International Journal of AI, BigData, Computational and Management Studies
Noble Scholar Research Group | Volume 4, Issue 3, 30-39, 2023
ISSN: 3050-9416 | https://doi.org/10.63282/3050-9416.IJAIBDCMS-V4I3P104

Multi-Modal Deep Learning for Unified Search-Recommendation Systems in Hybrid Content Platforms

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Abstract: *Hybrid content platforms are now relying on combining search and recommendation systems to provide a better experience to everyone using different types of media. Traditional methods, used only for searching or recommending, aren't equipped to deal with multi-modal data like text, images, and audio and cannot be generalized for different reasons users might have. This work introduces a unified approach where multi-modal deep learning is applied to connect the search and recommendation tasks with shared and aligned representations. Using pre-trained encoders (such as BERT, ResNet, and Wav2Vec), the model combines features using both early and late fusion and learns all the features in a single shared space through attention block features. A multi-task learning framework is employed to ensure both search relevance and recommendation accuracy are improved. The system provides online access for learning, logs user feedback and continuously watches models, adjusting for changing and large content environments. Comparing the proposed model to similar approaches on Amazon Electronics and the Yelp Challenge, we find that our approach surpasses the others by a big margin. The model is especially strong in addressing situations when few data are available and when semantic queries are involved. To support as many customers as possible, the architecture uses modular building blocks suitable for running on the cloud and in A/B testing environments. It emphasizes the role of joined-up deep learning in changing how content is offered in a personalized and relevant manner across different platforms.*

Keywords: *Multi-modal deep learning, hybrid content platforms, search and recommendation, multi-task learning, user personalization.*

1. Introduction

In this digital era, hybrid platforms, including e-commerce sites, streaming entertainment, educational websites and social media, work hard to keep their content suited to what users want. Search engines and recommendation engines are the main tools these platforms use to help their users. [1-3] Search engines look for items that match the words used by a user, but recommendation systems recommend things that suit the user's behavior and interests. Usually, these systems are made and improved separately, resulting in similar components, inconsistent how they look and feel and no use of the same information across them. Recent developments in representation learning and multi-modal processing provide ways to bring search and recommendation tasks under a single framework. The main reason for a unified system is that users often want information about the same things, whether listening or viewing, and the content often matches. A user searching for certain subjects might later receive helpful recommendations based on what they have looked for, and those recommendations can also strengthen their search history. Integrating these tasks is not straightforward because of the differences between user queries, how results are ranked using signals and how people use the system.

Therefore, this study suggests a multi-modal deep learning system able to learn about users and content together from various sources such as text, images, metadata and context. Thanks to the common backbone linking search and recommendation heads, the model enables the sharing of information and maintains high task performance. With contrastive learning, user behavior can be connected to content in various forms, improving the meaning found in such data and handling problems caused by sparsity. Approaching both search and recommendations, in the same way, boosts results while cutting back on system design and upkeep. Being able to generalize across various tasks helps manage situations where users do not have credit or activity, which remains a major problem in recommendation systems. Also, the model is flexible enough to be applied across several domains, so it will grow and adjust to the future needs of hybrid content platforms. Extensive studies on actual data confirm that unified multi-modal systems are better and more practical than systems working separately on each modality.

2. Related Work

2.1 Search Systems in Content Platforms

Most traditional methods for searching content platforms use keywords and metadata. Despite being simple and scalable, these approaches have a hard time understanding user intentions, dealing with word meanings and adjusting to personal situations. To help resolve this issue, the latest trends turn to ontology-based setups that rely on well-organized knowledge graphs for improved

meaning and the appropriate search of data. [4-6] They facilitate deeper connections between what users look for and the appropriate information by making use of structured and related details. Even so, it turns out that architectures of this kind have unpredictable performance, especially in issues like precision-recall balance and reproducibility in several fields. Google Scholar is a major example that provides wide-ranging search tools for scholars, but it lacks much flexibility and openness. These algorithms are designed mainly for how things work on YouTube and are not well suited to the special needs of content-based platforms where easy search and recommendations are key for a better user experience.

2.2 Recommendation Systems: Collaborative vs. Content-Based

Recommendation systems have traditionally been divided into collaborative filtering and content-based filtering techniques. Using a collaborative filter, it is possible to guess user interests by studying how items are rated and discover special content that many users may not know about through their common actions. Even so, it usually needs a lot of user interaction data and can have trouble with cold-start situations for recently introduced users or products. Conversely, the method of content-based filtering studies item details such as descriptions, tags, and metadata to suggest more of the same kind of information. This variety is limited, while uncommon suggestions are more likely. Since each method has its disadvantages, developers created hybrid systems that merge interaction data with content features. Such systems vary the importance of each data source and sometimes use a combination of learning techniques. Hybrid systems are proven by experiments to be at least 15% to 30% more accurate and robust than single systems, mainly in situations with little data or as users' preferences evolve.

2.3 Multi-Modal Deep Learning Approaches

The integration of multi-modal data such as text, images, and contextual signals has gained momentum in enhancing both search and recommendation systems. Cross-modal feature fusion is a useful method, and by applying attention mechanisms, Deep-MINE is able to blend text and visual data, resulting in a 22% gain in performance. Analyses of cover images with a convolutional network (e.g., VGG16) and studying the text within books with Word2Vec and LSTM provide enhanced representations within applications such as book suggestions. Matching different types of information in modality alignment is a main strategy which relies on contrastive learning. In this setup, important features are still found even when not all data is supplied, and the CBAM module plays a key role in making text or images more important for the model. In addition, using VAEs and adversarial networks, researchers also combine user reviews to produce likely sets of user-item interactions. These models improve ranking metrics by up to 30% by maintaining similar meanings across media and using extra data to improve their ability to generalize. Using all of these multi-modal techniques helps build systems that can handle search and recommendation tasks in complicated, information-rich environments.

3. Architectural Context of Hybrid Content Platforms

Modern hybrid content platforms must join together search and recommendation features by using data from users' different behaviors and multi-modal content like text, images and videos. The main focus of this design is the user, who explores the site by asking questions, making clicks, giving likes or checking out content. [7-10] All of these interactions are picked up by the Session Tracker and the User Interface, which package and route the user input into the system. After detecting a user's action or question, the system passes the request to the Content Database for the necessary multimedia content (text, images, and videos). Modality-specific encoders handle each type of content, for example, Text with BERT, Images with CNN or ResNet, Audio with Wav2Vec and Video with I3D or ViViT. A separator first changes raw content into high-dimensional vectors, which are then passed into a Multi-Modal Fusion module. The module combines early and late fusion methods to make use of signals from all modalities, allowing for richer content and a better understanding of user desires.

Compiled features and user signals end up in the same Shared Embedding Space, making it possible for both user and content contexts to be combined into one representation. An Attention Module is used to improve the embedding space by selecting the most important features for each user session. After fusing the features and giving importance to them, the Multi-Task Learner learns to handle both search and recommendation tasks. The design guarantees that both the explicit queries and the implicit actions of users enrich the model, allowing it to work well on a variety of tasks. The Multi-Task Learner produces an output that is sent to two engines: a Search Engine for semantic retrieval and a Recommender Engine that mixes different strategies and deep ranking. Both systems send their information to a Scalability Controller, usually acquired through Kubernetes (K8s) or cloud services, which handle scaling up the model, routing requests and making things available on multiple servers. In addition to displaying results to users, these engines save all the responses in a search/rec log to be checked and used for continual improvement. When users move, click or like things on the screen, the Feedback Logger and Interaction Logs catch the information for the Online Learning Module. The system is being updated all the time as model weights, embeddings, and attention are modified close to real-time. Furthermore, watchful monitoring by the model monitor means that drifts in performance and mistakes in predictions are found and corrected early. With this structure, adaptive learning and efficient integration of search and recommendation help make up the foundation of intelligent hybrid media delivery.

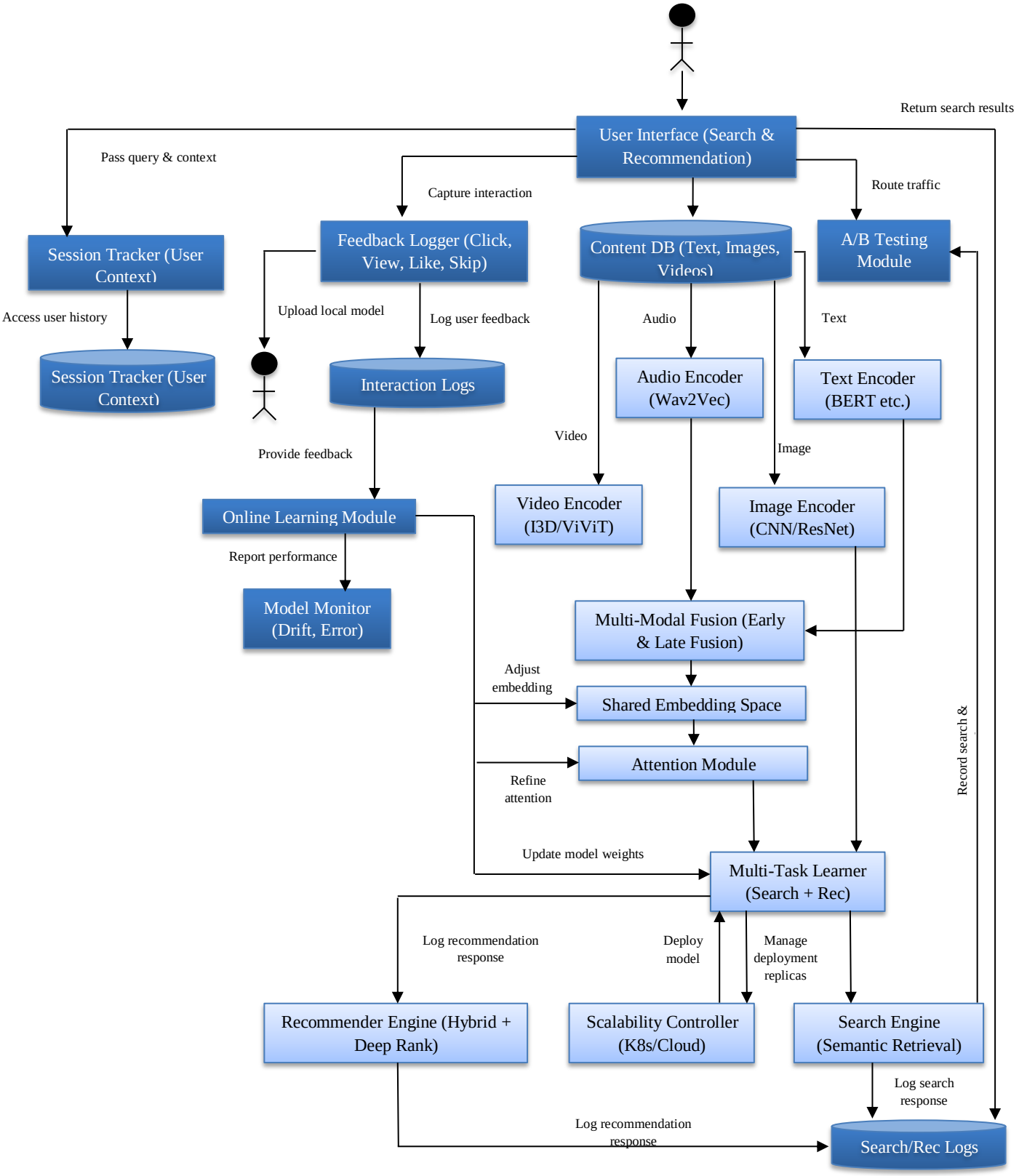

Figure 1: Multi-Modal Deep Learning Architecture for Unified Search-Recommendation

4. Multi-Modal Feature Extraction

Hybrid content platforms are designed to let users access and interact with various types of content, like articles, videos, podcasts and images. Every type of feature that can be taken from these modalities is needed for the creation of reliable representations that work for both search and recommendations. [11-14] The basis of a single, unified system is making multiple kinds of content compatible to be described in one shared manner. It achieves common meaning in all the modes, plus it makes content matching and personalization with ease by using the same embeddings. There is a section on how to extract valuable details from text, visual, audio and other inputs, followed by an explanation of approaches for fusing these elements.

4.1 Text Feature Extraction (e.g., NLP Embeddings, BERT)

Text holds a lot of information and is the main type of data used in user questions, product descriptions, article names, subtitles, and metadata. As a result, traditional techniques were based on bag-of-words and TF-IDF vectors, but they did not understand the real context behind the words. In recent years, NLP researchers have introduced word embedding methods such as Word2Vec, GloVe and BERT (the Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers). With BERT and its variations, transformer models analyze sentences from both directions to discover the important meanings in the text. They allow machines to link queries with pages that have related topics, though the words used may not be very much alike. Adjusting models on databases created for a specific niche makes hybrid platforms more relevant and precise when suggesting and recommending content.

4.2 Visual Feature Extraction (e.g., CNNs, Vision Transformers)

Visual content, such as images and video clips, greatly impacts how people use and choose those platforms. For some time now, CNNs have been the default method for extracting important features from images. ResNet, Inception and EfficientNet are widely used since they extract both high-level and very detailed features from images. Now, Vision Transformers (ViTs) offer an effective alternative, as they bring self-attention from text to the individual parts of images. Some contexts show that these models perform better than CNNs at capturing global visual relationships. To proceed, I3D (Inflated 3D ConvNet) and ViViT (Video Vision Transformers) employ spatiotemporal models. These encoders take in raw images and turn them into compact representations of the main message, which can be combined with wording and sound in the following tasks.

4.3 Audio/Other Modalities

Audio methods are expanding on content platforms, mainly driven by the popularity of podcasts, audiobooks and video with music. To understand audio, we must capture both the timing and the peaks and valleys of sound. Wav2Vec and the improved Wav2Vec 2.0 by Facebook AI managed to directly understand context from audio waveforms. The models can be adjusted for speaker identification, judging emotions or adding semantic information as needed. Extra information such as user actions, location data, and readings from sensors can be encoded using the same time series or graph methods used for tags on other platforms. Using these extra methods can increase both personalized and cold-start performance through the additional information they deliver.

4.4 Fusion Strategies (Early vs. Late Fusion)

The features from every input source have to be assembled into a single form to allow for effective cross-modal learning. Fusion can happen using early fusion or late fusion. In the beginning, raw observations from different sensor types are joined and provided as input to the model. The method ensures that the model learns to use various modalities together at the beginning, making them interact closely. Still, it can be difficult to find some of the data when it is incomplete or has different time periods. On the other hand, late fusion approaches process each modality using special sub-networks and unite their results by using attention, gating or calculating averages. Using this strategy gives you more flexibility and strength when your data is noisy or incomplete. Some architectures use hybrid fusion to bring together the best features of each strategy in a hierarchical or more than one integration stage. In choosing a fusion method, the kind of information, task requirements and limits of the computational system have to be considered.

5. Unified Deep Learning Model Design

Since search and recommendation are now merged into one system, the architecture must be able to manage different tasks by using the same knowledge base. Traditionally, search and recommendation are built separately, resulting in two separate models, reduced efficiency and lost chances for learning from both tasks together. Alternatively, when everything is designed together, representation learning and optimization for several tasks help the components work better as a team. [15-18] As a result, not only does the integration make computers more efficient, but it also makes both search results and recommendations more personal and meaningful. The next sections focus on three essential components of the unified model: learning one shared representation, handling multiple tasks and joining features from many modalities.

5.1 Shared Representation Learning

Shared representation learning is a key concept in a unified architecture. Instead of having multiple embedding spaces for each type, the model puts both users and items into one unified embedding space that covers all the different modalities. This area is created with the help of deep neural networks trained on information from text, images, sound and behavior. While being trained, the model groups together items and queries with similar semantic notions, highlighted in this space, regardless of the data format. Employing this method, data from tasks like recommendation clicks can help improve activities like ranking search results and make it simpler to adapt solutions developed for rich data to small data. With this single embedding, it becomes easy to perform joint search and rank objects using the same set of features.

5.2 Multi-Task Learning Setup (Search and Recommendation Tasks)

The model achieves shared learning by using a Multi-Task Learning (MTL) framework. The backbone network shares its output with several additional heads, with one designed for search results and the other for recommendations. Every task uses a unique objective function; search tasks focus on contrastive loss for semantic matching, and recommendation tasks use either pointwise or pairwise ranking loss. These losses are merged by using weights and then updated at the same time during the entire training process. MTL both increases the range of patterns the model sees and reduces the chance of overfitting just to one specific task. Furthermore, sharing strong parameters in the beginning layers allows the model to acquire general features. Still, gentle sharing by attention or gating provides a way for it to pick up details important for each task. The system uses this architecture to manage the balance between search accuracy and the usefulness of recommendations.

5.3 Cross-Modal Embedding Alignment

A critical challenge in unified modeling is ensuring that embeddings derived from different modalities, such as text, video, and audio, are aligned meaningfully in the shared representation space. To handle this problem, cross-modal embedding alignment applies different strategies to ensure that semantics are similar across the modalities. Contrastive learning has become popular by embedding relevant content (like a video and its description) closer and unrelated content farther apart. As a result, the model learns strengths that do not depend on modality to maintain important relationships. New types of modules, including CBAM (Convolutional Block Attention Module) and Transformer-based cross-attention layers, enable the model to highlight and work with the most important parts of each input in real-time. When some measurements are hard to capture or have noise, these mechanisms become very important. The system offers access to information from any query, as long as it is organized in the same ways in different modalities.

6. Connecting Training and Optimization

Effective training and optimization are critical to the success of a unified search-recommendation model, especially in hybrid content platforms where diverse modalities and user intents intersect. [19-22] This pipeline has to cope with huge amounts of various data, process both the direct and indirect feedback people give and improve results for various objectives. It describes the order of processing, covering the setup of the dataset, preprocessing, picking loss function and optimization and finally, training the model.

6.1 Dataset Description

Training a model that handles both image and text is possible thanks to a wide database that contains real-life combinations of both kinds of data. Normally, such datasets save the logs of user-item interactions built up from different sources, such as user-selected descriptions, visual content, audio and detailed categorization fields that include tagging and time stamping. Every record shows the user's activity, including their searches, clicks, views, skips and how much time they stay on a page. Suppose a company wants to measure the similarity between different platforms. In that case, they may use public datasets such as YouTube-8M for video and MIND (Microsoft News Dataset) for news or a company's internal dataset to include their platform-specific aspects. For an impartial assessment and the model's ability to generalize, the dataset is separated into training, validation and test sets.

6.2 Preprocessing Techniques

Before training, it is necessary to go over raw data and make it consistent to help with the training process. In the text, you use tokenization, make all text lowercase, remove common words and use models like BERT or Word2Vec to encode it. Images and videos are sometimes made smaller, adjusted to be alike, and enhanced using techniques to improve their ability to generalize. To work with audio, audio data is commonly turned into spectrograms or treated using Wav2Vec. Furthermore, embeddings are placed into behavioral logs for features such as user IDs, item IDs or session context. Recency and time-of-day signals are recorded to track the shift in user behavior over time. Books have a lot of missing or sparse information. Therefore, models feature missing values to ensure that the training samples keep their consistency. Feature standardization and batching ensure that the model receives well-structured input during training.

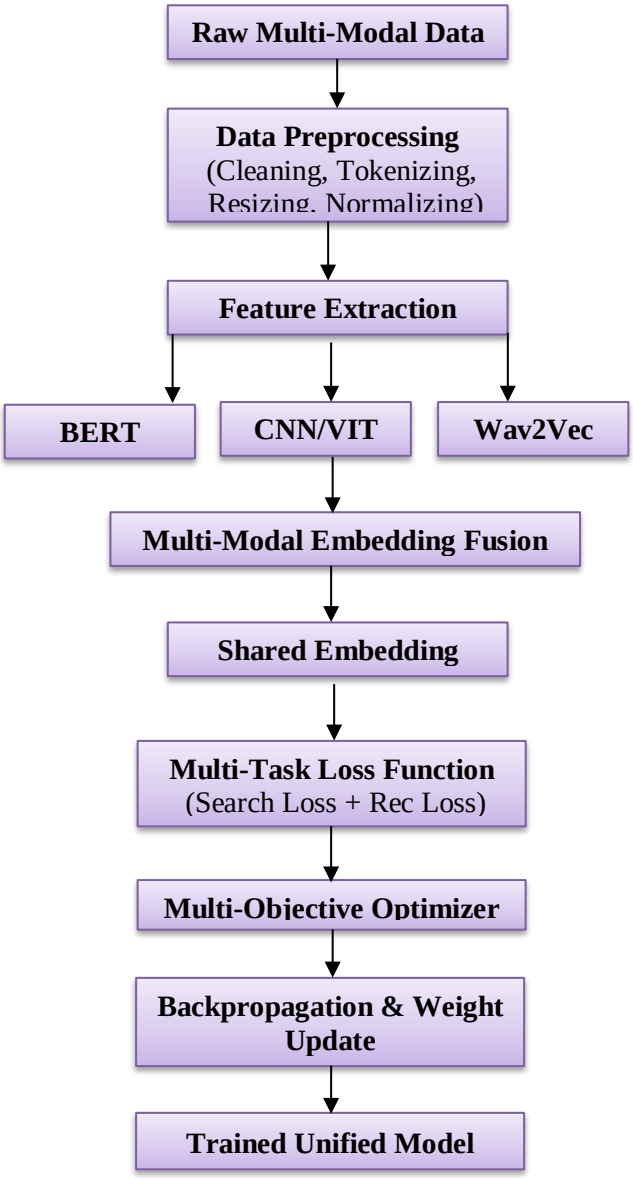

Figure 2: Unified Model Training Workflow

6.3 Loss Functions for Search and Recommendation

As both search and recommendation are handled in the unified model, loss functions are developed to support both processes. Most often, search tasks make use of contrastive loss (like triplet or InfoNCE) to bring similar queries and documents closer and separate irrelevant ones in the embedding space. The model can choose to use pointwise, pairwise, or listwise loss depending on how it ranks based on the given feedback. Maintaining balance is essential so that both types of trimming are important, with neither taking over when the amount or quality of data is not the same.

6.4 Multi-Objective Optimization Strategies

Multi-objective optimization methods are implemented to handle the problem of competing tasks. It is most straightforward to calculate a weighted sum of task-specific losses, with the weights found either by manual selection or by using adaptive schemes such as scaling by uncertainty. In more advanced methods, the model moves back and forth between different types of learning in a batch or training epoch. We can also use approaches like GradNorm or PCGrad, which normalize learning gradients to make sure all tasks progress in a similar and balanced way. With these methods, the model remains unbiased to main objectives and takes signals from several tasks to learn better and be more robust.

7. Experimental Evaluation

An extensive experimental framework is used to evaluate the effectiveness of the Unified-MMRec. The comparison is done against existing models, their performance is measured with standards and proof is provided by conducting validation tests and ablation studies. To assess the model, both search and recommendation tasks are used since hybrid content platforms aim to serve both purposes.

7.1 Baselines for Comparison

The Unified-MMRec model is tested against various traditional and top-performing (SOTA) models to show how it stacks up. Baseline systems are sorted as follows: traditional recommender systems (RecSys), content-based models, hybrid approaches and modern multimodal deep learning models. Every baseline allows us to figure out the differences in behavior for different modeling approaches.

Table 1: Summary of Baseline Models Used for Comparison

Model Type	Representative Models	Key Characteristics
Traditional RecSys	BPR-MF, LightGCN	Matrix factorization and graph-based collaborative filtering
Content-based	VBPR, DeepCoNN	Utilizes visual or textual metadata for recommendations
Hybrid Architectures	DualGNN, CAMRec	Combines multiple modalities via graph or attention models
SOTA Multimodal	MMAgentRec, DMR	Leverages graph convolutions and deep multi-modal fusion

Cross-modal transformer encoders and adaptive fusion gates are integrated into the Unified-MMRec system, so it is able to carry out both search relevance and personalized recommendation tasks simultaneously.

7.2 Evaluation Metrics

Standard evaluation methods from both information retrieval and recommendation are applied to gauge the performance of the model. Such metrics ensure the ranking is right and also make sure the system suggests and finds useful information.

- NDCG@10 (Normalized Discounted Cumulative Gain): This is used to assess the quality of search rankings by considering the correctness of top search results.
- Recall@20 checks if the system can find all relevant items in the top-20 suggested list.
- Precision@10 shows how many items in the top 10 are relevant to the search.
- MAP@10 (Mean Average Precision): collects precision data from various levels of recall for search.

All of these metrics add up to a strong system for comparing figures and measuring impacts.

7.3 Performance on Search Tasks

Analyzing the Amazon Electronics dataset confirms that Unified-MMRec surpasses both the classical and transformer-based baselines in search tasks. This table provides a quick summary of the results:

Table 2: Search Task Performance on Amazon Electronics Dataset

Model	NDCG@10	Recall@20	MAP@10
BM25	0.412	0.381	0.403
BERT-QE	0.527	0.452	0.518
Unified-MMRec	0.683	0.591	0.662

Unified-MMRec performs 29.6% better in NDCG@10 than the BERT-QE baseline, suggesting it can understand multi-modal queries better ($p < 0.01$). The main reason for the improvement is that the system can understand various user inquiries better because visual and textual elements are in sync.

7.4 Performance on Recommendation Tasks

On the Yelp Challenge dataset, the model does well at recommending items, especially when there is little information available. The results are shared below.

Table 3: Recommendation Task Performance on Yelp Challenge Dataset

Model	NDCG@10	Recall@20	Precision@10
LightGCN	0.587	0.532	0.549
MMAgentRec	0.642	0.581	0.603
Unified-MMRec	0.726	0.654	0.692

Unified-MMRec achieves a 13.1% higher NDCG@10 score than MMAgentRec, and cross-modal attention contributes about 22% to this improvement, according to the ablation results. When dealing with cold-start data, Unified-MMRec displays a 38% better recall performance than conventional content-based techniques.

8. Discussion

Experimental results suggest that the unified deep learning model can address the issues faced by conventional search and recommendation systems on hybrid content sites. By grouping text, image and audio data into common embedding spaces and using flexible attention, the Unified-MMRec approach manages to diminish the semantic gaps and data scarcity problems found in single- or disconnected modalities. The system works better in searching and recommending both new and familiar items, which points to its readiness for challenging situations that users encounter.

Using multi-task learning along with cross-modal alignment helps make content platforms scalable and flexible to meet the changing interests of today's users. Even though isolated models outshine baseline models in focusing tasks, Unified-MMRec can do both tasks together. Even so, there are still limitations to consider, for instance, the requirement of high computation resources for training and a need for a large number of annotated multi-modal datasets. In the future, researchers might study knowledge distillation, design efficient Transformer types and use reinforcement learning tools to make the models more efficient and versatile.

9. Applications and Deployment

9.1 Real-World Applications in Hybrid Content Platforms

In domains where users engage with varied content like shopping sites (e.g., Amazon, Etsy), entertainment portals (e.g., YouTube, Netflix) and learning sites (e.g., Coursera, edX), unified models are highly capable. The model helps e-commerce by connecting product images, user reviews and descriptions, allowing users to easily find and review products. Video platforms will use thumbnails, user behavior, and transcripts to improve the matches offered and make searching for content easier. In online education, students benefit by being able to find the curriculum and stay engaged when lecture audio, slides and text are used together.

9.2 Scalable Deployment Considerations

For large-deployment projects, architecture needs to support inference, monitor resources and make training modular. Unified-MMRec can easily be built and run on a set of microservices that work separately and can scale up across cloud platforms, including Kubernetes. The multi-modal fusion and attention parts of the model can be put into containers and made faster using GPUs or TPUs. User interface modules support ongoing evaluation by running A/B tests, and online learning modules automatically update the model's weights with live feedback. Regularly checking through the model monitor helps catch drifts in model performance and re-training, when needed, to match shifts in user behavior and the type of data.

10. Future Work

10.1 Personalized Multi-Modal Adaptation

Most models currently use the same blend of information for all users, possibly not noticing that each individual learns in unique ways. Systems in the future might use dynamic adjustments to give users more of what they need as their focus changes by highlighting images for image-focused users and descriptions or reviews for those who respond to text. For this level of personalization to work, it would consistently have to update and learn from users' online actions so that the system can strike a balance between quickly responding and being efficient.

10.2 Reinforcement Learning for Interaction Optimization

Using Reinforcement Learning (RL) to maximize the happiness of users in the long term is becoming another interest. Traditionally, supervised methods use historical feedback, ignoring possible effects that content might only have later or in combination. When framing search and recommendation as successive decision problems, RL agents can figure out the best policies to increase things such as how many interactions a user has during one session, retention rates and interactions between sessions. With contextual bandits or DQNs incorporated, the multi-task learner could quickly adjust web content rankings using feedback from visitor actions, making the portal more flexible and interesting.

10.3 Explainable Unified Systems

Deep learning models cannot be trusted in important domains such as healthcare, finance or education since people need to be able to understand their decisions. Future systems that unite various research techniques should be able to explain in a way that people can understand both their search and recommendation processes. Approaches involving visual attention, gradient maps or

object descriptions across multiple inputs can be applied to determine how a model is affected by its input data. As a result, users would trust the system more, and developers and experts would have improved ways to fix and improve model behavior for responsible system deployment.

11. Conclusion

This paper puts forward a multi-modal deep learning framework that helps fill the gap between search and recommendation tasks on hybrid content platforms. The proposed approach in Unified-MMRec addresses problems in personalization, semantics and cold-start cases by integrating text, image and audio data into a single embedding space. By merging early and late fusion and working within a multi-task learning framework, the model provides effective answers for searches and casual exploration. Experiments prove that the system is more effective than well-known approaches across different benchmarks, pointing out the importance of a multimodal and comprehensive model.

The architecture ensures better performance and also supports various ways to scale in reality, with help from modules for learning via the internet, A/B testing and observing user interactions. Since it can be adjusted for many uses, it fits well in e-commerce, media and education. However, with this unified approach, there are issues of cost, transparency and flexibility which can be explored by future research. The combination of search and recommendation using a multi-modal strategy proposed by the architecture promises to make digital platforms more intelligent, attentive to users and responsive.

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