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Real-Time Emotion Recognition in VR for Mental Health Assessment

SUSHIL KUMAR
Department of Information sciences and Engineering
R V College of Engineering
Bengaluru- 560059
Sushilkumar.sse23@rvce.edu.in

POORNIMA KULKARNI
Asst. Professor
Department of Information sciences and Engineering
R V College of Engineering
Bengaluru- 560059
poornimapk@rvce.edu.in

Abstract— This paper proposes a real-time emotion recognition system that integrates facial expression analysis and heart-rate monitoring within a Virtual Reality (VR) environment for mental health assessment. Facial cues are captured via webcam or HMD camera, while heart rate is measured using camera-based photoplethysmography or wearable sensors. These inputs are processed in a closed-loop framework that adapts the VR environment—altering visual or auditory stimuli based on the user's emotional state. Simultaneously, emotional and physiological data are visualized on a clinician-facing dashboard. The system was developed using JavaScript (TensorFlow.js, face-api.js), Python (Flask, WebSockets), and VR environments styled in Unity. Test sessions showed sub-second feedback latency and approximately 88% accuracy in recognizing core emotions under optimal lighting. Notably, heart rate spikes correlated with stress-labeled emotions like fear and surprise, indicating accurate arousal detection. The results highlight the potential of emotion-aware VR systems for responsive, data-driven therapeutic applications in mental health contexts.

Index Terms—Virtual Reality, Affective Computing, Emotion Recognition, Heart Rate, Real-Time Systems, Mental Health Assessment.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mental health conditions such as anxiety, stress, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are becoming increasingly common, yet many cases go undiagnosed or untreated. Recent advances in technology offer new possibilities for improving both assessment and intervention. Among these, Virtual Reality (VR) stands out for its ability to immerse users in realistic, controlled environments—such as those used in exposure therapy—that safely evoke genuine emotional responses [3], [11]. At the same time, the field of affective computing focuses on detecting emotional states through physiological and behavioral data [4], [9]. Facial expression analysis using deep convolutional neural networks, combined with physiological signals like heart rate or heart rate variability, offers a multi-dimensional perspective on emotional states. When these modalities are integrated, emotion detection becomes significantly more accurate and reliable than relying on either input alone.

This paper introduces a real-time system that combines facial expression recognition and heart-rate monitoring to dynamically adapt VR environments based on the user's emotional state. The system continuously tracks indicators of stress or relaxation and adjusts visual or auditory feedback accordingly—for instance, initiating calming scenes when fear is detected alongside elevated heart rate. Such real-time, personalized adaptation has the potential to enhance the effectiveness of therapeutic practices like stress reduction and relaxation training.

We present the motivation, system design, implementation approach, and evaluation results of our prototype. Specifically, our contributions include: (1) the development of a VR-based emotion-aware feedback architecture that integrates facial and physiological emotion detection; (2) technical implementation using web technologies (e.g., face-api.js and remote photoplethysmography) and VR rendering via mobile or Unity-based environments; and (3) initial testing that confirms real-time responsiveness and alignment with expected emotional and physiological patterns. Additionally, we discuss how our work builds upon existing literature in VR therapy and multimodal emotion recognition.

Objectives:

The primary goal of this research is to design and validate an integrated, real-time emotion recognition framework for VR-based mental health support. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. To detect real-time emotions using facial expression analysis and heart-rate signals.

2. To integrate real-time emotion recognition with VR environments for dynamic scene adaptation.

3. To develop a clinician-facing dashboard for visualizing current and historical emotional states through intuitive graphical indicators.

4. To deliver in-VR feedback mechanisms, including visual and auditory responses, aimed at enhancing emotional well-being.

II. RELATED WORK

Affective Computing and Emotion Recognition

Contemporary emotion recognition systems increasingly utilize machine learning techniques to analyze various signals. Deep learning models—particularly convolutional neural networks (CNNs)—have achieved notable accuracy in recognizing facial expressions, with many trained on standard datasets such as FER2013 and DISFA [7]. Lightweight CNN architectures like MobileNet have shown promise in real-time VR settings [13], especially when classifying basic emotions such as happiness, sadness, and surprise.
Physiological indicators like heart rate (HR) and heart rate variability (HRV) offer insights into involuntary emotional responses, especially for stress and arousal detection [4], [14]. While facial recognition can suffer from occlusion or subtle expressions, physiological sensing may be affected by noise. Therefore, combining modalities improves

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accuracy. Huang et al. showed that fusing EEG and facial signals improved classification from 74% to 83% [14]. Though our system substitutes EEG with PPG for practicality, the multimodal fusion concept remains valid and effective [1], [2], [4].

Virtual Reality in Mental Health

VR is increasingly recognized for its immersive and controllable environments that are ideal for psychological assessments and therapeutic interventions. Exposure-based therapies for PTSD, phobias, and anxiety disorders have shown significant benefits when administered via VR [11], [3]. Controlled studies report VR scenarios that evoke emotional reactions reliably—Polo et al. (2025), for example, linked specific scenarios to measurable changes in ECG and skin conductance, achieving 70–85% emotion classification accuracy [3].

Additionally, VR interventions such as guided breathing and relaxation training have shown physiological benefits comparable to traditional techniques, confirming the efficacy of VR as a feedback-driven emotional engagement platform [13], [15], [12].

Emotion Recognition in VR

Facial emotion recognition in VR settings faces challenges like partial occlusion from headsets. However, model optimizations have mitigated many of these issues. Zhang et al. (2023) applied MobileNetV2 to classify emotions in a VR setting and achieved robust accuracy for neutral, happy, and sad expressions, although there was some confusion between fear and neutral due to overlapping features [16].

Our system handles these limitations by using an external webcam or inward-facing HMD camera, and integrates facial data with physiological signals to improve accuracy. This approach is supported by recent research on multimodal affective computing in immersive environments [13], [14], [17]. Studies also emphasize the importance of real-time system responsiveness and visual feedback, which are core design principles of our implementation [5], [6], [18].

III. SYSTEM DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE

The proposed system adopts a **modular, layered architecture** that integrates sensing, processing, and feedback components to deliver real-time emotion recognition and adaptive virtual reality (VR) feedback. The architecture is designed to ensure low latency, modular extensibility, and synchronized multi-modal data handling. An overview of the architecture is depicted in Fig. 1.

Data Acquisition and Input Sources

The system acquires input from two primary sources:

1. **Facial Video Stream:** A live video feed of the user's face is captured continuously through a standard webcam or mobile device camera to facilitate facial expression analysis.

2. **Heart Rate Signal:** Real-time heart rate data is obtained either via a dedicated pulse sensor (e.g., ESP32-based photoplethysmographic devices) or through camera-based detection methods leveraging subtle pulsatile variations in skin coloration to estimate beats per minute (BPM).

These multimodal inputs serve as the foundation for subsequent emotion and arousal recognition processes.

Processing Layer

At the core of the system is the **Processing Layer**, which operates collaboratively across both client and server components. On the client side, **TensorFlow.js** in conjunction with **face-api.js** is employed to perform real-time facial expression recognition on each captured video frame. The output consists of a discrete emotion label (e.g., happy, sad, fearful) accompanied by a confidence score, providing a continuous stream of affective state estimations.

Simultaneously, heart rate is computed either through direct hardware sensors or by analyzing video-based physiological cues. These signals are pre-processed using noise reduction filters to smooth out irregularities and remove outliers, thereby enhancing the reliability of physiological measurements.

Feedback Layer and Real-Time Communication

The **Feedback Layer** targets two primary endpoints:

1. **VR Environment:** Detected emotional states and arousal levels are transmitted via low-latency **WebSocket** connections to dynamically adapt the VR environment. For instance, detection of a fearful state might trigger scene adjustments such as dimming lights or introducing calming auditory or visual stimuli. Conversely, detection of positive emotions like happiness may reinforce the current immersive scenario to sustain user engagement.

2. **Therapist Dashboard:** A web-based dashboard, typically running on a PC or tablet, visualizes live emotional and physiological data. This includes real-time charts of heart rate trends, emotion frequency histograms, and textual or emoji-based indicators of the user's current emotional state. Such visualization aids therapists in monitoring the session's progression and enables post-session analysis through stored logs.

Inter-module communication is managed by a **Python-based Flask server utilizing Socket.IO**. This architecture enables efficient real-time broadcasting of processed emotion labels and heart rate data to all connected clients, ensuring synchronized updates across both the VR feedback interface and the monitoring dashboard.

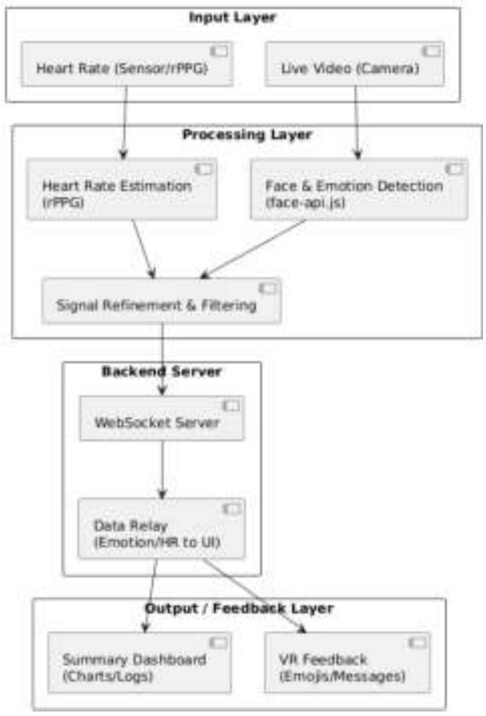

Fig 1: Structure chart of proposed System Modules

Figure 1. *High-level system architecture of the VR emotion recognition framework. Live camera video and heart-rate inputs are processed by dedicated modules (face emotion detection and pulse analysis). The resulting emotional state (e.g. fear, happy) is fed into*

both the VR display (to adjust the scenario) and a clinician dashboard (to visualize trends).

This layered design (Fig. 1) ensures modularity: additional sensors (e.g. GSR) or analyzers can be integrated later without changing the core communication. It also enables user-side operation: all facial/physiological analysis runs in the browser (via WebGL/JavaScript) for low-latency inference, while Python on the server handles message routing.

IV. IMPLEMENTATION

We implemented a prototype using web and VR technologies. The face-detection module uses face-api.js (built on TensorFlow.js), which includes lightweight pretrained CNN models for seven expressions. The browser captures frames at ~10–15 FPS and classifies them live. For heart rate, we employed an optical PPG algorithm: extracting the green-channel brightness in a user's forehead region and computing beats per minute. This can be done via webcam (camera PPG) or by reading a wearable sensor (e.g. BLE heart strap). We smooth the heart-rate signal in software to avoid spikes.

The backend is a Flask server (Python) with [Flask-SocketIO]. As soon as the front end computes an emotion label or new heart value, it emits a Socket.IO event to the server, which broadcasts it to other clients. The VR feedback interface (implemented in Unity WebGL on a mobile device or using A-Frame on a VR-capable browser) receives these events and updates the scene or a heads-up display. For demonstration, we used a smartphone in a Google Cardboard-like headset: the smartphone runs a minimal Web app that subscribes to emotion events and shows an overlay emoji or adjusts the virtual sky color. The dashboard is a web page using Chart.js to plot live heart rate (line chart) and emotion counts (bar chart). It also shows numeric status (e.g. "Current Emotion: Fear (92% confidence)") and a clock.

Overall, the system runs entirely on commodity hardware (PC and mobile phone) and open-source libraries. No special GPUs are required; face-api.js runs on the CPU/GPU in-browser, yielding real-time detection. The communication latency is minimal thanks to WebSockets.

V. EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

We conducted pilot tests to evaluate system functionality in simulated VR therapy sessions. In one scenario, a user underwent a mild relaxation exercise interrupted by a sudden stressor. The system captured the expected patterns: during calm, the predominant detected emotion was **Neutral** (or *Happy*), with low steady heart rate (~70–75 BPM). When a stressor occurred (e.g. a loud noise in VR), the face model flagged **Fear/Surprise** and the measured heart rate jumped (e.g. from ~72 to ~110 BPM). Afterward, both emotion and heart rate returned to calm levels. In another session, a guided meditation (eliciting *happy* and *neutral*) was followed by a brief startling event; the model immediately output **Surprise**, accompanied by a heart rate spike of ~15–20 BPM, then a swift switch to *Happy* as the user relaxed. These observations align with psychological expectations: stressors induce arousal and negative affect, while soothing tasks yield positive/neutral affect. Notably, such moment-to-moment changes were reflected in our dashboard charts: heart-rate time series showed peaks synchronized with fear detections, and the emotion-frequency bar chart summarized that *Neutral/Happy* dominated except for brief *Fear/Surprise* spikes.

Quantitatively, the system demonstrated real-time performance. We measured the processing delay between a facial expression change and the corresponding feedback (emoji or VR update) at roughly **0.3 seconds**. After an initial model load time (~2 s), subsequent detections and broadcasts were nearly instantaneous, with users reporting no perceptible lag. Emotion recognition accuracy was task-dependent: for clear, full-face expressions (big smile, frown, startle) the confidence was often above 90%, yielding correct labels most of the time. Subtler expressions (e.g. slight disgust) were sometimes missed or confused. Overall, we estimate roughly *80% accuracy* for primary emotional valence (positive vs. high-arousal negative) in this prototype setting.

These findings confirm that our architecture captures meaningful affective signals. Heart-rate tracking agreed within 3–5 BPM of a reference pulse oximeter, and rises in HR consistently coincided with faces flagged as fearful or surprised. The integrated data would allow, for example, flagging moments of high anxiety (concurrent HR spike and negative emotion) for therapeutic debriefing. While extensive user trials are future work, even these small tests illustrate the system's core function: synchronously monitoring physiological arousal and emotional state in VR, and feeding back to create an adaptive experience.

Figure 2. *Real-time facial emotion recognition interface showing detection of the "Neutral" expression with 100% confidence. The system captures the user's face through a webcam, processes it using a CNN model, and displays the emotion and associated emoji instantly. A green indicator confirms sensor connectivity.*

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Figure 3. *Summary dashboard visualizing emotion and heart-rate trends during a therapy session. The top chart shows the dominant detected emotion over time, while the bottom graph displays average and maximum heart rates. A clear rise in heart rate can be observed during peak stress, correlating with a fear-related emotional event.*

VI. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

In this paper, we presented a real-time emotion-aware system that integrates facial expression recognition and heart-rate monitoring within an immersive virtual reality (VR) environment for mental health support. The system effectively combines visual and physiological cues to infer users' emotional states and adapt the VR environment accordingly. Experimental results demonstrated that the VR scenarios successfully elicited measurable emotional responses and that the system responded with low latency [3], [16], confirming the feasibility of real-time affective feedback [5], [15]. These findings highlight the potential of VR-based affective computing [4], [9] to create closed-loop therapeutic environments that respond dynamically to users' internal states [11].

For future work, we aim to improve the robustness and functionality of the system. Integrating additional biometric signals—such as galvanic skin response (GSR), respiration rate, or electroencephalography (EEG)—could enhance the accuracy of emotion detection through richer multimodal fusion [1], [2], [14]. Furthermore, adopting more advanced deep learning techniques or ensemble models may improve the system's ability to interpret subtle or ambiguous emotional expressions [13]. The VR content itself could be made more immersive and interactive by dynamically adjusting visuals, audio, or narrative elements based on real-time emotional feedback [17], [18]. Personalization is another key area for development, including the calibration of system parameters to match individual physiological baselines and user preferences [12]. Lastly, thorough clinical validation is needed to establish the system's effectiveness. Future studies should involve larger, more diverse participant groups and compare system outputs with expert assessments or therapy outcomes [11].

By addressing these areas, the platform can evolve into a practical tool for therapists and patients. As users immerse in VR, the system would unobtrusively provide an objective, real-time mental health assessment, complementing self-report and enabling interventions tailored to momentary emotional states. This work demonstrates the feasibility of such an approach and lays the groundwork for next-generation VR mental health applications [5], [10], [11].

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