

# Lowering Depression and Anxiety: A Quantitative Research on the Relationship of Six Common Behaviors on Human's Mental Health

Dang Quang Hoang, Karthikeyan Marikrishnan  
Yuqing Ren, Muhammad Hamza Raza, Hadi Sharifi

## I. INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Depression and anxiety are two widespread types of disorders that cause a tremendous consequence on human life. The World Health Organization (WHO) has ranked depression as the fourth leading cause of human disability. By 2020, it is expected to be the second leading cause [19]. Many researches touch the symptoms of anxiety and depression. As an example, depression causes health complications [32], cardiovascular diseases [14], in some cases increases the risk of cardiovascular diseases by 80% [25]. In case of anxiety, on average, up to 33.7% of the human populations experience it in their life time [12]. Anxiety not only affects the human body physically but also affects learning and reasoning capabilities [27][15]. Undeniably, these are two major risks for human life. This research analyzes data from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS)[4] for eleven years. It shows how these six behavior factors (physical activity, eating disorder, smoking, drinking alcohol, social media, and education/technology) are correlated to mental health (mainly depression and anxiety). It shows this relationship in an interactive visualization. It also analyzes the data and creates a model for predicting the possibility of having a mental health based on input on six factors. The research provides a more enhanced model by tuning and add/remove features. It proposes guidelines that could lead to reduction of depression and anxiety in the society.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### ◦ *The effects of physical activity?*

We have studied three research papers. The [30] paper provided a survey on the association between physical and therapeutic activity on depression and anxiety. The [21] paper analyzes multiple databases to identify factors causing depression as well as examine whether physical activity prevents depression. Both show that physical activity reduces and, in some cases, prevents depression and anxiety. The criticism on these papers are that they do not pay adequate attention to symptoms and approaches to deal with depression and anxiety as well as benefits of exercise training. Interestingly, the [31] found that there is no relation between vigorous physical activity and mental health or well-being. We believe the reason of this results is the vigorous nature of physical activity.

### ◦ *The effects of alcohol abuse and smoking?*

We picked four papers [18][29][11][24], all corroborated our

hypothesis that abusing alcohol and smoking leads to anxiety and depression. Two of the researches used the BRFSS data set. These are valuable research to us. Almost all of them did show a shortcoming that the effects on mental health goes beyond one to two variables. Interestingly, research [24] from 96 advised school to look into using smoke to help teenagers cope with depression. We are not going to use this paper. Smoking may temporarily alleviate depression but it leads to more mental and health symptoms.

### ◦ *The effects of social media?*

We have studied three research papers in this topic. They show a strong correlation between social media and depression and anxiety. The paper [20] emphasizes on the correlation between social media and depression while considering other environmental and factors such as family and financial. The second paper [17] analyzes social networking sites and the relation to depression in older adolescents. The participants used have small age difference which lowers the risk of many environmental factors skewing the results. The third paper [33] analyzes the use of social media and how it relates to depression, anxiety, sleep quality and self-esteem in adolescents.

### ◦ *The effects of technology/education?*

We have studied three papers [16][13][23]. All show positive correlation between factors such as high usage of smartphone, low education level and type 2 diabetes, and depression and anxiety. They have confirmed our hypothesis that smartphone/education/diabetes are among leading factors of depression disorder and anxiety. All three papers touch particular aspects of technology and we think we should follow the same trend. We may focus on a particular technology, such as cellphone, instead of "technology" in general.

### ◦ *The effects of eating disorder?*

The first of the three papers [26] shows that eating disorder leads to stress and anxiety in high school girls. The second paper [22] shows that women with eating disorder get highly stressed and the stress led to anxiety behaviors. They also concluded that traditional female role causes these symptoms. The third paper [28] shows genetically some patients are showing symptoms of eating disorder. This genetic issue leads to other issues such as depression and anxiety. The criticism we have on these papers that they only pick female population. For our research we will use these

papers nevertheless, we will make sure to use data for both male and female.

### III. HYPOTHESIS AND PROPOSED METHOD

In the survey of this research, we noticed that almost all researches on mental health, covers one to very few number of factors. This research picked the most dominant human behaviors (smoking, drinking, eating, physical activity, education/knowledge, and social media/internet) at the current day and age and finds a relationship between them and mental health (depression and anxiety). The novelty of this work is that it not only picked more behavioral factors but it also used the state of art machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL) algorithm to provide a statistical model for predicting the possibility of having or getting mental disease. The results are not only shown in a traditional statistical figures and charts but also in a delicate graphic visualization that is interactive. The interactive visualization summarizes the results of the analysis in a very friendly, easy to use graphical model.

*Our research hypothesis is that smoking, drinking, eating unhealthy, physical activity, education/knowledge, and social media/internet factors has direct effect on the mental health. They could deteriorate or enhance the mental health.*

#### ◦ The dataset BRFSS

"The Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) is the nation's premier system of health-related telephone surveys that collect state data about U.S. residents regarding their health-related risk behaviors, chronic health conditions, and use of preventive services"[4].

Our preliminary observation of the BRFSS[4] dataset is that, there are two sets of data. A set belongs to years 1995 to 2010 and another set from 2011 to 2017. BRFSS questionnaire changed (or modernized) after 2011. Questions were updated to contain more recent related topics such as internet usage.

BRFSS has core questions and optional ones. The core questions are asked by all state participating in the BRFSS program but the optional ones are not mandatory on states. Hence, some of the questions that were very interesting and important to our research, were not used in all states. This was one challenge to overcome in this research.

As an example, social media is not part of BRFSS questionnaire. We did find that the dataset after 2011 have data on internet usage. Internet usage can be used as a factor that implies social media usage. We end up tweaking and in some cases generalizing few factors. The factors affected by this approach are: Eating disorder to eating vegetable and fruits, social media usage to internet usage, and technology and education to education grade level.

#### ◦ The conducted research and the analytics

We have used 11 years of BRFSS data (3GB from 2007 to 2017). We obtain the data in SAS [10] XPT format and we converted it to SQLite [9] tables. This tremendously was

helpful in extracting the factors we needed for our research. SQL language was familiar to all the research conductors and many tools were there available to use to extract data from the BRFSS dataset.

We used Python and analytical python libraries such as Numpy [6] and Pandas [7] as a programming vehicle. We used Jupyter notebook as a tool to write our code to further clean the data, organize it, normalize it, and statistically visualize it.

At this stage, we showed the effect of each factor in each year on all the states and territories of US. We showed the data trend for each factor and compared it with the trend of the status of mental health. From these statistical analysis we drew fascinating conclusions. We added an interactive visualization in which users can pick a year, pick a factor, and visually sees the status of mental health in all states and territories of US. The interactive visualization calculates what proportion of the surveyed population has mental issues and what proportion have the selected behavior. Users can visually feel and see the effect of each factor on various states and territories. The link to the interactive visualization can be found in [1].

#### ◦ The advanced data modeling

We brought more innovation and novelty to the table by using ML and DL to provide analytical models to predict the possibility of getting (or having) mental health. Currently our accuracy at its best is 72% and we understand that it is not very high but for the short time of the life of this project, this is a great achievement. We need more time to optimize our model(s) and increase the accuracy. We consider that a future work for this research.<sup>1</sup>

At the start of our analysis journey, we used Random Forest, Gaussian NaiveBayes, Linear Discrimination, KNN, Quadratic Discriminant, AdaBoost, and Gradient Boosting to build the ML models. Based on Decision Tree from Random Forest algorithm, we sorted our features from most important to least important. We used this ranking to tune our algorithms and to make sure we avoid model overfitting. The best accuracy after hyper-parameters tuning for each model was 69% by linear Discrimination. We also tried deep learning (DL) models for classification with various layers of neurons. Yet we got 68% accuracy. Clearly, there was more optimization work needed to increase the accuracy of our models.

#### ◦ Enhancing ML models by tuning features

At this point, we decide to tune our features and add more features that are meaningful to our analysis. Some examples of added features are: sex (male or female), general health status, employment, income, and more. We also dropped features that are part of this research but were not available in all years such as internet usage or eating vegetables and fruits. Details on these feature and the logic behind our pick

<sup>1</sup>Our experience in big corporation show that, some models takes 5 to 7 weeks of full time work to get to an accuracy of 80%.

and drop features can be seen in the Fig 6. Our accuracy increased to 72% using Random Forest and Gradient Boosting algorithms. We got similar results with our deep learning model.

#### ◦ Distribution of work

All these tasks are distributed among all the researchers of this paper. Each of us owned a factor, extract it and cleaned for the analysis. The statistical analysis and ML model build was done by each member and results reported and generated separately. Different members took some tasks to consolidate the research work. Tasks such as conversion to SQLite, consolidating all visualization into one, optimizing the ML model(s), and writing the reports and proof writing them. For more details on how tasks were distributed, please refer to 8.

### IV. EVALUATION

After cleaning up the data and consolidating it into one place (SQLite database), we evaluated our hypothesis based on the data we collected. With respect to smoking and drinking alcohol, as can be seen from the Figure 1, cross all the years, proportion of smokers was low (less than 20%) and the proportion of drinkers was more than 50%. The interesting part is that they seemed to be in lockstep with mental issues. All three trending to reduce but with spike in drinking and almost seen in smoking, the mental health got worsen. This support our hypothesis and the hypothesis of previous researches that drinking and smoking has direct effect on mental health.

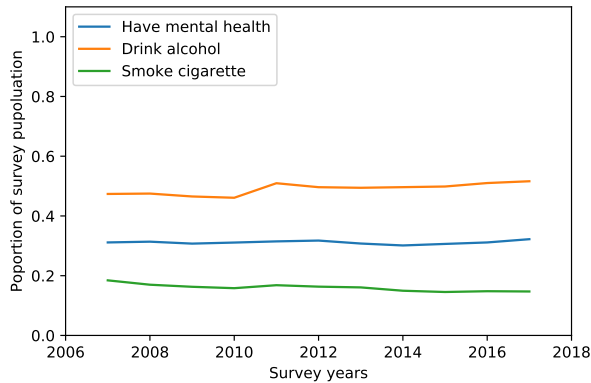


Fig. 1: Smoking and drinking vs. mental issues.

With respect to physical activity in Figure 2, we compared NOT working out and having mental issues. The results are stunning. proportion of people from sample population is almost equal to proportion of those do not have physical activity. In other words, low physical activity can be directly affecting the mental health and deteriorating it.

When it comes to fruit and vegetables, the Figure 3 the data shows that vegetable and fruit consumption is high from 2007 to 2017. There is a very small trend of increasing and

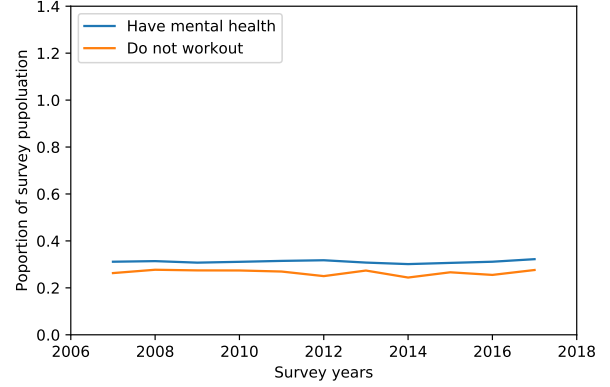


Fig. 2: Physical activity vs. mental issues.

we see similar such trend but in decreasing the mental issues. Though the data does not show dramatic effect but one cannot help but notice that consuming fruit and vegetables (healthy food) has a slight effect on reducing mental health.

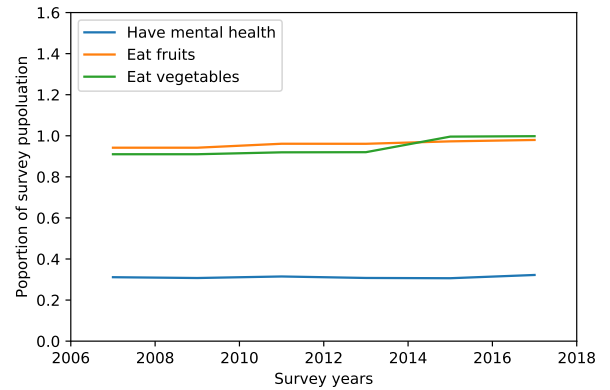


Fig. 3: Eating veggies and fruits vs. mental issues.

Using technology (in our case internet) Fig 4, on the other hand, shows that increase of usage has increase in mental issues. The data about internet was available from 2013 and the proportion of sampled population using internet above 70% and increasing. We notice that in that period of time (2013-2017), mental issues are increasing.

Lastly, Fig 5 shows that people of the sampled population were almost 90% had highschool or above degree. And the number of educators were mildly increasing. We notice that mental issues was decreasing toward last few years and it starts to slightly increase. This is very interesting because in our mind, the more you know the better mental health you may have. Nevertheless, this result does not show it that way.

We think that education and knowledge would help prevent mental issues but other factors that comes with it, such as using internet, will offset the good effect of education on mental health and lead to mild increase in the mental issues.

All above mentioned analysis show the results of six

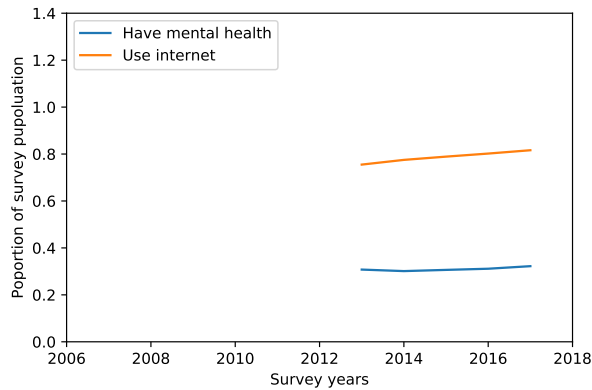


Fig. 4: Using internet vs. mental issues.

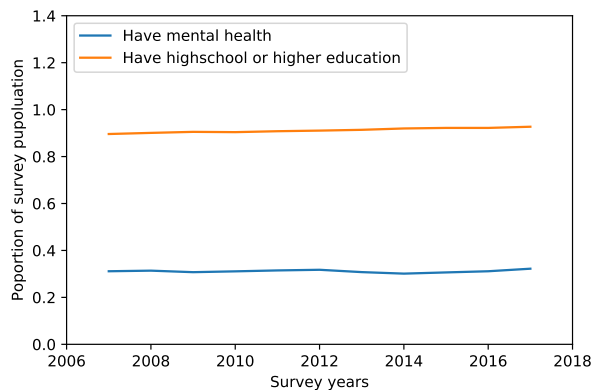


Fig. 5: Education vs. mental issues.

factors on US as a whole. We wanted to show the effect more visually and in more details for each state. Therefore, we grouped the data based on year, state, and behavior factor in a website available here [3]. The visualization consist of map of united states colored based on the proportion of reported mental health. The higher the mental issue the darker the color would show. This an interactive visualization in which user can select a factor, pick a year, and by pointing to each state, it provide details of about the that state such as percentage of mental issues and the selected factor reported for that state. Figure 7 shows one page of this this visualization.

This visualization provides a summary of the effects of the six factors on each state from year 2007 to 2017. By selecting a year, the map extracts data from that year and shows proportion of mental health issues in all states using the visual choropleth map. Users can visually notice which states reported more mental health issues and by hovering the mouse over that state, get the status of picked factor in form of pop up. The visualization is written in D3 [2] and it is portable across all operating systems. The visualization can be publicly reached online [1].

As part of this research, we examined multiple machine

learning models to create a predictive model that by feeding the six factors, it predicts the possibility of getting mental health. We evaluated six ML models, and examined multiple DL model layer setups. The accuracy of our model(s) were very low at the beginning. Using hyper-parameters option from scikit-learn [8] package, we managed to increase the accuracy to 69%. We tried to use DL models for classifications using Keras [5] DL programming language. Though DL techniques are used in image recognition, we build a DL classification model and after hours of trainings and model setup modification, we yet got 68%.

To enhance our model, we took our research one step up and re-evaluated features we were using for our model. We dropped some features and added features. We managed to get the accuracy of our model to 72%. At the end, Random Forest classifier performed the best for our analysis. Fig 6 shows the features used for our optimized model. We are not please with this accuracy but not disappointed either. We are planning to put more time and effort as a follow up to this research to increase the accuracy to above 90%.

## V. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The research showed that behavioral habits has effect on mental health particularly on depression and anxiety. It showed a direct relationship between mental health and the six habit factors. The six factors are: smoking, drinking, physical activity, eating disorder (in form of not eating healthy at all), social media (internet), and education.

The research conducted set of analytics to extract the data from BRFSS dataset from 2007 to 2017. The analytics activities included, data conversion, cleaning, normalization, aggregation, and applying machine and deep learning algorithms. The best accuracy achieved was 69% with the six features of the research and got enhanced to 72% after tuning the model by adding new features and removing some features. The accuracy is not breathtaking but, at this stage of research, is a good starter. The analytics model is based on Random Forest method for classification and prediction.

The research also produced an interactive visualization that showed the effects of the six factors on mental health in the form of choropleth map in which user can visually interact with the map and get information on the proportion of BRFSS takers who has mental health and one of the six factors for year 2007 to 2017.



Figure 7: Six factors vs. mental health for all states.

## Choropleth Map of Mental Health Sample Population Data 2017

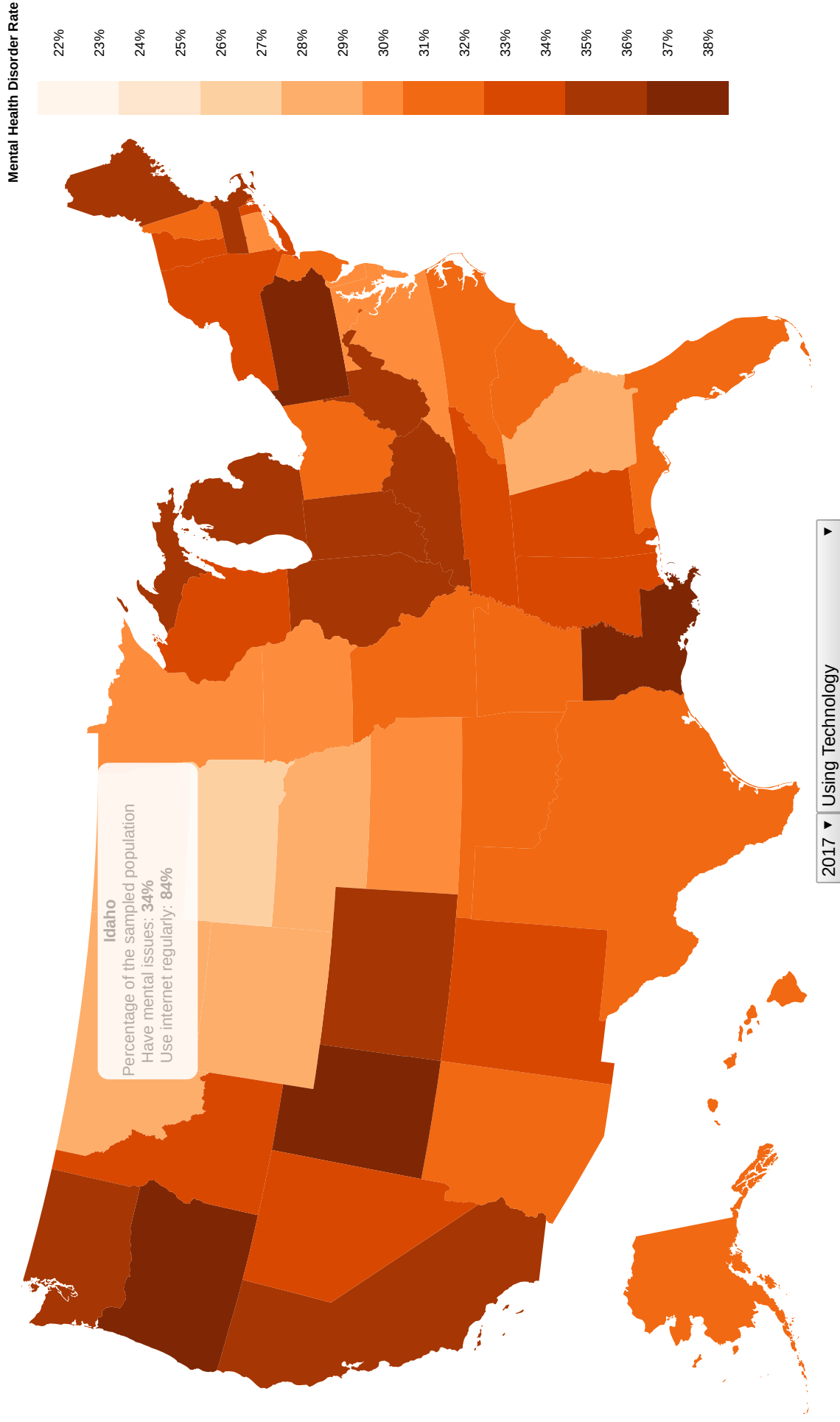
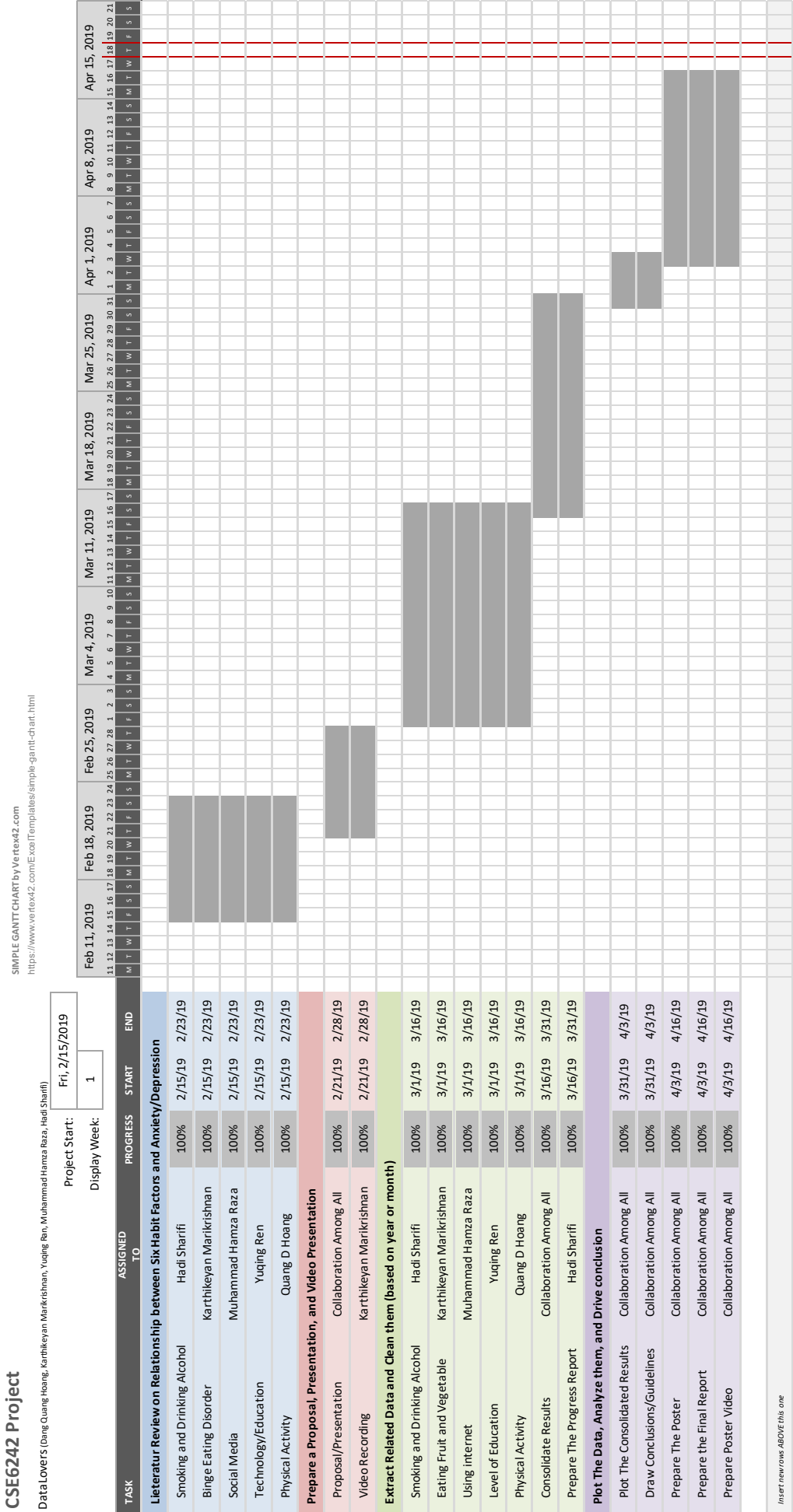


Figure 8: The schedule of the team for the research.



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## VI. APPENDIX

There are 2000 words and 2 floats (tables, figures, etc.) in the LaT...

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