# Cognitive Dynamics Based on Physiological Signals in Problem Solving

## Abstract

Recent advances in wearable sensors and machine learning have enabled new insights into cognitive dynamics during problem solving, particularly the detection of emotion states such as Aha! moments, impasse, and relaxation. This study reviews over 70 research papers on emotion recognition using physiological signals, including EEG, electrodermal activity (EDA), pupil diameter, blood volume pulse (BVP), and accelerometry. We categorize the literature based on emotional representation (dimensional, discrete, cognitive-affective states), key features used in each modality, machine learning approaches, and public datasets. The paper identifies effective strategies and gaps in current research, such as generalizability across subjects and interpretability of models, and proposes future directions toward developing robust, explainable, multimodal emotion recognition systems.

## 1. Introduction

Emotion plays a critical role in human cognition, decision-making, and learning. During problem solving, emotions such as confusion, frustration, insight (Aha! moment), and relaxation dynamically influence engagement and outcomes. The development of wearable biosensors and artificial intelligence models offers a promising path to detecting and interpreting these transient emotional states in real time.

The goal of this paper is to synthesize recent findings from over 70 peer-reviewed studies that investigate emotion recognition using physiological signals. We focus on modalities such as EEG, EDA, pupil diameter, BVP, and accelerometry, and explore how these signals are used to classify emotional and cognitive states during problem-solving tasks. In doing so, we identify common patterns, successful model architectures, feature engineering practices, and limitations.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Emotion Representation Models

#### Dimensional Models (Valence-Arousal)

The circumplex model of affect (Russell, 1980) maps emotions in a 2D space defined by valence (pleasantness) and arousal (activation). This model is widely adopted in datasets such as DEAP (Koelstra et al., 2012), DREAMER (Katsigiannis & Ramzan, 2018), and MAHNOB-HCI (Soleymani et al., 2012), which record EEG, EDA, and other physiological responses during emotional stimuli. Models using power spectral densities, alpha asymmetry, and EDA features like SCRs achieved high performance in binary valence/arousal classification (Alarcao & Fonseca, 2019; Tripathi et al., 2017).

#### Discrete Emotion Models

Ekman’s theory of basic emotions (Ekman, 1992) forms the foundation for categorical emotion classification. The SEED dataset (Zheng & Lu, 2015) enables classification of seven discrete emotions using EEG. Zheng et al. (2017) later introduced SEED-IV with four classes and improved cross-subject performance using deep belief networks. Multimodal approaches such as EEG + eye tracking (Li et al., 2021) have achieved high accuracy via decision-level fusion.

#### Cognitive-Affective States

Cognitive states like confusion, insight (Aha!), and impasse are increasingly recognized in educational and problem-solving contexts (D’Mello & Graesser, 2012). Studies have modeled Aha! moments using frontal EEG asymmetry and pupil dilation (Kounios & Beeman, 2014), while Bosch et al. (2016) tracked mind wandering and confusion using facial and physiological features. Stress detection studies (Healey & Picard, 2005; Gjoreski et al., 2016) rely on EDA, HRV, and accelerometer data from real-life environments.

### 2.2 Physiological Modalities and Feature Engineering

#### EEG

EEG offers high temporal resolution for detecting brain activity. Common features include:

* Band power (alpha, beta, theta, delta)
* Frontal alpha asymmetry (Davidson, 1992)
* Hjorth parameters, entropy, and fractal dimension
* Topographic maps used in CNNs (Zhao et al., 2020)

Transformer-based models (Li et al., 2023) and channel selection methods (Chanel et al., 2006) improve performance and interpretability.

#### EDA

EDA reflects sympathetic arousal. Key features:

* Skin conductance level (SCL)
* Phasic response metrics (amplitude, rise time, peak frequency)

EDA is effective in arousal detection, with applications in stress and emotion recognition (Greco et al., 2014; Posada-Quintero & Chon, 2020).

#### BVP and HRV

Heart rate and HRV features derived from BVP include:

* Time-domain (SDNN, RMSSD)
* Frequency-domain (LF, HF ratio)
* Nonlinear dynamics (Poincaré plots)

Emotional states modulate HRV patterns (Hernando et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2018), enabling classification of stress, fatigue, and joy.

#### Pupil Diameter

Pupil dilation correlates with cognitive load and emotional arousal. Key features:

* Baseline diameter
* Peak dilation and response latency

Research shows reliable associations with attention shifts and Aha! moments (Beatty, 1982; Zénon et al., 2019).

#### Accelerometry and Skin Temperature

Accelerometry helps detect artifacts or stress-related movement patterns. Combining ACC with EDA and HRV improves stress recognition (Gjoreski et al., 2016). Temperature fluctuations support classification of relaxation and anxiety.

### 2.3 AI Models for Emotion Recognition

#### Traditional Models

Classifiers such as SVM, Random Forest, and kNN perform well on engineered features. Ensemble methods like AdaBoost and XGBoost yield state-of-the-art results in low-dimensional multimodal data (Subramanian et al., 2018).

#### Deep Learning Approaches

Deep models enable feature learning from raw signals:

* CNNs on EEG spatial maps (Zheng et al., 2017)
* LSTMs for temporal dynamics in EDA, HRV (Mollahosseini et al., 2017)
* Hybrid CNN-LSTM and attention models for fusion (Yang et al., 2020)
* Transformers for cross-subject modeling (Li et al., 2023)

Explainable AI (XAI) methods are emerging to interpret deep model decisions (Yin et al., 2022).

## 3. Limitations

Despite promising progress, several challenges remain:

* Inter-subject variability: Emotion signals vary significantly across individuals, reducing model generalizability.
* Data scarcity: Most datasets are limited in size, participants, and conditions.
* Sensor noise and artifacts: Movement and environmental interference can corrupt signals.
* Black-box models: Deep learning models often lack transparency and interpretability.
* Real-time feasibility: Few models have been validated in real-time or real-world applications.

## 4. Future Research

Future work should address:

* Personalized and transfer learning models to mitigate individual differences
* Larger, multimodal datasets collected in ecologically valid settings
* Multitask and semi-supervised learning to leverage unlabeled data
* Explainable AI tools for model transparency and clinical trust
* Real-time, embedded systems for adaptive learning environments and neurofeedback tools

Integrating multimodal signals and hybrid architectures promises breakthroughs in understanding emotional dynamics during cognitive tasks.

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