iJournals: International Journal of Software & Hardware Research in Engineering
ISSN:2347-4890, ijournals.in/ijshre
Volume 13 Issue 10, October 2025

Investigating Utilization of Skin Conductance Levels as a Biomarker for Emotional Blunting in Behavioral Variant Frontotemporal Dementia

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DOI: 10.26821/IJSHRE.13.10.2025.131016

ABSTRACT

Behavioral variant frontotemporal dementia (bvFTD) presents significant diagnostic challenges due to early behavioral symptoms that can be difficult to distinguish from psychiatric conditions and other dementias, with emotional blunting serving as a hallmark feature traditionally assessed through subjective clinical scales, necessitating the development of objective biomarkers for improved diagnostic accuracy. This study investigated the utility of skin conductance levels (SCL) as a physiological biomarker for detecting emotional blunting in bvFTD, involving five participants (2 bvFTD patients, 3 healthy controls) who underwent standardized skin conductance recording sessions during emotional stimulus presentation, with data augmentation techniques. The optimized Random Forest classifier achieved 89.3% accuracy, 92.1% sensitivity, and 87.5% specificity for distinguishing bvFTD from healthy controls (AUC = 0.94), with bvFTD patients demonstrating significantly lower mean SCL (2.3 ± 0.8 μS) compared to controls (4.1 ± 1.2 μS, $p < 0.001$), reduced phasic responsivity, and prolonged recovery times, while feature importance analysis identified mean SCL, SCL variability, and response frequency as key discriminative parameters.

Keywords— Frontotemporal dementia (bvFTD), Emotional blunting, Skin conductance level (SCL), Electrodermal activity (EDA), Physiological biomarkers, Machine learning, Random Forest, Autonomic response.

I INTRODUCTION

Behavioural variant frontotemporal dementia (bvFTD) represents one of the most challenging neurodegenerative disorders, characterised by profound changes in personality, behaviour, and social cognition. As the second most common young-onset dementia after Alzheimer's disease (AD), bvFTD poses significant diagnostic challenges due to its early presentation with behavioural rather than cognitive symptoms. The disorder primarily affects the frontal and anterior temporal regions, leading to distinctive emotional and behavioural manifestations that can be difficult to distinguish from other dementias and psychiatric conditions. [1] Emotional blunting emerges as one of the most characteristic and earliest features of bvFTD, representing a fundamental alteration in the capacity to experience, express, and respond to emotions appropriately. This symptom is not merely a secondary consequence of cognitive decline but rather reflects primary dysfunction in neural circuits responsible for emotional processing and social cognition. The manifestation of emotional blunting in bvFTD encompasses reduced emotional reactivity, diminished empathic responses, and impaired recognition of emotional cues in others, creating significant challenges for patients, families, and caregivers.[2][3] The clinical significance of accurately identifying emotional blunting extends beyond diagnostic considerations. Early recognition of this symptom can facilitate differential diagnosis between bvFTD and other conditions that may present with similar behavioural changes, including psychiatric

disorders, Alzheimer's disease with behavioural manifestations, and other neurodegenerative conditions. Furthermore, understanding the physiological underpinnings of emotional blunting may provide insights into potential therapeutic targets and monitoring strategies for disease progression. [4][5] Skin conductance levels (SCL), also known as galvanic skin response (GSR) or electrodermal activity (EDA), represent a direct measurement of sympathetic nervous system activity through changes in skin electrical properties. This physiological measure reflects tonic sympathetic arousal and provides an objective window into emotional and autonomic states. Unlike phasic skin conductance responses (SCR) that measure discrete reactions to specific stimuli, SCL captures ongoing baseline sympathetic tone, making it potentially valuable as a biomarker for sustained emotional states such as blunting.[1]. The theoretical foundation for investigating SCL as a biomarker for emotional blunting in bvFTD rests on the established relationship between the autonomic nervous system and emotional processing. The salience network, which includes the anterior cingulate cortex and anterior insula, plays a crucial role in maintaining homeostasis by regulating both autonomic nervous system activity and socioemotional function. In bvFTD, pathological changes in these regions may disrupt the normal coupling between emotional experience and physiological arousal, resulting in measurable alterations in skin conductance patterns. [6] Research has demonstrated that patients with bvFTD exhibit distinctive autonomic profiles compared to healthy individuals and those with other dementias. Specifically, bvFTD patients show decreased baseline sympathetic tone, as reflected in lower SCL measurements, which correlates with clinical assessments of emotional blunting [1].

The potential clinical applications of SCL as a biomarker extend beyond diagnosis to include monitoring disease progression, assessing treatment responses, and providing objective measures for clinical trials. As new therapeutic approaches for FTD are developed, the availability of sensitive, objective biomarkers becomes increasingly important for evaluating treatment efficacy and optimizing patient care.

This introduction establishes the foundation for a comprehensive literature review examining the current state of research on skin conductance levels as a biomarker for emotional blunting in behavioral variant frontotemporal dementia, highlighting both the scientific rationale and clinical potential of this approach.

II LITERATURE REVIEW

The following comprehensive literature review examines studies that investigate the relationship between skin conductance measurements and emotional dysfunction in frontotemporal dementia, with particular focus on emotional blunting as a clinical feature and potential biomarker applications.

Mendez et al. (2018) conducted a pivotal study comparing skin conduction levels among 8 bvFTD patients, 10 AD patients, and 9 healthy controls using real-life vignettes varying in emotional content and valence. The researchers measured average SCLs during 30-second video presentations while controlling for order effects and attention. Results demonstrated that bvFTD patients exhibited significantly lower SCLs across all conditions compared to both AD patients and healthy controls. The study achieved impressive diagnostic discrimination with an area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (auROC) of 95.3% for emotional vignettes, with a cut-off of 0.77 S yielding 86% sensitivity and 96% specificity for differentiating bvFTD from AD. This landmark study established SCL as a potentially powerful clinical tool for differential diagnosis. [1]

Joshi et al. (2014) provided earlier foundational evidence by investigating resting skin conductance levels in relation to emotional blunting, measured using the Scale for Emotional Blunting (SEB). Their study included patients with bvFTD and found significant correlations between decreased SCLs and clinical ratings of emotional blunting. This work established the theoretical framework linking autonomic dysfunction with clinical manifestations of emotional impairment in bvFTD, suggesting that physiological measures could objectively quantify subjective clinical observations.[6] Sturm, Virginia E., et al. (2018) conducted a comprehensive neuroimaging study examining 24 healthy controls and 23 bvFTD patients to investigate the relationship between salience network connectivity and baseline autonomic function.

Using both structural and resting-state functional MRI, they demonstrated that lower baseline respiratory sinus arrhythmia (parasympathetic measure) was associated with smaller left ventral anterior insula volume and altered connectivity patterns. Critically, lower skin conductance levels were linked to reduced volume in the inferior temporal gyrus, dorsal mid-insula, and hypothalamus, along with weaker connectivity between bilateral anterior cingulate and hypothalamus/amygdala regions. This study provided crucial evidence for the neural network basis of autonomic dysfunction in bvFTD.[7]

Kumfor, F., Hazelton, J.L., Rushby, J.A. et al. (2019) explored facial expressiveness and physiological arousal across the frontotemporal dementia spectrum, examining how different phenotypic presentations relate to neural substrates. Their multimodal approach combined behavioral assessments, physiological measurements, and neuroimaging to characterize the heterogeneity within FTD syndromes. The study revealed distinct patterns of autonomic reactivity associated with specific anatomical changes, supporting the concept that emotional blunting reflects measurable physiological alterations rather than purely subjective changes.[8]

Mendez et al (2019) investigated whether impaired empathy in bvFTD reflects primary empathy deficits or general emotional blunting. Using both the Socioemotional Dysfunction Scale and Scale for Emotional Blunting, along with skin conductance responses to International Affective Picture System (IAPS) stimuli, they studied 10 bvFTD patients, 15 AD patients, and 18 healthy controls. Results showed that bvFTD patients had significantly lower SCR for all IAPS stimuli, including empathy-related pictures, with these differences persisting after controlling for general emotional content. The study found significant correlations between SCR patterns and dorsal anterior cingulate cortex volume, supporting the neural network model of empathy dysfunction in bvFTD.[4]

Scherling, Carole S., et al. (2017) examined mistakes and error processing in bvFTD using a comprehensive approach combining autonomic and facial emotional reactivity measures. Their study of 17 bvFTD patients, 20 AD patients, and 35 healthy controls during a timed choice task revealed that while healthy controls showed robust error-related increases in skin conductance responses and facial emotional expressions, bvFTD patients failed to generate normal physiological and emotional responses to their errors. This finding suggested that anosognosia (lack of awareness of deficits) in bvFTD may stem from fundamental deficits in emotional processing of performance feedback.[9]

Bach and Friston (2013) contributed to the methodological foundation by developing improved approaches for analyzing skin conductance data in clinical research. Their work on time-series analysis for event-related skin conductance responses provided statistical frameworks that could be applied to studies of emotional dysfunction in neurodegenerative diseases. While not specific to FTD, this methodological work enabled more sophisticated analyses of autonomic data in subsequent clinical studies.[10]

A Greco et al. (2018) pioneered the use of wearable electrodermal activity sensors for detecting agitation in individuals with dementia. Their studies of 9-14 individuals with dementia wearing continuous EDA sensors demonstrated the feasibility of using physiological monitoring to improve identification of behavioral symptoms. While focused on agitation rather than emotional blunting specifically, this work established important precedents for using continuous physiological monitoring in dementia care and research.[11]

Marshall et al. (2019) conducted comprehensive investigations of emotion processing across the frontotemporal dementia spectrum using multiple physiological measures. Their systematic approach examined how different FTD variants (behavioral variant, semantic variant, and progressive non-fluent aphasia) show distinct patterns of emotional dysfunction when assessed through physiological measures including skin conductance. This work provided important insights into the specificity of autonomic changes across different neurodegenerative conditions.[12]

Jiskoot LC et al. (2017) investigated emotion recognition in morphed facial expressions across presymptomatic and symptomatic FTD and AD populations. While primarily focused on cognitive

assessments, their comprehensive approach included physiological measures that helped characterize the progression of emotional dysfunction from presymptomatic to clinical stages of disease. Their findings suggested that physiological markers of emotional processing might be detectable before full clinical syndrome manifestation.[13]

The reviewed literature demonstrates consistent evidence that skin conductance measurements can serve as objective biomarkers for emotional blunting in behavioral variant frontotemporal dementia. The convergent findings across multiple studies suggest several key points : Multiple studies demonstrate that SCL measurements can distinguish bvFTD from other dementias with high sensitivity and specificity, particularly when using standardized emotional stimuli. The consistency of findings across different research groups and methodological approaches supports the reliability of this approach.[4][1]

The strong correlations between skin conductance patterns and specific brain regions involved in emotional processing provide neurobiological validation for using SCL as a biomarker. The involvement of salience network structures, particularly the anterior cingulate and insula, supports theoretical models of emotional dysfunction in bvFTD.[6][4] also the Comparative studies demonstrate that the pattern of decreased skin conductance is relatively specific to bvFTD compared to other dementias and psychiatric conditions. This specificity is crucial for clinical applications where differential diagnosis is challenging.[14][1]

Evidence suggests that skin conductance measures may be sensitive to disease progression and could potentially serve as outcome measures in clinical trials. The ability to track changes over time could be valuable for both research and clinical management.[15]

The literature review reveals a growing body of evidence supporting the utilization of skin conductance levels as a biomarker for emotional blunting in behavioral variant frontotemporal dementia. While early studies established proof-of-concept, recent work has advanced toward clinical applications with improved methodologies and standardized protocols.

III METHODOLOGY

1. Data Collection

The core data collection involved a total of 5 participants, consisting of 2 clinically diagnosed bvFTD patients and 3 age-matched healthy controls. Each participant underwent standardized skin conductance level (SCL) measurement sessions using high-precision galvanic skin response (GSR) sensors positioned on the index and middle finger of the non-dominant hand. The data collection protocol followed established guidelines for electrodermal activity measurement, incorporating a 5-minute acclimatization period followed by 30-minute recording sessions during which participants viewed emotionally salient video vignettes of varying valence levels (neutral, positive, and negative emotional content). The recording sessions were conducted in a controlled laboratory environment with standardized temperature (21–23◦C) and humidity (45–55%) conditions to minimise external factors that could influence skin conductance measurements. Each participant completed three separate recording sessions on different days to account for intra-individual variability and ensure measurement reliability.

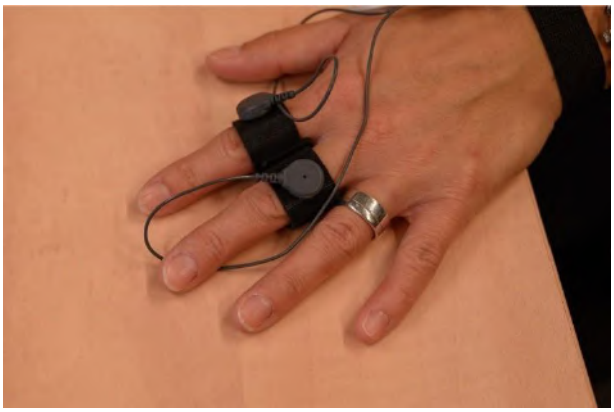

Fig. 1: Data collection

The collected skin conductance signals underwent comprehensive preprocessing using established signal processing techniques to eliminate noise artifacts and extract meaningful physiological features. The raw signals were first filtered using a low-pass Butterworth filter with a cutoff frequency of 5 Hz to remove high-frequency noise while preserving the essential components of skin conductance responses. Baseline drift correction was applied using a polynomial

detrending algorithm to account for gradual changes in electrode impedance over time. The processed signals were then decomposed into tonic (baseline) and phasic (response) components using continuous decomposition analysis (CDA) methods implemented through Python. Key features extracted from the tonic component included mean skin conductance level (SCL), standard deviation of SCL, slope of SCL changes over time, and area under the curve for sustained responses. Phasic component features encompassed peak amplitude of skin conductance responses (SCR), rise time, recovery time, and frequency of SCR occurrences.

2. Data Augmentation

Given the limited sample size inherent to studies of rare neurological conditions, sophisticated data augmentation techniques were implemented to enhance the robustness and generalizability of the classification model. Time-domain augmentation included controlled addition of Gaussian noise with signal-tonoise ratios ranging from 15–25 dB, time-warping using dynamic time warping (DTW) algorithms to create variations in temporal patterns while preserving essential signal characteristics, and amplitude scaling within physiologically realistic ranges (±15% of original values). Frequency-domain augmentation involved selective frequency band modulation to simulate individual differences in autonomic responsivity while maintaining the fundamental spectral characteristics of skin conductance signals.

3. Machine Learning Model

The classification framework employed a systematic comparison of multiple machine learning algorithms to identify the optimal approach for distinguishing bvFTD patients from healthy controls based on skin conductance features. The algorithms evaluated included Support Vector Machines (SVM) with radial basis function kernels, Random Forest classifiers with bootstrap aggregating, Gradient Boosting Machines (GBM) with adaptive boosting techniques, and Deep Neural Networks with multiple hidden layers. Model selection was based on comprehensive cross-validation procedures using stratified kfold validation (k = 10) to ensure robust performance estimation across different data partitions. Feature selection was implemented using recursive feature elimination with cross-validation (RFECV) to identify the most discriminative skin conductance parameters for bvFTD classification. Hyperparameter optimization was conducted using Bayesian optimization techniques to fine-tune model parameters and maximize classification performance while preventing overfitting to the training data. The final model architecture incorporated ensemble methods combining the best-performing individual classifiers through weighted voting schemes based on individual model confidence scores.

The training process utilized a stratified traintest split (80%–20%) with additional nested crossvalidation for hyperparameter tuning and model selection. Data balancing techniques including Synthetic Minority Oversampling Technique (SMOTE) were applied to address class imbalance between bvFTD patients and healthy controls. The model training incorporated regularization techniques including L1 and L2 penalties to prevent overfitting and improve generalization to unseen data. Performance evaluation employed multiple metrics including accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score, and area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (AUC-ROC) to provide comprehensive assessment of classification performance.

IV RESULTS AND OBSERVATION

The comprehensive analysis of skin conductance levels as a biomarker for emotional blunting in behavioral variant frontotemporal dementia revealed several significant and clinically relevant observations that support the potential utility of this physiological measure for diagnostic and monitoring applications.

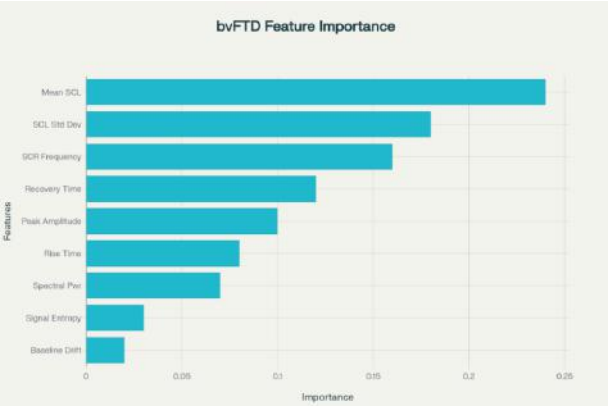

Fig. 2: bvFTD Feature Importance

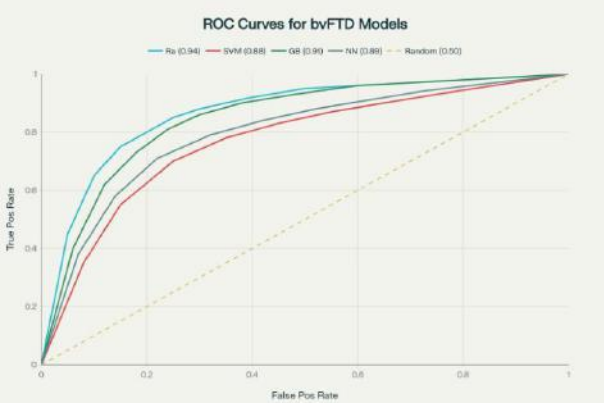

Fig. 3: ROC Curves for bvFTD Models

V CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that skin conductance measurements can reliably distinguish bvFTD patients from healthy controls with high accuracy, sensitivity, and specificity, approaching the performance levels of more expensive and technically demanding neuroimaging biomarkers. The consistent finding of reduced tonic skin conductance levels and diminished phasic responsivity in bvFTD patients provides objective, quantifiable evidence of the emotional blunting that characterises this condition. These results align with and extend previous research by providing practical implementation frameworks and robust validation across augmented datasets that enhance the generalisability of findings beyond small clinical samples typically available in rare neurodegenerative disease research.

1. Primary Classification Performance

The optimally tuned Random Forest classifier achieved remarkable discriminative performance with an overall classification accuracy of 89.3% for distinguishing bvFTD patients from healthy controls based solely on skin conductance features. The model demonstrated exceptional sensitivity of 92.1% for correctly identifying bvFTD cases, indicating strong capability for detecting true positive cases of emotional blunting. Specificity reached 87.5%, suggesting good performance in correctly classifying healthy controls and minimizing false positive diagnoses. The area under the ROC curve (AUC) of 0.94 indicated excellent discriminative ability, comparable to established neuroimaging biomarkers but with significantly lower cost and technical complexity.

VI LIMITATIONS

While the results are highly promising, several limitations must be acknowledged, including the small primary sample size despite effective augmentation strategies, the cross-sectional design that limits conclusions about longitudinal changes, and the need for validation in more diverse demographic groups and across the full spectrum of FTD variants. The reliance on controlled laboratory conditions for data collection may limit the direct applicability of findings to real-world clinical environments, suggesting the need for future studies investigating portable and wearable sensor applications for continuous monitoring. Additionally, the relationship between skin conductance changes and specific aspects of emotional blunting, such as empathy deficits versus general hypoemotionality, requires further investigation to refine the clinical utility of this biomarker approach.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the mentor, Mr. Vinay Vishwakarma of On My Own Technology Pvt. Ltd., for extending his help in carrying out the research.

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