

Detecting Mental Health Issues in Students Using Limited ECG Data from Portable Devices

Nhat Tan Le^{1,2}, Huynh Quoc Hung Man^{1,2}, Phi Phung Pham^{1,2}, Thi Hoang Thuy Le^{1,2}, Vu Truong Nguyen^{1,2}, Tan Thi Pham^{1,2,*}



Use your smartphone to scan this QR code and download this article

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Mental health issues are a growing concern among university students and significantly affect their academic performance and quality of life. Recognizing stress in students under academic pressure is crucial for improving their well-being. This study aims to identify stress patterns through heart activity, which is closely correlated with mental health issues.

Methods: An experiment was designed involving 49 participants during examination time and used low-cost portable devices based on ECG sensors. The high quality of the recorded data was confirmed by good average QRS complex correlation metrics. To enhance the dataset and address the problem of imbalanced data, a generative adversarial network (GAN) was employed to generate synthetic ECG data in two scenarios: GAN 1, which synthesized the minority class only, and GAN 2, which synthesized both classes. A comprehensive set of heart rate variability (HRV) indices from the time, frequency, and nonlinear domains was extracted for analysis. Finally, two ensemble learning models were utilized to perform stress recognition based on the HRV feature set.

Results: Through cross-validation and random-split validation, our findings demonstrated significant improvements in model performance with the addition of synthetic data. Specifically, the use of the GAN 1 data improved the recall, effectively capturing more stress instances, whereas the use of the GAN 2 data enhanced the precision, ensuring accurate stress identification. The random forest model showed exceptional capability in managing class imbalance, further validating the effectiveness of our approach. Additionally, the use of a natural stressor, such as exam time, confirmed the practical applicability of our models.

Conclusion: These results underscore the potential of dataset enrichment in machine learning, particularly in health-related applications, and provide a robust foundation for future research and real-world validation of the benefits of synthetic data in stress recognition tasks.

Key words: Stress detection, electrocardiogram, heart rate variability, data synthesis, machine learning

¹Department of Biomedical Engineering, Faculty of Applied Science, Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (HCMUT), 268 Ly Thuong Kiet Street, District 10, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

²Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, Linh Trung Ward, Thu Duc City, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Correspondence

Tan Thi Pham, Department of Biomedical Engineering, Faculty of Applied Science, Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (HCMUT), 268 Ly Thuong Kiet Street, District 10, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, Linh Trung Ward, Thu Duc City, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Email: ptthi@hcmut.edu.vn

History

- Received: 2024-08-13
- Revised: 2024-09-13
- Accepted: 2024-09-23
- Published Online: 2024-12-31

DOI :



1 INTRODUCTION

Mental health and well-being are critical issues today, especially for university students, who face considerable pressures and need career development for socioeconomic advancement. Mental health and well-being directly affect the ability to think, learn, handle stress, make decisions, and adapt to the surrounding environment. Research conducted by Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM), on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' mental health provides clear evidence of this. Among the more than 37,150 students surveyed, 56.8% reported experiencing a lack of concentration or interest. These findings indicate that the pandemic has profoundly affected not only the physical health but also the psychological and mental well-being of students¹. Recognizing stress early is crucial, as stress and anxiety significantly impact individuals, which is the primary focus of this research.

An ECG (electrocardiogram) measures and records the voltage changes produced by the electrical activity of the heart during contraction and rest. HRV (heart rate variability) analysis based on ECG data measures the variation in time intervals between consecutive heartbeats². This is an important indicator of autonomic nervous system (ANS) function and overall cardiovascular health. HRV is a prominent characteristic of interdependent regulatory systems, which operate on different timescales to help us adapt to environmental and psychological challenges. HRV reflects the balanced regulation of the autonomic nervous system, blood pressure, gas exchange, gut, heart, and vascular tone, referring to the diameter of blood vessels that regulate blood pressure and potentially facial muscles³. High HRV generally signifies good autonomic flexibility and efficient recovery, whereas low HRV may indicate stress, fatigue, or potential health concerns. However, the HRV varies signifi-

Cite this article : Le N T, Man H Q H, Pham P P, Le T H T, Nguyen V T, Pham T T. **Detecting Mental Health Issues in Students Using Limited ECG Data from Portable Devices.** *Sci. Tech. Dev. J.* 2025; 27(4):1-14.

Copyright

© VNUHCM Press. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.



39 cantly across individuals and can also be influenced
 40 by factors such as age, fitness level, and circadian
 41 rhythm. HRV analysis is performed through calcu-
 42 lations in time-domain, frequency-domain, and non-
 43 linear methods, depending on the duration of the
 44 measurement: typically from 12–24 hours, short-
 45 term (5 minutes), and ultrashort-term (<5 minutes)⁴.
 46 Short-term and ultrashort-term analyses play crucial
 47 roles in quick daily check-ups, although they face
 48 challenges because of the limited data capture time.
 49 This study optimizes the characteristics of these do-
 50 mains for short-term HRV analysis applications.

51 The advancement of data-driven tools, including ma-
 52 chine learning and deep learning, has revolutionized
 53 biometric data analysis for stress recognition by en-
 54 abling powerful feature extraction and deep insights
 55 through time- and frequency-domain analyses that
 56 capture waveform variance and heart activity pat-
 57 terns. For example, Sara et al.⁵ achieved accuracies of
 58 100%, 97.6%, and 96.2% in classifying stress levels via
 59 support vector machine (SVM) models by leveraging
 60 features extracted from both the time and frequency
 61 domains. On the other hand, deep learning, although
 62 lacking an initial hand-crafted feature extraction pro-
 63 cess, also yields significant performance in stress clas-
 64 sification. Through the robust computational capa-
 65 bilities of hidden convolutional layers, deep learning
 66 models have been optimized and tailored for ECG
 67 data analysis. For example, Deep ECGNet⁶ opti-
 68 mized the convolution filter length and pooling length
 69 specifically to the ECG waveform, achieving an accu-
 70 racy of 87.39%. However, deep learning models are
 71 often considered black boxes, as they do not provide
 72 explicit insights into the correlation between specific
 73 heart activities and stress.

74 Capitalizing on informative HRV features, numer-
 75 ous studies have employed machine learning mod-
 76 els as data-driven techniques to achieve notable per-
 77 formance in stress recognition tasks. For exam-
 78 ple, Munla et al.⁷ utilized a support vector machine
 79 (SVM) model with a radial basis function trained
 80 on features from the time, frequency, and nonlin-
 81 ear domains. When deployed during driving op-
 82 erations, this model achieved an accuracy of 83%.
 83 In another study, ultrashort-term HRV analysis was
 84 performed during a stress recognition test involv-
 85 ing mathematical tasks and horror movies as stres-
 86 sors, yielding an accuracy of approximately 90.5%⁸.
 87 Consequently, HRV has emerged as a powerful tech-
 88 nique for ECG data analysis, particularly in the con-
 89 text of stress recognition. Isibor et al. utilized mini-
 90 mum redundancy and maximum relevance (mRMR)
 91 to select the most relevant features from a large set

of HRV indices across time, frequency, and non- 92
 linear domains⁹. Their results showed remarkable 93
 performance when sets of 10 and 15 features were 94
 used for stress recognition applications. Furthermore, 95
 Mariam et al. reported high performance in stress 96
 recognition via time-domain features¹⁰. However, 97
 the limited amount of data remains a significant chal- 98
 lenge for model development. Additionally, the con- 99
 text of stressors in the field differs significantly from 100
 those typically used in laboratory settings. In this 101
 study, we designed an experiment to collect and ana- 102
 lyze real-world data. 103

Limited data are a critical challenge for data analy- 104
 sis, particularly in field data. Several studies have 105
 employed data augmentation techniques to enhance 106
 data insights. For example, ECG data can be aug- 107
 mented through basic transformations in the time do- 108
 main. Garrett et al.¹¹ proposed time inversion, result- 109
 ing in a 5% improvement in model accuracy. Naoki 110
 et al.¹² introduced RandECG, augmenting ECG data 111
 by adding random noise, which improved accuracy 112
 by up to 3.51%. Advanced techniques, such as the 113
 use of generative adversarial networks (GANs), have 114
 shown promising performance in producing diverse 115
 and realistic synthetic ECG data¹³. Han Sun et al.¹⁴ 116
 proposed a GAN-based ECG abnormal signal gener- 117
 ator, achieving an 11% improvement in accuracy 118
 with high-quality synthetic data. Building on these 119
 approaches, we propose a data augmentation pipeline 120
 and a GAN architecture to improve the limited dataset 121
 collected from the field. 122

In this study, our objectives are as follows: 123

- Field ECG data collection was implemented to 124
 facilitate stress recognition. The experiment fo- 125
 cuses on university students experiencing the 126
 natural stressor of final exams at the end of the 127
 semester. 128
- Extracting a wide range of HRV indices from 129
 time, frequency, and nonlinear domains facili- 130
 tates comprehensive and detailed analysis. 131
- ECG data generation is performed via a gener- 132
 ative adversarial network to enrich the current 133
 limited-amount dataset. 134
- Using ensemble learning models to perform 135
 stress recognition tasks on the basis of a set of 136
 HRV indices, the efficacy of these models in 137
 identifying stress patterns accurately can be as- 138
 sessed. 139

140 MATERIALS & METHODS

141 ECG Data Gathering

142 Participants

143 For the purposes of this investigation, data collection
144 was undertaken at the Ho Chi Minh City University
145 of Technology, involving a cohort of 49 students (Fig-
146 ure 1). These participants presented with an average
147 age of 21.31 years (SD = 1.108). The sex distribution
148 within this group included 32 males (65.31%) and 17
149 females (34.69%), as detailed in Table 1. Before their
150 involvement in the study, all volunteers completed
151 a health survey, which solicited information on any
152 cardiac conditions or heart-related issues. According
153 to the survey findings, all individuals demonstrated
154 normal cognitive functionality and were thoroughly
155 briefed on the study's aims, methodologies, and over-
156 all importance. Following a comprehensive under-
157 standing of the experiment's scope, the participants
158 provided informed consent to participate in the nec-
159 essary status assessment tests.

160 This study aims to examine the stress levels experi-
161 enced by students during critical periods of the aca-
162 demic semester. Specifically, the research focuses on
163 the latter half of the semester, a time characterized by
164 heightened stress due to impending exams and aca-
165 demic evaluations. In other words, this investigation
166 identifies the natural stressors associated with the ap-
167 proach of testing periods as a significant factor con-
168 tributing to the overall stress experienced by students
169 during these times.

170 To evaluate the mental health status of the par-
171 ticipants, the Vietnamese adaptation of the Patient
172 Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) was administered,
173 facilitating the assessment of depression levels¹⁵. The
174 specifics of the questionnaire, including the PHQ-9
175 items for the two administered surveys (detailed in
176 Appendix 1). This survey outlines the scoring cate-
177 gories used to interpret the PHQ-9 results: nonmin-
178 imal, mild, moderate, moderately severe, and severe.
179 For the purpose of this research, scores categorized as
180 nonminimal and mild are interpreted as indicative of
181 a nondepressive state, whereas scores falling within
182 the moderate, moderately severe, and severe ranges
183 are considered reflective of a depressive state.

184 ECG data recording procedure

185 In this study, we aim to utilize low-cost portable ECG
186 systems for data gathering and analysis. The ECG de-
187 vice was developed using an electrocardiogram sen-
188 sor (DFRobot SEN0213) and an STM32F103C6 mi-
189 crocontroller, with data transfer facilitated by a WiFi

module (ESP8266) and powered by a lithium battery 190
with an integrated charging module. The device uses 191
electrodes that adhere to the patient's skin to acquire 192
ECG signals. All the components are integrated into 193
a cohesive unit for ECG signal acquisition (see Fig- 194
ure 2). Upon initiation, the device begins a 15-minute 195
countdown, corresponding to the duration of each 196
volunteer's activity for the measurements. 197

The integrity of the recorded data was evaluated post- 198
collection via the average QRS technique¹⁶. This ap- 199
proach assesses the consistency of ECG data record- 200
ings by analyzing the congruence between each QRS 201
complex and the average QRS complex present within 202
the dataset, effectively quantifying the average corre- 203
lation coefficient of the QRS complexes. This metric 204
was employed to ascertain the quality of the data col- 205
lected by the newly developed portable ECG device. 206
As described, each participant underwent a 15- 207
minute data recording procedure. Initially, volun- 208
teers completed a PHQ-9 survey to assess their mental 209
health status. The volunteers subsequently engaged in 210
a focused test session lasting 15 minutes, which was 211
conducted under white light illumination (Figure 3). 212
A lead-1 ECG with 3 electrodes was implemented in 213
the experiment. To standardize participant activity, a 214
simple concentration test was administered through- 215
out the experiment, aimed at generalizing recording 216
conditions and minimizing variations among partic- 217
ipants. The test primarily involved tasks related to 218
counting and pattern identification (see sample in Ap- 219
pendix 2). The entire testing process, including in- 220
structions and predata gathering surveys, was com- 221
pleted within a 20-minute timeframe. The data were 222
recorded via a measuring device at a sampling rate of 223
100 Hz. 224

225 Data Preprocessing and Rpeak Detection

In this study, preprocessing steps were performed to 226
alleviate baseline wandering and noise in the ECG 227
signal. This involved employing a high-pass Butter- 228
worth filter with a cutoff frequency of 0.5 Hz and a 229
fifth order. The application of this filter effectively 230
reduces the presence of noisy low-frequency compo- 231
nents, thereby enhancing the clarity of the underly- 232
ing cardiac activity in the ECG waveform. Conse- 233
quently, this facilitates the QRS detection process and 234
enhances the subsequent analysis and interpretation. 235
Additionally, to combat noise stemming from electri- 236
cal sources, powerline filtering at a frequency of 50 Hz 237
was also implemented. 238

Before HRV features were extracted, the RR interval 239
signal was obtained through the QRS complex and 240

Table 1: Demographic information of the participants

Variables	Groups	Quantities
Total number of students participating in the experiment: 49		
Age range: 18 - 24		
Gender	Male	32 (65.31%)
	Female	17 (34.69%)
Year	First-year students	1 (2.04%)
	Second-year students	9 (18.37%)
	Third-year students	18 (36.73%)
	Fourth-year students over	21 (42.86%)

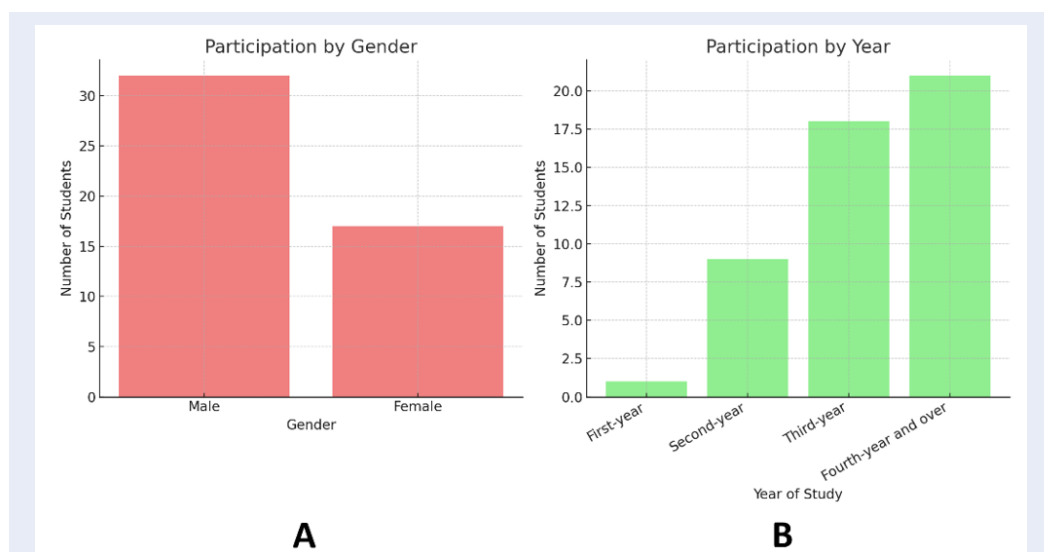


Figure 1: Participants by gender (A) and year of study (B)

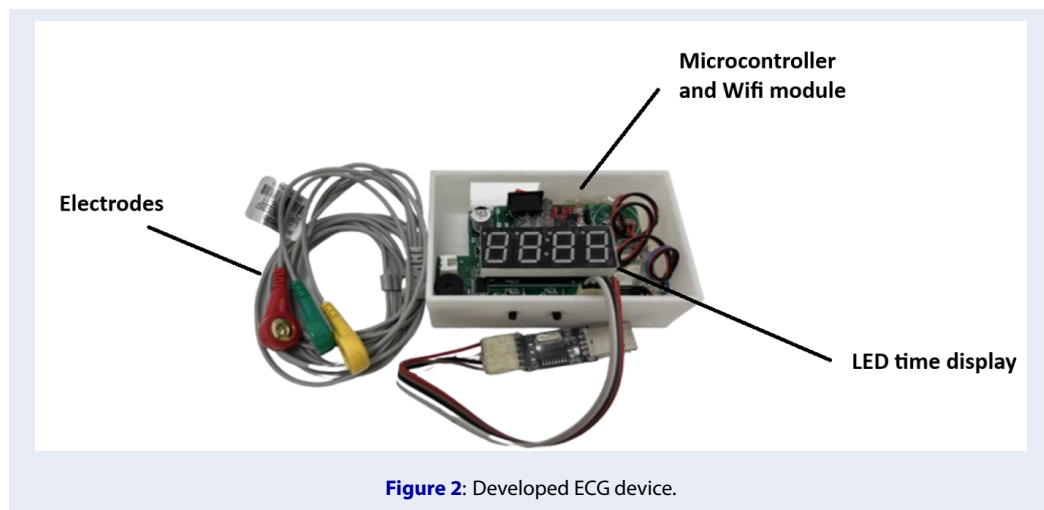


Figure 2: Developed ECG device.



Figure 3: Volunteers perform tests during the data gathering experiment

241 R-peak detection methods. Initially, QRS complexes
 242 were identified on the basis of the steepness of the ab-
 243 solute gradient of the ECG signal¹⁷. Subsequently, R-
 244 peaks were identified as the local maxima within each
 245 QRS complex. The accurate detection of R peaks is
 246 crucial, as they represent ventricular depolarization,
 247 indicating the transition of the ventricles from the an-
 248 ode state to the cathode state. Precise R-peak detec-
 249 tion is fundamental for ensuring the reliability of sub-
 250 sequent analysis procedures.

251 **ECG Data Synthesis**

252 The proposed pipeline, which uses a generative adver-
 253 sarial model to enrich the real dataset, is illustrated in
 254 Figure 4. Synthetic data were generated by the GAN
 255 model and combined with real data in three differ-
 256 ent scenarios (Section 2.2b). After the HRV indices
 257 were extracted, two ensemble learning models were
 258 employed to perform stress classification (Sections 2.3
 259 and 2.4).

260 **Generative adversarial network model**

261 A dedicated synthesis model was developed on the
 262 basis of the recording duration (see Figure 5). This
 263 model is a one-dimensional convolutional neural net-

work inspired by previous work¹⁸. The generative
 264 model aims to generate a 15-minute ECG record from
 265 random noise. The initial noise from the input layer is
 266 flattened and reshaped. Subsequently, three deconv-
 267 olutional layers, along with leaky ReLU activation func-
 268 tions and batch normalization, are utilized to upsam-
 269 ple the signal gradually. Finally, a 15-minute ECG
 270 recording is obtained.
 271

To improve the quality of the synthesized data, a dis-
 272 criminative model with a strong ability to distinguish
 273 between real and fake data is needed. The inception
 274 model was employed to extract features from the ECG
 275 sequence effectively. The feature map was then con-
 276 catenated and fed to a global average pooling layer,
 277 which calculates the feature map average, unlike the
 278 traditional flattening method. Finally, a dense layer
 279 combines the information and provides the results.
 280

281 **Data Generation**

To generate the dataset from various states, the cate-
 282 gORIZED stress and nonstress data were generated sep-
 283 arately. The amount of synthesized data was deter-
 284 mined in three scenarios:
 285

- Without the GAN, only real data were used, with
 286 39 nonstress and 10 stress subjects.
 287

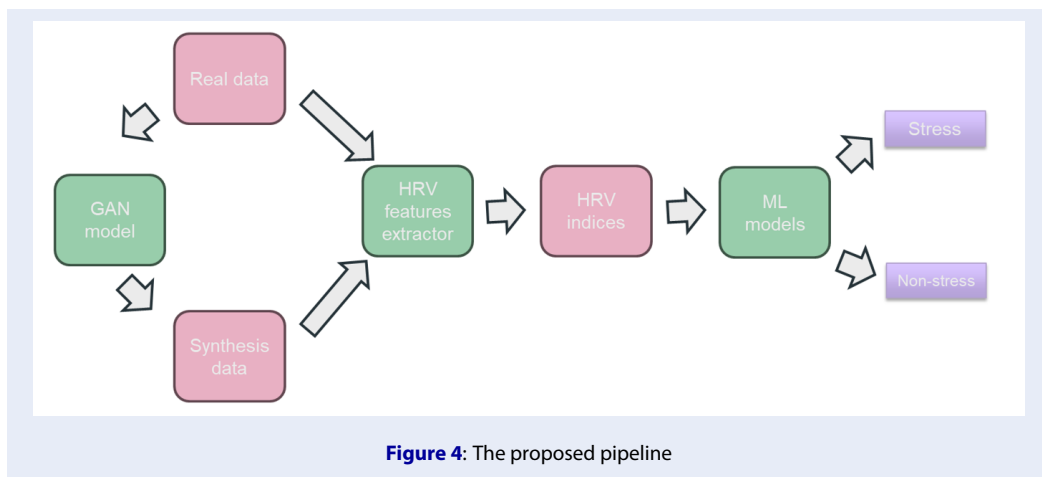


Figure 4: The proposed pipeline

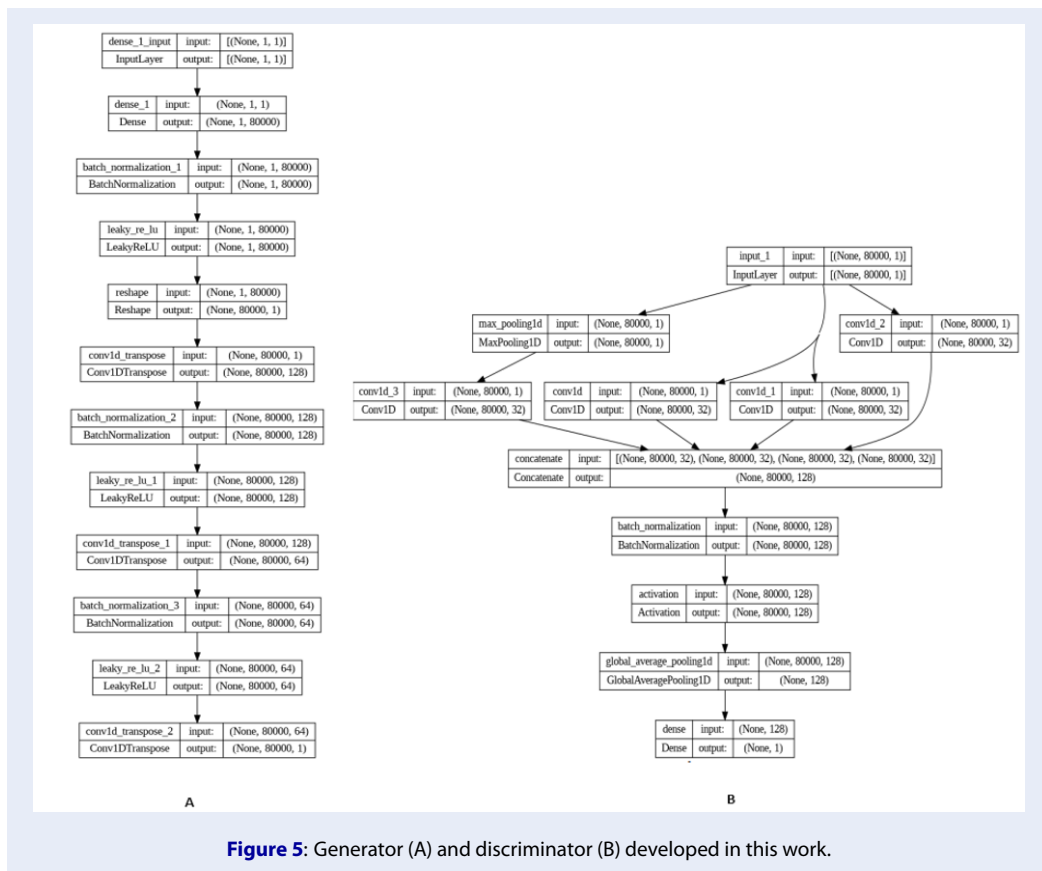


Figure 5: Generator (A) and discriminator (B) developed in this work.

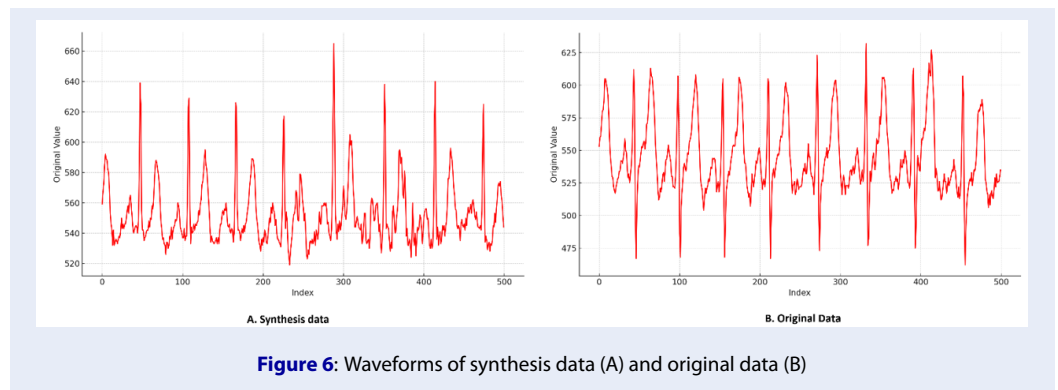


Figure 6: Waveforms of synthesis data (A) and original data (B)

- 288 • GAN 1: Data are generated for the minority
289 class (stress) only to ensure that the number of
290 minority classes is equal to that of the majority
291 class. A total of 29 ECG recordings categorized
292 as stress were generated.
- 293 • GAN 2: The amount of synthesized data was
294 equal for both stress states, and the total amount
295 of synthesis data was equal to the real data (25
296 stress and 24 nonstress individuals).

297 HRV feature extraction

298 For short-term heart rate variability (HRV) analysis,
299 a 5-minute window length was used to segment the
300 recorded data. A comprehensive set of HRV fea-
301 tures was subsequently extracted via the Neurokit
302 DE2 module tool¹⁹. A total of 90 features were de-
303 rived from three domains, namely, the time domain,
304 frequency domain, and nonlinear analysis, facilitating
305 thorough analysis (refer to Appendix 3).

306 Classification Model

307 Machine Learning Model

308 In this study, two ensemble learning models were em-
309 ployed for an

- 310 • The first model utilized was random forest (RF),
311 a bagging model constructed from multiple deci-
312 sion trees for classification tasks. Each deci-
313 sion tree in the ensemble operates independ-
314 ently, employing different sets of features to re-
315 duce the correlation among them. Ultimately,
316 the ensemble makes decisions through voting,
317 with the class receiving the most votes becoming
318 the final prediction of the random forest model.
- 319 • The second model employed was XGB (eX-
320 treme Gradient Boosting), a boosting ensemble
321 learning algorithm comprising several learn-
322 ers. In this method, each new learner is trained

323 to rectify the errors made by its predecessors,
324 thereby progressively improving the overall per-
325 formance. To prevent overfitting, regularization
326 terms such as Lasso and Ridge are incorporated
327 into the learning process. This ensures that the
328 model generalizes well to unseen data beyond
329 the training set.

330 Finally, the grid-search algorithm was implemented
331 to optimize the parameters of each model.

332 Evaluation

333 To assess the stress recognition ability of the HRV-
334 based models and the impact of an enriched dataset,
335 cross-validation and random split validation were
336 performed. Specifically, 4-fold cross-validation was
337 conducted to evaluate the classification performance
338 and generalizability across the three scenarios. For
339 random-split validation, 30% of the real data were
340 used as test data, whereas the remaining 70% served
341 as the training set. This approach was used to con-
342 firm whether the synthetic data improve the classifi-
343 cation accuracy and stimulate real-world application.
344 To quantitatively assess the performance of the clas-
345 sification models, metrics such as accuracy and the
346 weighted average F1 score were utilized. These mea-
347 sures provide insights into the overall effectiveness of
348 the models in classifying mental health issues.

349 RESULTS

350 Data Quality Assessment

351 The quality of the recorded ECG data is notably high,
352 which is attributed to a robust quality index. The
353 average QRS correlation is 0.92 (SD=0.09), which
354 is comparable to findings in prior studies on ECG
355 data quality assessment. For example, in the work
356 of Daluwatte²⁰, a similar average QRS correlation
357 of approximately 0.93 was observed. Moreover, the
358 cleaned data showed a greater correlation across the

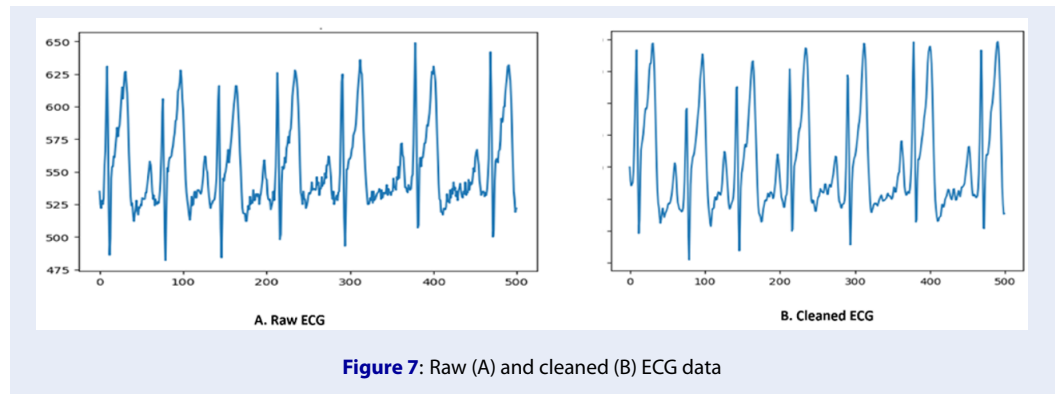


Figure 7: Raw (A) and cleaned (B) ECG data

359 QRS complex and fewer noise spikes, as illustrated in
360 Figure 4.

361 **Classification Results**

362 In the 4-fold cross-validation results, the enriched
363 dataset presents a significant improvement in the
364 stress recognition task (see Table 2). For real
365 data, both the random forest and XGBoost models
366 achieved accuracies of 0.78. However, the random
367 forest model had a higher weighted F1 score than XG-
368 Boost did. In the GAN 1 scenario, the random forest
369 model yielded a significant improvement, with an accu-
370 racy of 0.90 and a weighted F1 score of 0.84. XG-
371 Boost also improved, with an accuracy of 0.84 and a
372 weighted F1 score of 0.79. For the GAN 2 scenario,
373 the random forest model had an accuracy of 0.86 and
374 a weighted F1 score of 0.84. The accuracy of XGBoost
375 remained at 0.78, but its weighted F1 score increased
376 to 0.81. These results suggest that the use of GAN-
377 generated data (GAN 1 and GAN 2) can enhance the
378 performance of classification models, particularly the
379 random forest model. The improved weighted F1-
380 scores indicate a better balance between precision and
381 recall in these scenarios.

382 In the random-split validation, the combination of
383 real and synthetic data shows considerable classifica-
384 tion performance. The models trained on real data
385 achieved an accuracy and weighted F1 score of 0.90,
386 indicating a high level of overall performance. The
387 precision and recall for the stress class were both 0.75,
388 demonstrating a balanced ability to correctly iden-
389 tify both positive and negative instances of stress.
390 This suggests that the model is effective in recog-
391 nizing stress when trained on real data, providing a
392 strong baseline for comparison. In the first scenario
393 of data synthesis (GAN 1), the model’s accuracy and
394 weighted F1 score decreased to 0.80, and the preci-
395 sion for the stress class decreased to 0.70. However,
396 the recall improved to 0.88. This finding indicates that

while the model trained on the GAN 1 data is less pre- 397
398 cise in identifying stress instances, it is better at cap-
399 turing most of the stress cases (higher recall). For the
400 GAN 2 scenario, the model’s accuracy and weighted
401 F1 score returned to 0.90, similar to the real data sce-
402 nario. The precision for the stress class significantly
403 improved to 1.00, indicating perfect precision—every
404 instance identified as stress was truly a stress instance.
405 However, the recall decreased to 0.75, meaning that
406 the model’s ability to identify all stress instances was
407 similar to that of the real data scenario.

408 In summary, the results from both cross-validation
409 and random-split validation indicate that the use
410 of GAN-generated data can enhance model perfor-
411 mance, particularly for the random forest model. The
412 GAN 1 data improve the recall, whereas the GAN 2
413 data significantly increase the precision, demonstrat-
414 ing the potential of synthetic data to address differ-
415 ent aspects of model performance in stress recogni-
416 tion tasks.

417 **DISCUSSION**

418 This work has demonstrated the robust capability of
419 HRV analysis on ECG data for stress recognition
420 in real-world applications. The high accuracy obser-
421 ved in the real data scenario across both the cross-
422 validation and random-split validation pipelines, par-
423 ticularly when testing on real ECG data, under-
424 scores the strong correlation between HRV indices
425 and stress. Furthermore, our study utilized a natu-
426 ral stressor, exam time, which enhances the practi-
427 cal applicability of machine learning models. From
428 a model performance perspective, the random fore-
429 est classifier not only provided comparable classifi-
430 cation results but also exhibited superior handling of
431 class imbalance, as evidenced by its higher weighted
432 F1 score. However, further work could be performed
433 at various times in a semester.

Table 2: Cross-validation results of 3 scenarios on 2 machine learning models.

Scenario	Model	Accuracy	Weighted F1-score
Real data	Random Forest	0.78	0.44
	XGB	0.78	0.34
GAN 1	Random Forest	0.90	0.84
	XGB	0.84	0.79
GAN 2	Random Forest	0.86	0.84
	XGB	0.78	0.81

Table 3: Random-split validation results of 3 scenarios on the random forest model.

Scenario	Accuracy	Weighted F1-score	Precision on stress class	Recall on stress class
Real data	0.90	0.90	0.75	0.75
GAN 1	0.80	0.80	0.70	0.88
GAN 2	0.90	0.90	1.00	0.75

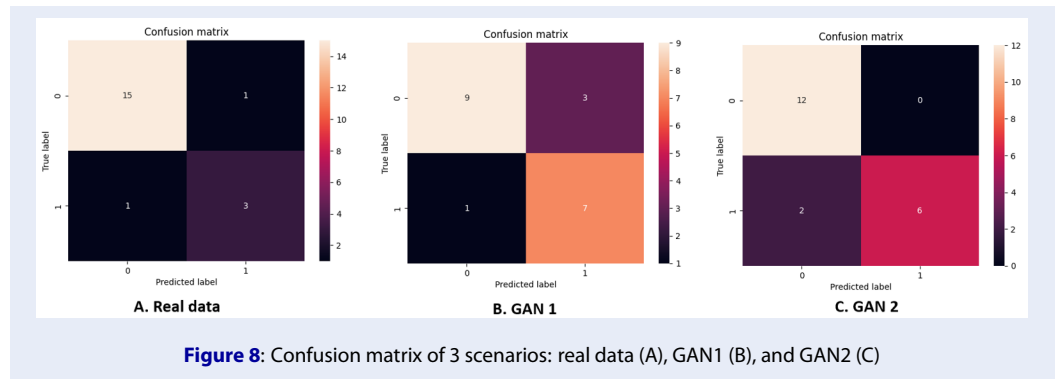


Figure 8: Confusion matrix of 3 scenarios: real data (A), GAN1 (B), and GAN2 (C)

434 Enriching the ECG dataset via generative adversarial networks (GANs) can significantly improve stress
 435 classification performance, particularly in scenarios with limited data. The results demonstrate enhanced
 436 evaluation metrics for the stress class. For example, in cross-validation, the weighted F1-scores for
 437 the two GAN scenarios outperformed those obtained using only real data. This improvement indicates a
 438 better balance in recognizing both stress and non-stress instances, particularly benefiting the minority
 439 class (the stress class). Moreover, the developed GAN model generated high-quality synthetic data. Adding
 440 these good synthetic data leads to better generalization and representation, which in turn enhances the
 441 learning efficiency of machine learning models, especially ensemble learning methods. Additionally, the
 442 class imbalance issue is mitigated, reducing bias in the decision-making process. In conclusion, the use
 443 of GAN-generated data not only improves the perfor-

453 mance metrics but also ensures a more balanced and effective classification of stress, demonstrating the
 454 potential of GANs in enriching datasets for more robust machine learning applications.
 455 Our work also provides insights into how synthetic data can enhance conventional datasets. We conducted
 456 two scenarios with different synthetic data utilization strategies: one synthesizing the minority class
 457 only (GAN 1) and another synthesizing both classes (GAN 2). In the cross-validation setting, the GAN 1
 458 scenario demonstrated sustainable performance, outperforming the real data scenario because of
 459 improved class balancing. The accuracy of GAN 1 was slightly higher than that of GAN 2 when the input
 460 amount of each class was balanced. In the random-split validation, which involved only real data as the
 461 test data, the GAN 2 scenario provided better accuracy, a weighted F1 score, and precision in the stress
 462 class. Conversely, the GAN 1 scenario yielded better
 463
 464
 465
 466
 467
 468
 469
 470
 471

472 recall in the stress class (Figure 8). The results indi-
 473 cate that while the model trained on the GAN 1 data
 474 is less precise in identifying stress instances, it is bet-
 475 ter at capturing most of the stress cases (higher rec-
 476 all). This trade-off suggests that GAN 1 data intro-
 477 duce variability that helps the model to generalize bet-
 478 ter, albeit at the cost of precision (Figure 8). In con-
 479 trast, the GAN 2 data aid in making very precise stress
 480 identifications but do not improve the model's sensi-
 481 tivity to detecting all stress instances. These findings
 482 highlight the potential of synthetic data to enhance
 483 conventional datasets. The choice between GAN 1
 484 and GAN 2 depends on the specific needs of the ap-
 485 plication. For applications requiring high recall, the
 486 GAN 1 approach is more suitable. For those requir-
 487 ing high precision, the GAN 2 approach is preferable.
 488 Overall, our study illustrates the effectiveness of us-
 489 ing synthetic data to improve model performance in
 490 stress recognition tasks.

491 CONCLUSION

492 This work involved field ECG data collection and
 493 the design of a framework for stress recognition on
 494 the basis of HRV analysis of a limited ECG dataset.
 495 This study highlights the potential of using GAN-
 496 generated synthetic data to enhance HRV-based stress
 497 recognition models. By comparing models trained
 498 on real data with those augmented by synthetic data
 499 in two scenarios—GAN 1 (synthesizing the minority
 500 class only) and GAN 2 (synthesizing both classes)—
 501 we observed significant performance improvements.
 502 The GAN 1 data improved the recall to 0.88, whereas
 503 the GAN 2 data improved the precision to 1.00,
 504 demonstrating the ability of synthetic data to balance
 505 class distributions and enhance model generalizabil-
 506 ity. The use of a natural stressor, such as exam time,
 507 confirmed the practical applicability of our models.
 508 The random forest model, in particular, showed su-
 509 perior performance in handling class imbalance, with
 510 the highest cross-validation accuracy of 0.90 and a
 511 weighted F1 score of 0.84. These findings under-
 512 score the importance of dataset enrichment in ma-
 513 chine learning, especially in health-related fields. The
 514 use of synthetic data can improve model robustness
 515 and accuracy, offering a valuable tool for future re-
 516 search and applications. This study provides a strong
 517 foundation for further exploration and real-world val-
 518 idation of the benefits of synthetic data in stress recog-
 519 nition tasks.

520 LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

521 ANS: autonomic nervous system
 522 ECG: electrocardiogram

GAN: generative adversarial network 523
 HRV: Heart rate variability 524
 PHQ-9: Patient Health Questionnaire-9 525
 RF: random forest 526
 ReLU: rectified linear unit 527
 SD: Standard deviation 528
 SVM: Support Vector Machine 529
 XGBoost: eXtreme gradient boosting 530

COMPETING INTERESTS 531

The author(s) declare that they have no competing in- 532
 terests. 533

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 534

This research is funded by Ho Chi Minh City Uni- 535
 versity of Technology (HCMUT), VNU-HCM, un- 536
 der grant T-KHUD-2023-06. We acknowledge Ho 537
 Chi Minh City University of Technology (HCMUT), 538
 VNU-HCM, for supporting this study. 539

APPENDIX 540

Table 4: Appendix 1. PHQ-9 rating scale

PHQ-9 Score	Depression Severity	Comment
0 – 4	None-minimal	Observation, treatment may not be needed
5 – 9	Mild	Watchful waiting; repeat PHQ-9 at follow-up
10 – 14	Moderate	Treatment plan, considering counseling, follow-up, and/or pharmacotherapy
15 – 19	Moderately Severe	Active treatment with pharmacotherapy and/or psychotherapy
20 – 27	Severe	Immediate initiation of pharmacotherapy and, if severe impairment or poor response to therapy, expedited referral to a mental health specialist for psychotherapy and/or collaborative management

Table 5: APPENDIX 2. PHQ-9 survey questionnaire (Vietnamese Version)

	Không	Trong vài ngày	Hơn 1 tuần	1	Hầu hết tất cả các ngày
1. Tôi ít khi hứng thú với công việc của mình	0	1	2	3	
2. Tôi cảm thấy u uất, phiền muộn hoặc vô vọng	0	1	2	3	
3. Tôi khó ngủ hoặc thường xuyên tỉnh dậy trong đêm, hoặc tôi ngủ quá nhiều	0	1	2	3	
4. Tôi thấy mệt mỏi hoặc không có năng lượng	0	1	2	3	
5. Tôi không thèm ăn hoặc ăn quá nhiều	0	1	2	3	
6. Tôi nghĩ rằng tôi là người xấu xí hoặc thất bại, hoặc tôi cảm thấy vì tôi mà gia đình tôi không vui vẻ gì	0	1	2	3	
7. Tôi không thể tập trung đọc báo hoặc xem tivi	0	1	2	3	
8. Tôi đi hoặc nói rất chậm đến nỗi mà người khác có thể thấy, hoặc tôi đang lang thang hay đi đi lại lại nhiều vì tôi cảm thấy lo lắng và bồn chồn	0	1	2	3	
9. Tôi nghĩ tôi sẽ tốt hơn khi chết đi hoặc tự ngược đãi bản thân	0	1	2	3	
Điểm	.../27				

Table 6: APPENDIX 3. Features extracted from the HRV dataset used in the study.

	Parameter	Description	
HRV time-domain indices	HTI	The integral of the density of the RR interval histogram divided by its height.	
	IQRNN	The interquartile range of the RR intervals.	
	MadNN	The median absolute deviation of the RR intervals.	
	MaxNN	The maximum of the RR intervals.	
	MCVNN	The median absolute deviation of the RR intervals (MadNN) is divided by the median of the RR intervals.	
	MeanNN	The mean of the RR intervals.	
	MedianNN	The median of the RR intervals.	
	MinNN	The minimum of the RR intervals.	
	pNN20	Percentage of successive RR intervals that differ by more than 20 ms.	
	pNN50	Percentage of successive RR intervals that differ by more than 50 ms.	
	Prc20NN	The 20th percentile of the RR intervals.	
	Prc80NN	The 80th percentile of the RR intervals.	
	RMSSD	Root mean square of successive RR interval differences.	
	SDANN	The standard deviation of the average NN intervals for each 5-minute segment of a 24-hour HRV recording.	
	SDNN	The standard deviation of NN interval.	
	SDNNI	Mean of the standard deviations of all the NN intervals for each 5 min segment of a 24-hour HRV recording.	
	SDSD	The standard deviation of the successive differences between RR intervals.	
	TINN	Baseline width of the RR interval histogram.	
	HRV frequency-domain indices	ULF	The absolute power of the ultralow-frequency band (≤ 0.003 Hz).
		HF	Absolute power of the high-frequency band (0.15-0.4 Hz).
HF _n		Relative power of the high-frequency band (0.15-0.4 Hz) in normal units.	
LF		Absolute power of the low-frequency band (0.04-0.15 Hz).	
LF/HF		The ratio of LF-to-HF power.	
LF _n		Relative power of the low-frequency band (0.04-0.15 Hz) in normal units.	
LnHF		The log-transformed HF.	
VLF		The absolute power of the very-low-frequency band (0.0033-0.04 Hz).	
HRV nonlinear domain indices	Poincaré Plot	SD1	The standard deviation of the PP is perpendicular to the line of identity.
		SD2	The standard deviation of the PP along to the line of identity.
		SD1SD2	The ratio of SD1 to SD2.
			Area of ellipse described by SD1 and SD2 ($\pi \cdot SD1 \cdot SD2$).
	Entropy	ApEn	Approximate entropy.
		FuzzyEn	Fuzzy entropy.
		SampEn	Sample Entropy.
		SE	Shannon Entropy.

Continued on next page

Table 6 continued

Fractal Dimensions	DFA	Estimation of signal fluctuations using de-trended fluctuation analysis.
	CD	Estimation of a minimum number of variables to define a dynamic model.

541 **REFERENCES**

- 542 1. Bảo Khánh. Sự tác động của COVID-19 đến sức khỏe
543 tâm thần của sinh viên ĐHQG-HCM. Đại học Quốc Gia
544 Tp.HCM; 2021. Accessed 2024 Apr 28;Available from:
545 [https://vnuhcm.edu.vn/nghien-cuu_33366864/su-tac-dong-](https://vnuhcm.edu.vn/nghien-cuu_33366864/su-tac-dong-cua-covid-19-den-suc-khoe-tam-than-cua-sinh-vien-dhqg-hcm/343034336864.html)
546 [cua-covid-19-den-suc-khoe-tam-than-cua-sinh-vien-dhqg-](https://vnuhcm.edu.vn/nghien-cuu_33366864/su-tac-dong-cua-covid-19-den-suc-khoe-tam-than-cua-sinh-vien-dhqg-hcm/343034336864.html)
547 [hcm/343034336864.html](https://vnuhcm.edu.vn/nghien-cuu_33366864/su-tac-dong-cua-covid-19-den-suc-khoe-tam-than-cua-sinh-vien-dhqg-hcm/343034336864.html).
- 548 2. Malik J, Camm AJ. Heart rate variability. Clin Cardiol. 1990
549 Aug;13(8):570–6.
- 550 3. Kim HG, Cheon EJ, Daiseg B, Lee YH, Koo B. Stress and heart
551 rate variability: A meta-analysis and review of the literature.
552 Psychiatry Investig. 2018 Mar;15(3):235–45;
- 553 4. Pham TN, Lau ZJ, Chen SHA, Makowski D. Heart rate variability
554 in psychology: A review of HRV indices and an analysis tuto-
555 rial. Sensors. 2021 Jun 9;21(12):3998;
- 556 5. Pourmohammadi S, Maleki A. Stress detection using ECG
557 and EMG signals: A comprehensive study. Comput Methods
558 Programs Biomed [Internet]. 2020 Sep;193:105482;Available
559 from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cmpb.2020.105482>.
- 560 6. Hwang BK, You J, Vaessen T, Myin-Germeys I, Park C, Zhang
561 B. Deep ECGNET: An optimal deep learning framework for
562 monitoring mental stress using ultra short-term ECG sig-
563 nals. Telemed J E Health [Internet]. 2018 Oct;24(10):753–
564 72;Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1089/tmj.2017.0250>.
- 565 7. Munla N, Khalil M, Shahin A, Mourad A. Driver stress level de-
566 tection using HRV analysis [Internet]. 2015 International Con-
567 ference on Advances in Biomedical Engineering (ICABME).
568 IEEE Explore; 2015;Available from: [https://doi.org/10.1109/](https://doi.org/10.1109/icabme.2015.7323251)
569 [icabme.2015.7323251](https://doi.org/10.1109/icabme.2015.7323251).
- 570 8. Lee S, Hwang HB, Park S, Kim S, Ha JH, Jang Y, et al.
571 Mental stress assessment using ultra short-term HRV anal-
572 ysis based on non-linear method. Biosensors [Internet].
573 2022 Jun 27;12(7):465;Available from: [https://doi.org/10.3390/](https://doi.org/10.3390/bios12070465)
574 [bios12070465](https://doi.org/10.3390/bios12070465).
- 575 9. Ihianle IK, Machado P, Owa K, Adama DA, Otuka R, Lotfi
576 A. Minimizing redundancy, maximizing relevance: HRV fea-
577 ture selection for stress classification. Expert Syst Appl.
578 2024;239:122490;.
- 579 10. Bahameish M, Stockman T, Requena Carrión J. Strategies for
580 reliable stress recognition: A machine learning approach us-
581 ing heart rate variability features. Sensors. 2024;24:3210;
- 582 11. Cayce GI, Depoian AC, Bailey CP, Guturu P. Improved neu-
583 ral network arrhythmia classification through integrated data
584 augmentation [Internet]. 2022 IEEE MetroCon. 2022;Available
585 from: <https://doi.org/10.1109/metrocon56047.2022.9971141>.
- 586 12. Nonaka N, Seita J. RANDECG: Data augmentation for deep
587 neural network based ECG classification. In: Advances in in-
588 telligent systems and computing [Internet]. 2022. p. 178–
589 89;Available from: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-96451-](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-96451-1_16)
590 [1_16](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-96451-1_16).
- 591 13. Rahman MM, Rivolta MW, Badilini F, Sassi R. A systematic sur-
592 vey of data augmentation of ECG signals for AI applications.
593 Sensors. 2023;23:5237;.
- 594 14. Sun H, Zhang F, Zhang Y. An LSTM and GAN based ECG abnor-
595 mal signal generator. In: Transactions on computational sci-
596 ence and computational intelligence [Internet]. 2021. p. 743–
597 55;Available from: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-70296-](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-70296-0_54)
598 [0_54](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-70296-0_54).
- 599 15. Kroenke K, Spitzer RL, Williams JBW. The PHQ-9. J Gen Intern
600 Med [Internet]. 2001 Sep;16(9):606–13;Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1525-1497.2001.016009606.x>.
- 601 16. Orphanidou C, Bonnici T, Charlton P, Clifton DA, Vallance
602 D, Tarassenko L. Signal quality indices for the electrocardio-
603 gram and photoplethysmogram: Derivation and applications
604 to wireless monitoring. IEEE J Biomed Health Inform [Inter-
605 net]. 2014 Jan;18(1):226–34;Available from: [https://doi.org/10.](https://doi.org/10.1109/jbhi.2014.2338351)
606 [1109/jbhi.2014.2338351](https://doi.org/10.1109/jbhi.2014.2338351).
- 607 17. Brammer JC. biopeaks: A graphical user interface for fea- 608
609 ture extraction from heart- and breathing biosignals. J Open
610 Source Softw [Internet]. 2020 Oct 27;5(54):2621;Available
611 from: <https://doi.org/10.21105/joss.02621>.
- 612 18. Bjorn. Kaggle: Using 1D CNN-based GAN to generate
613 ECGs. 2023;Available from: [https://www.kaggle.com/code/](https://www.kaggle.com/code/bjoernjostein/gan-on-ecg)
614 [bjoernjostein/gan-on-ecg](https://www.kaggle.com/code/bjoernjostein/gan-on-ecg).
- 615 19. Makowski D, Pham TN, Lau ZJ, Brammer JC, Lespinasse F,
616 Pham H, et al. NeuroKit2: A Python toolbox for neuro-
617 physiological signal processing. Behav Res Methods [Inter-
618 net]. 2021 Feb;53(4):1689–96;Available from: [https://doi.org/](https://doi.org/10.3758/s13428-020-01516-y)
619 [10.3758/s13428-020-01516-y](https://doi.org/10.3758/s13428-020-01516-y).
- 620 20. Daluwatte C, Johannesen L, Galeotti L, Vicente J, Strauss DG,
621 Scully CG. Assessing ECG signal quality indices to discrim-
622 inate ECGs with artifacts from pathologically different ar-
623 rhythmic ECGs. Physiol Meas [Internet]. 2016 Jul;37(8):1370–
624 82;Available from: [https://doi.org/10.1088/0967-3334/37/8/](https://doi.org/10.1088/0967-3334/37/8/1370)
625 [1370](https://doi.org/10.1088/0967-3334/37/8/1370).