Star Graph Neural Networks for Session-based Recommendation

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ABSTRACT

Session-based recommendation is a challenging task. Without access to a user’s historical user-item interactions, the information available in an ongoing session may be very limited. Previous work on session-based recommendation has considered sequences of items that users have interacted with sequentially. Such item sequences may not fully capture complex transition relationships between items that go beyond simple inspection order. Thus, graph neural network (GNN) based models have been proposed to capture the transition relationship between items. However, GNNs typically propagate information from adjacent items only, thus neglecting information from items without direct connections. Importantly, GNN-based approaches often face serious overfitting problems.

We propose Star Graph Neural Networks with Highway Networks (SGNN-HN) for session-based recommendation. The proposed SGNN-HN applies a star graph neural network (SGNN) to model the complex transition relationship between items in an ongoing session. To avoid overfitting, we employ highway networks (HN) to adaptively select embeddings from item representations. Finally, we aggregate the item embeddings generated by the SGNN in an ongoing session to represent a user’s final preference for item prediction. Experiments on two public benchmark datasets show that SGNN-HN can outperform state-of-the-art models in terms of \( P@20 \) and \( MRR@20 \) for session-based recommendation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Recommender systems can help people obtain personalized information [2], which have wide applications in web search, e-commerce, etc. Many existing recommendation approaches apply users’ long-term historical interactions to capture their preference for recommending future items, e.g., collaborative filtering [4, 8, 9], Factorizing Personalized Markov Chains (FPMC) [20], and deep learning based methods [23, 32, 37]. For cases where a user’s long-term historical interactions are unavailable, e.g., a new user, it is challenging to capture her preferences in an accurate manner [10]. The session-based recommendations task is to generate recommendations based only on the ongoing session.

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ACM Reference Format:
We review related work from four angles: general recommendation models, sequential recommendation models, attention-based models, and GNN-based models.

2.1 General recommendation models
Collaborative Filtering (CF) has been widely applied in recommender systems to capture user’s general preferences according to their historical interactions with items [9]. Many CF methods consider the user-item interaction matrix based on Matrix Factorization (MF) [39]. In recent years, neural network based methods have been applied to CF. For instance, He et al. [8] propose Neural Collaborative Filtering (NCF), which utilizes a multi-layer perceptron to express and generalize matrix factorization in a non-linear way. Chen et al. [4] propose a Joint Neural Collaborative Filtering (J-NCF) to learn deep features of users and items by fully exploring the user-item interactions. Some neighborhood-based CF models have been proposed to concentrate on the similarity among users or items. For instance, Item-KNN [22] has been utilized in session-based recommendation by focusing on the similarity among items in terms of co-occurrences in other sessions [5].

Important, even though collaborative filtering-based methods can capture a user’s general preferences, it is unable to detect changes in user interest; as a consequence, they cannot generate recommendations that instantly adapt to a user’s recent needs.

2.2 Sequential recommendation models
To capture the sequential signal in interactions, Markov Chains (MCs) have been widely applied. For instance, Rendle et al. [20] propose Factorizing Personalized Markov Chains (FPMC) to capture both user’s sequential behaviors and long-term interest. Wang et al. [31] propose a Hierarchical Representation Model (HRM) to improve the performance of FPMC by a hierarchical architecture to non-linearly combine the user vector and the sequential signal.

Deep learning methods like RNNs have also been widely applied in recommender systems. For instance, Hidasi et al. [10] propose GRU4REC to apply GRUs in session-based recommendation; they utilize a session-parallel minibatch for training. Li et al. [14] propose a Neural Attentive Recommendation Machine (NARM) to extend GRU4REC by using an attention mechanism to capture user’s main purpose. Furthermore, as information contained in an ongoing session may be very limited, neighbor information is introduced to help model an ongoing session [11, 17, 30]. For instance, Jannach and Ludewig [11] introduce neighbor sessions with a K-nearest neighbor method (KNN). Unlike traditional KNN, Wang et al. [30] propose a Collaborative Session-based Recommendation Machine (CSRM) to incorporate neighbor sessions as auxiliary information via memory networks [25, 33].

However, Markov Chain-based models can only capture information from adjacent transactions, making it hard to adequately capture interest migration. Moreover, as to RNN-based methods, interaction patterns tend to be more complex than the simple sequential signal in an ongoing session [19].

2.3 Attention based models
As items in a session have different degrees of importance, many recommendation methods apply an attention mechanism to distinguish the item importance. For instance, Liu et al. [16] apply an attention mechanism to obtain a user’s general preference and recent interest relying on the long-term and short-term memories in the current session, respectively. Moreover, in order to better distinguish the importance of items and avoid potential bias brought by unrelated items, Pan et al. [18] propose to measure item importance using an importance extraction module, and consider the global preference and recent interest to make item prediction. Furthermore, for the cases that a user’s historical interactions are available, Ying et al. [36] propose a two-layer hierarchical attention network that takes both user’s long-term and short-term preferences into consideration. In addition, to account for the influence of items in a user’s long-term and short-term interactions, Chen et al. [3] propose to utilize a co-attention mechanism.

However, attention-based methods merely focus on the relative importance of items in a session, without considering the complex transition relationship between items in an ongoing session.

2.4 Graph neural networks based models
Recently, because of their ability to model complex relationships between objects, graph neural networks (GNNs) [12, 15, 28] have
The goal of session-based recommendation is to predict the next item to click based on the ongoing session. We formulate this task as follows. Let \( V = \{v_1, v_2, \ldots, v_{|V|}\} \) denote all unique items in all sessions, where \(|V|\) is the number of all unique items. Given a session as \( S = \{s_1, s_2, \ldots, s_n\} \) consisting of \( n \) sequential items, where \( s_i \in V \) is the \( i \)-th item in the session, we aim to predict \( s_{n+1} \) to click. Specifically, we output the probability of all items \( \hat{y} = \{\hat{y}_1, \hat{y}_2, \ldots, \hat{y}_{|V|}\} \), where \( \hat{y}_i \in \hat{y} \) indicates the likelihood score of clicking item \( i \). Then, the items with the highest top-K scores in \( \hat{y} \) will be recommended to the user.

### 3.1 Session star graph construction

For each session \( S = \{s_1, s_2, \ldots, s_n\} \), we construct a star graph to represent the transition relationship among the items in the session. We not only consider the adjacent clicked items, but also consider the items without direct connections by adding a star node, which leads to a full connection of all nodes in the session star graph. Specifically, each session is then represented as \( G_s = (V_s, E_s) \), where \( V_s = \{x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_m, x_s\} \) denotes the node set of the star graph. Here, the first part \( \{x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_n\} \) indicates all unique items in the session, which we call satellite nodes, and the latter part \( x_s \) is the newly added star node. Note that \( m \leq n \) since there may exist repeated items in the session. \( E_s \) is the edge set in the star graph, which consists of two types of edges, i.e., satellite connections and star connections, used for propagating information from satellite nodes and star node, respectively.

**Satellite connections.** We utilize satellite connections to represent the adjacency relationship between items in a session. Here, we use the gated graph neural networks (GGNN) [15] as an example. Actually, other graph neural networks like GAT [28] and GCN [12] can also be utilized to replace GGNN in our model. For the satellite connections, the edges \((x_i, x_j) \in E_s\), i.e., the blue solid lines in the star graphs in Fig. 2, mean that the user clicks item \( x_j \) after clicking \( x_i \). In this way, the adjacent relationship between two items in the session can be represented by an incoming matrix and an outgoing matrix. Considering an example session \( S = \{x_2, x_3, x_5, x_4, x_7\} \), we can construct the incoming matrix and the outgoing matrix of GGNN as in Fig. 3.

**Star connections.** Inspired by [6], we add a star node to propagate information from non-adjacent items. More specifically, we add a
Satellite nodes update. For each satellite node, the neighbor nodes for propagating information are from two types of sources, i.e., the adjacent nodes and the star node, which corresponds to the information from nodes with and without direct connections, respectively. Compared to GGNN [15] and GAT [28], the star node in the proposed SGNN can make information from unconnected items available for propagation across two hops.

First, we consider the information from adjacent nodes. For each satellite node $x_i$ in the star graph at layer $l$, we utilize the incoming and the outgoing matrices to obtain the propagation information as follows:

$$a_i^l = \text{Concat}(A_i^l([x_1^{l-1}, x_2^{l-1}, \ldots, x_m^{l-1}]^T W^l + b^l), \quad A_i^O([x_1^{l-1}, x_2^{l-1}, \ldots, x_m^{l-1}]^T W^O + b^O)), \quad (3)$$

where $A_i^l, A_i^O \in \mathbb{R}^{1 \times m}$ are the corresponding incoming and outgoing weights for node $x_i$, i.e., the $i$-th row in the incoming matrix and the outgoing matrix. $W^l, W^O \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$ are the learnable parameters for the incoming edges and the outgoing edges, respectively, while $b^l, b^O \in \mathbb{R}^d$ are the bias vectors. Hence, we can obtain $a_i^l \in \mathbb{R}^{1 \times 2d}$ to represent the propagation information for node $x_i$. After that, we feed $a_i^l$ and node $x_i$’s previous state $h_{i}^{l-1}$ into the gated graph neural networks as follows:

$$z_i^l = \sigma(W_{z} a_i^l + U_z h_{i}^{l-1}),$$
$$r_i^l = \sigma(W_{r} a_i^l + U_r h_{i}^{l-1}),$$
$$\hat{h}_i^l = \tanh(W_{h} a_i^l + U_h (r_i^l \odot h_{i}^{l-1})),$$
$$h_i^l = (1 - z_i^l) \odot h_{i}^{l-1} + z_i^l \odot \hat{h}_i^l, \quad (4)$$

where $W_z, W_r, W_h \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times 2d}$ and $U_z, U_r, U_h \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$ are trainable parameters in the network. $\sigma$ represents the activation function $\text{sigmoid}$ in above formulas and $\odot$ is the element-wise multiplication. $z_i^l$ and $r_i^l$ are the update gate and the reset gate, which controls how much information in the former state $h_{i}^{l-1}$ should be preserved and how much information of the previous state should be written in the candidate activation $h_i^l$, respectively. In this way, information from adjacent items can be propagated in star graph neural networks.

Next, we consider information from the star node. In star graph neural networks, the star node can represent the overall information from nodes with and without direct connections, respectively. Specifically, we calculate the similarity $\alpha_i^l$ of each satellite node $x_i$ and the star node $x_s$ with a self-attention mechanism as:

$$\alpha_i^l = \frac{(W_{q} h_s^l)^T W_{k} x_i^{l-1}}{\sqrt{d}}, \quad (5)$$

where $W_{q} \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$ are the learnable parameters, $h_s^l$ and $x_i^{l-1}$ are the corresponding item representation of $x_s$ and $x_i$, respectively, and $\sqrt{d}$ is used for scaling the coefficient. Finally, we apply a gating network to selectively integrate the information from the adjacent node $h_i^l$ and from the star node $x_s^{l-1}$ as follows:

$$h_i^l = (1 - \alpha_i^l) h_i^l + \alpha_i^l x_s^{l-1}. \quad (6)$$
where the gating is the concatenation operation, \( W_g \in \mathbb{R}^{dx2d} \) is a trainable parameter that transforms the concatenated vector from \( \mathbb{R}^{2d} \) to \( \mathbb{R}^d \), and \( \sigma \) is the sigmoid function. After the highway networks, we can obtain the final representation of satellite nodes as \( h^l \), and the corresponding star node as \( x^l \) (denoted as \( x_s \) for brevity).

We detail the proposed procedure of SGNNs in Algorithm 1. We first initialize the representation of satellite nodes and star node as step 1 and 2. Then we update the representations through \( L \)-layer SGNNs using steps 3 to 8, where we update the satellite nodes in steps 4 to 6 and the star node in step 7 at each SGNN layer. After that, we utilize the highway networks to combine the item embeddings before and after the multi-layer SGNNs in step 9. Finally, we return the new representations of the satellite nodes and the star node.

### Algorithm 1 The procedure of Star Graph Neural Networks

**Input:** \( \{x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_m\} \): Initial embeddings of the unique items in the session  
**Output:** \( h^l \) and \( x_s \): New representation of the satellite nodes and star node  
1. \( h^0 = \{x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_m\} \)  
2. \( x_s^0 = \text{average}(x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_m) \)  
3. for \( l \) in range(\( L \)) do  
4. \( \hat{h}_l = \text{GGN}(h^{l-1}, A^l, A^0) \) based on (3) and (4)  
5. \( \alpha^l = \text{Att}(h_l, x^l_s) \) based on (5)  
6. \( h^l = \text{Gating}(\hat{h}_l, x^l_s, \alpha^l) \) based on (6)  
7. \( x^l_s = \text{SelfAtt}(x^{l-1}_s, h^l) \) based on (7) and (8)  
8. end for  
9. \( h^l = \text{HighwayNetworks}(h^0, h^l) \) based on (10) and (11)  
10. return new satellite nodes \( h^l \) and new star node \( x_s \)

### 3.3 Session representation and prediction

After generating the item representations based on the star graph neural networks, we obtain the sequential item embeddings from the corresponding satellite nodes \( h^l \in \mathbb{R}^{dxm} \) as \( u \in \mathbb{R}^{dxm} \). In order to incorporate the sequential information into SGNN-HN, we add learnable position embeddings \( p \in \mathbb{R}^{dxm} \) to the item representations, i.e., \( u^p = u + p \).

Then we consider both the global preference and recent interest within the session to generate a final session representation as user’s preference. As previous work has shown that the last item in a session can represent a user’s recent interest \([16, 34]\), we directly take the representation of the last item as the user’s recent interest, i.e., \( z_r = u^p_{m} \). As for the global preference, considering that items in a session have different degrees of importance, we combine the items according to their corresponding priority:

\[
z_g = \sum_{i=1}^{n} y_i u^p_i. \tag{12}
\]

where the priority \( y_i \) is decided by both the star node \( x_s \) and the current interest \( z_r \) simultaneously. Specifically, the weights of items are decided by a soft attention mechanism:

\[
y_i = W_0^T \sigma(W_1 u^p_i + W_2 x_s + W_3 z_r + b), \tag{13}
\]

where \( W_0 \in \mathbb{R}^d, W_1, W_2, W_3 \in \mathbb{R}^{dxd} \) are trainable parameters to control the weights, and \( b \in \mathbb{R}^d \) is the bias. Then we combine user’s global preference and her current interest as the final session representation by concatenating them:

\[
z_h = W_4 [z_g; z_r]. \tag{14}
\]

where \([\cdot] \) is the concatenation operation and \( W_4 \in \mathbb{R}^{dx2d} \) transforms the concatenated representation from \( \mathbb{R}^{2d} \) into \( \mathbb{R}^d \).

After obtaining user’s preference, we use it to make recommendations by calculating the probabilities on all candidate items in \( V \). First, to solve the long-tail problem in recommendation \([1, 7]\), we apply a layer normalization on the session representation \( z_h \) and the embedding of each candidate item \( v_i \), i.e., \( z_h = \text{LayerNorm}(z_h) \) and \( v_i = \text{LayerNorm}(v_i) \), respectively. After normalization, we calculate the scores \( \hat{y} \) of each item in the item set \( V \) by multiplying
the session representation with all item embeddings as follows:

$$\hat{y}_i = z_h^T y_i.$$  \(\text{(15)}\)

Finally, we apply a softmax layer to normalize the preference scores of candidate items. It is worth noting that we will face a convergence problem after normalization as the softmax loss will be trapped at a very high value on the training set [29]. To address this problem, a scale coefficient \(\tau\) is applied inside the softmax to obtain the final scores:

$$\hat{y} = \frac{\exp(\tau y_i)}{\sum_{j=1}^{V} \exp(\tau y_j)}, \quad \forall i = 1, 2, \ldots, |V|,$$  \(\text{(16)}\)

where \(\hat{y} = (\hat{y}_1, \hat{y}_2, \ldots, \hat{y}_|V|)\). Finally, the items with the highest scores in \(\hat{y}\) will be recommended to the user.

To train our model, we employ cross-entropy as the optimization objective to learn the parameters as:

$$L(\hat{y}) = -\sum_{i=1}^{|V|} y_i \log(\hat{y}_i) + (1 - y_i) \log(1 - \hat{y}_i),$$  \(\text{(17)}\)

where \(y_i \in y\) reflects the appearance of an item in the one-hot encoding vector of the ground truth, i.e., \(y_i = 1\) if the \(i\)-th item is the target item of the given session; otherwise, \(y_i = 0\). In addition, we apply the Back-Propagation Through Time (BPTT) algorithm [21] to train the SGNN-HN model.

4 EXPERIMENTS

4.1 Research questions

To examine the performance of SGNN-HN, we address four research questions:

(RQ1) Can the proposed SGNN-HN model beat the competitive baselines for the session-based recommendation task?

(RQ2) What is the contribution of the star graph neural networks (SGNN) to the overall recommendation performance?

(RQ3) How does SGNN-HN perform on sessions with different lengths compared to the baselines?

4.2 Datasets

We evaluate the performance of SGNN-HN and the baselines on two publicly available benchmark datasets, i.e., Yoochoose and Diginetica.

- **Yoochoose** is a public dataset released by the RecSys Challenge 2015, which contains click streams from an e-commerce website within a 6 month period.

- **Diginetica** is obtained from the CIKM Cup 2016. Here we only adopt the transaction data.

For Yoochoose, following [14, 16, 34], we filter out sessions of length 1 and items that appear less than 5 times. Then we split the sessions for training and test, respectively, where the sessions of the last day is used for test and the remaining part is regarded as the training set. Furthermore, we remove items that are not included in the training set. As for Diginetica, the only difference is that we utilize the sessions of the last week for test. After pre-processing, 7,981,580 sessions with 37,483 items are remained in the Yoochoose dataset, and 204,771 sessions with 43,097 items are remained in the Diginetica dataset.

Similar to [14, 16, 34], we use a sequence splitting preprocess to augment the training samples. Specifically, for session \(S = \{v_1, v_2, \ldots, v_n\}\), we generate the sequences and corresponding labels as \((\{v_1\}, \{v_2\}, \{v_3\}, \ldots, \{v_1, \ldots, v_{n-1}\}, v_n)\) for training and test. Moreover, as Yoochoose is too large, following [14, 16, 34], we only utilize the recent 1/64 and 1/4 fractions of the training sequences, denoted as Yoochoose 1/64 and Yoochoose 1/4, respectively.

The statistics of the three datasets, i.e., Yoochoose 1/64, Yoochoose 1/4 and Diginetica are provided in Table 1.

4.3 Model summary

The models discussed in this paper are the following: (1) Two traditional methods, i.e., S-Pop [2] and FPMC [20]; (2) Three RNN-based methods, i.e., GRU4REC [10], NARM [14] and CSRM [30]; (3) Two attention-based methods, i.e., STAMP [16] and SR-IEM [18]; and (4) Two GNN-based methods, i.e., SR-GNN [34] and NISER+ [7].

- **S-Pop** recommends the most popular items for the current session.
- **FPMC** is a state-of-the-art hybrid method for sequential recommendation based on Markov Chains. We omit the user representation since it is unavailable in session-based recommendation.
- **GRU4REC** applies GRUs to model the sequential information in session-based recommendation and adopts a session-parallel mini-batch training process.
- **NARM** employs GRUs to model the sequential behavior and utilizes an attention mechanism to capture user’s main purpose.
- **CSRM** extends NARM by introducing neighbor sessions as auxiliary information for modeling the current session with a parallel memory module.
- **STAMP** utilizes an attention mechanism to obtain the general preference and resorts to the last item as recent interest in current session to make prediction.
- **SR-IEM** employs a modified self-attention mechanism to estimate the item importance and makes recommendations based on the global preference and current interest.
- **SR-GNN** utilizes the gated graph neural networks to obtain item embeddings and make recommendations using an attention mechanism to generate the session representation.
- **NISER+** introduces L2 normalization to solve the long-tail problem and applies dropout to alleviate the overfitting problem of SR-GNN.

4.4 Experimental setup

We implement SGNN-HN with six layers of SGNNs to obtain the item embeddings. The hyper parameters are selected on the validation set which is randomly selected from the training set with a
proportion of 10%. Following [7, 18, 34], the batch size is set to 100
and the dimension of item embeddings is 256. We adopt the Adam
optimizer with an initial learning rate $10^{-3}$ and a decay factor 0.1
for every 3 epochs. Moreover, L2 regularization is set to $10^{-5}$ to
avoid overfitting, and the scale coefficient $\tau$ is set to 12 on three
datasets. All parameters are initialized using a Gaussian distribution
with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 0.1.

4.5 Evaluation metrics
Following previous works [14, 34], we adopt P@K and MRR@K
to evaluate the recommendation performance.

\[ P@K = \frac{n_{hit}}{N}, \]
\[ MRR@K = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{v_{target} \in \text{test}} \frac{1}{\text{Rank}(v_{target})}, \]

where $N$ is the number of test sequences in the dataset and $n_{hit}$ is
the number of cases that the target item is in the top-K items of the
ranked list.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Overall performance
We present the results of the proposed session-based recommen-
dation model SGNN-HN as well as the baselines in Table 2. For
the baselines we can observe that the neural methods generally
outperform the traditional baselines, i.e., S-POP and FPMC. The
neural methods can be split into three categories:

RNN-based neural baselines. As for the RNN-based methods,
we can see that NARM generally performs better than GRU4REC,
which validates the effectiveness of emphasizing the user’s main
purpose. Moreover, NARM outperforms NISER+ for most cases on
the three datasets, which means that neighbor sessions with similar intent
can help boost the recommendation performance.

Attention-based neural baselines. As for the attention-based method-
s, STAMP and SR-IEM, we see that SR-IEM generally achieves a
better performance than STAMP, where STAMP employs a combi-
nation of the mixture of all items and the last item as “query” in
the attention mechanism while SR-IEM extracts the importance
of each item individually by comparing each item to other items.
Thus, SR-IEM can avoid the bias introduced by the unrelated items
and make accurate recommendations.

Table 2: Model performance. The results of the best perform-
ing baseline and the best performer in each column are under-
dlined and boldfaced, respectively. * denotes a significant
improvement of SGNN-HN over the best baseline using a
paired t-test ($p < 0.01$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Yoochoose 1/64</th>
<th>Yoochoose 1/4</th>
<th>Diginetica</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P@20</td>
<td>MRR@20</td>
<td>P@20</td>
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<td>S-POP</td>
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<td>18.35</td>
<td>27.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>GRU4REC</td>
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<td>59.53</td>
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<td>NARM</td>
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<td>28.63</td>
<td>69.73</td>
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<td>CSRMM</td>
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<td>29.71</td>
<td>70.63</td>
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<td>STAMP</td>
<td>68.74</td>
<td>29.67</td>
<td>70.44</td>
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<tr>
<td>SR-IEM</td>
<td>71.15</td>
<td>31.71</td>
<td>71.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NISER+</td>
<td>70.57</td>
<td>30.94</td>
<td>71.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SGNN-HN</td>
<td>72.06*</td>
<td>32.61*</td>
<td>72.85*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GNN-based neural baselines. Considering the GNN-based meth-
ods, i.e., SR-GNN and NISER+, we can observe that the best per-
former NISER+ can generally outperform the RNN-based and atten-
tion-based methods for most cases on the three datasets, which
verifies the effectiveness of graph neural networks on modeling the
transition relationship of items in the session. In addition, NISER+
outperforms SR-GNN for most cases on the three datasets except
for Yoochoose 1/4, where NISER+ loses against SR-GNN in terms of
MRR@20. This may be due to the fact that the long-tail problem
and the overfitting problem become more prevalent in scenarios
with relatively few training data.

In later experiments, we take the best performer in each category of the neural methods for comparison, i.e., CSRMM, SR-IEM and
NISER+.

Next, we move to the proposed model SGNN-HN. From Table 2,
we observe that SGNN-HN can achieve the best performance in
terms of P@20 and MRR@20 for all cases on the three datasets.
The improvement of the SGNN-HN model against the baselines
mainly comes from two aspects. One is the proposed star graph
neural network (SGNN). By introducing a star node as the transition
node of every two items in the session, SGNN can help propagate
information not only from adjacent items but also items without
direct connections. Thus, each node can obtain abundant informa-
tion from their neighbor nodes. The other one is that by using the
highway networks to solve the overfitting problem, our SGNN-HN
model can stack more layers of star graph neural networks, leading
to a better representation of items.

Moreover, we find that the improvement of SGNN-HN over the
best baseline in terms of P@20 and MRR@20 on Yoochoose 1/4 are
1.11% and 2.84%, respectively, and 1.46% and 2.07% on Yoochoose 1/4.
The relative improvement in terms of MRR@20 is more obvious
than that of P@20 on both Yoochoose 1/4 and Yoochoose 1/4. In
contrast, a higher improvement in terms of P@20 than of MRR@20
is observed on Diginetica, returning 4.27% and 3.90%, respectively.
This may be due to the fact that the number of candidate items
are different on Yoochoose and Diginetica, where the number of
candidate items in Yoochoose 1/64 and Yoochoose 1/4 are obviously less than that of the Diginetica dataset.

Our results indicate that our proposed SGNN-HN model can help put the target item at an earlier position when there are relatively few candidate items and is more effective on hitting the target item in the recommendation list for cases with relatively many candidate items.

5.2 Utility of star graph neural networks
In order to answer RQ2, we compare the star graph neural networks (SGNN) in our proposal with a gated graph neural network (GGNN) [15] and a self-attention mechanism (SAT) [27]. On the one hand, GGNN can only propagate information from the adjacent nodes while neglecting nodes without direct connections. Correspondingly, we only need to update the satellite nodes at each SGNN layer. In other words, the SGNN will be simplified to GGNN. On the other hand, SAT can be regarded as a full-connection graph that each node can obtain information from all nodes in the graph. In particular, if we remove the GGNN part from the SGNN, set the number of star nodes as the number of items in the session and then replace Eq. (2) by an identity function, i.e., $x_i = [x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_n]$, where $x_i \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times n}$, then the SGNN will become a self-attention mechanism.

Generally, SGNN can be regarded as a dynamic combination of GGNN and SAT.

To prove the effectiveness of SGNN, we substitute the SGNN in our proposal with two alternatives for propagating information between items and evaluate the performance in terms of P@20 and MRR@20 on three datasets. The variants are denoted as: (1) GGNN-HN, which replaces the SGNN with a simple GGNN; (2) SAT-HN, which replaces SGNN with SAT. See Figure 4.

In Figure 4, we see that SGNN-HN can achieve the best performance in terms of both P@20 and MRR@20 on three datasets. Moreover, as for the variants, GGNN-HN performs better than SAT-HN for all cases on the three datasets. We attribute this to the fact that the self-attention mechanism propagates information from all items in a session, which will bring a bias of unrelated items. However, the GNN-based methods, i.e., GGNN-HN and SGNN-HN, can both explore the complex transition relationship between items via GNN to avoid the bias brought by the unrelated items, thus a better performance is achieved than SAT-HN. Moreover, comparing GGNN-HN to SGNN-HN, we see that GGNN-HN can only propagate information from adjacent items, missing much information from unconnected items and leading to a worse performance than SGNN-HN.

5.3 Utility of highway networks
For RQ3, in order to investigate the impact of the number of GNN layers on the proposed SGNN-HN model and to validate the effectiveness of the highway networks, we compare SGNN-HN to its variant SGNN-SR, which removes the highway networks from SGNN-HN. In addition, the comparison involves the best performer in the category of GNN-based methods, i.e., NISER+. Specifically, we increase the number of GNN layers from 1 to 6, to show the performance in terms of P@20 and MRR@20 of NISER+, SGNN-SR and SGNN-HN on three datasets. The results are shown in Figure 5.

As shown in Figure 5, SGNN-HN achieves the best performance in terms of both P@20 and MRR@20 for almost all cases on three datasets. For P@20, from Figure 5a, 5c and 5e, we can observe that as the number of GNN layers increases, the performance of both SGNN-SR and NISER+ drops rapidly on the three datasets. Graph neural networks for session-based recommendation face a serious overfitting problem. Moreover, SGNN-SR outperforms NISER+ for all cases on the three datasets, which indicates that the proposed SGNN has a better ability than GGNN to represent the transition relationship between items in a session. As to the proposed SGNN-HN model, as the number of layers increases, we can see that the performance in terms of P@20 decreases slightly on Yoochoose 1/64 as well as Yoochoose 1/4 and remains relatively stable on Diginetica.
In addition, as the number of layers goes up, the performance of SGNN-HN shows a large gap over SGNN-SR and NISER+. By introducing the highway gating, SGNN-HN can effectively solve the overfitting problem and avoid the rapid decrease in terms of P@20 when the number of GNN layers increases.

For MRR@20, we can observe that as the number of layers increases, SGNN-SR shows a similar decreasing trend on the three datasets. However, the performance of NISER+ goes down on Yoochoose 1/64 and Diginetica while it increases on Yoochoose 1/4. In addition, NISER+ shows a better performance than SGNN-SR with relatively more GNN layers. Unlike SGNN-SR, we can observe that SGNN-HN achieves the best performance for most cases on the three datasets. Moreover, with the number of layers increasing, the performance of SGNN-HN increases consistently, which may be due to the fact that the highway networks in SGNN-HN can adaptively select the embeddings of item representations before and after the multi-layer GNNs. Furthermore, comparing SGNN-HN to SGNN-SR, we can see that the improvement brought by the highway networks is more obvious when incorporating more GNN layers. This could be due to the fact that with the highway networks, more GNN layers can be stacked, thus more information about the transition relationship between items can be obtained.

Moreover, comparing the effect of the highway networks on P@20 and MRR@20 in our SGNN-HN model, we can observe that the highway networks can improve the MRR@20 scores as the number of GNN layers increases while maintaining a stable P@20 score. This could be due to the fact that SGNN-HN is able to focus on the important items so that it can push the target item at an earlier position by using the highway networks.

5.4 Impact of the session length

To answer RQ4, we evaluate the performance of SGNN-HN and the state-of-the-art baselines, i.e., CSRM, SR-IEM and NISER+ on three datasets. Following [16, 34], we separate the sessions according to their length, i.e., the number of clicked items. Specifically, the sessions containing less than or equal to 5 clicked items are regarded as "Short", while others are deemed as "Long". We set the threshold to 5 as in [16, 34] since it is the closest integer to the average length of sessions in three datasets. The ratios of "Short" and "Long" sessions for test for the Yoochoose 1/64 and Yoochoose 1/4 datasets are 70.10% and 29.90%, respectively, and 76.40% and 23.60% for Diginetica. The performance in terms of P@20 and MRR@20 of SGNN-HN and the baselines are shown in Figure 6.

From Figure 6, we see that SGNN-HN can achieve the best performance in terms of P@20 and MRR@20 for all cases on the three datasets. Moreover, as the session length increases, the performance of all models in terms of both P@20 and MRR@20 on the three datasets consistently decreases, which may be due to the fact that longer sessions are more likely to contain unrelated items, making it harder to correctly identify the user preference. For P@20, as shown in Figure 6a, 6c and 6e, we see that among the baselines, CSRM performs worst for both "Short" and "Long" sessions on the three datasets, validating that the transition relationship in the session is more complicated than a simple sequential signal. By comparing SR-IEM and NISER+, we can observe that their performance are similar for the "Short" sessions, while NISER+ shows an obvious better performance for the "Long" sessions. This indicates that by modeling the complex transition relationship between items, GNNs can accurately obtain user’s preference to hit the target item when user-item interactions are relatively many.

As for MRR@20, NISER+ does not show better performance than SR-IEM on both "Short" and "Long" sessions on Yoochoose 1/64, and the same phenomenon is observed on Yoochoose 1/4. However, SGNN-HN clearly outperforms SR-IEM for all cases on the three datasets. We attribute the difference in performance between NISER+ and SGNN-HN to: (1) the SGNN makes the information from long-range items available in information propagating; and (2) the highway networks in SGNN-HN allow for the complex transition relationship between items to be investigated more accurately through multi-layer GNNs, which can boost the ranking of the target item in the list of recommended items.

In addition, in terms of P@20, the improvements of SGNN-HN against the best baseline NISER+ for "Short" and "Long" sessions are 1.18% and 0.79% on Yoochoose 1/64, respectively; 4.96% and 4.67% improvements of SGNN-HN over NISER+ on Diginetica are observed. This indicates that SGNN-HN is more effective at hitting the target item for relatively short sessions. Moreover, in terms of MRR@20, the improvements of SGNN-HN against the best baselines NISER+ and SR-IEM for "Short" and "Long" sessions are 1.23% and 2.97% on Yoochoose 1/64, respectively. Here higher improvement is observed on "Long" sessions. Differently on Diginetica, 4.62% and 3.76% improvements of SGNN-HN against NISER+ are observed on "Short" and "Long" sessions, respectively. The difference in terms of

<table>
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<th>Session length</th>
<th>P@20 (%)</th>
<th>MRR@20 (%)</th>
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<td>63</td>
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<td>SR-IEM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>CSRM</td>
<td>SR-IEM</td>
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<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>CSRM</td>
<td>SR-IEM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td>CSRM</td>
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<tr>
<td>71</td>
<td>CSRM</td>
<td>SR-IEM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>CSRM</td>
<td>SR-IEM</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
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<th>MRR@20 (%)</th>
</tr>
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<td>CSRM</td>
<td>SR-IEM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>CSRM</td>
<td>SR-IEM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>16.5</td>
<td>CSRM</td>
<td>SR-IEM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>SR-IEM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>CSRM</td>
<td>SR-IEM</td>
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<table>
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<th>MRR@20 (%)</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>CSRM</td>
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<td>SR-IEM</td>
</tr>
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<td>32.0</td>
<td>CSRM</td>
<td>SR-IEM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>CSRM</td>
<td>SR-IEM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6: Model performance on short and long sessions.
MRR@20 between the two datasets may be due to the fact that the average session length are different; it is bigger in Yoochoose 1/64 than in Digimetrica. As there are proportionally more long sessions in Yoochoose 1/64, this explains the bigger improvement on “Long” than “Short” sessions for Yoochoose 1/64.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

In this paper, we propose a novel approach, i.e., Star Graph Neural Networks with Highway Networks (SGNN-HN), for session-based recommendation. SGNN-HN applies star graph neural networks (SGNN) to model the complex transition relationship between items in a session to generate accurate item embeddings. Moreover, to deal with the overfitting problem of graph neural networks in session-based recommendation, we utilize highway networks to dynamically combine information from item embeddings before and after multi-layer SGNNs. Finally, we apply an attention mechanism to combine item embeddings in a session as the user’s general preference, which is then concatenated with her recent interest expressed by her last clicked item in the session for making item recommendation. Experiments conducted on two public benchmark datasets show that SGNN-HN can significantly improve the recommendation performance in terms of P@20 and MRR@20.

As to future work, on the one hand, we would like to incorporate neighbor sessions to enrich the transition relationship in the current session like in [11, 30]. On the other hand, we are interested in applying star graph neural networks to other tasks like conversational recommendation [13, 26] and dialogue systems [38] to investigate its scalability.

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