

# Towards a Knowledge-aware Food Recommender System Exploiting Holistic User Models

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## ABSTRACT

Food recommender systems typically rely on popularity, as well as similarity between recipes to generate personalized suggestions. However, this leaves little room for changes in user preferences, such as a user who wishes to adopt healthier eating habits.

In this short paper, we present a recommendation strategy based on knowledge about food and users' health-related characteristics to generate personalized recipes suggestions. By focusing on personal factors as a user's BMI and dietary constraints, we exploited a *holistic user model* to re-rank a basic recommendation list of 4,671 recipes, and investigated in a web-based experiment (N=200) to what extent it generated satisfactory food recommendations. We found that some of the information encoded in a users' *holistic user profiles* affected their preferences, thus providing us with interesting findings to continue this line of research.

## KEYWORDS

Food Recommender Systems, User Modeling

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## 1 INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

In recent years, *food recommender systems* have achieved major progress in suggesting what a person could eat [4, 17, 18]. The field has followed in the footsteps of most other RecSys domains by focusing on similarity between items [3, 19]. This has pointed out how recipes can be linked in terms of ingredients, taste, meal type, and other characteristics [21].

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However, food recommender research has only a limited understanding of relevant personal characteristics and user goals [20]. In particular, developments to design health-aware recommender systems have focused on simple re-ranking models based on recipe features [10, 19], while there has been little research on dietary constraints and health goals in personalized recommendations [11, 18].

One domain-overarching problem is that users tend to stick popular items [2, 8]. This is problematic in food recommenders, because unhealthy recipes tend to be the most popular on recipe websites [21]. This leaves little room to discover healthier alternatives when using a collaborative approach to recommendation.

To alleviate this 'popularity problem', it is proposed to focus on user characteristics and goals [2, 5]. In food recommender systems, recipe factors are typically prioritized over user characteristics [18]. We see this as a missed opportunity, as there might be multiple personal characteristics (e.g., body-mass index) and contextual factors (e.g., mood) that determine how appropriate a recipe is for a user, as well as how likely that user is to try a different, healthier recipe. Moreover, food recommenders often do not consider constraints [14, 18], such as dietary preferences (e.g., vegan users).

This work proposes a first step to incorporate more personal factors and constraints into a food recommender system. To do so, we propose a novel, but simple recommender strategy that combines knowledge about food and users to generate personalized recipe suggestions, which we refer to as a *holistic user model* (HUM). Our recommendation algorithm exploits common-sense knowledge about food requirements (e.g., a user's BMI) to identify the most suitable recipes. To assess its performance, we investigate to what extent users preferred such knowledge-aware recommendations over those generated by a popularity-based algorithm, using a strict baseline to assess the model's performance in a one-shot recommender user study. We posit the following research questions:

- *RQ1*. To what extent can we predict food choices, using a holistic model in a knowledge-aware recommender system?
- *RQ2*. Which user characteristics and goals, and recipe features affect a user's food preferences?

## 2 APPROACH

This section describes a simple, but explainable method that considers personal characteristics to provide recipe recommendations. First, we introduce the *holistic user model* and how it encodes user

**Table 1: Aspects that are part of the Holistic User Model.**

User Aspect	Factor
Demographics	Gender/Sex, Age
Affect	Mood
Domain knowledge	Cooking Experience
Behavioral Data	Level of Physical Activity
Health Data	Food Requirements, Amount of Sleep, Mood, Stress level, Weight (BMI)

needs and constraints. Second, we describe the knowledge-aware recommendation strategy that aims to identify the most suitable recipes for a given user, which is later tested in a user study.

## 2.1 Basics of Holistic User Modeling

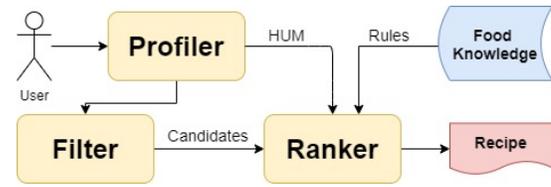
As stated in [6], a holistic user model (HUM) is a representation of the user that is obtained by merging and processing heterogeneous data from social networks, smartphones and personal devices. Based on this paradigm and literature on food choices (e.g., [13]), each user’s needs and preferences can be modeled through eight aspects (also called: ‘facets’): *demographics, interests, affects, knowledge and skills, psychological traits, behaviors, social connections, and health data*. The aim is to learn about each aspect through various behavioral traces, such as posts on social networks (e.g., Twitter), fitness app activities (e.g., Strava), visited locations, and personal data gathered from wearable devices. These data types can be processed using machine learning and natural language processing techniques to infer higher-level characteristics of the person.

In this paper, we assume that a HUM of the target user has been previously built and it is available. For the sake of brevity, please refer to [6] for a complete description of the workflow that allows to build a HUM. However, as a rich source of data is not always available from the onset (i.e., cold start situation), we design a representation that facilitates basic needs and food constraints (e.g., a user is vegan), and excludes users’ food preferences and social relations. In doing so, we approximate the user model for our knowledge-aware food recommendation strategy by inquiring on *five user aspects*. Table 1 lists the employed aspects (e.g., demographics), along with their underlying factors (e.g., gender, age). By ignoring a user’s food preferences, we try to avoid simple food recommendations that were based on a similarity calculation, as has been done in earlier studies [18].

## 2.2 Designing a Knowledge-aware Food Recommender System

The workflow carried out by our *food recommender system* is depicted in Figure 1. Our system can be classified as a knowledge-based recommender system [1], as its recommendation strategy exploits common-sense knowledge about food choices to identify the most suitable recipes for a target user (cf. [6, 16]). In a nutshell, the output of the recipe recommendation process is based on three main components: A PROFILER, a FILTER step, and a RANKER step.

The whole process is initiated by the user asking for a specific recipe (*main course, second course, or dessert*). In the first step of the workflow, we build a Holistic User Model of the target user. The to-be-encoded information can be obtained by explicitly asking the user or by querying external profiling platforms, such as Myrror (cf.

**Figure 1: Workflow of our Knowledge-aware Food Recommender System.**

[6]). Once the profile is built, the FILTER generates a preliminary set of candidate recipes by filtering non-compliant recommendations. This step is carried out by analyzing the user’s food restrictions and cooking experience, and subsequently removing recipes from the list of candidates which contain ingredients that a user wishes to avoid (e.g., lactose, meat), or that are too complex to prepare.

After filtering, the set of candidate recommendations is still large and requires further re-ranking, which is done by the RANKER component. Given a user  $u$ , the goal of this component is to assign to each recipe  $r$  a  $score(r, u)$ , to rank all the candidate recipes and to identify the top-1 that matches the user best, in terms of the user’s characteristics and constraints. To do so, we propose two scoring mechanisms. First, we propose a simple *popularity-based* score, which is adopted as a baseline in our user evaluation study:

$$popScore(r) = avgRating(r) * \log_{10}(count(r)) \quad (1)$$

Formula (1) shows that our baseline awards higher scores to popular recipes, where  $count(r)$  is a rating counter stored in our database of 4,761 recipes. However, such a basic scoring scheme does not consider the needs, nor the constraints of the target user. Conversely, we aim to take advantage of the richness of personal information available in a HUM to better tailor our recipe recommendations. Accordingly, we propose a somewhat more sophisticated *holistic* scoring function:

$$holistic(r, u) = popScore(r) * knowledge(r, u) \quad (2)$$

The knowledge-aware part (i.e.,  $knowledge(r, u)$ ) is a modifier that increases or decreases the score of a recipe by using some general knowledge about food choices. Such knowledge is encoded as *rules*, having the form *factor*  $\rightarrow$  *modifier*, where *factors* are operationalizations of user aspects, and *modifiers* are recipe characteristics. In a nutshell, if the left part of a rule is satisfied, the modifier is applied on the recipe by increasing or decreasing the popularity score.

Although we cannot discuss all the details of our knowledge-based scoring formula due to space reasons, we emphasize that these rules are based on common-sense knowledge about food choices. For example, our knowledge-aware recommender awards a lower score to recipes that are high in calories, if the user has a high BMI. Moreover, we consider insights from recent studies about the link between user factors and food consumption, such as the relation between stress and the amount of salt in recipes<sup>1</sup>. Table 2 reports some of the rules we encoded in our recommender system, listing user aspects and factors, and the corresponding modifiers.

<sup>1</sup><https://oklahoman.com/article/feed/687315/did-you-know-salt-reduces-stress>

**Table 2: Selection of rules encoded in our knowledge-aware recommender.**

User Aspect	Factor	Modifier
Demographics	<i>BMI&gt;25</i>	low-calories recipes ↑ high-calories recipes ↓
	<i>BMI&lt;25</i>	high-calories recipes ↑
Mood	<i>bad</i>	recipes with sugar ↑
Behaviors	<i>&gt;30 min/day activity</i>	high-protein recipes ↑↑ high-calories recipes ↑
Health	<i>stress=yes</i>	high-sodium recipes ↑
Health	<i>sleep=low</i>	high-magnesium recipes ↑
Health	<i>depression=yes</i>	high-fat recipes ↓

### 3 USER EVALUATION

To examine the effectiveness of our holistic user model, we compared it to our popularity-based baseline in a web-based experiment on food recipes. Users were presented three different pairs of recipes (i.e. the top-1 recipes of our holistic and popular recommendation models), and asked to choose the recipe they preferred the most. Recipes were sampled from a database of 4,671 recipes, which we share online at: <https://tinyurl.com/recipes-uniba>. The recipes were obtained from the popular Italian food community platform GialloZafferano<sup>2</sup>, and translated to English. The recipes contain information about their name, category, preparation difficulty, as well as their ingredients, macro-nutrients, calories, rating count, and average website rating. Moreover, they also include several binary tags, such as *vegetarian*, *vegan*, *lactose-free*, and *low-nickel*.

#### 3.1 Participants

We invited a total of 200 participants on Amazon MTurk to participate in a choice study on food recipes. To ensure high quality feedback, we only sampled users who had a HIT acceptance rate of 99% and successfully completed at least 500 HITS in the past. Participants were compensated with 0.5 USD for a HIT, which took them on average five minutes to complete. Eventually, we had to remove nine participants due to missing stimulus data.

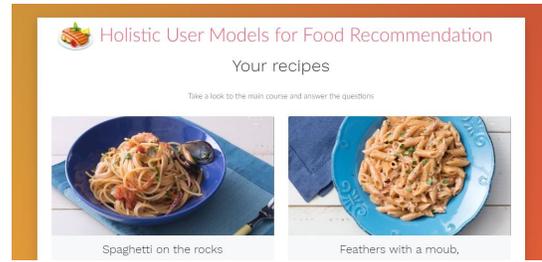
#### 3.2 Experimental Procedure & Measures

Users interacted with a Web Application<sup>3</sup>. First, to build a user model in line with Table 1, we asked users to disclose personal information. We inquired on the user’s gender, age, BMI (5-point scale), recipe website usage (4-point scale), cooking experience (5-point scale), and mood (i.e., ‘good’, ‘neutral’, or ‘bad’). In addition, we also asked users about their typical sleep length, stressed and depressed feelings (yes/no), dietary goals (lose or gain weight, or none), and dietary constraints (e.g., *vegan*, *low-nickel*).

Subsequently, we ran our food recommendation pipeline. Each user was presented three pairs of recipes, where each pair represented a different part of a meal: main courses (i.e. mostly pasta dishes), second courses (i.e. mostly meat-based dishes), and desserts. Each pair consisted of one recipe that was generated using a simple popularity-based ranking, as well as another recipe that was obtained by applying our holistic user model scoring. A screenshot of

<sup>2</sup><https://www.giallozafferano.it/ricette-cat/>

<sup>3</sup>It can be found at: <http://90.147.102.243:8080/foodrecsys/>



**Figure 2: Screenshot of the user study recommending the user two recipe choices (holistic vs popular).**

the interface showing both the alternatives to the user is provided in Figure 2. For each pair of recipes, we asked users which of the two recipe they preferred the most, or whether they preferred none of them. In addition, we also inquired on their underlying motivations for choosing either recipe (if any), presenting four propositions about the chosen recipe on 5-point Likert scales: ‘It seems savory and tastier’, ‘It helps me to eat more healthily’, ‘It would help me to lose/gain weight’, and ‘It seems easier to prepare’.

### 4 RESULTS

To address *RQ1*, we compared preferences for popular and holistic recommendations per course (i.e., pasta meal, meat meal, dessert), as well as all courses combined in two separate logistic regression analyses. To address *RQ2*, we examined whether choices were determined by specific recipe factors or user factors and motivations.

#### 4.1 Preferences per Meal Type

Overall, a sequence of two-sample t-tests showed that users were more likely to choose popular recipes for the main course (54.0% (popular) vs 32.5% (holistic)):  $t(190) = -3.27, p < 0.01$ , as well as for dessert recipes (54.5% vs 36.1%):  $t(190) = -2.70, p < 0.01$ . In contrast, users preferred holistic recipes (49.2%) over popular recipes (33.0%) for the second course:  $t(190) = 2.51, p = 0.013$ . These mixed results suggested that the holistic user model did not entirely outperform the popular baseline, and that differences might boil down to specific user factors and motivations.

To examine *RQ2*, we used three different logistic regression models (excluding ties), to predict which recipe type was chosen in each course, based on a set of user factors and motivations. Table 3 describes the performance of each model, pointing out that the ‘2nd course’ model had a low predictability and was not significant, while the predictive value of the ‘Main Course’ model ( $R^2 = .24$ ) was higher than that of the ‘Dessert’ model ( $R^2 = .14$ ), as it also included more significant personal predictors.

Nonetheless, the predictive value of the user factors was small. Although the knowledge-aware recommender used factors such as BMI and cooking experience for its HUM, most of them did not steer user preferences towards the holistic recipes. Although none of them affected dessert recipe choices, we did find that male participants were more likely to choose second course holistic recipes ( $p < 0.05$ ). Since second course recipes were typically meat or fish-based, this was consistent with previous findings that men prefer meat-based dishes over sweet dishes [9]. With respect to the main course, users who reported to be in a good mood preferred

**Table 3: Logistic regression models predicting choices for holistic recipes (compared to popular). Reported are regression coefficients. \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ .**

Holistic	Main Course	2nd Course	Dessert
<i>Personal factors</i>			
BMI	.44	.078	.22
Website use	.19	.32	.082
Cooking freq.	-.49	.024	-.50
Mood	<b>.88*</b>	-.36	.52
Gender (male)	.13	<b>.96*</b>	-.53
Age	.013	-.031	-.011
<i>Choice Motivation</i>			
Taste-related	<b>-.82**</b>	-.11	<b>-.55**</b>
Health-related	<b>.98***</b>	.024	.30
Weight-related	.28	.044	-.068
Ease to prepare	<b>-.71***</b>	-.045	<b>-.62***</b>
Weight-gain goal	<b>-3.04**</b>	-.93	.18
Weight-loss goal	<b>-1.15*</b>	-.87	<b>-.99*</b>
Constant	2.03	.53	<b>4.43***</b>
<i>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></i>	<b>.24***</b>	.062	<b>.15***</b>

the holistic recipe. This is a notable finding, as mood is a common factor in the music recommender domain [12, 22], but not in food.

A user’s reported motivation for choosing either recipe provided more insight. Table 3 shows that users chose popular recipes due to their taste and ease to prepare, while users with health-related goals were more likely to choose the holistic main course. In contrast, users with either weight-gain or weight-loss goals (not part of the holistic model) were more likely to choose popular main courses and desserts (weight-loss only). This suggested that weight-related goals were distinct from general healthy eating habits, and that the holistic user model supported the latter.

## 4.2 Recipe Factors vs User Factors

We also investigated to what extent different recipe characteristics<sup>4</sup> could predict user choices (*RQ2*), and how they compare to user characteristics across all meal types. In Table 4, we report the results of two multilevel logistic regression models, for either holistic or popular recipes. Although our database comprised more recipe characteristics than reported in Table 4 (e.g., sugar, fat, etc.), we excluded those that had high cross-correlations (e.g., calories and carbs:  $r > 0.8$ ). We also excluded personal factors that had no predictive value in Table 3.

We found that both models have little predictive quality, as the  $R^2$  are small: 0.021 for holistic recipes, 0.036 for popular recipes. Although Table 4 shows that personal factors did not play a role in user decision-making, a few recipe factors affected preferences for either recipe type. The results suggested a ‘health divide’ between holistic and popular recipes, as low-carb and high-protein *holistic* recipes were more likely to be chosen than high-carb, low-protein recipes, which was in line with the health-related motivations to choose a holistic recipe. In contrast, *popular* recipes were more likely to be chosen if they contained more carbs and more saturated fat, which supported findings in [19, 21].

<sup>4</sup>Recipe characteristics have also been investigated in [21] and [3] in the past, but not user with recipe characteristics at the same time as done in this work.

**Table 4: Multilevel logistic regression models predicting choices for any recipe, clustered at the user level, per model (holistic vs popular). \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ .**

	Holistic Recipes	Popular Recipes
<i>Recipe factors</i>		
Carbohydrates	<b>-.0094*</b>	<b>.011*</b>
Protein	<b>.013*</b>	-.014
Saturated fat	.023	<b>.051**</b>
Fiber	.011	-.031
<i>Personal factors</i>		
BMI	.065	-.086
Mood	.084	-.085
Gender (male)	.30	-.32
Constant	<b>-.57*</b>	-.096
<i>Pseudo R<sup>2</sup></i>	<b>.021*</b>	<b>.036***</b>

## 5 CONCLUSIONS & FUTURE WORK

We have investigated to what extent we could predict food choices using a *holistic user model (RQ1)*. The results are mixed, as recipes based on a popularity ranking are chosen more often among main course and dessert recipes, while recipes taken from our holistic user model are preferred among second course recipes. This suggests that the set of aspects and factors in our HUM requires further improvement to meet user preferences. However, we wish to emphasize that we have used a strict popular baseline, which has shown to be hard to ‘beat’ [21], particularly for taste-related dishes as desserts. Moreover, it seems that user models are more effective when focused on specific meal types, as most of their predictive value is lost when aggregated across all recipes.

With regard to which specific user characteristics, goals, and recipe features affect user preferences (*RQ2*), the results are also mixed. Most of the user factors encoded in our holistic model have not led to preference differences, except for mood and gender in specific meal types. However, the underlying motivations of user choices, such as taste, health, and ease to prepare, do signal that a holistic user model can appeal to users who wish to pursue healthy food choices. A knowledge-aware recommender should also capture such motivations, as they seem to support behavioral change [2, 7].

To follow up on this study’s results, it should be addressed how weight-loss goals can be discerned from health-related goals. For example, users might not be interested in reducing their calorie and fat intake, but to consume specific nutrients [11]. We propose to investigate: *how can a holistic user model support healthy maintenance behaviors?* Moreover, there is currently a limited understanding on how personalized recipe suggestions can support behavioral change in the longer-term. Psychological theories as Prochaska’s transtheoretical model of behavioral change might help [7], but have yet to be applied in personalized contexts. Finally, research should also consider other behavioral goals that underlie our food consumption, such as sustainability [14, 15].

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