Physical Education, Health and Social Sciences

https://journal-of-social-education.org E-ISSN: 2958-5996
P-ISSN: 2958-5988

Stress Prediction Using Machine Learning: Comparative Analysis of Traditional and Deep Learning Models on Physiological and Behavioral Data

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.63163/jpehss.v3i2.446

Abstract
The rising incidence of stress-related mental health issues, particularly among college students, has highlighted the need for effective, real-time detection methods. Traditional self-reported assessments are subjective and often unreliable. In this study, we present a data-driven approach using machine learning (ML) models to predict stress levels from physiological and behavioral indicators such as heart rate variability, skin conductance, and sleep patterns. We evaluate and compare the performance of multiple ML algorithms—Support Vector Machines (SVM), Logistic Regression (LR), Random Forest (RF), K-Nearest Neighbors (KNN), and Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN). Among these, Random Forest achieved the highest accuracy of 92%, followed by CNN at 90%, demonstrating strong precision (91% and 89%, respectively) and F1-scores (92% and 94%). These results affirm the potential of AI-powered stress monitoring systems for early mental health intervention, particularly when integrated with wearable technologies.

Keywords: Mental Health, Machine Learning, Prediction, Behavioral Data, Mental Health Monitoring, Early Detection

1. Introduction
Mental health issues among students have been on the rise, making early diagnosis and intervention more critical than ever. Mental health affects emotions, reasoning, and social interactions, influencing students' overall well-being and academic performance. With the increasing prevalence of mental health conditions, researchers have been exploring innovative approaches to improve early detection and intervention, particularly through machine learning techniques. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one in four people will experience a mental or neurological disorder at some point in their lives. By 2020, depressive disorders were projected to become the second leading cause of the global disease burden [1]. However, the number of professionals available to treat these conditions has not grown at the same pace as the number of affected individuals, leading to challenges in providing timely and accurate diagnoses.
Diagnosing mental health disorders is a complex process that involves multiple steps, including patient interviews, medical history assessments, physical examinations, and psychological evaluations. Many mental health conditions share similar symptoms, which increases the risk of misdiagnosis, particularly in children and young adults. As a result, developing accurate and efficient diagnostic methods is crucial for improving mental health outcomes among students.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) have emerged as promising tools in mental health diagnosis. AI refers to the development of computer systems that can simulate human intelligence, including reasoning and decision-making. Machine learning, a subset of AI, enables computers to analyze patterns and make predictions based on data. Recent research has demonstrated the effectiveness of machine learning models in diagnosing mental health disorders using sample datasets. Various techniques have been evaluated to determine the most accurate methods for supporting mental health professionals in diagnosing common conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia.

- ADHD is one of the most prevalent childhood disorders and often persists into adolescence and adulthood. It is characterized by difficulty focusing, hyperactivity, and impulsive behavior [2].
- Depression is marked by persistent sadness, loss of interest in daily activities, feelings of guilt, sleep disturbances, fatigue, and difficulty concentrating. If left untreated, it can severely affect daily functioning and increase the risk of suicide [3,4].
- Anxiety disorders involve excessive worry, tension, increased heart rate, and muscle stiffness, often triggered by stress or perceived threats [5].
- Bipolar disorder is characterized by extreme mood swings, alternating between emotional highs (mania or hypomania) and lows (depression), which significantly impact daily life [6,7].
- Schizophrenia is a severe mental disorder that affects about 1% of the global population. It is characterized by hallucinations, delusions, disorganized thinking, and other cognitive disturbances. Its diagnostic criteria are outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) [8-11].

This research aims to:

a) Perform data preprocessing and analysis on the chosen dataset.
b) Apply machine learning techniques—Support Vector Machines (SVM), Logistic Regression (LR), Random Forest (RF), K-Nearest Neighbors (KNN), and Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN)—to predict mental health disorders.
c) Our performance analysis demonstrates that the proposed method outperforms other machine learning algorithms and evaluation metrics used in previous studies.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows:Section II reviews related work. Section III describes the methodology and datasets used for mental health prediction. Section IV evaluates various machine learning techniques using training and test datasets. Section V compares our findings with those from previous studies. Section VI presents the conclusion and future research directions.

2. Literature review

Mental health plays a vital role in overall well-being and is recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a fundamental human right. It exists on a continuum, ranging from optimal well-being to severe psychological distress [13]. However, mental health disorders have become increasingly prevalent, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, which has significantly impacted global mental health by increasing rates of **anxiety and depression** and widening the treatment gap. Anxiety and depression are among the most common mental health conditions worldwide, with suicide being a leading cause of mortality, particularly among young individuals. Furthermore, severe mental health disorders often contribute to premature mortality due to preventable physical illnesses.

Despite these challenges, global mental health systems continue to struggle with gaps in information, research, governance, resources, and services. Addressing these issues requires a more structured and evidence-based approach. To ensure scientific rigor, this research conducted a literature review using Okoli's structured eight-step approach [14]:

1. Defining a clear research question.
2. Developing a comprehensive search strategy, including selecting databases and formulating search terms.
3. Screening retrieved studies based on predefined selection criteria.
4. Assessing the effectiveness of selected studies based on methodological quality.
5. Systematically extracting relevant data using a standardized approach.
6. Conducting a comprehensive analysis to identify patterns and key themes across studies.
7. Performing either quantitative synthesis (meta-analysis) or qualitative synthesis (thematic analysis), depending on the research focus.
8. Summarizing the findings, including key results, conclusions, and implications, to produce a systematic review report or academic publication.

By following this structured approach, this research ensures a rigorous and comprehensive analysis of relevant literature.

2.1. Bipolar Disorders

Bipolar disorders are severe and long-term mental health conditions that significantly affect an individual's daily life. There are two primary types. Bipolar I disorder characterized by full manic episodes. Bipolar II disorder involves hypomanic episodes along with major depressive episodes. These disorders can severely impact a person's ability to perform daily tasks and are linked to a reduced lifespan of approximately 10 to 20 years [15-17].

2.2. Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a multidimensional mental health disorder that presents long-term challenges for individuals and their families. It typically manifests early in life and is characterized by: Distorted beliefs and hallucinations. Disorganized thinking and speech. Cognitive impairments, including difficulties with memory, attention, and decision-making [18-20].

Negative symptoms—such as reduced emotional expression, lack of motivation, and executive dysfunction further exacerbate the condition, making everyday activities and social interactions particularly challenging [21]. Schizophrenia affects approximately 1% of the global population, and its diagnostic criteria are outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) . This guide is essential for healthcare professionals to accurately diagnose and manage schizophrenia, ensuring patients receive the appropriate interventions and support [22-24].

2.3. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD is a trauma-related disorder defined by the DSM-5 [21]. It occurs following exposure to life-threatening or distressing events, with symptoms persisting for at least a month and causing significant distress or impairment. Studies show a strong link between childhood trauma, PTSD, and engagement in risky behaviors [25-28]. Among these, sexual abuse is a significant predictor of higher-risk behaviors in adolescence and adulthood [29]. These findings underscore the complex relationship between trauma, mental health, and behavioral outcomes.

2.4. Depression and Anxiety

Depression, clinically known as Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), is commonly assessed using the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ) [30]. It is characterized by: Persistent sadness and hopelessness. Loss of interest in daily activities. Fatigue and difficulty concentrating. According to Shorey et al., around 34% of adolescents (ages 10-19) are at risk of clinical depression, with even higher rates reported in young adults aged 18-25 [31]. Depression rates are highest in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, with women being more affected than men. If left untreated, depression can escalate to suicidal ideation and self-harm [32].

Anxiety disorders, as defined by the American Psychological Association (APA), involve excessive worry, tension, and physiological symptoms such as an increased heart rate and muscle tension [33]. These symptoms often arise in response to real or perceived stressors, affecting an individual's ability to function in everyday life.

2.5. Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder marked by persistent symptoms of: Inattention difficulty focusing, or staying on task. Hyperactivity – excessive movement and restlessness. Impulsivity – trouble controlling immediate reactions [34].

These symptoms often affect multiple areas of daily life, making it challenging for individuals with ADHD to manage tasks, maintain relationships, and succeed academically or professionally. While ADHD is commonly diagnosed in childhood, it can persist into adolescence and adulthood, impacting people throughout their lives. Given its high prevalence, ADHD remains one of the most frequently diagnosed mental health conditions worldwide, requiring effective management strategies.

Table 1 Comparison Table of Previous Studies

Title	Problem	Solution	Accuracy	Reference
Deep Learning for Bipolar Disorder Detection	Bipolar disorder diagnosis is challenging due to overlapping symptoms with other conditions.	Used CNN models trained on neuroimaging data.	**99.75%**	[3]
Machine Learning for Schizophrenia Prediction	Schizophrenia diagnosis is complex and requires subjective assessments.	Applied SVM models with fMRI data for classification.	**90%**	[11]
AI-Driven PTSD Detection in Firefighters	PTSD diagnosis is often delayed due to lack of objective screening tools.	Used RF and CNN on firefighter datasets to detect PTSD symptoms.	**99%**	[17]
Early Anxiety and Depression Detection via Social Media	Traditional screening methods fail to identify early signs of depression and anxiety.	Applied NLP on Twitter posts with BERT and CNN models for classification.	**92.4%**	[18]
ADHD Diagnosis Using Machine Learning	ADHD diagnosis relies on behavioral assessments, which can be subjective.	Used Extreme Learning Machine (ELM) and SVM for ADHD detection.	**87.5%**	[9]
Predicting Depression from Resting-State fMRI	Depression is often misdiagnosed due to subjective self-reports.	Used Support Vector Machines (SVM) and Deep Learning models.	**95%**	[10]
Multimodal AI for Schizophrenia Diagnosis	Single-modality methods (text, image, or audio) provide incomplete mental health insights.	Combined neuroimaging, text, and social media analysis for schizophrenia prediction.	**89%**	[8]
Stress Detection in Students Using ML	Real-time stress detection is difficult without physiological monitoring.	Applied Random Forest (RF) and CNN to wearable sensor data.	**91%**	[6]

AI for Suicide Risk Prediction in Depressed Patients	Suicide risk assessment is inconsistent and difficult to predict.	Developed a deep learning-based suicide prediction model using social media data.	**88.5%**	[20]
Automated Detection of PTSD Using Physiological Signals	PTSD symptoms often go undiagnosed due to subjective reporting.	Applied CNN and LSTM models on EEG and heart rate variability data.	**93%**	[15]
Depression and Anxiety Prediction Using Smartwatch Data	Wearable-based mental health monitoring lacks robust ML models.	Implemented Random Forest and XGBoost models for depression and anxiety detection.	**96%**	[5]
Childhood ADHD Diagnosis Using Neuroimaging	Diagnosing ADHD in children is complex due to overlapping symptoms with other disorders.	Used Deep CNN and SVM on fMRI and EEG datasets.	**86.6%**	[1]
Text-Based Sentiment Analysis for Mental Health Diagnosis	Social media data is often underutilized in mental health screening.	Applied Natural Language Processing (NLP) and LSTM models for text-based predictions.	**90.3%**	[8]
Schizophrenia Risk Assessment Using Genetic and Behavioral Data	Identifying schizophrenia risk factors early is difficult.	Combined genetic, behavioral, and clinical data using ML models.	**87%**	[2]
CNN-Based Detection of Bipolar Disorder Using Speech Data	Traditional bipolar disorder diagnosis methods are slow and subjective.	Trained a CNN model on speech patterns to differentiate bipolar patients from controls.	**92%**	[21]

3. Methodology

3.1 Dataset Description

This study utilizes a dataset comprising physiological and behavioral indicators commonly associated with stress. The features include:

- Heart Rate Variability (HRV)
- Skin Conductance Levels (SCL)
- Sleep Patterns
- Physical Activity Levels

These indicators were selected due to their established correlation with psychological stress and their compatibility with wearable sensors, enabling practical real-world applications.

3.2 Data Preprocessing

To ensure the integrity and usability of the dataset, the following preprocessing steps were applied:

- **Handling Missing Data:** Missing values were imputed using statistical techniques such as mean and median filling.
- **Feature Scaling:** Standardization (z-score normalization) was applied to all numerical features to ensure consistent data distribution across models.
- **Train-Test Split:** The data was randomly split into 80% training and 20% testing sets to enable model training and unbiased evaluation.

3.3 Machine Learning Models

The following models were implemented and evaluated using the preprocessed dataset:

- **Random Forest (RF):** An ensemble learning method using multiple decision trees for improved classification accuracy.
- **Support Vector Machine (SVM):** A margin-based classifier effective in high-dimensional spaces.
- **Logistic Regression (LR):** A linear classifier known for its simplicity and interpretability.
- **K-Nearest Neighbors (KNN):** A non-parametric classifier based on distance metrics.
- **Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN):** A deep learning model effective in learning hierarchical features from structured input data.

3.4 Evaluation Metrics

To assess the models' effectiveness, the following performance metrics were used:

- **Accuracy:** Overall correctness of predictions.
- **Precision:** The proportion of correctly predicted positive instances.
- **Recall:** The proportion of actual positives correctly identified.
- **F1-Score:** Harmonic mean of precision and recall.
- **AUC-ROC:** A measure of the model's ability to distinguish between classes.

4. Results and Discussion

The experimental evaluation demonstrates that machine learning models can effectively predict stress levels based on physiological and behavioral data. Among the models tested, **Random Forest (RF)** exhibited the highest overall performance, achieving an **accuracy of 92%,** with a **precision of 0.91, recall of 0.94**, and an **F1-score of 0.92**. This highlights its robustness in handling complex, non-linear patterns within the dataset. The **Convolutional Neural Network (CNN)** also performed strongly, particularly excelling in recall (1.00) and F1-score (0.94), which is indicative of its ability to capture subtle stress-related patterns. Although **Support Vector Machine (SVM)** reached a commendable **accuracy of 89%**, its relatively higher computational cost makes it less practical for real-time applications. On the other hand, simpler models like **Logistic Regression (85% accuracy)** and **Naive Bayes (75% accuracy)** demonstrated moderate performance, confirming that linear and probabilistic assumptions may not fully capture the complexity of stress-related signals. The results validate the hypothesis that ensemble and deep learning models, when trained on meaningful physiological indicators, can significantly enhance the accuracy and reliability of stress detection systems.

4.1 Performance Comparison of Machine Learning Models

The following table summarizes the performance metrics of different ML models used for stress prediction:

Model	Accuracy	Precision	Recall	F1-Score	AUC-ROC	Strengths	Weaknesses
Random Forest	92%	0.91	0.94	0.92	0.95	High accuracy,	Computationally expensive

						robust to noise	
CNN	90%	0.89	1.0	0.94	0.97	Strong feature extraction	Requires large dataset
SVM	89%	0.87	0.90	0.88	0.91	Works well with small datasets	High computational cost
Logistic Regression	85%	0.83	0.86	0.84	0.88	Simple and interpretable	Limited in handling complex relationships
KNN	80%	0.78	0.82	0.79	0.81	Easy to implement	Computationally intensive
Decision Tree	79%	0.76	0.80	0.77	0.80	Fast and explainable	Prone to overfitting
Naïve Bayes	75%	0.72	0.76	0.73	0.78	Works well with small data	Assumes feature independence

5. Conclusion and Future Work

This study demonstrates the effectiveness of machine learning models in predicting stress using behavioral and physiological data. Among the models evaluated, Random Forest outperformed others with 92% accuracy, 91% precision, and an F1-score of 92%, while CNN followed closely with 90% accuracy and the highest recall of 100%, indicating its strength in detecting true stress cases. These findings highlight the practical potential of RF and CNN models for real-time, wearable-based mental health monitoring applications. For future work, extending the dataset to include more diverse populations and deploying models in real-time systems will enhance generalizability and usability. Furthermore, incorporating robust privacy and data security protocols will be essential for the ethical deployment of AI-powered health monitoring tools.

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