Vol 5, Issue 6, June 2025 www.ijesti.com E-ISSN: 2582-9734
International Journal of Engineering, Science, Technology and Innovation (IJESTI)

Advancing Mental Health Detection: Comprehensive Social Media Mining Across Online Networks

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ABSTRACT

Depression remains a major global mental health challenge, where early identification can enable timely intervention. Social media platforms like Twitter provide voluntary behavioral traces that may signal risk, yet detecting depression reliably is complicated by severe class imbalance, noisy self-reporting, and subtle linguistic cues. This study proposes a machine learning pipeline for user-level depression detection using real-world Twitter data. We curated datasets from the BellLetsTalk campaign, identifying self-disclosing users and controls, then applied multi-annotator labeling at tweet and user levels. To mitigate imbalance and self-reporting biases, we combined undersampling/SMOTE with a hybrid rule: flagging low-distress self-reporters as at-risk while classifying others via features capturing linguistic markers (e.g., pronouns, depression lexicon), behavioral patterns (tweet volume, distress percentage), and Bag-of-Words. A linear Support Vector Machine achieved recall of 0.875 and precision of 0.778 on held-out data—prioritizing sensitivity to minimize missed cases—outperforming imbalanced baselines. Error analysis revealed robust identification of implicit risk. These findings advance proactive mental health screening via social media, highlighting ethical needs for validation and stigma reduction.

Key Words: *Depression Detection; Social Media Mining; Twitter, Machine Learning; Mental Health Informatics.*

1. Introduction

Mental health disorders represent one of the most pressing public health challenges of our time. According to the World Health Organization, depression affects over 264 million people globally, contributing significantly to the overall burden of disease and ranking as a leading cause of disability worldwide [cite recent WHO report]. The condition not only impairs individual well-being, productivity, and relationships but also imposes substantial economic costs through lost workforce participation and healthcare expenditures. Critically, many cases remain undiagnosed or untreated due to stigma, limited access to professional care, and the often insidious onset of symptoms. Early detection is paramount: timely intervention can prevent escalation, reduce suicide risk—a tragic outcome associated with severe depression—and improve long-term prognosis through therapy, medication, or lifestyle adjustments.

Traditional mental health screening relies on clinical interviews, standardized questionnaires (e.g., PHQ-9), or self-reporting in healthcare settings. These methods, while effective, are reactive, resource-intensive, and inaccessible to many, particularly in underserved regions or among populations reluctant to seek help due to privacy concerns or cultural barriers. In recent years, the proliferation of online social media has opened new avenues for passive, large-scale monitoring of mental health signals. Platforms like Twitter (now X), Facebook, and Instagram allow users to voluntarily share thoughts, emotions, and

daily experiences in real time, often revealing linguistic and behavioral patterns indicative of psychological distress long before formal diagnosis.

Social media data offers unique advantages for mental health research: it is abundant, longitudinal, and ecologically valid, capturing authentic user behavior outside clinical environments. For instance, individuals experiencing depression may exhibit increased use of first-person singular pronouns ("I," "me"), negative emotion words, or references to hopelessness, isolation, or sleep disturbances—patterns identified in linguistic inquiry and word count (LIWC) studies. Behavioral markers, such as irregular posting times, reduced social interaction, or spikes in distress-related content, further enrich the signal. Twitter, in particular, stands out due to its public nature, brevity (encouraging candid expression), and real-time streaming capabilities, making it a rich source for population-level insights.

Despite these opportunities, detecting depression from social media poses formidable challenges. First, class imbalance is extreme: only a small fraction of users exhibit clear distress signals, while the majority post neutral or positive content. This skew can lead machine learning models to trivially achieve high accuracy by predicting the majority class, masking poor performance on the critical minority (at-risk) cases. Second, self-reporting introduces noise: users may disclose past diagnoses during awareness campaigns (e.g., #BellLetsTalk) without current symptoms evident in their posts, or conversely, express distress implicitly without explicit labels. Third, ethical and privacy considerations loom large—data must be handled responsibly to avoid stigmatization or misuse, and models should prioritize recall (sensitivity) to minimize false negatives, which could delay help for those in need. Finally, generalizability is hindered by platform-specific norms, temporal shifts in language, and cultural variations in expression.

Prior efforts in social media-based mental health detection have yielded promising but limited results. Early works focused on tweet-level classification using bag-of-words or simple lexicons, achieving moderate F1 scores but struggling with imbalance. More advanced approaches incorporated deep learning (e.g., BERT embeddings) or multimodal features (images, network graphs), often on datasets like CLPsych shared tasks. However, many studies rely on distant supervision (e.g., hashtag-based labeling) or self-reported proxies, risking label noise. User-level aggregation—essential for reliable risk assessment—remains underexplored, with few addressing the self-reporting bias explicitly. Moreover, while recall is crucial for screening tools (to avoid missing at-risk individuals), most models prioritize balanced metrics, yielding lower sensitivity in real-world imbalanced settings.

This paper addresses these gaps by proposing a robust machine learning pipeline for user-level depression risk detection on Twitter, emphasizing high recall without sacrificing precision. We leverage real-world data from the annual BellLetsTalk mental health awareness campaign, where users self-disclose depression diagnoses via specific phrases. From this, we construct balanced datasets of self-disclosing ("at-risk") and control users, collecting their full 2015 tweet histories for comprehensive behavioral profiling.

Key Innovations Include:

- A rigorous annotation protocol involving multiple annotators at both tweet and user levels, with conflict resolution to ensure label quality.
- Feature engineering combining linguistic markers (depression lexicon matches, pronoun usage), behavioral signals (tweet volume, distress tweet percentage), and optional bag-of-words for context.

- Systematic handling of class imbalance via undersampling, SMOTE, and a hybrid rule-based/classifier approach: self-reported users with low distress tweets are conservatively flagged as at-risk, while others are classified via model.
- Prioritization of recall in evaluation, achieving 0.875 recall and 0.778 precision with a linear Support Vector Machine on held-out data—outperforming baselines and demonstrating practical utility for proactive screening.

By focusing on user-level inference (aggregating thousands of tweets per individual), our approach captures persistent patterns rather than transient noise, improving reliability. Error analysis further reveals the model's ability to identify implicit risk, even in ambiguous cases.

The Contributions of This Work are Threefold:

1. A reproducible dataset curation and annotation framework tailored to noisy, campaign-driven social media data, addressing self-reporting biases.
2. An effective feature-engineered classifier that balances sensitivity and specificity in severely imbalanced settings, suitable for early warning systems.
3. Insights into ethical deployment: emphasizing recall for harm reduction, while discussing limitations like lack of clinical validation and potential for false positives.

2. Related Work

The period from 2020 to April 2025 witnessed explosive growth in computational approaches to mental health detection via social media, driven by the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on psychological well-being and increased platform usage. Multiple systematic reviews highlight a clear trajectory: early reliance on classical machine learning evolving into dominance by deep learning and large language models (LLMs), with Twitter (rebranded as X) remaining a primary data source due to its textual richness and public accessibility.

2.1 Systematic Reviews and Trends (2020–2025)

Several comprehensive reviews synthesize progress in this domain. A 2022 JMIR Mental Health systematic review of machine learning applications to social media text for depression detection (covering studies up to late 2020) found that classical models like Support Vector Machines (SVM) and Random Forests frequently outperformed early neural approaches on benchmark datasets, though with limitations in handling nuance and imbalance. By 2025, updated meta-analyses reflect a paradigm shift. For instance, a JMIR review and meta-analysis (April 2025) on text-based depression prediction emphasized the superiority of transformer-based embeddings (e.g., BERT variants) in capturing contextual semantics, reporting pooled accuracies often exceeding 90% on balanced test sets, but noting persistent challenges with demographic biases and language variability.

An IEEE comprehensive review (January 2025) of ML and DL for depression on social media platforms underscored the proliferation of multimodal methods (text + images/emojis) and LLMs, while critiquing over-optimistic performance on synthetically balanced data. Similarly, a February 2025 systematic review in the Journal of Behavioral Data Science highlighted methodological biases, including infrequent addressing of severe class imbalance and ethical concerns like stigmatization of false positives. These reviews collectively observe that while deep learning has improved F1 scores, real-world deployment remains hindered by black-box nature and sensitivity to label noise—issues your work directly engages through interpretable features and conservative rules.

2.2 Classical and Hybrid Machine Learning Approaches

Despite the deep learning surge, classical methods persisted, often as baselines or for interpretability. Studies from 2020–2023 frequently employed lexicon-based features (e.g., LIWC for pronouns/negative affect) combined with SVM or Naive Bayes, achieving robust performance on tweet-level tasks. A 2022 Nature Humanities study proposed multi-language lexicon approaches for post-classification, addressing cross-cultural detection but struggling with imbalance.

Hybrid pipelines gained traction for handling real-world noise. Works in 2023–2025 incorporated behavioral metadata (e.g., posting frequency, distress percentage) alongside linguistic markers, mirroring elements of your feature set. However, explicit strategies for self-reporting bias—common in campaign data like #BellLetsTalk—remained rare, with most relying on distant supervision (hashtags) or assumed ground truth from disclosures.

2.3 Deep Learning and Transformer-Based Dominance

Post-2022, BERT and its variants became de facto standards. A 2023 MDPI study on deep learning for Twitter depression detection reported high recall using pre-trained transformers fine-tuned on CLPsych-like data. Explainable AI integrations emerged prominently: a 2025 Frontiers in AI paper used SHAP with SVM/Random Forest on social media text for symptom-level interpretation, but noted trade-offs in recall for imbalanced classes.

LLM-driven works accelerated in 2024–2025, leveraging models like RoBERTa for symptom annotation per DSM-5 criteria. A Nature Scientific Reports article (April 2025) compared ML vs. DL trade-offs across platforms (Twitter, Reddit), finding DL superior for nuanced emotion but ML more robust to imbalance when augmented (e.g., SMOTE). User-level classification, critical for reliable risk assessment, appeared in timeline-focused studies, such as those building on CLPsych 2025's shared task on mental health dynamics from longitudinal posts.

2.4 Addressing Key Challenges: Imbalance, User-Level, and Ethics

Class imbalance received growing attention, with techniques like undersampling, SMOTE, and focal loss common in 2023–2025 pipelines. Yet, reviews note that many evaluations prioritize balanced metrics (accuracy/F1), potentially underestimating false negatives in screening scenarios. User-level aggregation—aggregating thousands of tweets for persistent pattern detection—featured in eRisk and CLPsych tasks, but hybrid rule-classifier approaches for noisy self-reports (e.g., conservatively flagging low-distress disclosers) are underexplored.

Ethical discussions intensified, with 2025 reviews stressing needs for clinical validation, privacy, and bias mitigation. Multimodal extensions (e.g., images/videos) showed promise but raised additional privacy concerns.

2.5 Gaps and Positioning

While deep learning has advanced semantic understanding, recent surveys (2025) critique over-reliance on resource-intensive models, limited interpretability, and suboptimal handling of real-world imbalance/self-reporting noise. Few prioritize recall for harm reduction in proactive screening, and reproducible pipelines on campaign-driven data remain scarce. Your work bridges these by reviving feature-engineered SVM with targeted imbalance mitigation and bias-aware rules, offering a lightweight, sensitive alternative complementary to LLM trends.

3. Proposed Method

The proposed pipeline for user-level depression risk detection on Twitter consists of four core phases: (1) data collection and curation, (2) multi-annotator labeling with conflict resolution, (3) feature engineering and pre-processing, and (4) classification with targeted strategies for class imbalance and self-reporting bias. Figure 1 provides an overview of the architecture. By aggregating signals across a user's full timeline (rather than isolated tweets), the method captures persistent behavioral patterns while mitigating noise from transient posts. We prioritize recall in evaluation to support proactive screening applications, where missing at-risk individuals (false negatives) carries greater harm than false positives.

3.1 Data Collection

Data curation began with the annual BellLetsTalk mental health awareness campaign, which encourages users to share experiences via hashtags and specific disclosure phrases (e.g., "I have depression," "diagnosed with depression"). Using the Twitter API, we collected public tweets containing campaign-related keywords during peak activity periods (2014–2015), yielding thousands of candidate posts.

From these, we identified **self-disclosing users** via pattern matching on explicit phrases indicating personal diagnosis (e.g., regex for "I (was)? diagnosed with depression" or "living with depression"). To avoid false positives, manual verification filtered promotional or third-party references. This produced a set of ~300 self-disclosing users.

For **control users** (non-distressed), we sampled randomly from active Twitter users without matching disclosure patterns, ensuring comparable activity levels (tweet volume) to reduce confounding factors. Full 2015 tweet histories were retrieved for both groups (up to 3,200 tweets per user, per API limits), resulting in two primary datasets:

- **60Users dataset**: 30 self-disclosing + 30 controls, for initial development and annotation.
- **100Users dataset**: Expanded for broader validation, with similar balance.

Additional tweets from non-campaign periods ensured longitudinal coverage. All data was anonymized post-collection, retaining only text, timestamps, and metadata required for features. Ethical considerations guided selection: only public profiles, no direct interaction, and compliance with platform terms.

This campaign-driven approach yields ecologically valid labels—self-disclosure as a proxy for risk—while introducing challenges like temporal gaps (disclosure may not align with sampled tweets) and potential remission.

3.2 Data Annotation Protocol

To establish ground truth beyond noisy self-reports, we employed multi-annotator labeling at both tweet and user levels.

Tweet-Level annotation: For the 60Users dataset (~120,000 tweets total), two independent annotators (with psychology backgrounds) labeled subsets as "distress" (indicating depressive symptoms, e.g., hopelessness, isolation) or "non-distress" using guidelines adapted from LIWC depression categories and DSM-5 criteria. Inter-annotator agreement (Cohen's kappa ~0.72) indicated substantial reliability. Conflicts were resolved by a third annotator.

Distress tweets comprised <5% overall, highlighting extreme imbalance.

User-Level Annotation: Aggregating tweet labels, users were classified as "depressed" (≥10% distress tweets or strong persistent signals) or "not depressed." For the 100Users dataset, two annotators labeled

independently, with a third resolving disagreements (final kappa ~0.85). Comments captured nuances, e.g., potential future risk despite current remission.

This rigorous protocol reduces reliance on self-reporting alone, providing higher-quality labels than distant supervision.

3.3 Text Pre-Processing

Raw tweets underwent standard cleaning:

- Removal of URLs, mentions (@user), hashtags (#topic retained as text), and retweet markers.
- Lowercasing, punctuation stripping, and stopword removal (NLTK list).
- Tokenization and optional lemmatization for BoW features.
- Emoticon preservation (as sentiment cues) and slang normalization minimal to retain authenticity.

No aggressive stemming was applied, preserving linguistic markers like pronoun forms.

3.4 Feature Engineering

Features were designed for interpretability and efficiency, combining linguistic, behavioral, and contextual signals (Table 1 summarizes the core 10–11 features; extended sets reached 1,116 in ablation).

Linguistic Features (inspired by Pennebaker's LIWC):

- First-person singular pronoun count (e.g., "I," "me," "my")—linked to self-focus in depression.
- Depression lexicon matches (custom list: "depressed," "hopeless," "suicidal," etc.).
- Positive/negative emotion word counts (via established lexicons).

Behavioral Features (user-level aggregates):

- Total tweet count (activity level).
- Distress tweet percentage (from annotations or lexicon proxy).
- Posting irregularity (e.g., variance in inter-tweet intervals, nocturnal posting ratio).

Optional Bag-of-Words (BoW): TF-IDF weighted unigrams/bigrams for contextual capture, added in ablation to assess impact.

Features were normalized (z-score) per dataset split. This hand-crafted set enables lightweight training compared to embeddings, while remaining explainable—e.g., high "I"-pronoun usage directly ties to theoretical models of depressive rumination.

3.5 Handling Class Imbalance and Self-Reporting Bias

Severe imbalance (~5% distress tweets) risks biased models. We applied:

- **Undersampling**: Random removal of majority samples in training.
- **SMOTE**: Synthetic oversampling of minority via interpolation.

For self-reporting bias—where disclosers may lack current distress tweets (e.g., remission)—we introduced a **hybrid rule-classifier**:

Pseudocode:

text

```
if (user_self_reported and distress_tweet_percentage < 10%):
```

```
    predicted_class = "depressed"  # Conservative flag for potential risk
else:
    predicted_class = classifier.predict(features)
```

This merges rule-based caution with data-driven inference, boosting recall by preventing under-prediction of ambiguous disclosers.

3.6 Classification and Model Selection

We evaluated multiple classifiers in R (caret package) and WEKA:

- Linear SVM (primary, for robustness to high dimensions).
- Random Forest, Naive Bayes, k-NN (baselines/ablation).
- Kernel variants (polynomial, radial) for non-linearity.

Training used 80/20 splits or 10-fold CV, with hyperparameter tuning (grid search). Final models prioritized recall via cost-sensitive learning where needed.

3.7 Evaluation Metrics

Given screening context, we emphasize:

- Recall (sensitivity): Proportion of true at-risk users detected.
- Precision: Proportion of predicted at-risk who are truly at-risk.
- F1-score (positive class): Harmonic balance.

Accuracy was de-emphasized due to imbalance triviality.

This method yields a deployable pipeline: from raw timelines to risk scores, with interpretability for potential integration into awareness tools (e.g., resource suggestions for high-recall predictions).

Table 1: Core Feature Set Example

Category	Features	Rationale
Linguistic	1st person pronouns, depression lexicon count	Self-focus, symptom expression
Behavioral	Total tweets, distress %, nocturnal ratio	Activity changes, sleep disruption
Contextual	BoW (optional)	Topic capture

4. Experimental Setup and Results

This section details the datasets, baselines, evaluation protocols, and empirical findings. Experiments were conducted in R (caret package for modeling, tm/VIM for pre-processing) and WEKA (for kernel explorations). We evaluated both tweet-level (to establish baselines) and user-level classification, with primary focus on the latter for practical screening utility. Code and anonymized feature extracts are available for reproducibility [note: placeholder for repository].

4.1 Datasets

Three datasets were used:

- **60Users**: 30 self-disclosing + 30 controls (~120,000 tweets total, 2015 histories). Fully annotated at tweet-level (two annotators, kappa=0.72) and user-level (one annotator). Used for initial development and tweet-level experiments.

- **100Users**: Expanded balanced set for user-level validation (two annotators + third for conflicts, kappa=0.85). Predictions generated via top models.
- **CLPsych2015**: Public shared task dataset (~1,000 users, annotated for depression risk). Used for cross-dataset generalization (no re-annotation).

Severe imbalance persisted: distress tweets <5% in annotated sets.

Splits: 80/20 train/test (stratified by user class) or 10-fold CV. Held-out test sets ensured no leakage.

4.2 Baselines and Classifiers

We compared:

- Naive Bayes, k-NN, Random Forest (ensemble baseline).
- SVM variants: linear (primary), polynomial, radial, sigmoid kernels.
- Imbalance handling: none (original), undersampling, SMOTE, downsampling for tweet-level.

Key experiments (labeled as in thesis for traceability):

- Tweet-level: exp1-svm-down (top with undersampling, no BoW); exp2-4 (with BoW).
- User-level core: exp5-svm-original/SMOTE on 60Users; exp7-11 Random Forest/SVM on CLPsych.
- Improved: exp14-5/11 (hybrid rule excluding low-distress self-reporters from training, conservatively flagging them).
- Ablation: exp15 (1,116 features including extended lexicons).

Hyperparameters tuned via grid search (e.g., SVM cost C=1–10).

4.3 Evaluation Metrics

Prioritizing screening: recall (catch at-risk cases), precision (avoid unnecessary alarms), F1 (positive class). Accuracy de-emphasized due to imbalance (>95% baseline by predicting majority).

Two scenarios for self-reporters:

- Scenario A: Treat as "depressed."
- Scenario B: Treat as "not depressed."

4.4 Tweet-Level Results

Tweet-level classification proved challenging due to sparsity—most tweets neutral even from at-risk users.

Table 2: Summarizes Top Performers (20 Test Users Subset)

Experiment	Precision	Recall	F1
exp1-svm-down	0.142	0.765	0.240
exp2-svm-down	0.130	0.752	0.221
exp4-svm-down	0.128	0.741	0.218

Undersampling boosted recall over imbalanced baselines (~0.10–0.20 recall). BoW additions slightly degraded held-out performance, suggesting overfitting on sparse signals. 10-fold CV showed higher metrics (~0.80 recall for BoW models), highlighting generalization issues.

These modest results underscore tweet-level limitations: transient content lacks persistence for reliable distress detection.

4.5 User-Level Results

User-level aggregation yielded substantially stronger performance, validating timeline-based profiling.

Table 3: Scenario A/B on 60 Users/CLPsych (Exp 5–11)

Experiment	Precision	Recall	F1
exp5-svm-SMOTE	0.692	0.750	0.720
exp6-svm-original	0.778	0.625	0.693
exp11-rf (CLPsych)	0.714	0.714	0.714

Table 4: Improved Hybrid (Exp14)

Experiment	Precision	Recall	F1
exp14-5 (SVM-SMOTE hybrid)	0.778	0.875	0.824
exp14-11 (RF hybrid)	0.750	0.750	0.750

Table 5: Ablation and 100 Users Predictions (Exp14-5)

Dataset	Precision	Recall	F1
100Users	0.636	0.875	0.737

4.6 Discussion of Results

User-level outperforms tweet-level dramatically, supporting aggregation for persistent signals. Hybrid rule addresses self-reporting noise effectively, prioritizing recall for harm reduction. Feature-engineered SVM proves efficient and sensitive, rivaling resource-heavy alternatives in this imbalanced niche.

5. Discussion and Limitations

The findings of this study illuminate both the promise and the constraints of using Twitter data for proactive depression risk detection. By prioritizing user-level classification and a hybrid approach to handling noisy self-reports, the pipeline achieved a recall of 0.875 alongside precision of 0.778—metrics that prioritize sensitivity in a domain where missing at-risk cases carries profound consequences. This performance surpasses many classical baselines in imbalanced settings and offers a lightweight alternative to resource-intensive deep learning models dominant in recent literature.

5.1 Interpretation of Results

The stark contrast between tweet-level (low recall ~0.75, precision ~0.14) and user-level performance underscores a core insight: depression signals on social media are often sparse and persistent rather than concentrated in isolated posts. Individual tweets may reflect momentary emotions or unrelated topics, even from distressed users, leading to high noise and class imbalance at the granular level. Aggregation across timelines (~thousands of tweets per user) reveals behavioral patterns—elevated first-person pronouns, depression lexicon matches, reduced activity, or nocturnal posting—that align with established psychological markers, such as ruminative self-focus and sleep disruption.

The hybrid rule's impact proved pivotal: by conservatively flagging self-reported users with low distress tweets (<10%) as at-risk while classifying others via SVM, recall improved markedly without catastrophic precision loss. This reflects real-world ambiguities—remission, intermittent symptoms, or stigma-driven understatement—common in campaign data like BellLetsTalk. Error analysis further revealed the model's nuance: several "misclassifications" involved users annotators noted as vulnerable to future relapse, suggesting the pipeline captures implicit risk beyond explicit labels.

Compared to contemporaneous work, these results are competitive. While transformer-based models (e.g., BERT fine-tuning in 2023–2025 studies) achieve higher F1 on balanced benchmarks, they often underperform on severe imbalance or require vast compute. Our feature-engineered SVM, with ~10 core features, offers interpretability—e.g., traceable links to LIWC theory—and efficiency, training in minutes versus hours for LLMs. Cross-dataset testing on CLPsych2015 yielded comparable F1 (~0.75), indicating moderate generalizability despite temporal shifts (2015 vs. shared task eras).

Practically, high recall positions this as a screening tool: flagging users for non-intrusive resources (e.g., helpline links) rather than diagnosis. In population monitoring, it could augment awareness campaigns by identifying silent sufferers.

5.2 Broader Implications

This work contributes to the evolving field of digital phenotyping for mental health. By leveraging voluntary, public data, it exemplifies passive monitoring's potential scalability—reaching underserved populations avoiding clinical stigma. The emphasis on recall aligns with ethical imperatives in harm-reduction screening: false negatives risk delayed intervention (potentially escalating to suicidality), while false positives, though burdensome, can be mitigated through soft interventions.

Theoretically, results reinforce linguistic and behavioral theories of depression expression online. Elevated "I"-pronouns and lexicon hits echo Pennebaker's work on self-focused language in distress, while behavioral features capture anhedonia or circadian disruption.

For deployment, integration with platforms (e.g., triggered resource prompts for high-risk patterns) could enhance public health impact, though requiring careful governance to avoid misuse.

5.3 Limitations

Despite strengths, several limitations warrant caution.

First, **label quality and bias**: Ground truth relies on self-disclosure proxies and manual annotation. Self-reports may reflect past rather than current depression, introducing noise the hybrid rule only partially mitigates. Annotator subjectivity—though measured via kappa (~0.8)—and potential cultural biases (English-centric data) limit representativeness. Demographic imbalances (e.g., campaign participants skew younger/female) may reduce generalizability to diverse populations.

Second, **temporal and platform constraints**: Data from 2015 predates major interface changes (e.g., character limit expansion, algorithm shifts), potentially affecting posting behaviors. Twitter's evolving demographics and content moderation (post-2022 rebranding) raise questions about current applicability.

Third, **absence of clinical validation**: Annotations draw from symptom proxies, not DSM-5 diagnoses by professionals. This precludes claims of diagnostic accuracy; the pipeline detects risk signals, not confirmed illness. False positives could stigmatize, while cultural variations in expression (e.g., indirect language in non-Western contexts) may yield false negatives.

Fourth, **ethical and privacy risks**: Even public data involves sensitive inference. Predictive stigma—labeling users without consent—poses harm, particularly if models leak or are repurposed. Severe imbalance handling (SMOTE/undersampling) risks synthetic artifacts amplifying biases.

Fifth, **scope exclusions**: Multimodal signals (images, emojis, networks) were omitted, potentially missing richness captured in 2024–2025 studies. No longitudinal tracking beyond 2015 histories limits dynamic modeling of onset/remission.

Finally, evaluation on small held-out sets (~20–100 users) constrains statistical power; larger-scale validation is needed.

These limitations highlight the technology's supportive—not substitutive—role alongside clinical expertise.

5.4 Future Directions

Addressing gaps opens avenues: (1) Multimodal integration (e.g., image sentiment) for richer signals; (2) LLM prompting for zero-shot feature extraction, blending interpretability with power; (3) Partnerships for clinically validated datasets, enabling diagnostic benchmarks; (4) Cross-platform/generalization studies (e.g., Reddit, Instagram); (5) Ethical frameworks, including user opt-in monitoring or explainable outputs; (6) Real-time deployment pilots with crisis organizations, measuring intervention efficacy.

Ultimately, this work advances accessible, sensitive detection while urging responsible progression in computational mental health.

6. Conclusion and Future Work

This study has demonstrated the feasibility of proactive depression risk detection using publicly available Twitter data, addressing a critical gap in early mental health intervention. By curating real-world datasets from the BellLetsTalk awareness campaign and employing a rigorous multi-annotator labeling protocol, we moved beyond noisy self-reporting proxies to establish reliable ground truth. The proposed pipeline—integrating interpretable feature engineering (linguistic markers like first-person pronouns and depression lexicon counts, alongside behavioral signals such as distress tweet percentage) with systematic imbalance mitigation (undersampling, SMOTE)—culminated in a linear Support Vector Machine classifier enhanced by a novel hybrid rule. This rule conservatively flags self-disclosing users with subtle signals as at-risk, prioritizing recall (0.875) while maintaining solid precision (0.778) at the user level.

These results highlight several key advancements. First, user-level aggregation over full timelines dramatically outperforms tweet-level approaches, capturing persistent patterns of distress amid sparse, noisy posts—a finding that reinforces the value of longitudinal behavioral profiling in digital phenotyping. Second, the hybrid approach effectively navigates self-reporting biases inherent in campaign-driven data, where disclosures may reflect past rather than current symptoms. By blending rule-based caution with data-driven classification, the method achieves sensitivity suitable for screening contexts, where false negatives pose greater risk than manageable false positives. Third, in an era dominated by computationally intensive transformers and LLMs, this lightweight, explainable pipeline offers practical efficiency: rapid training, theoretical grounding in psychological constructs (e.g., ruminative self-focus), and performance competitive with deeper models on imbalanced benchmarks.

Broader implications extend to public health and digital ethics. In a world where depression affects millions yet stigma deters help-seeking, passive social media monitoring could democratize early signals—flagging vulnerable individuals for gentle nudges toward resources like helplines or campaigns. The emphasis on recall embodies a harm-reduction ethic: better to over-support than overlook suffering.

Moreover, reproducibility—through open tools (R caret, WEKA) and detailed protocols—invites community extension, fostering collaborative progress in computational mental health.

Yet, as discussed, this work is foundational rather than definitive. Limitations—temporal constraints (2015 data), lack of clinical validation, demographic biases, and ethical risks of predictive stigma—underscore that such tools must complement, not replace, professional care. False positives could erode trust; unaddressed cultural nuances might exacerbate inequities.

Looking ahead, several promising directions emerge to build on these foundations. First, **multimodal enrichment**: Incorporating images, emojis, or network interactions (e.g., reduced replies indicating isolation) could capture non-textual cues, as recent 2024–2025 studies suggest. Hybridizing with vision-language models might yield richer profiles without sacrificing interpretability.

Second, **clinical and longitudinal validation**: Partnerships with mental health professionals could enable datasets with gold-standard diagnoses (e.g., PHQ-9 aligned), facilitating dynamic modeling of onset, remission, or relapse. Extending to real-time streaming—monitoring evolving timelines—would support adaptive interventions.

Third, **integration of advanced AI with ethics-by-design**: Prompting LLMs (e.g., Grok or GPT variants) for zero-shot symptom extraction could augment features, while explainable interfaces (e.g., SHAP visualizations) demystify predictions. Crucially, user-centric frameworks—opt-in monitoring, transparent consent, and bias audits—must guide deployment to mitigate stigma.

Fourth, **cross-platform and cultural generalization**: Validating on diverse sources (Reddit for deeper narratives, Instagram for visual expression) and multilingual datasets would broaden applicability, addressing Western/English biases.

Fifth, **impact evaluation**: Pilot integrations with crisis organizations (e.g., triggered resource messages) could measure real-world outcomes: reduced isolation, increased help-seeking, or averted crises—bridging computational promise to tangible lives saved.

Ultimately, this research contributes a sensitive, ethical stepping stone toward compassionate AI in mental health. By illuminating subtle digital footprints of distress, it invites a future where technology not only detects vulnerability but fosters connection—reminding us that behind every data point lies a human story deserving empathy and support.

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