With preliminary analyses using MovieLens and Netflix datasets, we showed the parametric tuning of N from 10 to ε , which lies in the x -axes of plots given by Fig. 1. Each parametric time-bin size for an active user is used for prediction. The predicted rating value based on neighbours with top- k PCC values is checked using $RMSE$ and recorded. All possible time-bin sizes for N are set from 10 to 50 ($N \leftarrow \{10 \dots \varepsilon = 50\}$). Each recorded prediction attempt is used for the calculation of average $RMSE$ from the exact time-bin size. In Fig. 1, the lowest $RMSE$ value for static N at each dataset is separately investigated. In Fig. 1a, MovieLens yields the lowest $RMSE$ at $N_{MovieLens} = 41$, whereas Netflix yields a value of $N_{Netflix} = 48$ in Fig. 1b. These static values are used for each user-in-test, i.e. active user, during the experiments.

Unlike prior efforts, we define a general time-bin of users in the datasets by restricting overall rating actions into the recent ones. We use an updated version of ρ_{uv} equation by I_{uv} , which now defines the common ratings only derived from the time-bins of test user and neighbour. Instead of all user ratings, we consider those included in the time-bin of users. The most recent rating actions performed before the test item are captured for the test user based on the static time-bin size. Then, similarities between the test user and its prospective neighbours are calculated. The time-bin calculation for neighbours is dynamically performed differently than the static time-bin of test user. The active user time-bin is set statically but the prospective neighbour time-bin size is flexibly in the range of 5 and 100 movie ratings from the whole user history. We observe that if neighbour selection is restricted to a single time-bin size, then the commonly rated item set, I_{uv} , cannot provide efficient information. A neighbour is expected to rate at least 5 items; otherwise, we monitor a significant accuracy drop in both datasets. Additionally, more than 100 item-sized time-bins can create a run-time overhead. All variable-sized time-bins are utilised for the best similarity score. However, there are several constraints for users to be considered as neighbours. If a target movie we want to predict is not in the time-bin of any prospective neighbour, then we cannot collaborate with this prospective neighbour. The test item must be in the rated list of the prospective neighbour, plus there must be some other rated items that are in common with those from the test user. Therefore, time-bins containing the target movie are primarily derived for collaboration with the test user. In the beginning, we define filtering to verify if the prospective neighbour satisfies the aforementioned conditions.

Fig. 2 depicts the initial selection of neighbour nominees based on the constraints. Let the table rows indicate any time-bins of users. An active user u and test item i with a rating value of C_{actual} are first considered. Then, any prospective neighbour, such as the first user in Fig. 2, is selected for the time-bin-based neighbourhood algorithm. For instance, *neighbour nominee₁* has a rating for the item-in-test, along with $item_1$, $item_2$, $item_{last}$, and some others whose ratings lie in vector \vec{I}_{v1} . This nominee is suitable for the time-bin-based neighbouring because it contains the test item and some other items commonly rated by the active user. The intersection set of time-bin history, $I_{uv1} = I_u \cap I_{v1}$, is the focal point that returns

feedback regarding the resemblance between two users. In contrast, *neighbour nominee_{last}* is never selected because the test item has not been rated. Our time-bin-based approach puts a temporal restriction on this neighbour selection procedure by reconfiguring user rating history, I . Accordingly, we compose the neighbour list based on common user preferences.



$$I_{v1} = C_2 \cup C_6 \cup I_{v1} \cup C_1 \cup C_9$$

$$I_u = C_3 \cup C_6 \cup I_u \cup C_9$$

Figure 2 Example of neighbour nominee selection and rejection

During the neighbour selection procedure in our proposed scheme, PCC is calculated for each nominee. Because there can be multiple time-bins for each prospective neighbour owing to the flexible size, the selection of best performing time-bin is decided via the co-rated item count and PCC. Therefore, in addition to sorting significant PCC scores, the commonly rated item count is also considered. Finally, taking the sorted correlation weights, k actual neighbours are selected with their highly populated time-bins regarding common ratings concerning the active user.

Lastly, the prediction formula given by Eq. (2) is executed as being implicitly subject to the time-bins of users. The prediction formula treats neighbours selected with higher PCC values and commonly rated item counts. Accordingly, we focus on the correlations between the time-bins of neighbour and test user during the prediction. The inactivity time frames of neighbouring users are not included, thanks to the time-bin approach for better collaboration. In Algorithm 1, the overall steps are summarised.

In Algorithm 1, the neighbour selection procedure is shown. Based on preliminarily analysed movie datasets, we create predictions for any active user utilising the extracted time-bin size in Fig. 1a and Fig. 1b. The active user rating date for a test item is used as the starting point. By going back in the timeline, previous ratings are considered, and N item ratings are captured. This is the indication of user activation frequency to mitigate the temporal side-effects. This process is performed in line 2 of Algorithm 1. Then, variable-sized prospective neighbour time-bins are extracted in line 5.

There are two underlying constraints: (i) having the test item rated and (ii) having other commonly rated items concerning the test user time-bin. Neighbours can have flexible time-bin size and all possible time-bins are extracted by obeying $5 \geq N_{prospective\ neighbour} \geq 100$. If there are less than 5 items, an exception occurs based on our requirements, and if there are more than 100 items, performance bottleneck is observed.

Algorithm 1: Time-bin-based neighbourhood

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1: procedure SELECT NEIGHBOURS (testUserId, testMovieId, N)
2:   testUserTimebin  $\leftarrow$  getTimebin(testUserId, testMovieId, N)
3:                                      $\triangleright$  Based on N, test user time-bin is decided
4:                                      $\triangleright$  The most recent items are selected related to the test item rating date
5:   prospectiveNeighbours  $\leftarrow$  getProspectiveNeighbours(testMovieId, testUserTimebin)
6:      $\triangleright$  Filtering time-bins that include the test item and some other commonly rated items with respect to test user
7:      $\triangleright$  All possible variable-sized time-bins are inferred
8:   for all Neighbour in prospectiveNeighbours do
9:     [neighbourTimebins, PCC]  $\leftarrow$  getNeighbourTimebins(testUserTimebin, testMovieId, Neighbour)

10:    neighbourTimebins  $\leftarrow$  SORT(neighbourTimebins, PCC)
11:     $\triangleright$  Time-bins of any neighbour sorted by PCC values obtained with respect to the test user time-bin
12:    for all Timebin in neighbourTimebins do
13:       $n_{common}^{Timebin}$   $\leftarrow$  getCommonCount(Timebin, testUserTimebin)  $\triangleright$  Common rating count
14:    end for  $\triangleright$  Iterating for all possible time-bins of a neighbour
15:     $n_{common}^{Timebin}$   $\leftarrow$  SORT( $n_{common}^{Timebin}$ )
16:    finalTimebin  $\leftarrow$  selectBestPerforming(neighbourTimebins, PCC,  $n_{common}^{Timebin}$ )
17:     $\triangleright$  the one having higher ranking scores both in PCC and common rating count
18:  end for  $\triangleright$  Iterating for all possible neighbours
19:  return top-k distinct neighbours
20:   $\triangleright$  With the top PCC values between the selected time-bin patch of neighbour and the test user
21: end procedure

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Between lines 8 and 18 of Algorithm 1, prospective neighbour time-bins are selected; accordingly, PCCs are computed beforehand concerning the test user. PCC has a higher priority in neighbourhood calculation. In line 10, *sorting* is applied first to observe the dominant correlation values between user time-bins. After that, any prospective neighbour is processed for the commonly rated items in the time-bin of interest. Among various neighbour time-bin possibilities, only that with the higher number of common elements and higher PCC value is selected. Finally, in line 19 of Algorithm 1, *k* neighbours are elected with the highest privileged time-bins based on PCC. After Algorithm 1, Eq. (2) is called for test item prediction. The performance of the proposed approach is numerically measured in the next section.

4 EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

In this section, we evaluate the prediction performance of the proposed approach. The traditional method with standard neighbour selection and the time-bin-based approach were tested comparatively using the performance metrics given in Section 2. During the evaluations, multi-class classification via confusion matrix construct was utilised, as mentioned. We examined the results at the rating granularity, addressing the Netflix and MovieLens datasets. Thus, more detailed analyses at the rating levels are presented with rating-wise monitoring.

The test phase contains two different perspectives. The first is that the static *N* value is forced for the test user. A test person is expected to watch and rate at least *N* movies in the time-bin, which may cause a cold start problem [21]. Therefore, in the second phase of experiments, we removed this requirement by flexibly allowing test users who watch $< N$ movies. This means that if any test user has watched less than *N* movies in the timeline before the test item, this

exact amount in the $[5, N)$ interval can construct the time-bin. The lower limit is still 5, similar to that in prospective neighbour time-bins. From Fig. 3 to Fig. 6, the performance metrics for the first experimental phase are illustrated by setting *N* as constant. If a user has less than *N* movie ratings, this user is skipped both for the time-bin-based method and for the standard approach without time-bin. Hence, the same '*N* film constraint' is applied for both approaches, thereby making a fair comparison between the two. In the figures below, bar plots represent with and without the time-bin-based approaches. In dark coloured bars, the standard approach does not consider time-bin-based correlation calculations; instead, it considers the whole user history.

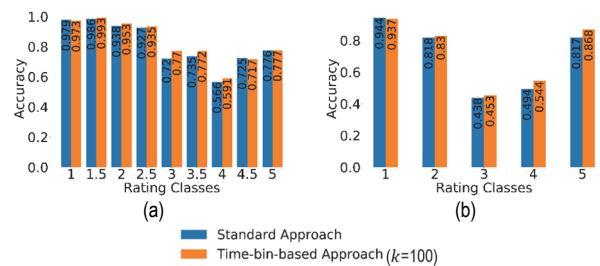


Figure 3 Accuracy (with static *N*), (a) Movie Lens, (b) Netflix

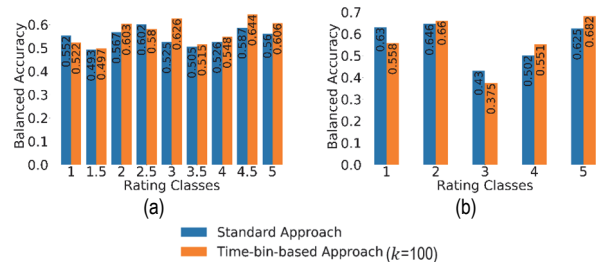


Figure 4 Balanced accuracy (with static *N*), (a) Movie Lens, (b) Netflix

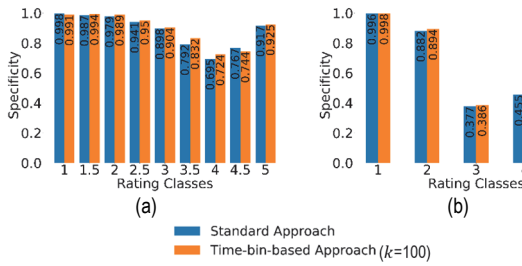


Figure 5 Specificity (with static N), (a) Movie Lens, (b) Netflix

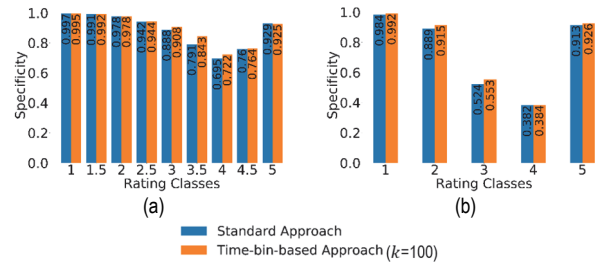


Figure 9 Specificity (with flexible N), (a) Movie Lens, (b) Netflix

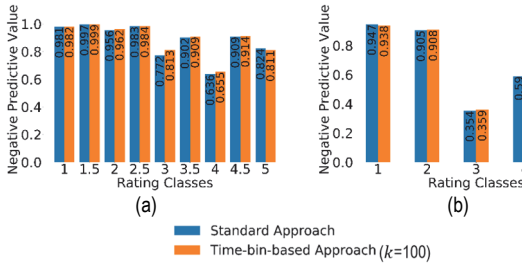


Figure 6 NPV (with static N), (a) Movie Lens, (b) Netflix

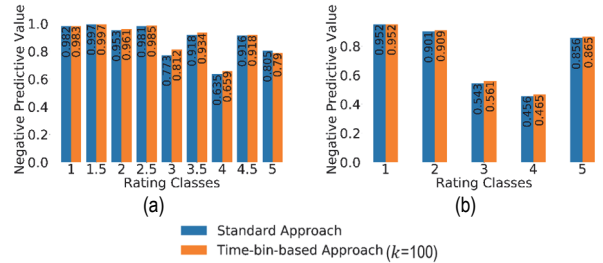


Figure 10 NPV (with flexible N), (a) Movie Lens, (b) Netflix

According to rating-based inspection, each rating class is presented with the corresponding performance metrics. We employed the accuracy and balanced accuracy metrics to monitor the overall performance. In addition, specificity and inverse precision, i.e., NPV, were considered for the negative classification performance. We randomly selected users from MovieLens and Netflix Prize for the test. The results presented here denote the average of 18000 distinct test attempts. From the above figures, it can be observed that when rating-based results are averaged into a single score, the time-bin-based approach outperforms the values in the standard method for all metrics.

We also unveiled the cold start problem of static N , and the test user time bin was allowed to be flexible down to 5. To this end, the same metrics are monitored for both datasets as presented from Fig. 7 to Fig. 10. Similarly, the performance of the proposed method is valid; additionally, the metric scores slightly increase, on average, if the test user time-bin is flexible.

Owing to rating-wise observations, a notable finding from the results is the user judgement on the highest/lowest rating values. This inference shows that the maximum likes and dislikes have relatively higher scores on the metrics, which is crucial for binary prediction.

Furthermore, the performance of '3' and '4' rating values is relatively lower. These rating classes source essential information for the threshold of user judgments that are also utilised for the performance metrics. The applied algorithm alters the threshold in the Netflix dataset when active user time-bin size flexibility is allowed. From Fig. 3 to Fig. 6b and from Fig. 7 to Fig. 10b, the threshold changes from '3' to '4' for the Netflix dataset.

As a general remark, negative predictions made in the tests presented higher ratios than positive predictions. On observing the balanced accuracy and specificity, it can be concluded that the TP rate is less in comparison to the TN rate. The standard approach obeys the N film restrictions for fairness; thus, the overall gain for both approaches demonstrates that the TN predictions are more effective.

Finally, other than the bar plots above, we separately observed a compound metric, MCC, that yielded an average score from the rating values. MCC presents a wide implicit observation, especially for binary predictions. The score improvements were recorded for both datasets for the time-bin-based approach. However, the best performance was observed in the MovieLens dataset, where MCC was in the range [0,3; 0,4], similar to the Netflix dataset. Compared to the standard approach, the MCC improved by +7,44% and +5,36% for MovieLens and Netflix datasets, respectively, when Algorithm 1 was applied with flexible N .

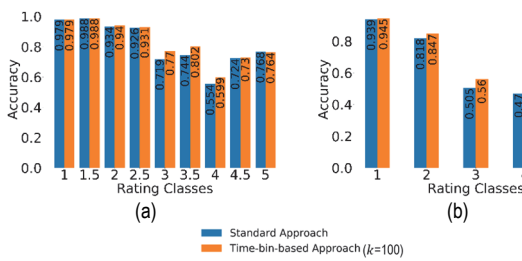


Figure 7 Accuracy (with flexible N), (a) Movie Lens, (b) Netflix

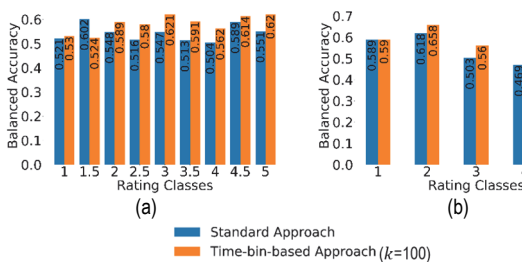


Figure 8 Balanced accuracy (with flexible N), (a) Movie Lens, (b) Netflix

5 CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we presented an approach to boost the prediction performance of an RS framework using temporal features. The time-bin-based method enhanced the top- k neighbour selection procedure and the prediction accuracy was improved. After analysing the datasets preliminarily for global temporal information, the time-bin size was determined for the test user. PCC was utilised for

user-user similarity weights, in which the rating history of the test user was restricted to the last N items. Neighbours, whose time-bin size can be flexible, were selected using the calculated weights and thereby implicitly the common rating counts. The algorithm was tested using the *NetflixPrize* and *MovieLens* datasets. The possibility of cold start problem can be reduced if the time-bin size of the test user is flexible. Improvements were observed in all performance metrics for the proposed approach. In future work, the algorithm can be extended to other temporal user actions, such as date of system registration and total time spent online on an application.

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Contact information:

Sercan AYGUN, Res. Asst., PhD. Cand.
Yildiz Technical University, Computer Engineering Department,
Davutpasa Kampusu, EEF, Bilg. Muh. D-Blok, 34220, Esenler / Istanbul
E-mail: ayguns@yildiz.edu.tr

Mustafa KATIPOGLU, Alumni Student
(Corresponding author)
Yildiz Technical University, Computer Engineering Department,
Davutpasa Kampusu, EEF, Bilg. Muh. D-Blok, 34220, Esenler / Istanbul
E-mail: mukatipoglu98@gmail.com, mustafa.katipoglu@std.yildiz.edu.tr