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A Review of Machine Learning Ranking Systems: Methods, Applications, and Challenges

Varun Bitkuri[1*], Raghuvaran Kendyala[2], Chandrakanth Rao Madhavaram[3], Hemanth Kumar Gollangi[4], Sanjay Ramdas Bauskar[5]

[1]Stratford University ,Software Engineer, Varunbittu452@gmail.com
[2]University of Illinois at Springfield, Department of Computer Science, raghukend@gmail.com
[3]Microsoft , Sr Technical Support Engineer, madhavaram.chandrakanth@gmail.com
[4]South East Missouri University, Dept of Computer Science, hemanthkumargollangi19@gmail.com
[5]Pharmavite LLC, Senrior DBA, sanjayBauskar@gmail.com

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***Corresponding author:** Varun Bitkuri

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Abstract

Machine learning (ML) has transformed the approach of developing ranking systems, as smart priority and sorting of information can be made, based on the relevance, behavior, and preferences of the user. Such ranking models based on ML play an essential role in real-time searching, recommendation sites, digital advertisement, and personalized content delivery. These systems are able to reduce the way information is presented by learning the patterns in large datasets to maximize user satisfaction and involvement. This review addresses in full detail the history, methods, and assessment of machine learning-based ranking systems, concentrating on pointwise, pairwise, and listwise learning-to-rank schemes. There are traditional equipment like Linear Regression and SVMRank and the modern ones like RankBoost, ListNet and LambdaRank. Important evaluation measures, such as Precision and Recall, are considered within multi-topic and relevance-sensitive ranking task. In addition, the horizontal search engine, the e-commerce product filtering, and click-through rate (CTR) prediction in online advertising are explored by domain-specific applications. Other major issues covered in the review include data sparsity, feature imbalance, interpretability, scale and fairness of model outcomes. Ethics such as transparency, use of AI responsibly, and fairness in areas where the AI will be critical like healthcare, hiring, and education is examined. The paper ends with an observation of the future research activities and future implications to make up a strong, scalable, ethically sound ranking system that is adaptive to fluent user demands and changing data environments.

Keywords: *Machine Learning, Ranking Systems, Learning to Rank (LtR), Information Retrieval, Click-Through Rate (CTR) Prediction, Ethical AI.*

I. Introduction

In the field of information retrieval (IR), ranking is a fundamental problem where the objective is to order objects, such as papers, web pages, or products, according to how relevant they are to a particular user query. Ranking systems have developed to become highly dynamic and complex systems, making up the backbone of search engines, recommendation systems and other decision-support systems[1]. These systems solve fundamental activities like discerning the intention of the user, rating of relevance of items, and provision of the most relevant results in the shortest time possible

Techniques for retrieving information Traditional ranking algorithms include BM25 and language models of information retrieval (LMIR). The models concentrated on ranking specific documents or list of documents in terms of term frequency and probabilistic methods. Nonetheless, the application of these classical techniques has not been adequate to capture more nuances and context of the user behavior and document semantics with the growing amount and complexity of the data[2]. In the effort to address such needs, ranking mechanisms have been expanded to take into account a more domain-independent architecture, especially in the case of large-scale search engines such as Google, Bing, and Yahoo. The systems make use of a huge amount of data across a wide range of domains to build models of ranking that can be generalized to different user queries[3]. Another very important issue in this respect is the adaptation of the ranking models, which would have much in common with classifier adaptation and be susceptible to the same problems as concept drift and covariate shift.

One of the major developments during the past few years in this area is the Learning to Rank (LTR) paradigm, where the problem of ranking is viewed as a supervised machine learning problem[4]. The idea of LTR techniques is to learn models on labeled data that denote relative importance of items in a ranking list. LTR algorithms may be pointwise, pairwise and listwise, depending on the structure of the training data. These are RankNet, LambdaRank, RankBoost and ListNet models.

Moreover, the common ranking models are constructed based on the scoring functions like neural networks, gradient boosting decision trees, and support vector machines (SVMs). They are combined with specialized loss functions that are built to maximize ranking performance metrics. It is important that feature vectors must be generated in an effective manner to model the performance and it becomes especially critical when task requires proficiency in features such as web information retrieval, recommendation systems, and pattern recognition[5]. The need to have smart systems and individually based content delivery has given a very important significance to the use of learning in any ranking systems. The modern ranking systems have to be robust, scalable, just, and should be able to adapt to the ever-changing user requirements and distributions of data. This review presents the scenario of machine learning-based ranking systems, including the methodologies, real-world systems, problems and promises of the promising research area that is currently under construction.

A. Structure of the Paper

The paper is organized as follows: Section II will include the foundations of ranking systems, and Section III will include related applications. Section IV outlines the main challenges; Section V presents a brief literature review, and Section VI concludes the paper with possible methods for further research.

II. Fundamentals of Ranking Systems

Ranking mechanisms are at the core of contemporary information retrieval and recommendation systems that sort items, documents or entities in a systematic order in terms of their relative relevance or significance to a particular query or situation. A wide range of algorithmic techniques is used in these systems such as heuristic techniques, learning-to-rank models, and probabilistic models, to calculate relevance scores and rank outputs on them. The ranking method often uses relevance modelling, feature extraction, and assessment with appropriate metrics including accuracy, recall, Mean Average accuracy (MAP), and Normalized Discounted Cumulative Gain (nDCG). Ranking systems are also essential in areas of research where it is important to enhance the efficiency as well as accuracy in accessing data, and users of databases can access the most relevant information present in complex databases. Their performance has a direct relation to user satisfaction and judgment in areas like web searching, scholarly retrieval, online commerce, and individualized recommendations.

B. Categorization of Learning-to-Rank Approaches

Models online to optimize on latency, limited storage and limited compute deliverable to real-time services. The ranking problem can be formulated in three different ways to train online models; namely pointwise, pairwise, and listwise ranking methods.

- **Pointwise:** In Pointwise techniques include training a model to rate each candidate's relevance to the query on an individual basis. The issue is described as a binary classification, where a click or purchase is considered a good user contact and a lack of interaction is considered a bad class. Based on the query, user context, and objects recorded in the features, the model assigns a score to each candidate that represents the likelihood of prompting an interaction.
- **Pairwise:** A binary classifier is taught to score two candidates at once in paired techniques. The first candidate is more likely to be interacted with than the second, according to the positive class, while the converse is true for the negative class. All positive classes are used to initialize the training data, and the order of elements within a pair is switched at random with a 50% probability to maintain balance.
- **Listwise:** Listwise methods need training models over a complete list of elements at once. It is challenging to create a loss function for such a model as it is impossible to supply the actual rating of a whole list[2]. One method builds on pointwise methods by assuming a multinomial instead of a multivariate Bernoulli.

C. Traditional Machine Learning Techniques in Ranking Systems

The following are the conventional machine learning techniques that are most frequently employed in both academia and industry:

- **Linear Regression-Based Ranking:** The Rankle library package introduces the linear regression (LR) approach, however no publication has examined how well it works as compared to other LTR methods. Ranklib employs the least squares LR algorithm. Using this technique, the weight vector for the ranking model is selected by minimizing the total distance between the labels produced by the ranking model's ranking and the training query–document pairings' ground truth labels.
- **Support Vector Machine for Ranking (SVMRank):** SVM-Rank for LTR based on support vector machines. By comparing each pair, the algorithm ranks every query-document pair in a retrieved query-document pair list. This approach uses the error rate between the real ranking and the model's ranking as a loss function. The goal of the SVM-Rank technique is to minimize the loss function value between the ranking model labels and the real relevance labels on the training dataset. This method creates a linear weight ranking model[4].

D. Performance Assessment and Evaluation Metrics

Target-tracking algorithms' performance assessment (PE), is essential for comparing current algorithms and proposing new ones. PE refers to the evaluation and assessment of a system's numerous performance indicators. It is important since it provides evaluation findings of the system's performance and serves as the foundation for system performance optimization want to investigate ways to create a ranked list that excels at the subtopic retrieval challenge. How to assess such a rating is not immediately clear. Early in the ranking process, it makes intuitive sense to include texts from a wide range of subtopics[6].

- **Recall:** The percentage of pertinent papers that are recovered is known as recall. In this task, we are interested in the fraction of relevant catchphrases retrieved in each document.
- **Precision:** According to Manning, precision is defined as the percentage of recovered documents that are pertinent. Precision will be the percentage of relevant catchphrases that are retrieved during this period.

III. Domain-Specific Applications of Ranking Systems

Machine learning-based ranking systems have found widespread adoption across a range of domain-specific applications. Learning-to-rank algorithms efficiently arrange documents in information retrieval and online search according to their relevance to user queries, with a growing emphasis on vertical search engines designed for specialized content. In e-commerce, ranking algorithms enhance product visibility and personalization by filtering items based on user preferences and contextual features. Similarly, in online advertising, models such as logistic regression are used for click-through rate (CTR) prediction, enabling targeted ad delivery and performance optimization. These uses demonstrate the versatility and significance of ranking systems in actual digital ecosystems.

E. Information Retrieval and Web Search

Learning to rank is a sort of learning-based information retrieval technique that uses documents annotated with their relevance to certain queries to train a ranking model. An arbitrary new question should be able to be automatically rated by the model. Based on a variety of ML techniques, learning to rank algorithms such as Ranking SVM, Rank Boost, Rank Net, Listen, Lambda Rank, and others have previously demonstrated their promising results in information retrieval, particularly Web search.

To obtain information that is limited to a certain domain, however, the growth of domain-specific search engines has led to a greater focus shifting from broad-based search to specialized verticals[7]. Topicalities or content kinds are handled differently by various vertical search engines. For instance, a medical search engine ought to be obviously topic-specific, in contrast, a search engine for music, images, or videos would only target specific types of items. In contrast, a search engine for music, images, or videos would only target specific types of items.

F. E-Commerce and Product Recommendation

E-commerce is the most advanced and forward-thinking platform, offering billions of users access to millions of items. Thousands of things are bought on e-commerce sites every second. Since India's yearly purchasing rate is 51% and rising daily, e-commerce there is expanding more quickly than in other nations. With so many goods, the average individual cannot find the product. Filters could be effective then. It will create a list of items by crawling e-commerce sites and extracting every product. All goods are filtered according to the best price and quality[8].

Python on the PyCharm IDE was used to develop the web scraping and data mining modules. The user waits for results after typing the product they want into the search window. Information is kept in the activity tracker database, which also serves as a suggestion system in the event that the same user returns and looks for a new product. The database will then contain a scrape of every e-commerce website linked to that product. After that, the system will rank items based on the Product Rank Algorithm and utilize the Recommendation System to look for related products.

- **Product Rank Algorithm:** After items are scraped from websites, system does two-layer filtering for the user since it is not always required for products to be filtered based on the user's search parameters. In order to rank scraped items, will assign an initial value of 1/n (n = number of parameters) to each parameter. The product with the highest ranking will ultimately be shown to the user first.
- **Recommendation Algorithm:** The parameters from the activity tracker database will be utilized to suggest other goods to the user once all of the requested products have been scrapped. Think of a scenario in which four users—Alice, Bob, Chris, and Daniel—share a passion for gaming. There are some games that are either action or strategy-driven.

G. Online Advertising and Click-Through Rate (CTR) Prediction

In the advertising business, online advertising has taken the lead. In order to reach potential customers, the Internet has offered a variety of online advertising formats that utilise various digital media vehicles, including e-commerce sites, social media platforms, and search portals. In internet advertising, click-based performance indicators, such clicks and click-through rate (CTR), are used to gauge how relevant advertisements are from the perspective of users. Researchers and practitioners agree that increasing CTR is an effective way to achieve the long-term expansion of online advertising ecosystems. The primary causes of the rise in online advertising rates are:

- worldwide reachable and accessible all the time 24 hours, 365 days.
- It is extremely focused and may be made to target a set of clients with similar interests.
- It is simple to measure the advertisement's effectiveness by keeping track of views.
- Online advertisements, in contrast to traditional methods, offer two channels of communication via which customers may engage with the company.
- Much more affordable and practical advertising strategy that works for both small and large enterprises.
- It is considerably easier and quicker to update advertisement information.
- Adding animations, games, and movies may make it more engaging and dynamic.

The click-through rate (CTR) of online users who see adverts on their webpages is a measure of their propensity to click. It is a metric that compares the number of people who clicked on the advertisement to the total number of times it was shown. A supervised learning approach called logistic regression serves as the foundation for this CTR estimate model[9]. The LR method employs a known set of input data and known responses to the data to build a predictor model that generates believable predictions for the response to unknown data.

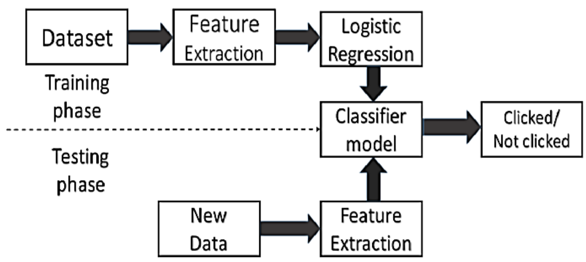

Fig. 1. System Model for CTR Prediction Classifier

The trained model is used to forecast, using previously unknown input feature values, the chance that a user would click on an advertising. As illustrated in Figure 1, the process involves training a classifier and using it to estimate the click-through probability for a new ad.

IV. Applications and Challenges in Ranking Systems

Machine learning-based ranking systems are extensively used across domains such as information retrieval, e-commerce, and online advertising to enhance relevance and user engagement. However, these systems face significant challenges, including data sparsity, feature imbalance, scalability limitations, and lack of interpretability especially in large-scale applications. Moreover, the ethical use of ranking systems has become increasingly important, with concerns around fairness, transparency, and accountability in critical areas like healthcare, hiring, and education. In this section, the actual applications, significant technical issues, and the ethical concerns that would determine research on ranking systems in the future are investigated.

H. Real-World Applications of Ranking Models

The value of ranking models lies in the ability to provide valuable and ordered knowledge based on raw data in a variety of industries. They are the foundations of systems that filter results of a search, offer goods, select adverts, and rank medical or law content. Generally speaking, ranking algorithms fall into two major categories: connectivity-based techniques like PageRank and HITS and content-based techniques like TFIDF and BM25. Rank-based application-driven resilient reputation model. Machine learning–based ranking systems play a pivotal role across diverse domains:

- **Information retrieval and web search:** Information retrieval has been significantly influenced by search engines, and the majority of internet users can't find what they're looking for. The user cannot get the exact search result they want from a standard keyword-based website[10]. Semantically sound online search engines are required in this case.
- **E-commerce and recommendation platforms:** Ranking of products based on the browsing history, purchasing history and the features of the items is directly related to the sales performance of the retail giants such as Amazon and Alibaba[11]. The expansion of e-commerce in the global economy and the commodities business sector, aligns with Amazon.
- **Online advertising systems:** A machine learning optimization approach or a manually developed scoring formula can be used to determine advertising ranking. Ad allocations rely on predicted click-through rates and Quality Scores to prioritize high-revenue content, improving monetization outcomes[12]. The objective of this area, which is often referred to the process of automatically creating a ranking function from training data is known as "learning to rank." This is a type of ML problem that can be either supervised or semi-supervised.

I. Core Challenges in Developing Ranking Systems

In order to identify the most pertinent outcomes among the data within a cluster, ranking involves rearranging the clusters' data that were collected through classification. There are a number of difficulties in ranking datasets, such as the fact that some require explicit user input while others rank automatically without requiring an explicit user query. These issues are the common bottlenecks in practical application especially in high-risk domains such as search engines, recommendation systems, e-commerce and healthcare. Below, outline the most significant challenges typically encountered in ranking system development[13].

- Ranking models can only work with large-scale data involving millions of queries and items. This needs effective algorithms and multi-distribution structures for training
- They do not provide a theoretical justification for the algorithms' ability to increase ranking results. In the second framework, this point has been somewhat improved.
- Numerous ranking tasks are characterized by high or skewed feature space (i.e., text, image, user metadata), challenging modern feature engineering and representation learning methods.
- DivRank has two limitations that prevent it from scaling to huge graphs. At every iteration, DivRank dynamically modifies the transition matrix. If the graph is particularly vast, this process may produce a full transition matrix, which would prevent it from being stored in main memory.

J. Ethical and Responsible Use of Ranking Systems

The growing use of machine learning-based ranking systems in critical domains such as hiring, lending, education, content recommendation, and healthcare, ethical concerns have become increasingly prominent. These systems must be designed and deployed responsibly to avoid reinforcing biases and ensure fair outcomes.

Key principles for ethical ranking practices include acknowledging institutional diversity, ensuring transparency in methodologies, prioritizing outcome-based over input-based measures, using verifiable data, and enabling users to understand and customize ranking outputs [14]. Beyond serving users, recent attention has shifted toward fairness for providers and institutions affected by rankings.

The European Commission's Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI stress ongoing validation and testing throughout a system's lifecycle. Even in the absence of complete algorithmic transparency, simulations can help anticipate the long-term impacts of ranking systems. Additionally, the European Commission Guidelines on Ranking Transparency provide a foundation for assessing fairness, although legal frameworks for long-term fairness in ranking systems are still developing [15]. Future efforts should address data access, timing, and platform responsibilities to support fair and accountable ranking practices.

V. Literature Review

The Literature Review summarizes recent advances in machine learning-based ranking systems, focusing on learning-to-rank methods, neural models, feature optimization, scalability, challenges, and future research directions to improve ranking accuracy and system performance.

Rahangdale and Raut (2019) provide a thorough learning-to-rank survey. They start by going over the various strategies and machine learning techniques, including approaches based on neural networks, SVM, regression, evolution, and boosting. The characteristics of each strategy are discussed in order to compare them. Additionally, learning-to-rank algorithms are compatible with a number of machine learning paradigms, such as reinforcement learning, active learning, deep learning, and semi-supervised learning. Learning-to-rank models leverage parallel computing or big data analytics to evaluate computational and storage benefits. Many real-time apps employ learning-to-rank for preference learning. Regarding this, provide a few illustrative pieces[16].

Zhao, Costa and Zou (2019) suggested recommending pull requests using a learning-to-rank (LtR) technique that reviewers can quickly review. In contrast to a binary model for pull request decision prediction, ranking method adds to the current pull request list by taking into account the possibility that each request will be promptly merged or denied. LtR models are constructed using 18 metrics and six distinct LtR algorithms, including ListNet, RankNet, MART, and random forest. They compare how well the six LtR algorithms work empirically on 74 Java applications. Evaluate the top-performing algorithm against both the small-size-first and first-in-and-first-out (FIFO) baselines, which were derived from earlier studies on pull request prioritization. Following that, Survey GitHub reviewers to find out how they feel about method's utility [17].

Guo et al (2019) A considerable amount of research has been done on using shallow or DNN referred to in this research as neural ranking models to address the issue of IR ranking. Neural ranking algorithms overcome many of the limitations of manually generated features by learning from the raw text inputs used in the ranking issue. Neural networks are capable of modelling complex activities, which is necessary to manage the intricacy of ranking relevance estimation. They feel that now is the ideal moment to review the state of the art, take note of current approaches, and acquire some knowledge for further advancement because there are many different neural ranking models available. As opposed to earlier research, this study will investigate neural ranking models from a variety of perspectives in order to analyse their underlying assumptions, essential design principles, and learning approaches [18].

Pasumarthi et al. (2019) suggested the first open-source library for deep learning frameworks that can solve large-scale ranking problems: TensorFlow Ranking. It supports various scoring algorithms, loss functions, and assessment metrics in the learning-to-rank environment and offers user-friendly APIs. Since TensorFlow is the foundation upon which library is built, it can take full advantage of its benefits. It may be used to learn ranking models over vast volumes of user activity data, which may include heterogeneous dense and sparse characteristics. For instance, it is extremely scalable in both training and inference. The library's ability to learn ranking functions for extensive search and recommendation applications in Gmail and Google Drive is practically shown. Additionally, without significantly affecting metrics, demonstrate that ranking models constructed with technique scale effectively for distributed training [19].

Shirzad and Keyvanpour (2018) described how feature selection has emerged as a fascinating problem for learning to rank algorithms. Reducing the number of features by shedding light on unnecessary and noisy characteristics is a solution, even though these features affect performance and cause overfitting in ranking algorithms. This paper proposes a framework to analyse feature selection research for FSLR ranking. The authors examine the most cutting-edge techniques under this framework and offer a number of criteria for evaluating them. In order to either appropriately choose techniques from pre-existing algorithms based on certain standards or b find ways to improve pre-existing processes., FSLR provides a systematic classification of present algorithms for future study [20].

Shaalan, Zhang and Chan (2018) suggested that rating things is at the heart of review aggregation, therefore, to solve the problem of review scarcity, the ranking problem of a group of items is framed as a learning to rank (L2R) problem. You may directly optimise the ranking of groups of items by creating a rank-oriented loss function. Rating labels are necessary for training standard L2R models, however item rating ground-truth data is not always accessible. Thus, the idea is to automatically produce weak supervision ranking labels for training by aggregating star ratings for things with a high number of reviews. Additionally, suggest using rating distributions, review contents, and helpfulness data to derive characteristics for the ranking model [21].

Table I summarizes recent studies on machine learning-based ranking systems, detailing their approaches, key findings, challenges faced, and future directions across methods, applications, scalability, and optimization.

Table 1: Comparative study of Related Work based on Machine Learning Ranking System.

Reference	Study On	Approach	Key Findings	Challenges	Future Direction
Rahangdale & Raut (2019)	Comprehensive survey on learning-to-rank (LtR) models	Comparative analysis of regression, SVM, NN, boosting, RL, SSL	Highlights broad categories of LT R techniques and how they integrate with hybrid ML paradigms	Scalability, integration with big data systems	Improving real-time applications using parallel LtR models
Zhao et al. (2019)	Application of LtR in software engineering (pull request review)	ListNet, RankNet, MART, Random Forest evaluated on GitHub PR data	LtR improves prioritization over traditional FIFO and size-based strategies	Generalization across diverse codebases	Extending LT R models to other software engineering tasks
Guo et al. (2019)	Survey of neural ranking models in information retrieval	Deep learning (CNN, RNN, attention models) for ranking	Neural models outperform traditional LTR methods in benchmark IR tasks	Lack of interpretability and high computation cost	Developing more explainable and efficient neural ranking models
Pasumarthi et al. (2019)	Scalable ML ranking systems using TensorFlow Ranking	Open-source framework for customizable LtR in production	Demonstrates scalability and flexibility in large-scale apps like Gmail, Drive	Engineering complexity in real-world deployment	Enhancing framework to support real-time feedback loops
Shirzad & Keyvanpour (2018)	Feature selection in LtR systems	Review of feature filtering and selection techniques	Identifies that reducing irrelevant/noisy features improves model performance	Overfitting due to irrelevant features, complex feature engineering	Development of dynamic feature selection methods based on data context
Shaalan et al. (2018)	Ranking with sparse review data using weak supervision	Custom rank-oriented loss, feature extraction from ratings	Weak supervision can approximate ground truth ranking effectively	Incomplete ground-truth labels, data sparsity	Exploring better heuristics to auto-label ranking datasets

VI. Conclusion and Future Work

Machine learning has significantly advanced the design and deployment of ranking systems, enabling personalized, efficient, and context-aware content delivery across domains such as web search, recommendation systems, and digital advertising. With the increasing scale and complexity of data, robust learning-to-rank models including pointwise, pairwise, and listwise approaches have become essential tools for ensuring relevance and user satisfaction. There have been techniques like SVMRank, Linear Regression and emerging ensemble methods which have shown good capabilities, but there are some recurring challenges like feature skew, interpretability, scalability-related issues and ethical considerations that do not make them a standard and equitable practice.

Future studies should consider the new interpretable and fair ranking algorithms to be developed with proper scaling capability to treat variable data settings. Addressing the issue of data sparsity, biases, and improving transparency by using explainable artificial intelligence (XAI) approaches will play a crucial role in boosting trust and accountability. Besides, hybrid techniques that involve the incorporation of the predictive strength of DL into the structure and simplicity of conventional techniques hold potential in terms of enhanced performance without sacrificing interpretability. Lastly, it is pivotal to incorporate sound ethical and governing systems to promote ethical use of ranking systems especially in areas like healthcare, education and employment that are sensitive. It is through solving these complex issues that ranking systems in the future will become more representative, egalitarian, and socially coherent.

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