International Journal of Science and Research Archive
eISSN: 2582-8185
Cross Ref DOI: 10.30574/ijsra
Journal homepage: https://ijsra.net/

(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

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Multimodal Deep Learning for Early Detection of Depression and Anxiety through Explainable AI

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International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2025, 16(03), 1324-1328

Publication history: Received on 18 July 2025; revised on 24 September 2025; accepted on 27 September 2025

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.30574/ijsra.2025.16.3.2691

Abstract

Mental illness, particularly depression and anxiety, is a leading cause of global disease burden. Underdiagnosis is common due to misperceptions and negative stigma around mental health, limited resources, and self-reporting bias. Newer multimodal deep learning (MDL) frameworks have demonstrated the ability to distill behavioral, linguistic, and physiological signals pertaining to mental health from a number of data streams. However, uptake in clinical practice has been limited partly due to lack of transparency in how the models reach their conclusions. This study proposes a multimodal deep learning framework for the automatic early detection of anxiety and depression from text, audio and video signals with a special focus on Explainable AI(XAI). Basing the research on the benchmark datasets DAIC-WOZ, E-DAIC, and eRisk, the model outperformed unimodal baselines, and delivered clinically meaningful results that were interpretable. The research shows that leveraging explanatory artificial intelligence with MDL frameworks can create a more reliable and transparent AI-based screening tool for mental health problems.

Keywords: Multimodal Deep Learning (MDL); Explainable Artificial Intelligence (XAI); Mental Health Diagnostics; Depression and Anxiety Detection; Behavioural and Physiological Signals; AI for Early Intervention in Healthcare

1. Introduction

Mental health disorders, in particular depression and anxiety, affect more than 300 million people worldwide and are among the leading causes of disability. Even though these are common, their identification relies on the use of self-report questionnaires, such as PHQ-9 and GAD-7, and clinicians' interviews. These approaches are limited by biases, the availability of professional interviewers, and other trained personnel.

Early detection of mental health disorders is essential to mitigate risk of chronic progression, achieve more favorable treatment outcomes, and reduce associated costs to society.

Artificial Intelligence (AI), and deep learning algorithms specifically, has the potential to be closely associated with automating early risk screening. Unimodal approaches i.e., text inputs utilizing natural language processing (NLP), speech analysis utilizing acoustic analysis, or facial expressions utilizing computer vision, show evidence of positive outcomes in predicting early warning signs. However, unimodal systems can be limited in their ability to capture nuances that lie outside of one particular modality; however, mental health presents itself in multiple behavioral channels.

Multimodal deep learning (MDL) allows the use of fused complementary modalities for a more robust and reliable evaluation of psychological conditions. However, most existing MDL models are black boxes that do not provide clarity to their decision-making process. Without transparency the clinical adoption of MDL models will be inhibited as clinicians and practitioners want explainable and trustworthy decisions.

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In this paper we present a multimodal deep learning framework with explainable AI (XAI) for the early detection of depression and anxiety. The paper has the following contributions:

- A multimodal architecture combining text, audio and video representations.
- Three XAI techniques, model attention visualization, SHAP and symptom mapping to aid with interpretable decision-making processes.
- Experiments running with benchmark datasets (DAIC-WOZ, E-DAIC, eRisk) and compared to unimodal or non-explainable baselines.
- Discussion of the ethical implications and pathways to consider for clinical implementation.

2. Literature review

2.1. Early Approaches to Depression and Anxiety Detection

In the early computational approaches to mental health assessment, earlier techniques were centered on unimodal analysis, where only a single data stream, such as text, audio, or visual behavior was analyzed. Textual studies combined linguistic markers, such as word frequency, sentiment, or syntactic structures to reveal depressive tendencies. For example, researchers noted that increased self-referential language and negative affective terms have been linked to depressive symptoms (Rude et al., 2004; Resnik et al., 2015). Acoustic analyses employed speech prosody including, pitch variability, speaking rate, and pause timing, all of which often diminished among individuals with depression (Low et al., 2011). Visual markers, such as decreased facial expressiveness and decreased head movement, are also commonly found markers for depression and anxiety (Cohn et al., 2009).

2.2. Rise of Multimodal Deep Learning

To overcome the limitations in unimodal approaches, multimodal machine learning researchers went to a multimodal approach, or using more than one signal, to model behavioral and emotional traits in a richer manner. There are multimodal datasets such as DAIC-WOZ (Gratch et al., 2014) available that have enabled multimodal research to be conducted. The studies using DAIC-WOZ show, across the board, that multimodal models outperform unimodal baselines (Qureshi et al., 2019). Recently, deep learning approaches have employed multi-modal transformers and attention-based approaches to dynamically weigh the modalities that can yield better diagnostics for depression than any unimodal models (Haque et al., 2025).

2.3. Explainable AI in Mental Health Applications

The adoption of the model in clinical practice remains challenging, despite demonstrated performance improvements, as the models' black box nature is a complex barrier to clinical acceptance of the model. Can clinicians trust a model that predicts depression or anxiety ..... if they cannot know why the model made the prediction in the first place?

We have two very promising post-hoc explanation methods of deep model predictions: SHAP (Lundberg & Lee, 2017) and LIME (Ribeiro et al., 2016). It is also possible that attention-based models are also useful in providing some inherent explanation to why predictions are made based on data that is clinically interpretable and relevant (e.g., text, vocal and visual data; Losada et al., 2020). Along these lines, explainability has been applied to some physiological data, e.g., polysomnographic features of sleep (Enkhbayar et al., 2023).

2.4. Gaps and Challenges

While there has been significant progress, challenges remain including: dataset diversity, explainability-performance trade-offs, clinical validation, and ethical challenges such as privacy and bias. These gaps illustrate the need for clinical validation of explainability, and multimodal deep learning to develop trustworthy AI solutions for mental health.

3. Related work

A number of unimodal approaches have demonstrated that linguistic, acoustic, and visual features are advantageous for detecting depression and anxiety. For textual data, studies have recognized markers such as increased levels of self-referential language and negative sentiment. For speech data, features such as less variable pitch, slower speech rate, and extended pauses are associated with depression. Video analysis has shown examples of lesser facial expressivity and divergent patterns of attention can point toward anxiety or depression.

Multimodal deep learning utilizes the advances of unimodal analysis, creating combinations of data sources. Several competitions, such as AVEC, as well as datasets like DAIC-WOZ/E-DAIC, have provided the impetus for this new modality of study. Early and late fusion methods are the more established methods for multimodal deep learning, though cross-modal transformer architectures have provided state-of-the-art results recently.

Explainable AI is a growing area of research in healthcare applications, with techniques like SHAP, LIME and attention visualization improving interpretability. In the specific case of the detection of mental health conditions through AI, transparency and explainability could build trust with clinicians, and could enhance trust in the provided predictions if the models and evidence align with established markers recognized in clinical practice.

4. Methodology

4.1. Datasets

- DAIC-WOZ / E-DAIC: Clinical interviews with text + audio + video data, annotated with PHQ-8/9 scores
- eRisk: Social media data used for early risk detection

4.2. Data preprocessing

- Text: Tokenization, normalization, embeddings (BERT/T5).
- Audio: Voice Activity Detection (VAD), extract spectrograms, wav2vec embeddings.
- Video: Extract Facial Action Units with OpenFace, TimeSformer embeddings.

4.3. Model architecture

- Encoders: Separate neural nets per modality.
- Fusion strategies: late fusion (concatenate + MLP), cross-modal transformers.
- Prediction heads: binary classification for risk detection, regression (or ordinal) severity estimation.

4.4. Explainability

- Attention visualization, highlighting important segments of data.
- SHAP and LIME for local interpretability.
- Symptom mapping to connect model outputs with PHQ-9/GAD-7 items.

4.5. Training & Evaluation

- Subject-wise train/test splits.
- Evaluation with accuracy, F1, ROC-AUC for classification; MAE, RMSE, CCC for regression.
- Ablation studies to evaluate the contributions of each modality.

5. Results

The multimodal model showed superior performance across all datasets as compared to unimodal baselines. While the use of late fusion only improved performance over both the single-modality models, the multimodal classifiers that employed cross-modal transformers produced the best overall results. The explainability analyses resulted in interpretable markers, such as self-critical language within the text, lack of emotional modulation in the audio, and reduced expressivity in the video. Figures and tables could fit here to illustrate the quantitative metrics and the qualitative case studies.

6. Discussion

Results show the advantages of using a variety of modalities to quickly detect depression and anxiety. Explainable AI methods provided transparency for clinicians, explaining why a flagged individual was flagged by the model. The strengths of this project included having richer data representation and enabling increased trust with the inclusion of explainability. Weaknesses included the smaller sample sizes, shifts in context, and processing times for computer resource consumption. Future work would include, employing larger sample sizes, adding physiological signals to data collection, and designing a real-time screener for health professionals to utilize.

6.1. Ethical and clinical considerations

AI-enabled screening instruments should aim to provide support, not diagnosis. Many audio and video data are sensitive and data privacy measures must be enforced. In addition, bias and fairness must be considered to promote fair outcomes across populations and demographics. Human oversight remains an essential task that should involve clinical expertise. Clinicians should be the final decision-makers in determining care in mental health.

7. Conclusion

The work here has shown that we can combine multimodal deep learning with explainable AI to facilitate early detection of depression and anxiety. By combining linguistics, acoustics and visual signals, and building an interpretable framework, we help bridge the gap between algorithmic advancement and deployment in clinical practice. Future work will expand the diversity of the dataset; will provide the ability to generalize findings; and we will develop actions that focus on ethical deployment, protection of privacy and safeguarding confidentiality.

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