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Huang, J.; Oosterhuis, H.; de Rijke, M.; van Hoof, H.

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A Debiased Simulator for Reinforcement Learning based Recommender Systems

Jin Huang
University of Amsterdam
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
j.huang2@uva.nl

Maarten de Rijke
University of Amsterdam & Ahold Delhaize
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
m.derijke@uva.nl

Harrie Oosterhuis
University of Amsterdam
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
oosterhuis@uva.nl

Herke van Hoof
University of Amsterdam
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
h.c.vanhoof@uva.nl

ABSTRACT

Reinforcement learning for recommendation (RL4Rec) methods are increasingly receiving attention as an effective way to improve long-term user engagement. However, applying RL4Rec online comes with risks: exploration may lead to periods of detrimental user experience. Moreover, few researchers have access to real-world recommender systems. Simulations have been put forward as a solution where user feedback is simulated based on logged historical user data, thus enabling optimization and evaluation without being run online. While simulators do not risk the user experience and are widely accessible, we identify an important limitation of existing simulation methods. They ignore the interaction biases present in logged user data, and consequently, these biases affect the resulting simulation. As a solution to this issue, we introduce a debiasing step in the simulation pipeline, which corrects for the biases present in the logged data before it is used to simulate user behavior. To evaluate the effects of bias on RL4Rec simulations, we propose a novel evaluation approach for simulators that considers the performance of policies optimized with the simulator. Our results reveal that the biases from logged data negatively impact the resulting policies, unless corrected for with our debiasing method. While our debiasing methods can be applied to any simulator, we make our complete pipeline publicly available as the Simulator for OFfline leArning and evaluation (SOFA): the first simulator that accounts for interaction biases prior to optimization and evaluation.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Computing methodologies → Interactive simulation; Reinforcement learning; • Information systems → Information retrieval; Recommender systems.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, interest in Reinforcement Learning for Recommendation (RL4Rec) has greatly increased in both academia and industry. The key idea behind Reinforcement Learning (RL) is to optimize a policy that matches states to actions, so that an agent performing these actions maximizes a cumulative reward [31]. RL does not just consider the immediate reward of an action, but also the effect it has on subsequent actions, allowing it to learn w.r.t. long-term goals. For Recommender Systems (RSs), long-term goals are usually some form of long-term user engagement, e.g., the cumulative number of clicks or the dwell time over sessions of multiple recommendations [42]. Furthermore, RL is particularly suited for exploring the item space over multiple interactions [41], learning a recommendation policy directly from complex recommendation scenarios [7, 32, 40, 41], and adapting quickly to real-time user feedback [37]. Figure 1(a) displays the typical flow of RL4Rec: a state is the historical interactions of a user who is about to receive a recommendation, an action is an item being recommended by the policy of the recommender system, and the reward is implicit or explicit user feedback (e.g., a click, a rating, dwell time, an order, etc.). The goal of RL4Rec is to maximize the cumulative reward over multiple sequential recommendations. RL methods learn from experience; in the RS setting this means that they learn by recommending items to users and observing their subsequent interactions.

Despite these advantages, the RL4Rec approach brings risks when applied online: during learning, exploratory or incorrect actions could be taken, which can be detrimental to the user experience [11, 17]. Since RL learns from experience, it is almost unavoidable that initially some disliked items are recommended. Furthermore, online deployment takes time, costs money, and many researchers – both in academia and industry – simply do not have access to an actual platform with live users.
Existing work has evaluated RL4Rec simulators by comparing simulated user feedback with real user feedback from logged data. For instance, some work evaluated the performance of a simulator by considering how well it predicts skip/click behaviors [36] or dwell time [40]. While this type of evaluation can simulate a single user interaction, it does not consider whether using a simulator actually leads to a well-performing policy. However, there is no work that directly considers the performance of the produced policies that result from using a simulator, despite this being the ultimate goal. E.g., if one wants to apply a policy learned in a simulator to a real-world RL4Rec setting, it is generally desired that the policy has the best performance possible. Moreover, simulators can be very effective ways to reproduce and benchmark RL4Rec methods, but such comparisons are considerably less reliable if their results are biased.

In this paper, we propose a debiasing method for RL4Rec simulators that mitigates the effect of bias in logged data. Furthermore, we introduce a novel way of evaluating the effect of bias on the final policy performance of a simulator. Our experimental results reveal that bias in logged data affects simulators and the policies they produce. While both of these contributions can be applied to any RL4Rec simulator, we combine both steps in a newly proposed Simulator for Offline Learning and evaluation (SOFA). SOFA bas its simulation on a user-item rating matrix learned from logged user data; unlike existing simulators, SOFA corrects for interaction bias when learning this matrix. To evaluate SOFA, we use publicly available datasets where part of the data was logged on randomly recommended items.

The main contributions of this work are as follows:

1. A novel approach for debiasing simulators that mitigates the effect of bias in logged data.
2. A novel evaluation method to analyze the effect of bias on RL4Rec.
3. Two types of experiments, both based on real-world datasets (Yahoo!R3 [19] and coat [24]) and based on a simulation study, that show that bias in logged data affects simulators and the policies they produce.
4. SOFA, a novel simulator for RL4Rec, the first that corrects for bias in logged data.

We release the code of SOFA\(^1\) so that future work can develop RL4Rec algorithms while mitigating the effect of bias.

2 BACKGROUND: REINFORCEMENT LEARNING FOR RECOMMENDATION

RL methods are commonly studied in the context of an Markov Decision Process (MDP), consisting of a state space \(S\), an action space \(A\), a reward function \(R\), the transition probabilities \(T\), and a discount factor \(\gamma\) [31]. We will now describe how we model the recommendation task as an MDP [4, 5, 37, 42]:
part of the state, in our experiments such information is not available.

**Action space** $A$: Action $a_t \in A$ taken by the RS consists of the recommendation of a single item $i_t$ in turn $t$.

**Reward** $R$: After receiving action $a_t$, consisting of item $i_t$ being recommended by the RS, the (simulated) user gives feedback $f_t \in \{0,1\}$ (i.e., skip or click) on this item. This feedback is used to generate the immediate reward $r_t = R(f_t)$.

**Transition probabilities** $T$: After the user provides feedback $f_{t+1}$ on item $i_{t+1}$, the state transitions deterministically to the next state $s_{t+1} = ([i_1,...,i_t,1],[f_1,...,f_{t+1}])$. The interaction terminates after 10 turns.

**Discount factor** $\gamma$: As usual in MDPs, $\gamma \in [0,1]$ aims to balance the effect of immediate rewards and future rewards. At its extremes, if $\gamma = 0$, the RS only considers the immediate reward when taking an action. When $\gamma = 1$, all future rewards will be taken into account evenly.

This completes our description of our RL4Rec MDP, which allows us to apply RL methods to recommendation. The main difference between RL4Rec and the traditional recommendation task is that RL4Rec methods: (i) make multiple sequential recommendations while keeping track of previous interactions with a user, and (ii) try to optimize the cumulative rewards, based on a discounted sum on the observed user feedback $f_t$, the reward function $R$, and the discount factor $\gamma$. Unlike the traditional recommendation setup, RL4Rec considers the long-term feedback/rewards an RS receives. We further discuss related work on RL4Rec in Section 4.

## 3 BACKGROUND: INTERACTION BIAS IN LOGGED USER DATA

The recommendation task traditionally has a user set $U = \{u_1,...,u_N\}$ on the one hand and an item set $I = \{i_1,...,i_M\}$ on the other hand. Logged user data is usually an observed rating matrix $Y \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times M}$. One slot $y_{u,i}$ in this rating matrix $Y$ denotes the rating user $u$ would give to item $i$ in practice, the complete rating matrix is rarely known, since users usually do not rate every available item. We use $O \in \{0,1\}^{N \times M}$ as an observation indicator: $o_{u,i} = 1$ if we observe the rating $y_{u,i}$ given by user $u$ on item $i$, otherwise $o_{u,i} = 0$. In reality, observed user behavior can be affected by many types of interaction bias. Figure 2 visualizes the effect of position bias and popularity bias on the Yahoo!R3 dataset [19]. Positivity bias occurs because users rate the items they like more often [21, 29] and results in positive feedback. (a) shows positivity bias caused by the fact that users rate items they like more often. (b) shows popularity bias caused by the fact that users tend to interact with more popular items.

### 3.1 Forms of Bias

Formally, MNAR is often modelled by separating the probability of observance and the probability of a rating. Generally, the rating $y_{u,i}$ a user would give will not be conditioned on whether the rating is given or not:

$$P(y_{u,i}|a_{u,i}) = P(a_{u,i} | y_{u,i})P(y_{u,i}).$$

We will now illustrate how this model can capture different forms of bias:

(i) **No Bias** – if every rating is equally likely to be observed, the ratings are not MNAR but Missing Completely At Random (MCAR) and all users and items are equally represented:

$$\forall (u,u') \in U, (i,i') \in I \{P(a_{u,i}) = P(a_{u',i'}).\}$$

(ii) **Positivity Bias** – when positivity bias is present, items that would receive a higher rating are more likely to be given a rating. One way to model positivity bias is to state that if an item is more preferred it is also more likely to be given a rating:

$$\forall u \in U, (i,i') \in I \{P(y_{u,i} > y_{u,i'}) \rightarrow P(y_{u,i}) > P(y_{u,i'}).\}$$

(iii) **Popularity Bias** – when popularity bias is present, items that are more popular are more likely to be given a rating. Let $pop(i)$ denote the popularity of an item; we can model popularity bias by stating that if an item is more popular it is also more likely to be given a rating:

$$\forall u \in U, (i,i') \in I \{pop(i) > pop(i') \rightarrow P(y_{u,i}) > P(y_{u,i'}).\}$$

Now that we have described MNAR types of bias, we can consider the effect they may have on RSs and RL4Rec simulators.

### 3.2 Effect of Bias on Rating Estimation and User Simulation

Without correction, the types of interaction bias identified above will affect rating prediction, and may thus influence the RL4Rec simulators and the policies they help produce (see Figure 3). To illustrate how this may happen, we will use a simple example to estimate the average rating of an item. Let $avg(i)$ be the true average rating:

$$\hat{avg}(i) = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{u \in U} y_{u,i};$$

the naive (uncorrected) estimate is simply the average of the observed ratings:

$$\bar{avg}(i) = \frac{1}{\sum_{u \in U} o_{u,i}} \sum_{u \in U, o_{u,i} = 1} y_{u,i}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (5)

In expectation, this naive estimate is affected by the observance probabilities:

$$E_0[\bar{avg}(i)] = \frac{1}{\sum_{u \in U} P(o_{u,i} = 1)} \sum_{u \in U} P(o_{u,i} = 1) y_{u,i}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (6)
If we compare the expected average rating estimate with the forms of bias discussed in Section 3.1, we see the following: (i) **No Bias** – if no bias is present (Eq. 2) the estimate is correct in expectation: \(E_0[\text{avg}(i)] = \text{avg}(i)\). (ii) **Positivity Bias** – if positivity bias is present (Eq. 3), the estimate is expected to overestimate the true rating: \(E_0[\text{avg}(i)] \geq \text{avg}(i)\). This happens because higher ratings are overrepresented in observation, thus the average is skewed upwards. (iii) **Popularity Bias** – popularity bias (Eq. 4) will also affect the estimate, however, it depends on how popularity is distributed. The more popular items will have a heavier influence on the estimate, thus, if more popular items are highly rated on average, it will overestimate. Conversely, it will underestimate if more popular items are lowly rated on average.

While these effects go beyond estimating the average rating, understanding the effect of bias in this simple case helps us understand the effect it has on rating prediction. E.g., if a model is trained to predict ratings on the observed ratings, then under positivity bias we can expect it to overestimate ratings on average. For the same reasons overestimation happens on the expected average estimate: the model is trained on a sample of ratings where positive ratings were oversampled [24]. In turn, RL4Rec simulators are often based on a predicted rating matrix, and clicks are more likely to occur if an item is recommended to a user where a high rating was predicted. Consequently, if logged data contains positivity bias, we would expect a simulator based on that data to simulate users to click more often due to the bias. In contrast, if users were asked to rate randomly sampled items, resulting in MCAR data, then we expect simulated users to click less on average. With more complicated forms of bias, such as popularity bias, the effects of the bias on the final user become less predictable. Nonetheless, without intervention we can expect bias in logged data to affect the simulated users, and unavoidably, it will thus also result in different learned RL4Rec policies. Therefore, it is important to understand the effects of interaction bias on simulations, and to develop methods for mitigating them.

### 4 RELATED WORK

**RL-based Recommendation.** Dulac-Arnold et al. [10] apply a Deep Deterministic Policy Gradient (DDPG) algorithm to improve the efficiency of recommender systems with a large number of items. Following this framework, Chen et al. [4] propose a tree-structured policy gradient recommendation framework, where a balanced hierarchical clustering tree is built over the items and picking an item is formulated as seeking a path from the root to a certain leaf of the tree. A branch of research has used Deep Q-Networks (DQNs) (or variants thereof) to improve recommendation performance. Zhao et al. [38] adapt a DQN architecture to incorporate positive and negative feedback of users. Others use DQN to deal with some special recommendation scenarios, such as tip recommendation [7], news recommendation [41], and recommendation mixed with advertisements [40]. Another line of research applies the Actor-Critic framework, which combines the advantages of Q-Learning and policy gradients for accelerated and stable learning. The Actor-Critic architecture is more suitable for large and dynamic action spaces and can reduce redundant computations when dealing with more complex recommendation scenarios, such as, e.g., list-wise recommendation [39], page-wise recommendation [37], and dynamic treatment recommendation [32]. Choi et al. [9] use biclustering to reduce the state and action space, making the resulting MDP easy to solve with RL. Chen et al. [5] propose a policy-gradient-based algorithm that corrects for bias caused by the unobserved feedback of actions not chosen by the previous RS. Zhang et al. [34] introduce a hierarchical RL framework to improve the diversity of recommender systems.

**Debiased Recommender Systems.** Debiased recommendation focuses on estimating the bias (e.g., positivity bias [21], popularity bias [21, 29]), and correcting for them. Existing work on debiasing mostly focuses on missing interactions (e.g., missing ratings) between users and items, and considers the case when they are Missing Not At Random (MNAR). When missing data is Missing Completely At Random (MCAR), maximum likelihood inference that is only based on the observed data is unbiased because of the key property of Missing At Random (MAR) condition that the observation process is independent of the value of unobserved data [12, 19]. In contrast, MNAR data fails to have this key property and will probably lead to biased parameter estimation and prediction because of using the incorrect likelihood function.

Methods proposed for debiasing MNAR data can be grouped into three categories. The first category applies missing data imputation on MNAR data with the joint likelihood of modeling rating prediction and the observation process [12, 19, 20]. The rating prediction model is meant to complete the rating matrix, while the observation process model is meant to learn how the data point is missing according to its value. The second category makes use of Inverse Propensity Scoring (IPS) from causal inference [14], and integrates it in the learning process [6, 15, 24]. Based on IPS, it is able to derive an unbiased estimator for a wide range of performance estimators, such as Mean Squared Error (MSE) and Mean Absolute Error (MAE) used in rating prediction models. This type of debiasing work, which separates the estimation of bias from recommendation models, makes it flexible to plug in any conditional probability estimation method as the propensity estimator [24]. The third category is a hybrid method that integrates the above two methods so as to obtain robust performance by avoiding the potentially large bias due to imputation inaccuracy and the high variance of the propagens [35].

**User Simulations.** A significant volume of research on RL algorithms is focused on games. As a result, many platforms have been built for learning and evaluating RL algorithms on games, such as the Arcade Learning Environment (ALE) [1]. Brockman et al. [2] collect a large series of such environments in the widely used OpenAI Gym platform [2]. An important reason for early work to consider games is that they can be simulated at scale with relatively low computational costs. Thus, RL algorithms can obtain a large number of interactions required to find the optimal policies, making research much easier.

In contrast with games, only recently simulators for RL-based RSs have been proposed. Rohde et al. [22] introduce RecoGym, which simulates an RL environment for online advertising based on completely synthetic data. However, since it uses fully synthetic data, it is unclear how well RecoGym simulates realistic user behavior. Shi et al. [25] propose PyRecGym, which bases its simulation on logged user data, and simulates a more general recommendation task. In order to aid reproducibility and sharing of models in academia, Le et al. [13] create Recsim: a configurable simulation platform for evaluating RL-algorithms on recommendation tasks. Recsim [36] and Virtual-Tabao [26] both use a Generative Adversarial Network to tackle the challenges of complex item distributions based on e-commerce datasets. Surprisingly, none of the existing RL4Rec simulators that
We introduce a debiasing method for RL4Rec simulators and an evaluation method to measure the effect of debiasing on the policies produced by simulators. Finally, we propose the SOFA simulator, which applies both contributions.

5 A NOVEL METHOD FOR DEBIASING SIMULATORS

We introduce a debiasing method for RL4Rec simulators and an evaluation method to measure the effect of debiasing on the policies produced by simulators. Finally, we propose the SOFA simulator, which applies both contributions.

5.1 Debiasing a Simulator

Le et al. [13] define the main components of an RL4Rec simulator to be a user model, an item model, and a user-choice model. The user model and item model aim to capture user preference for items, while the user-choice model simulates user feedback when an item is recommended by an RS. Generally, user preferences are modelled using a predicted user-item rating matrix. We focus on RL4Rec simulators that use predicted user-item ratings and a user-choice model on top of the predicted ratings (see Figure 1(b)). We consider the case where the rating prediction model is learned from logged data.

As discussed in Section 3.1, logged data suffers from interaction bias, which affects any rating prediction model learned from it. Consequently, any simulator using such a prediction model will also be biased. This poses a problem for RL4Rec, since simulated user behavior should not be affected by the way a dataset was logged. As a solution we propose the Intermediate Bias Mitigation Step (IBMS), an intermediate step between the logged data and the learned prediction model that aims to mitigate the bias originating from the data from affecting the model. Figure 3 displays where the Intermediate Bias Mitigation Step (IBMS) fits in the simulator pipeline: by mitigating the effect of bias before the prediction model is learned, it minimizes its effect to reach subsequent steps, including the final produced policies.

The IBMS can apply various debiasing methods; for this paper we use the IPS approach widely used in causal inference [14] and complete-cases analysis [18]. First, we consider a standard rating prediction loss. Let $\hat{Y}$ be the predicted ratings, $Y$ true ratings, and $o_{u,i} = 1$ indicate that a rating from user $u$ and item $i$ is present in the logged data. The standard loss is based on all the pairs that are present in the logged data:

$$L_{Naive} = \frac{1}{|\{(u,i): o_{u,i} = 1\}|} \sum_{(u,i): o_{u,i} = 1} \delta_{u,i}(Y, \hat{Y}).$$

We call this standard loss a naive approach, because it assumes all ratings are equally likely to be present in the logged data, i.e., the data is MCAR. In contrast, interaction data on RS is usually MNAR, which leads to a biased estimate of the full-information loss (i.e., the loss based on all ratings) since:

$$E[L_{Naive}] = \frac{1}{N \cdot M} \sum_{(u,i): o_{u,i} = 1} \sum_{M} P(o_{u,i} = 1) \delta_{u,i}(Y, \hat{Y}) = \frac{1}{N \cdot M} \sum_{u=1}^{N} \sum_{i=1}^{M} \delta_{u,i}(Y, \hat{Y}).$$

Due to the effect of the bias introduced by $P(o_{u,i} = 1)$, optimizing this naive loss can lead to a gross misprediction of the predicted rating matrix $\hat{Y}$ [24, 30]. To mitigate the effect of bias in MNAR feedback, Schnabel et al. [24] apply an IPS estimator [14]. If the probabilities $P(o_{u,i} = 1)$ are known, they can be corrected for by weighting the logged ratings:

$$L_{IPS} = \frac{1}{N \cdot M} \sum_{(u,i): o_{u,i} = 1} \delta_{u,i}(Y, \hat{Y}) P(o_{u,i} = 1).$$

Basing $L_{IPS}$ on logged data provides an unbiased estimate of the full-information loss:

$$E[L_{IPS}] = \frac{1}{N \cdot M} \sum_{(u,i): o_{u,i} = 1} \sum_{M} P(o_{u,i} = 1) \delta_{u,i}(Y, \hat{Y}) P(o_{u,i} = 1) = \frac{1}{N \cdot M} \sum_{u=1}^{N} \sum_{i=1}^{M} \delta_{u,i}(Y, \hat{Y}).$$

For this to be truly unbiased, the exact $P(o_{u,i} = 1)$ values have to be known. In practice, the logged data reveals which ratings were logged and which were not, thus an estimation method can be fitted on $o_{u,i} = 1$ to infer a model of $P(o_{u,i} = 1)$. Schnabel et al. [24] propose to use two simple propensity estimation methods: (i) Naive Bayes with Maximum likelihood [19], and (ii) Logistic Regression based on features of a user-item pair [23]. By IPS weighting the ratings, the IBMS can prevent bias from affecting the rating prediction model of a simulator. In the ideal case, this removes the effect of bias on the resulting policies completely. In practice, we do not expect IBMS to completely remove bias but mitigate it to a large degree. The IBMS is applicable to any simulator that simulates interactions based on a rating prediction model.

5.2 Evaluating the Effect of Bias in a Simulation

To evaluate how well the IBMS mitigates bias from affecting the resulting policies, we compare the performance of a policy trained in a simulator with and without the IBMS. Simulators are designed for situations where online deployment is impossible, thus, performance also needs to be estimated offline in these situations. Existing work has evaluated RL4Rec simulators by comparing their simulated feedback with logged user feedback [8, 26, 36], as shown in Figure 4(a). The downside of this evaluation is that it does not consider the performance of policies learned with the simulator, despite the fact that finding an optimal policy is the ultimate goal of RL4Rec.

As an alternative, we propose an offline evaluation method that does consider the final produced policies. Our evaluation method only requires a sparse set of MCAR ratings, gathered on randomly
selected items. Since publicly available datasets exist that meet this requirement (see Section 6) this method is available to all researchers in the field. Thus, we assume that a large number of MNAR ratings and a sparse set of MCAR ratings are available. Then our evaluation method consists of the following steps: (i) Train a policy using a simulator with the IBMS on the MNAR ratings, we will call the resulting policy the debiased policy. (ii) Train another policy using an identical simulator on the MCAR data, expect it does not apply IBMS, and call this the unbiased simulator. (iv) Finally, deploy both the biased and debiased policies in the simulator on the MNAR ratings, expect it does not apply IBMS, and prepares for the next turn of interaction. After $K$ turns, the episode is terminated, and the RS saves a sequence of transitions $[(s_1, a_2, r_2, s_2), \ldots, (s_{K-1}, a_K, r_K, s_K)]$ into experience buffer $D$. The transitions in $D$ can be subsequently used to update the parameters of the RS.

To address the functional requirements of a simulator, we design our Simulator for Offline learning and evaluation (SOFA), a debiased simulator consisting of two components: (i) a debiased user-item rating matrix to present users’ preference on items, and (ii) a user-choice model to simulate user feedback, and provide the updated state and immediate reward to RS:

- **The debiased user-item rating matrix** is produced using the IBMS where we apply Propensity-Scored Matrix Factorization (MF-IPS) [24]. Given a user $u$ and an item $i$, MF computes the predicted rating $\hat{y}_{u,i}$ as: $\hat{y}_{u,i} = \mathbf{p}_u^\top \mathbf{q}_i + a_u + b_i + c$, where the $\mathbf{p}_u$ and $\mathbf{q}_i$ are embedding vectors of user $u$ and item $i$, and $a_u$, $b_i$, and $c$ are offsets for the user, item and global respectively. MF-IPS is optimized by minimizing the prediction error between the observed ratings $y_{u,i}$ and the predicted rating $\hat{y}_{u,i}$, weighted inversely to $P(o_{u,i} = 1)$:

$$\arg\min_{P,Q,A} \sum_{(u,i)} \frac{\delta(y_{u,i} - \hat{y}_{u,i})}{P(o_{u,i} = 1)} + \lambda \left( \|P\|^2_F + \|Q\|^2_F \right).$$

- **The user-choice model** simulates user feedback on the item being recommended from the RS, and provides the updated state and immediate reward to RS. Thus, the following steps are required for the user-choice model: (i) **Feedback simulation**: We define ratings higher than 3 as positive preference, and

```latex
\begin{align*}
\text{Simulator} & \quad \{u_i\} \quad \text{Real feedback} \\
\text{Policy Learning} & \\
\text{User-choice Model} & \\
\text{Rating Matrix} & \\
\text{Limited Action Candidate} & \\
\text{Policy} & \\
\text{Pseudo GT} & \\
\{u_i\} & \quad \text{MCAR data} \\
\text{Solution 1: Limiting Action Selection} & \\
\text{Solution 2: Completing the Rating Matrix} & \\
\end{align*}
```

Figure 4: Different evaluation methods. (a) shows the evaluation of a simulator by comparing the simulated feedback (e.g., ratings) with logged user feedback. (b) shows the process of evaluating a simulator in an unbiased simulator created from the MCAR data, where the problem caused by the sparsity of MCAR data is handled by two solutions: solution 1 is to evaluate on policy with limiting action selection shown on the left-hand side of (b), while solution 2 is to evaluate in the simulator with the complete rating matrix generated based on MCAR data shown on the right-hand side of (b).
others as negative preference following common settings in RSs. Based on the assumption that users tend to click items if they have a positive preference for these items, if \( y_{ui,t} > 3 \), the user clicks item \( i_t \), denoted as \( f_t = 1 \); otherwise, the user skips the item, \( f_t = 0 \). (ii) State transition: just concatenate \( i_t \) and \( f_t \) with \( s_{t-1} \) as the updated state \( s_t \) as defined in Section 2. (iii) Reward generation: The immediate reward \( r_t \) of click and skip feedback is specifically set to 1 and -2, these values were chosen because preliminary experiments showed they lead to efficient and stable policy learning in experiments. Finally, the user-choice model sends the updated state and the immediate reward back to the RS.

6 EXPERIMENTAL SETUP

In response to the limitation of the existing simulators we point out and the solution we propose, we analyze three research questions in the experiments: (RQ1) Does interaction bias in logged data affect a simulator? (RQ2) Can IBMS mitigate this bias effectively? (RQ3) How does the intensity of bias affect the simulators and their resulting policies? Below, we describe the datasets, and present the evaluation details for the simulator and the produced policy including the evaluation metrics and parameters used in our experiments.

Datasets. Our experiments are based on two real-world datasets and several synthetic datasets we generated ourselves, each with MNAR logged data as training set and MCAR data as test set.

Yahoo!R3 dataset [19]. The MNAR logged data of this dataset contains approximately 300,000 user-supplied ratings from 15,400 users on 1,000 items in total. The MCAR data is collected by asking 5,400 users to give ratings on 10 items randomly selected from the 1,000 items. Following [24], we consider positivity bias and use Naive Bayes to estimate propensities \( P(o_{ui,i}) \).

Coat dataset [24]. The dataset includes ratings from 290 users on 24 self-selected items and 16 randomly-selected items from totally 300 items. Following [24], \( P(o_{ui,i}) \) is estimated by using standard regularized logistic regression trained with the profile of users (e.g., gender and age) and items (e.g., type and color). The bias estimated in the above way is not specified as a certain type of bias and can be recognized as a mixture of different types of biases.

Synthetic data. In order to measure the effect of the degree of bias on simulators, we generate several synthetic datasets with varying degrees of positivity bias. Unlike real-world data, this synthetic setup allows us to keep all factors constant except for the positivity bias. The generation of synthetic data involves two steps:

(i) Generate the complete true user-item rating matrix, denoted as GT. We follow Zou et al. [42] where the generation process is based on a standard Gaussian distribution. Given \( N \) users and \( M \) items, we generate the associated parameter vectors \( P \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times d} \) and \( Q \in \mathbb{R}^{M \times d} \) as profiles of users and items, \( p_u \) and \( q_i \) denoting profile vectors of user \( u \) and item \( i \), are both drawn from the normal distribution \( \mathcal{N}(0,1) \). User preference on items is determined by the inner-product of \( P \) and \( Q \), denoted as \( P^T Q \). GT is generated by mapping \( P^T Q \) into five rating bins with score from 1 to 5 according to a certain rating distribution \( P(Y = y) \). In practice, we choose \( N = 300 \), \( M = 300 \), \( d = 10 \), and set \( P(Y = y) = [0.526, 0.242, 0.144, 0.062, 0.026] \) for \( y = [1, 2, 3, 4, 5] \).

(ii) Generate MNAR logged data under the control of observation probability:

\[
P(o_{ui,i} | y_{ui,i}) = \alpha P(o_{ui,i} | y_{ui,i}, \text{pos-bias}) + (1-\alpha) P(o_{ui,i} | \text{uniform}).
\]

We set the probability of uniform observation \( P(o_{ui,i} = 1 | \text{uniform}) = 5\% \) so that \(~5\%\ of the user-item rating matrix is observed; thus, the remaining \(~95\%\ is missing. We set \( \mathbb{P}(o_{ui,i} = 1 | y_{ui,i} = y, \text{pos-bias}) = [0.029, 0.021, 0.035, 0.161, 0.577] \) for \( y = [1, 2, 3, 4, 5] \) to obtain a rating distribution similar to that of the Yahoo!R3 dataset. The intensity of bias is controlled by \( \alpha \): if \( \alpha = 1.0 \), the sampling probability is determined by positivity bias; if \( \alpha = 0 \), the logged data is sampled completely at random. We vary \( \alpha \in [0.0, 0.2, 0.4, 0.6, 0.8, 1.0] \) to generate MNAR logged data with different degrees of positivity bias.

Hyperparameters. The simulators rely on the user-item rating matrix generated by MF, including MF-IPS and MF-Naive. We followed the procedure of Schnabel et al. [24] to tune the MF hyperparameters: the \( L_2 \) regularization weight \( \lambda \in \{10^{-5}, \ldots, 1\} \) and dimension of embeddings of users and items \( d \in \{5, 10, 20, 40\} \), were chosen by cross-validation while considering to match the rating distributions of the predicted ratings with the real rating distributions simultaneously.

For the policy used in the experiments, we use a basic DQN policy with a Gated Recurrent Unit (GRU)-based network to encode discrete state and approximate action-value function. Due to space limitations, a detailed description of the architecture of this DQN policy is provided in the released code. The required hyperparameters come in two kinds: (1) Hyperparameters of the used DQN, e.g., \( \gamma \) discount factor, and the dimension \( h \) of the look-up layer, and the dimension \( h_{GRU} \) of the GRU hidden state. (2) Hyperparameters used in learning process, e.g., the size of replay buffer \( D \), the speed of greedy epsilon decay, the size of minibatch and the frequency of target network update. Following Zou et al. [42], we fix the discount factor \( \gamma \) to 0.9, and choose the other hyperparameters by running multiple experiments and seeing which resulted in the most stable learning curves which was measured by the average cumulative number of clicks over 10-turn interactions with given simulators. The specific values of the hyperparameters for different datasets will be released with the code.

Evaluation Metrics. To evaluate the performance of a policy, we use the cumulative number of clicks received over 10 interaction turns in the unbiased simulator. Additionally, we apply the evaluation metrics Mean Squared Error (MSE) and Mean Absolute Error (MAE), both of which are widely used for the rating prediction task. Finally, Accuracy (ACC) and Click-ACC are also used to show the accuracy of the predicted ratings and the predicted click/skip behavior generated by the click model, which maps high ratings into clicks and low ratings into skips.

---

1 This is slightly different from the setting in [24] without matching the real rating distributions. The median rating yields the minimal MSE loss when prediction error is large. This may cause most of the simulated feedback to be negative, and policies cannot learn useful information from the interactions.
7 EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

7.1 Effect of Interaction Bias

Recall that in Figure 3, we illustrate the propagation of the effect of bias from user interactions to reach the produced policies. We analyze the effect of bias on the task of predicting the rating matrix. In Table 1, we find that MF-IPS outperforms MF-Naive with metrics MSE, MAE and ACC on two real datasets and synthetic data with $\alpha = 1$.

Moreover, for a better understanding of how bias affects MF, we analyze the complete user-item rating matrices generated by MF-IPS and MF-Naive. For the sake of brevity, we only present the analysis of positivity bias on Yahoo!R3 and synthetic data. Figure 5(a) and 6(a) show the rating distributions of the MNAR logged data (Train) and the unbiased data (Test for MCAR data of Yahoo!R3 or GT for the synthetic data). Positivity bias in the logged data is adequately demonstrated resulting in a large “oversampling” of the higher ratings. Figure 5(b) and 6(b) show the rating distributions of the complete user-item rating matrices generated by MF-IPS and MF-Naive learned from the logged data. We find that MF-Naive tends to overestimate ratings, and this in turn confirms our theoretical analysis in Section 3.2. MF-IPS can mitigate this kind of bias to some extent, shown here as a larger number of lower ratings than with MF-Naive. We notice a mismatch in the rating distributions between the true rating matrices and the generated rating matrices with ratings concentrating at 2 for MF-IPS or 3 for MF-Naive. The main reason is that MF models learned from the sparse logged data still suffer from large prediction errors, and predicting ratings as the median yields the minimal loss (e.g., MSE loss).

To conclude, interaction bias affects the prediction of the rating matrix based on logged data. Thus, any simulator using such a prediction model will also be biased, and the quality of policies trained using such a biased simulator will be affected.

7.2 Evaluation Results on Resulting Policies

Two DQN policies equipped with the same networks first interact with two simulators, one with IBMS named SOFA and one without IBMS named Naive-Sim, and update their parameters from the interactions. Figure 7 and 8(a) shows the learning curves of these DQN policies, which track average cumulative number of clicks over 10-turn interactions with given simulators SOFA and Naive-Sim on Yahoo!R3, Coat and synthetic dataset with $\alpha = 1$. Results are an average of 10 independent runs, lines show mean performance, and shaded areas are confidence intervals.

We notice that learning curves show a downward trend at the beginning of learning, because the simulators follow the basic hypothesis for RSs that users would dislike repeated recommended items and directly skip them. The duplicate recommendation is detrimental to novelty and we should avoid it [27]. We can observe that these policies converge after multiple learning steps, and the cumulative numbers of click for the policies resulting from using Naive-Sim are consistently higher than SOFA over the whole learning process. It is noteworthy that the learning curves are based on the number of clicks received during training; they are an unreliable estimate of actual performance due to bias.

Figure 9 shows the evaluation results on the Yahoo!R3 and Coat datasets with two solutions of evaluation on the sparse MCAR data: (1) Solution-1: Limiting Action Selection, (2) Solution-2: Completing the Rating Matrix.

DQN policies resulting from using simulators outperform the random recommendation policy on two real datasets. For Solution-1, the gap of the cumulative number of clicks over interactions between the different policies is not significant on Yahoo!R3. The most plausible reason is that the limited action candidate set is too distinct from the items that policies would actually recommend. For Solution-2, the produced DQN policies clearly outperform random recommendation policies. In the first turn of interaction, policies show the same results because DQN-based policies randomly recommend an item in the first turn when the initial user state is empty. Then the policies recommend the item following the $\epsilon$-greedy strategy to choose the action with highest Q-value, and obtain better performance than random recommendation policy.

DQN policies resulting from using SOFA perform better than the policies resulting from using Naive-Sim in most cases, except for the evaluation results for Solution-1 on Yahoo!R3 dataset, most likely because the limited action candidate set results in very similar recommendations for all the different policies. The evaluation results on the debiased simulator show a reversal of relative differences compared to the learning curves. This again supports our analysis.
Table 1: MAE, MSE, ACC, and Click-ACC performance of MF-IPS and MF-Naive compared with unbiased test set. Click-ACC means the accuracy for the click or skip behaviors generated from the rating scores. ↓/↑ indicate smaller is better or worse.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Yahoo/R3</th>
<th>Coat</th>
<th>Synthetic (α = 1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MSE ↓</td>
<td>MAE ↓</td>
<td>ACC ↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MF-IPS</td>
<td>1.518</td>
<td>0.999</td>
<td>0.336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MF-Naive</td>
<td>2.263</td>
<td>1.287</td>
<td>0.222</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9: Evaluation results of the produced policies on Yahoo and Coat.

Section 3.2 that the simulator without IBMS overestimates ratings on average and simulates users to click more often because of bias. This reversal also answers RQ1 positively: Interaction bias in logged data does affect a simulator.

We also present evaluation results on the synthetic data with observation of the logged data fully associated with positivity bias (α = 1) by deploying the resulting policies in the unbiased simulator directly created with the complete true rating matrix GT, shown in Figure 8(b). We observe results consistent with those on the real-world datasets: DQN policies outperform the random recommendation policy, and the policies resulting from using SOFA outperform the policy resulting from using Naive-Sim. Therefore, we answer RQ2 positively: the proposed SOFA with IBMS does mitigate enough bias to result in better performing policies.

7.3 Effect of the Intensity of Bias

To answer RQ3, we evaluate the simulated feedback and the resulting policies in the synthetic simulator built with the complete true rating matrix GT.

Figure 10(a) shows the performance of simulated feedback with evaluation metric Click-ACC. When α equals 0 with no bias in the logged data, the performance of simulated feedback generated from the rating matrices completed by MF-IPS and MF-Naive are similar. With the increase of the bias in logged data, MF-IPS consistently outperforms MF-Naive. Both achieve their best performance when α = 0.4. With the increase of bias with α in range of 0.4–1.0, the performance of MF-Naive gradually decreases because the bias in logged data leads to grossly incorrect parameters estimation and rating prediction models. In contrast, MF-IPS with IBMS is more robust, which once again answers RQ2 positively.

Figure 10(b) and 10(c) show the cumulative numbers of clicks for policies over 5 and 10-turn interactions respectively. When α is bigger than 0.5, leading to a large degree of bias in the logged data, SOFA can lead to a better policy over 5 and 10-turn interactions. When α is smaller, SOFA performs worse over 10-turn interactions, but similar over 5-turn interactions. A plausible explanation is that IPS suffers from high variance and may underestimate ratings on average due to over-weighting the lower logged ratings. This underestimation of the ratings results in less positive feedback than the real case, and further affects the policy to obtain similar performance over 5-turn interactions, but worse on turn-10.

Finally, we answer RQ3: When the degree of bias in the logged data is very high, IBMS with using an IPS estimator can efficiently mitigate the bias from affecting the simulators and their produced policies. However, a minor flaw is that the IPS estimator used in IBMS can suffer from variance when there is very little bias in the logged data.

8 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have analyzed the phenomenon that interaction bias in logged data affects RL4Rec simulators and the policies they produce. To mitigate the effect of bias, we have proposed the Intermediate Bias Mitigation Step (IBMS), an intermediate step between the logged data and the learned prediction model. Furthermore, we have introduced a novel way of evaluating the effect of bias on the final policy performance of a simulator. Experimental results have revealed that (1) interaction bias in logged data affects a simulator, (2) the proposed IBMS can mitigate the bias, especially in the case of serious bias. We have combined IBMS and the newly proposed evaluation method, in a novel Simulator for Offline Learning to evaluate Reinforcement Learning for Recommendation (RL4Rec) algorithms while mitigating the effects of interaction bias.

While we think that the IBMS is an important contribution to RL4Rec, SOFA only simulates the single-item recommendation scenario, where only one item is recommended at once. In practice, RSs
often recommend multiple items at once, and thus future work could consider the effect of interaction bias on simulators for multi-item recommendation scenarios. Additionally, future work could consider simulators learned from logged data with implicit feedback and user preferences modeled using ranking approaches.

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