ExpScore: Learning Metrics for Recommendation Explanation

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ABSTRACT

Many information access and machine learning systems, including recommender systems, lack transparency and accountability. High-quality recommendation explanations are of great significance to enhance the transparency and interpretability of such systems. However, evaluating the quality of recommendation explanations is still challenging due to the lack of human-annotated data and benchmarks. In this paper, we present a large explanation dataset named RecoExp, which contains thousands of crowdsourced ratings of perceived quality in explaining recommendations. To measure explainability in a comprehensive and interpretable manner, we propose ExpScore, a novel machine learning-based metric that incorporates the definition of explainability from various perspectives (e.g., relevance, readability, subjectivity, and sentiment polarity). Experiments demonstrate that ExpScore not only vastly outperforms existing metrics but also keeps itself explainable. Both the RecoExp dataset and open-source implementation of ExpScore will be released for the whole community. These resources and our findings can serve as forces of public good for scholars as well as recommender systems users.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Information systems  →  Recommender systems; Evaluation of retrieval results; • Computing methodologies  →  Natural language generation.

KEYWORDS

Metric, Evaluation, Explainable Recommendation

ACM Reference Format:

1 INTRODUCTION

As explainable recommendation has drawn increasing attention in recent years [4, 14, 27], many studies explored the explanation generation for recommendation systems [9, 11, 26, 30]. However, existing task-agnostic text quality evaluation methods, such as BLEU [23], METEOR [3], and ROUGE [19], are not flexible or eligible to evaluate such explanations because they fail to consider the context of recommendation systems. According to [7, 18, 24, 28, 32, 33], explainable recommendations should serve to improve the transparency, persuasiveness, effectiveness, trustworthiness, efficiency, scrutability and user satisfaction of the recommendation systems. In addition, a good explanation should be easy to read (e.g., concise), consistent with the rating (consistency), and be sufficient for predicting users’ preference on items (explainability) [29].

An ideal way of evaluating the explainability of machine generated explanations is through online user-study. Balog et al [13] measured recommendation explanation quality by collecting users judgment on seven pre-designed goals. Though such human-centric evaluation is a desirable way, it costs extensive labors and time, and is not always repeatable or scalable. In most cases, offline evaluation is a more usable solution for general research scenarios. The most commonly used metrics for evaluating machine generated explanation sentences are BLEU [23], METEOR [3] or ROUGE [19] scores, which consider the word-level precision and recall of sentences. They can reflect the quality of a generated sentence on readability. However, these measures do not consider how well a sentence can be used as an explanation.

To the best of our knowledge, a general and commonly accepted metric for explanation evaluation in recommendation systems is still missing. Substantive and foundational research often depends on solid evaluation metrics [1]. A lack of suitable metrics hinders our ability to assess the performance of explanation generation models and push them for further improvements. In this paper, we discuss the construction of a human-labeled dataset, RecoExp, built by asking users to rate the perceived quality of recommendation explanations. Specifically, we adopt Neural Template (NETE) method [16], a state-of-the-art explanation generation model, to create recommendation explanation candidates. Through exploring and analyzing RecoExp, we explicate vital factors that may affect
human evaluations towards explainability of recommendation explanations. Based on these factors, we further develop \( \text{ExpScore} \), an extendable and adaptable learning metric, to evaluate recommendation explanations. The main contributions of the paper are summarized as follows.

- We develop a new \( \text{RecoExp} \) dataset to facilitate the progress on the recommendation explanation evaluation. \( \text{RecoExp} \) is designed to work when no ground-truth explanation is available so as to alleviate ground truth dependency, which is closer to the real-world explainable recommendation scenarios.
- We present a novel machine learning-based metric \( \text{ExpScore} \) for evaluating recommendation explanations. Experiments show that \( \text{ExpScore} \) vastly outperforms existing metrics and correlates better with human judgments.
- We propose an interpretable and easily extendable factor-based framework for \( \text{ExpScore} \) that explores the definition of explainability from various perspectives. We also provide a comprehensive analysis of domain-independent explainability factors.

2 DATASET

We conducted an IRB-approved Amazon Mechanical Turk survey to collect a large dataset called \( \text{RecoExp} \).

2.1 Survey Setup

Source data preparation We used the Movies and TV category of Amazon Review Dataset [21] as the data source for our survey. Specifically, we randomly extracted 634 product items with the required information about product name, description, and the corresponding human reviews (used as the reference corpus for calculating metrics such as BLEU). The solutions for generating textual explanations can be categorized as template-based [5, 6, 17] and generation-based [8, 18, 22]. The Neural Template (NETE) method [16] integrates template-based and generation-based approaches to make the explanation generation process more controllable, which is the state-of-the-art approach for recommendation explanation generation. Therefore, we adopted NETE [16], a state-of-the-art neural template explanation generation framework, to create three explanations for each product item.

Survey design Figure 1 shows a micro rating task example. Each micro rating task contains one product as a recommendation and three explanations for the recommendation. When doing each micro rating task, MTurk workers (MTurkers) were requested to read the product item name and description and evaluate three machine-generated explanations for their quality on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest quality and 5 being the highest quality. Personal information about the workers was not collected because it was not judged essential in this task, and this also helps to protect the workers’ privacy. Each survey consists of ten consecutive rating tasks and one mandatory question of what factors contributed to the decision-making process. 634 products were randomly assigned to each survey. We assured that each product had received five responses which is the critical criterion of valid product responses to mitigate the subjectivity of rating scores. Participants were paid $2.00 USD for their participation. The average task completion time was 12.28 minutes. A response would not be considered valid if the micro task completion time was less than 5s.

2.2 \( \text{RecoExp} \) Dataset

The collected \( \text{RecoExp} \) dataset contains 579 product items, 1,737 machine-generated explanations, and factors affecting ratings. We attempted to collect five responses for each explanation, considering that people might hold different opinions on the same explanation. Initially, 317 participants took our survey. A total of 288 participants provided valid responses for the 1,737 machine-generated explanations, reporting 8,685 explanation quality ratings. At the end of the survey, we asked an open question to the workers “what factors affected your ratings?” and 288 answers were collected.

Ratings Collection For rating tasks, we explore the distributions of rating scores and time cost from three perspectives (i.e., overall, by MTurker, by product item). The overall distributions aggregated all ratings (time cost) generated by all participants for all product items, while the MTurker (product item) distributions reported the average measurements per MTurker (product item). Surprisingly, the mean and median of all the three rating distributions in Figure 2 are above the average score of 3, indicating an acceptable or even good quality of machine-generated explanations. As expected, the rating distributions by MTurker and by product item in Figure 2 follow a normal distribution.

Factors Collection We employed a qualitative approach, based on open coding and constant comparison to understand factors affecting ratings from participants’ perspectives. We conclude 10 categories: good grammar, length, no repetitions, making sense, expressing opinions, detail, relevance, and emotion. We illustrate popular words mentioned in MTurkers’ answers in Figure 3. The highlighted words, such as “relevant,” “spelling,” “logic” inspired us to consider the corresponding factors in our explanation metric.

3 \( \text{ExpScore} \) Metric

Inspired by factors we collected in the \( \text{RecoExp} \) dataset, we first explain the factor-based framework of \( \text{ExpScore} \) and further present the explainability factors that serve as the basic modules of the framework. To the best of our knowledge, \( \text{ExpScore} \) is the first offline metric designed for evaluating recommendation explanations.

3.1 Factor-based Framework

The key idea of our evaluation framework is to learn a unified evaluation model that aggregates the scores of an explanation on various factors such as relevance, length, subjectivity, popularity, and grammar correctness.

Implementation details Our proposed framework shown in Figure 4 first extracts a set of numeric factors using machine-generated explanations and human reviews (as reference). The extracted factors are then fed as an input to our model. We adopt several simple models such as linear regression, logistic regression, and neural networks to examine the effectiveness of our framework. Figure 4 only shows the neural network as an illustration. For the neural network model configuration, we adopt two hidden layers with 6 and 3 hidden neurons. The learning rate is set to 0.01 and the \( L_2 \) regularization parameter is fixed to 0.01. As for the configuration of linear regression and logistic regression, we also set the \( L_2 \) regularization parameter to 0.01. We used Adam optimizer in PyTorch and stopped training until the loss does not decrease. Each factor is normalized and concatenated before being fed into the model. \( \text{ExpScore} \) as the output of the framework will be used to measure the
quality of explanations. The design of our evaluation framework enables the following merits for explanation evaluation.

**Extendability** We think any single factor is insufficient to measure the explanation quality comprehensively because each such factor can only evaluate explanation from one particular perspective. Therefore, our factor-based framework aims to gather the strengths of multiple text quality factors and generate a high-quality aggregated explainability score for the explanation. However, our framework leaves spaces for additional factor discovery and improvement in the future.

**Interpretability** In this study, we choose a factor-based framework for better interpretability compared to some BERT-like frameworks such as BertScore [31] and BLUERT [25]. We further examine the effectiveness of our framework by adopting several simple models. Inspired by the two typical paradigms (linear and non-linear) for model design, we adopt three machine learning methods, including linear and non-linear models, to explore the relationship between standalone text quality factors and ExpScore. Specifically, we trained linear regression, multinomial logistic regression, and multi-layer neural network models to fit the human ratings on the training dataset. We use cross-entropy as the loss function when training multilayer logistic regression and use mean squared error (MSE) for training linear regression and multi-layer neural networks.

**Adaptability** In general, our framework adaptability lies in two main aspects. First, it does not need any ground-truth explanations. It can be adopted in many real-world recommendation systems as long as it has machine-generated explanations and human reviews. Second, it is domain-independent. Although the RecoExp Dataset is based on a movie recommendation scenario, the factors we use in the framework are not specific to movies, and can be easily transferred to other recommendation systems.

### 3.2 Explainability Factors

As we know, factors are important modules of our ExpScore framework. However, there is no widely-acknowledged definition of explainability of explanation. We decided to let users define what makes a good explanation. From the survey conducted, we learned about many factors, such as good grammar, length, no repetitions, making sense, expressing opinions, detail, relevance, and emotion. We extracted frequently-mentioned and domain-independent factors, as we will explain in the following.

To detail the implementation of our method, let us see the notations used by RecoExp. For each explanation exp, we have its corresponding item as item, one human review of item as rev, the feature of item as fea, which is introduced in [16] (such as the color of a phone), and we take the average of five rating scores of the explanation as Ylabel. The following evaluation factors are considered in this work.

- **Relevance** Relevance score (REL) indicates if the explanation is relevant to the corresponding item. Since the item’s reviews are informative and reflect users’ opinions on the item, we use the item reviews as a reference. Specifically, we compute the semantic similarity between the explanation and the item review as a relevance score. For the implementation method, we use the sentence-BERT model [31] to get the embedding vectors of the explanation and the item review, and then compute the cosine vectors of the two embedding vectors Emb_exp and Emb_rev.
- **Length** Length (LEN) of the explanation in this work is defined as the number of words after removing stop words since the length of explanations may influence how users perceive the explanations.
- **Readability** The readability (REA) score of the explanation can be calculated based on the Flesch-Kincaid readability test. Higher scores indicate that the material is easier to read.
- **Polarity** Polarity (POL) [20] indicates the confidence level that explanations are positive or negative. Good explanations may persuade users not to buy an item rather than always giving positive opinions to "cheat" users. Similar to Subjectivity, we use Textblob2 to compute Polarity.
- **Grammar Correctness** Grammar correctness (GC) reflects the grammar quality of the generated explanations. Too many typos or grammar errors may confuse and frustrate readers. Also, grammar errors make the generated explanations less reliable. We use the Python Language Tool 3 to compute Grammar Correctness.
- **Feature appearance** Feature appearance (FA) measures if an explanation sentence captures item features. It checks whether the explanation contains feature words of the item.

### 4 RESULTS AND INSIGHTS

In this section, we present the results from our crowdsourced experiments. We start by assessing the proposed evaluation metric. Then we provide a comprehensive analysis of domain-independent explainability factors. Last we compare the performance of three implementations of ExpScore.

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2https://textblob.readthedocs.io/en/dev/
3https://pypi.org/project/language-tool-python/
We decompose the abstract concept of explainability of recommendation explanations into various factors, each of which describes one aspect of the explanation quality. In Table 2, we calculate the Kendall’s and Pearson’s correlation coefficient of all factors against human quality judgments. Polarity, Subjectivity, Relevance, and Length have stronger correlations with human assessments, indicating a better explainability when explanations have high Relevance and high emotional preference. However, Length is negatively correlated with the human judgment of explanation quality. One possible reason is that longer explanations are more likely to suffer from repetitions, low readability, and even grammatical errors. On the other hand, Table 3 shows the importance of all factors generated by ExpScore (linear). Polarity, Subjectivity, Relevance, Length, and Grammar correctness are the top essential factors among linear models.

4.3 Model Accuracy
We compare the average test accuracy of the three implementations of ExpScore in Table 4. Since we both have regression and multiclass tasks, we decide to adopt a custom accuracy to measure the learning performance for a fair comparison. Accuracy is calculated by considering that the model’s ExpScore is correct if it falls into the range of $|y_{label} - 0.5|$, where $y_{label}$ is the average human’s evaluation score of the corresponding explanation (range is 1 to 5). We could see that these three approaches achieve comparable performance, and the accuracy is not very high. However, high accuracy is not the ultimate goal of this paper. We could add more factors and utilize more complex models like BERT [10] in future work. As the first paper addresses learning metrics for recommendation explanations, we focus more on the interpretability of the framework.

5 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK
Web systems, including search and recommender systems, have been prone to various forms of biases [2]. Transparency is one of the ways we can promote these complex, black-box systems for fairness and social good. Creating and providing meaningful explanations is a primary user-centric way that can be accomplished [32]. In this paper, we introduced a new RecoExp dataset to facilitate research concerning the evaluation of recommendation explanations. We presented a novel machine learning-based metric ExpScore for evaluating recommendation explanations. For ExpScore, we proposed an interpretable and extendable factor-based framework that explores the definition of explainability from various perspectives. We showed that ExpScore vastly outperforms existing metrics and correlates better with human evaluation.

In the future, we plan to further explore this research direction in several different dimensions. For instance, here we only compared the explanations generated by NETE, while in the future, we will extend ExpScore to support additional explanation generation models and explanation datasets. Besides, since ExpScore is model-independent, it can provide a better reference for comparing explanation models than BLEU and ROUGE. We will also consider more evaluation factors to improve the accuracy of the evaluation model further. For example, informativeness and concreteness are highly preferred for a good explanation. Finally, we only considered text explanations in this work, while we will further consider multiple modalities such as images and knowledge graphs for evaluation in the future. Since textual reviews are often aligned with pictures in many scenarios, such as online shopping or hotel reviewing, we can adopt various modalities for joint learning.

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