INTEGRATING FACIAL PROFILING AND STRUCTURED CLINICAL INTERVIEWS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT IN DENTAL STUDENTS: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY

Usman Sana[1], Atif Rasool[2], Saira Majid[3], Ayesha Zafar[4], Mr. Abdul Aziz[5]

[1]*MS Clinical Psychology Scholar, MS Clinical Psychology Department, The Superior University, Lahore.*
[2]*MS Clinical Psychology, Department of Clinical Psychology, The Superior University, Lahore.*
[3]*MS Clinical Psychology, Department of Clinical Psychology, The Superior University, Lahore.*
[4]*MS Clinical Psychology, Department of Clinical Psychology, The Superior University, Lahore.*
[5]*MS Clinical Psychology, MS Clinical Psychology Department, The Superior University, Lahore.*
[1]*usman.sana@superior.edu.pk,* [2]*atif.rasool@superior.edu.pk,* [3]*sairamajid@superior.edu.pk*
[4]*ayesha.zafar@superior.edu.pk,* [5]*Csc.aaziz@gmail.com*

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Corresponding Author: *
Usman Sana

Abstract

This study explores the convergence of facial profiling, structured clinical interviews (SCID), and validated psychometric tools in detecting burnout and depression among dental students. The aim is to establish a comprehensive and scalable model for psychological distress screening. A mixed-methods, cross-sectional study was conducted on 100 dental students. Standardized tools included the PHQ-9 and MBI-SS. Facial images were analyzed using OpenFace 2.0 for activation patterns such as AU4 and AU12. A subset of 20 participants underwent SCID interviews to cross-validate self-report and facial metrics. Facial profiling revealed a significant correlation between AU4 intensity and burnout severity ($r = 0.44$, $p < .01$). Depression scores showed a predictive relationship with mid-facial asymmetry and reduced AU12 expression. SCID assessments confirmed distress patterns identified via facial analytics. The combined model predicted 43% of variance in psychological distress scores (adjusted $R^2 = .43$). The fusion of facial analytics and SCID provides a robust, bias-mitigated framework for identifying mental health risks in dental education. This study introduces an interdisciplinary model with potential utility in academic and clinical settings.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health remains a critical yet under addressed challenge in healthcare education, particularly among dental students who navigate a uniquely demanding academic and clinical environment (Polychronopoulou & Divaris, 2020). The convergence of rigorous coursework, patient care responsibilities, and professional expectations often precipitates stress-related conditions, including burnout, anxiety, and depression (Elani et al., 2021). Traditional assessment methods—such as self-reported surveys (e.g., DASS-21, PHQ-9) and qualitative interviews—are limited by their reliance on subjective disclosure, which may be compromised by social desirability bias, stigma, or poor self-awareness (Schwenk et al., 2022). These constraints underscore the need for more objective, scalable tools to evaluate psychological well-being in educational settings.

Emerging technologies in affective computing offer promising alternatives by quantifying emotions through physiological cues. The Facial Action Coding System (FACS; Ekman & Friesen, 1978) deciphers facial expressions into discrete Action Units (AUs), which correlate with specific emotional states. For instance:

- **AU4** (brow lowering) is strongly associated with negative affect, including stress or frustration (Saragih et al., 2023).

- **AU12** (lip corner pulling) reflects positive emotions like happiness (D'Argembeau & Van der Linden, 2023).

Unlike self-reports, FACS-based analysis captures involuntary micro-expressions, reducing bias and enhancing reliability (Cohn et al., 2021). However, extant research has yet to systematically integrate facial expression data with gold-standard clinical assessments, such as the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM Disorders (SCID; First et al., 2017), which provides validated diagnostic criteria for mental health conditions.

This study bridges this gap by adopting a triangulated methodology:

1. **Facial expression analysis** (FACS) to detect real-time emotional fluctuations.

2. **Standardized psychometric tools** (e.g., PSS-10, Maslach Burnout Inventory) to quantify stress levels.

3. **SCID-based clinical evaluations** to confirm diagnoses.

By synthesizing these approaches, our research advances two key objectives:

- **Early identification** of at-risk students through multimodal biomarkers.

- **Reduction of diagnostic inaccuracies** inherent to single-method assessments.

This paradigm aligns with the journal's focus on social justice by advocating for equitable mental health support in adult education. Timely interventions informed by robust data can mitigate disparities in student well-being, fostering inclusive academic environments (Morse et al., 2022).

Methods

The study involved a carefully selected group of 100 dental students from Azra Naheed Dental College, with an average age of 24 years and a majority being female. Participants were chosen based on their enrollment status and willingness to undergo multiple assessments, including facial imaging, psychological surveys, and clinical interviews. Ethical considerations were prioritized, with informed consent obtained and confidentiality assured. The research employed a multi-stage data collection process. First, high-resolution facial images were captured under controlled lighting conditions to ensure consistency. These images were analyzed using OpenFace 2.0, a facial recognition software that detects subtle muscle movements. Participants also completed two validated psychological assessments: the PHQ-9 for depressive

symptoms and the MBI-SS for burnout levels. To strengthen the findings, a subset of 20 students underwent structured clinical interviews using the SCID protocol, administered by experienced psychologists.

Facial expression analysis focused on AU4 (brow furrowing) and AU12 (genuine smiling), quantifying their frequency and symmetry to provide objective data on emotional states. These metrics were compared with self-reported survey results to assess alignment between observable cues and subjective experiences. The clinical interviews followed rigorous protocols, with independent scoring to minimize bias. Results were cross-referenced with survey responses and facial metrics to evaluate consistency across assessment methods.

Statistical analyses included correlation tests to examine relationships between facial AUs and psychological scores, as well as multivariate regression to identify predictors of distress severity. Machine learning algorithms, particularly support vector machines (SVM), were used to test whether facial metrics could classify participants based on mental health status. This comprehensive approach validated facial expression analysis as a diagnostic tool while exploring its potential for early distress detection in academic settings. By integrating multiple

data sources, the study provided a nuanced understanding of mental health assessment, demonstrating how technology can complement traditional methods to improve accuracy and equity in identifying at-risk students.

RESULTS

The study yielded significant insights into the psychological well-being of dental students, revealing concerning patterns of emotional distress across the participant population. Quantitative analysis demonstrated that a substantial proportion of students exhibited measurable psychological impairment, with 42% reporting mild symptoms, 35% showing moderate distress, and a clinically significant 23% displaying severe manifestations. These findings align with previous research highlighting the mental health challenges inherent in dental education (Polychronopoulou & Divaris, 2020), while also revealing important gender disparities in burnout severity that reached statistical significance ($p < 0.01$). The pronounced levels of distress observed underscore the urgent need for institution-wide mental health interventions tailored to the unique pressures of dental training programs.

Facial expression analysis provided compelling objective evidence supporting these self-reported measures. Students experiencing high burnout levels showed a 68% increase in AU4 (corrugator muscle activity) intensity compared to their peers ($p < 0.001$), strongly correlating with negative emotional states. Conversely, AU12 (zygomaticus major activation), associated with positive affect, demonstrated significantly reduced activity among participants with depressive symptoms ($p < 0.001$). A particularly novel finding emerged regarding facial asymmetry, with disproportionate muscle activation in the midface region explaining 14% of variance in anxiety scores ($\beta = 0.37$, $p = 0.002$). These physiological markers not only validated self-report data but also offered quantifiable, stigma-free indicators of psychological distress that could circumvent the limitations of traditional assessment methods (Cohn et al., 2021).

The study's multi-method approach achieved robust validation through clinical benchmarks. Comparison between SCID interviews and questionnaire results showed strong diagnostic agreement ($\kappa = 0.79$, 85% concordance), reinforcing the reliability of the integrated assessment model. Most innovatively, machine learning analysis demonstrated that facial metrics alone could predict clinically confirmed distress with 81% accuracy (AUC = 0.86, 95% CI [0.78,

0.92]). The support vector machine (SVM) classifier particularly excelled at identifying high-risk cases, achieving 84% sensitivity for severe symptoms. These results suggest that automated facial analysis, when calibrated against clinical standards, could serve as an efficient screening tool for early distress detection in academic settings - a finding with particular relevance for resource-constrained educational institutions (Saragih et al., 2023).

The convergence of these findings across measurement modalities - from physiological data to clinical interviews - presents a compelling case for reimagining mental health assessment in professional education. By demonstrating that observable facial biomarkers can reliably indicate psychological states and predict clinical diagnoses, this research opens new possibilities for equitable, non-invasive mental health monitoring. The strong performance of the predictive model (PPV = 0.82, NPV = 0.79) especially highlights how technological innovations might complement traditional methods to create more responsive support systems for at-risk students, a crucial consideration for promoting social justice in demanding academic environments.

DISCUSSION

This study presents compelling evidence for transforming mental health assessment paradigms in professional education through the innovative integration of facial expression analysis with gold-standard clinical methods. Our findings demonstrate that systematic analysis of facial muscle activity—particularly sustained brow tension (AU4) and diminished positive expressions (AU12)—provides physiologically grounded, objective markers that strongly correlate with both self-reported distress and clinical diagnoses. This multimodal approach addresses critical limitations in current assessment practices by supplementing subjective self-reports with quantifiable biomarkers while preserving the diagnostic rigor of structured clinical interviews (First et al., 2017). The 85% concordance between facial metrics and SCID-based diagnoses suggests that affective computing technologies can significantly enhance early detection of psychological distress in academic settings, particularly in high-stress disciplines like dental education where traditional screening methods may fail to capture at-risk students (Polychronopoulou & Divaris, 2020).

Several theoretically significant findings emerge from this work. The robust

association between increased AU4 activation and burnout symptoms (p < 0.001, d = 1.2) empirically validates the facial feedback hypothesis (Buck, 1980) in an applied educational context, suggesting that sustained stress manifests in measurable neuromuscular patterns. Furthermore, the discovery that midfacial asymmetry accounts for 14% of anxiety score variance introduces a novel physiological dimension to distress assessment—one that may reflect lateralized brain activity patterns associated with negative affect (Davidson, 1998). Most practically, our machine learning model's 81% diagnostic accuracy demonstrates that automated facial analysis, when calibrated against clinical standards, could become a scalable screening tool for resource-constrained institutions seeking to implement proactive mental health monitoring (Saragih et al., 2023).

The implications for educational practice are profound. Real-time facial expression monitoring in clinical simulation labs or lecture settings could enable institutions to: (1) identify students exhibiting early distress signals through non-invasive means, (2) tailor stress-reduction interventions based on objective physiological feedback, and (3) evaluate intervention effectiveness through longitudinal facial metric analysis. This aligns closely with the journal's focus on social justice by proposing an equitable assessment framework that reduces reliance on self-disclosure—a particular benefit for students from cultural backgrounds where mental health stigma remains prevalent (Kirmayer et al., 2021). Moreover, the technology's adaptability suggests potential applications across other marginalized trainee populations, including international students and first-generation professionals who may face additional barriers to seeking help.

However, four key limitations must inform future research directions. First, while our sample provided robust effect sizes, the 20-participant clinical subset necessitates larger validation studies to ensure generalizability. Second, as current facial recognition algorithms are primarily trained on Western facial norms (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018), developing culturally inclusive models requires multinational collaboration—an urgent priority given the global nature of dental education. Third, ethical implementation demands rigorous safeguards against data misuse, particularly concerning continuous monitoring in academic spaces. Finally, longitudinal studies must establish whether facial biomarkers can track therapeutic progress as effectively as they detect distress onset.

We propose three strategic recommendations for advancing this paradigm: (1) multi-institutional trials to test assessment frameworks across diverse educational cultures, (2) integration with existing student support systems to evaluate real-world feasibility, and (3) development of ethical guidelines for responsible technology deployment in academic mental health programs. These steps would ensure such innovations genuinely enhance—rather than complicate—student support ecosystems.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study present compelling evidence that integrating facial expression analysis with standardized diagnostic interviews creates a powerful new paradigm for identifying psychological distress in its earliest stages. By merging these two distinct but complementary approaches, researchers have developed an assessment methodology that overcomes many limitations inherent in traditional mental health screening techniques. The facial profiling component provides an objective, quantifiable measure of emotional states through sophisticated analysis of subtle muscle movements, while the structured clinical interviews contribute expert diagnostic validation and nuanced psychological interpretation. Together, they form a comprehensive evaluation system that

is both scientifically rigorous and practically feasible for implementation in academic environments.

This innovative hybrid approach holds particular promise for dental education programs, where students routinely face intense academic pressures combined with demanding clinical responsibilities. The non-invasive nature of facial analysis makes it especially suitable for regular mental health monitoring without disrupting educational activities or requiring extensive time commitments from students. When concerning patterns are detected through automated facial monitoring, the system can trigger more in-depth clinical evaluations, creating a tiered assessment process that efficiently allocates mental health resources. The empirical foundation of this methodology lends credibility to its findings, addressing common concerns about subjectivity in psychological assessment while maintaining the clinical depth necessary for accurate diagnosis.

The implications of this research extend well beyond the specific context of dental education. Healthcare training programs across various disciplines share similar challenges regarding student mental health, with medical, nursing, and other clinical programs all reporting high rates of stress,

anxiety, and burnout among trainees. The scalable nature of this combined assessment model suggests it could be adapted to benefit these related fields, potentially revolutionizing how educational institutions monitor and support student wellbeing. The technology's ability to provide continuous, real-time assessment represents a significant advancement over periodic self-report measures, allowing for more timely interventions before psychological distress becomes severe.

Furthermore, the successful integration of technological and clinical assessment methods demonstrated in this study points toward exciting possibilities for the future of mental healthcare more broadly. As facial recognition algorithms continue to improve and become more sophisticated, their potential applications in psychological assessment and treatment monitoring will likely expand. The current findings provide a strong foundation for future research exploring these possibilities, while also establishing important methodological standards for combining technological and clinical assessment approaches. The study's emphasis on empirical validation through comparison with gold-standard diagnostic interviews sets an important precedent for

ensuring the reliability and validity of such innovative assessment techniques.

While the immediate applications focus on educational settings, the long-term implications of this research could influence mental health practices in various professional environments where early detection of psychological distress is crucial. The principles underlying this hybrid assessment model - combining objective physiological measures with expert clinical judgment - may eventually inform new standards for mental health screening in high-stress professions beyond healthcare education. This study therefore represents not just an incremental improvement in assessment techniques, but potentially a significant step forward in how we conceptualize and implement mental health monitoring systems for populations at risk of stress-related psychological difficulties.

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