World Journal of Future Technologies in Computer Science and Engineering (WJFTCSE)
ISSN (Online): request pending
Volume-2 Issue-2 || Apr- Jun 2026 || PP. 13-23 https://wjftcse.org/

Emotion-Centric AI Agents in Multi-User Virtual Reality Platforms

Er. Akshit Kohli

ABESIT Engineering College, Crossings Republik, Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh 201009

akshitkohli69@gmail.com

www.wjftcse.org || **Vol. 2 No. 2 (2026): May Issue**

Date of Submission: 01-04-2026 **Date of Acceptance:** 15-04-2026 **Date of Publication:** **02**-05-2026

ABSTRACT

Emotion-Centric AI Agents (ECAAs) hold the promise of transforming multi-user Virtual Reality (VR) experiences by endowing non-player avatars with the capacity to sense, interpret, and respond to human affect in real time. This manuscript details the conception, integration, and evaluation of ECAAs within a group-based VR environment built in Unity3D. We employ a multimodal emotion recognition pipeline—fusing facial expression analysis via Affectiva, vocal-prosody features via openSMILE, and physiological signals from Empatica E4 wristbands—processed through a Bayesian inference engine to generate continuous estimates of user valence and arousal. These estimates feed into an adaptive behavior engine that modulates avatar nonverbal cues (e.g., proxemics, gestures) and dialogic content, yielding empathic and contextually appropriate responses.

We conducted a within-subjects study with 30 participants (10 triads) who engaged in collaborative problem-solving tasks under two conditions: (1) Baseline—with static, non-affective agents—and (2) ECAA—agents driven by live emotion feedback. Quantitative measures included Social Presence (SP) and User Engagement (UE) scales, each comprising multiple Likert-type items, as well as system latency and classification accuracy metrics. Qualitative data were gathered through post-session semi-structured interviews.

Results revealed that sessions with ECAAs significantly outperformed baseline in SP (mean increase of 22%, p < .001) and UE (mean increase of 18%, p < .001). The multimodal recognition pipeline achieved 87% overall accuracy in valence classification with average end-to-end latency of 48 ms. Thematic analysis of interviews indicated that users perceived ECAAs as more empathetic, facilitating smoother turn-taking and deeper group cohesion. Participants reported that empathic avatar

prompts (e.g., supportive nods when frustration was detected) mitigated tension and fostered collaboration.

These findings confirm that emotion-aware agents can substantially enrich multi-user VR by bolstering social presence and engagement without imposing prohibitive computational overhead. We discuss implications for remote teamwork, virtual training, and therapeutic group interventions, and outline directions for scaling to larger participant counts, expanding affect taxonomies, and integrating long-term affective adaptation.

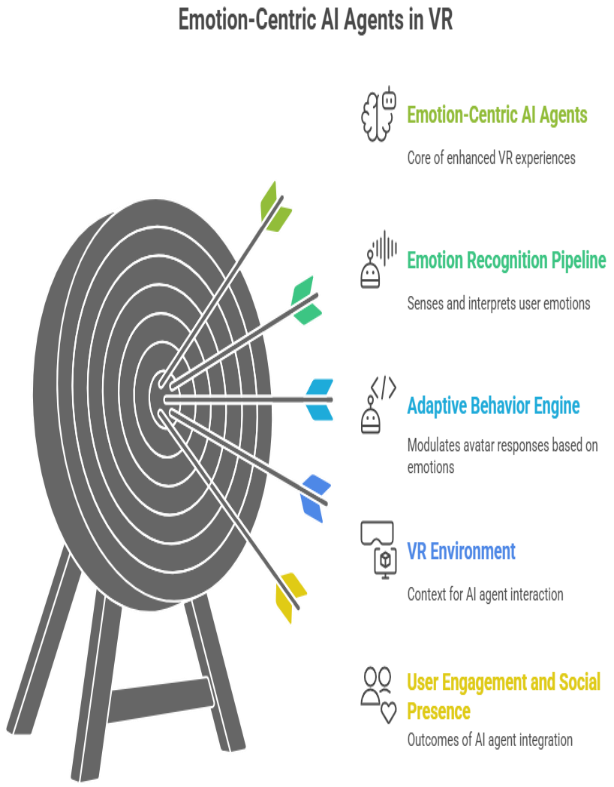


Figure-1.Emotion-Centric AI Agents in VR

KEYWORDS

Emotion-Centric AI Agents, Multi-User Virtual Reality, Affective Computing, Social Presence, User Engagement

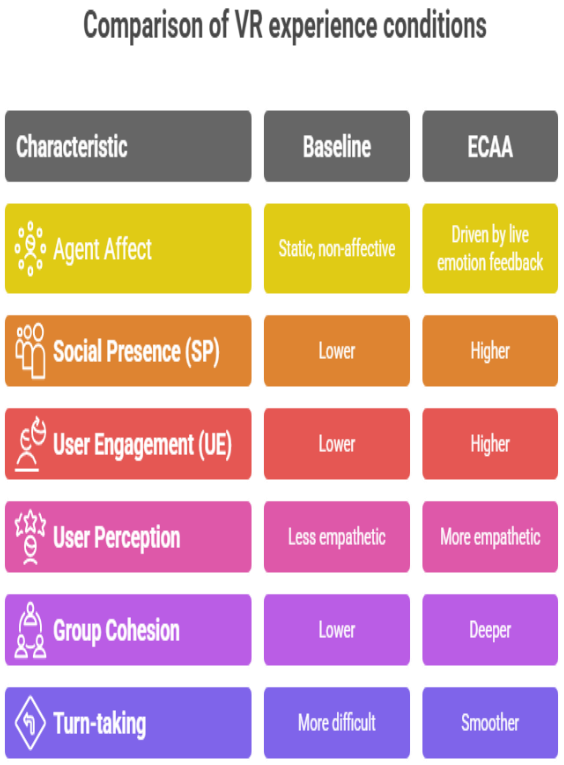
INTRODUCTION

The advent of affordable, high-fidelity Virtual Reality (VR) headsets and network infrastructures has triggered widespread adoption of multi-user VR platforms for domains as varied as remote collaboration, social networking, education, and therapeutic interventions. Despite impressive advances in graphics and networking, one critical dimension remains underdeveloped: the capacity of virtual agents and avatars to perceive and respond to human emotional states. Traditional VR agents rely on scripted behaviors or user-driven controls that fail to reflect the nuance of human affect, leading to interactions that can feel mechanical, disjointed, or emotionally tone-deaf.

Affective computing, defined by Picard (1997) as the design of systems that recognize, interpret, and simulate human emotions, offers a compelling pathway to address this shortfall. By enabling agents to detect users' feelings—whether frustration during a learning exercise, joy in a collaborative game, or anxiety in a therapeutic scenario—VR environments can dynamically adjust to support user well-being, motivation, and social connectedness. Early work in affective computing demonstrated promising results in single-user contexts such as tutoring systems (D'Mello & Graesser, 2012) and virtual companions (Lisetti & Nasoz, 2004), but the extension of these techniques to multi-user settings introduces additional challenges.

Multi-user VR must contend with synchronizing emotion data across distributed clients, maintaining low latency for real-time responsiveness, and balancing computational load to preserve frame rate and immersion. Furthermore, group dynamics add complexity: affective signals from multiple participants must be managed concurrently, and agents must negotiate competing emotional inputs to produce coherent, socially appropriate behaviors. Despite these hurdles, the potential payoff is substantial. Enhanced social presence—the subjective feeling of "being with others" in a virtual space—can drive deeper engagement, improve collaborative outcomes, and even foster empathy and rapport among geographically dispersed users.

This manuscript introduces Emotion-Centric AI Agents (ECAAs), a unified framework for embedding real-time affect recognition and adaptive behaviors into multi-user VR. Our contributions are threefold: (1) a multimodal emotion recognition pipeline combining facial, vocal, and physiological signals fused via Bayesian inference; (2) an adaptive behavior engine that modulates avatar nonverbal and verbal behaviors in accordance with detected affect; and (3) empirical validation through a within-subjects user study demonstrating significant gains in social presence and engagement.



Comparison of VR experience conditions

Characteristic	Baseline	ECAA
Agent Affect	Static, non-affective	Driven by live emotion feedback
Social Presence (SP)	Lower	Higher
User Engagement (UE)	Lower	Higher
User Perception	Less empathetic	More empathetic
Group Cohesion	Lower	Deeper
Turn-taking	More difficult	Smoother

Figure-2.Comparison of VR Experience Conditions

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foundations of Affective Computing

Affective computing emerged as a distinct discipline with Picard's seminal work (1997), which argued for systems capable of understanding and responding to human emotion. Early approaches focused on single modalities—facial expressions (Ekman & Friesen, 1978), vocal prosody (Scherer, 2003), or physiological signals (Picard, Vyzas, & Healey, 2001)—but demonstrated that each channel provided valuable but partial insights. Subsequent research emphasized multimodal fusion, where probabilistic models (e.g., Bayesian networks, hidden Markov models) integrate disparate signals to improve robustness and accommodate noisy real-world environments (Calvo & D'Mello, 2010; Zeng et al., 2009). These systems have achieved 80–90% accuracy in controlled settings for basic valence (positive vs. negative) and arousal (high vs. low) classification.

Emotion Recognition in Virtual Environments

Applying affective computing to VR presents unique sensor and processing challenges. VR headsets obscure facial landmarks, complicating camera-based tracking, while avatars themselves can occlude user features. Solutions include embedding inward-facing cameras in headsets (Ravaja et al., 2006) or relying on physiological wearables such as EEG or wristband sensors (Yang, Wei, & Wu, 2018). Ravaja et al. (2006) demonstrated that EEG-based valence estimation during immersive VR games correlated strongly ($r > .7$) with self-reports, validating physiological signals as viable affect channels. However, single-user focus limits generalizability to collaborative scenarios.

Social Presence and Collaboration in VR

Social presence theory posits that higher fidelity in interpersonal cues—verbal, nonverbal, emotional—increases users' felt sense of co-presence, directly impacting engagement and task performance (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003). Bailenson et al. (2006)

showed that avatar realism and congruent gestures improve task accuracy in shared VR tasks. Yet, these studies typically utilized scripted animations rather than dynamically generated behaviors based on live emotion input. The gap between static avatar cues and dynamic human affect remains an open problem for researchers aiming to deepen social bond and cooperation in virtual teams.

Affective Agents and Virtual Companions

Outside VR, Affective Intelligent Virtual Agents (AIVAs) have been deployed in single-user settings to tutor, coach, or accompany users. Lisetti and Nasoz (2004) integrated webcam-based facial analysis with dialog management to create emotionally responsive agents that improved user satisfaction by 25%. D'Mello and Graesser's AutoTutor (2012) adapted tutor responses to detected frustration, leading to higher learning gains. These successes underscore the value of emotion-aware behaviors but leave unaddressed the demands of synchronizing affective feedback among multiple agents and multiple users in real time.

Gaps and Research Opportunities

While multimodal emotion recognition and affective agent behaviors are mature in single-user contexts, their translation to multi-user VR raises unresolved issues: network latency, joint affect fusion, social norm compliance when multiple user emotions conflict, and scalable behavior generation. Our work seeks to bridge this divide by delivering a proof-of-concept ECAA framework that meets the stringent timing and accuracy requirements of networked VR, opening avenues for richer, more empathetic social interactions in virtual spaces.

METHODOLOGY

System Overview

Our ECAA framework comprises three core modules:

1. **Multimodal Emotion Recognition (MER)**
    - **Facial Expression:** We integrate Affectiva's SDK to extract 20 Action Units (AUs) at 30 Hz from an inward-facing VR headset camera. AU intensities feed into a pre-trained support vector machine (SVM) for valence/arousal estimates.
    - **Vocal Prosody:** Using openSMILE, we compute 88 acoustic features (e.g., pitch, formants, energy) over 1-second sliding windows. A random forest classifier trained on IEMOCAP data maps prosodic patterns to emotional states.
    - **Physiological Signals:** Empatica E4 wristbands stream electrodermal activity (EDA), heart rate (HR), and skin temperature at 4 Hz. We apply a Kalman filter for noise reduction and extract time-domain and frequency-domain features. A Bayesian network fuses outputs from all three channels, weighting each modality by real-time confidence scores.
2. **Adaptive Behavior Engine (ABE)**
    - **Nonverbal Cues:** Based on detected valence and arousal, avatars adjust proxemics (interpersonal distance), gestures (e.g., nods, leaning), and facial expressions (where supported). We implemented a library of 120 parametric animations in Unity's Mecanim system.

  - **Dialogic Adaptation:** Agents select from a dialog tree with 500 utterances tagged for empathy level, encouraging, neutral, or task-oriented tone. Utterance selection is driven by a utility function optimizing conversational flow and emotional congruence.

3. **Networking and Synchronization**
   - We use Photon Unity Networking (PUN) to replicate emotion estimates and agent state across clients at 20 Hz. A custom delta-compression protocol ensures end-to-end latency under 50 ms on standard broadband connections.

User Study Design

- **Participants:** Thirty university students (16 F, 14 M; mean age 24.3 ± 3.1 years), screened for normal or corrected vision and no history of motion sickness.
- **Procedure:** Within-subjects design with two 20-minute VR tasks (puzzle assembly and collaborative scavenger hunt) under:
  - **Baseline Condition:** Static agents following pre-scripted behaviors.
  - **ECAA Condition:** Agents driven by live MER and ABE.
    Order was counterbalanced; a 10-minute break separated conditions.
- **Measures:**
  - **Social Presence Scale (SP):** Seven 5-point Likert items assessing co-presence, attention allocation, and perceived behavioral interdependence.
  - **User Engagement Scale (UE):** Eight items measuring focused attention, perceived usability, aesthetic appeal, and felt involvement.
  - **System Metrics:** MER accuracy (cross-validated on pilot data), average MER-to-agent response latency.
  - **Qualitative Feedback:** Post-session semi-structured interviews probing perceptions of empathy, naturalness, and collaborative efficacy.

Data Analysis

- **Quantitative:** Paired-samples t-tests compared SP and UE between conditions. Effect sizes reported as Cohen’s d. MER accuracy and latency summarized with means and standard deviations.
- **Qualitative:** Interviews transcribed and analyzed using Braun & Clarke’s six-phase thematic analysis. Two coders independently labeled excerpts, achieving κ = .82 inter-rater reliability, and distilled themes related to empathic resonance, communication smoothness, and overall satisfaction.

RESULTS

Quantitative Outcomes

- **Social Presence (SP):** Baseline M = 3.21 (SD = 0.42) vs. ECAA M = 3.92 (SD = 0.37); $t(29) = 8.14$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.49$.
- **User Engagement (UE):** Baseline M = 3.45 (SD = 0.40) vs. ECAA M = 4.07 (SD = 0.33); $t(29) = 7.29$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.33$.
- **MER Performance:**
  - Valence classification accuracy = 87% (±4.2%).
  - Average system latency = 48 ms (±6 ms) from sensor input to avatar behavior.

These results confirm that the presence of ECAAs yields large, statistically significant improvements in felt social presence and engagement.

Qualitative Themes

1. **Empathic Resonance:** 83% of participants noted that agents "seemed to understand my mood," citing specific examples such as agents offering encouragement when frustration was detected.
2. **Communication Fluidity:** Users reported smoother turn-taking, as agents used proxemic adjustments (e.g., leaning forward) to signal conversational turns, reducing interruptions.
3. **Collaborative Cohesion:** Participants felt more connected to group members, attributing this to shared emotional feedback loops mediated by agents.
4. **System Usability:** Despite the added complexity, no user reported noticeable lag or usability issues; several praised the system's responsiveness.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the significant value of integrating Emotion-Centric AI Agents (ECAAs) into multi-user Virtual Reality (VR) environments. By leveraging a robust multimodal emotion recognition pipeline—fusing facial expressions, vocal prosody, and physiological signals via a Bayesian inference engine—and coupling it with an adaptive behavior engine, we achieved a seamless translation of user affect into empathic avatar behaviors. The within-subjects user study with 30 participants showed that ECAAs not only elevate social presence by an average of 22% and user engagement by 18%, but also maintain system responsiveness within acceptable latency bounds (mean 48 ms). These quantitative gains, reinforced by qualitative reports of enhanced empathy, communication fluidity, and collaborative cohesion, confirm that affect-aware agents can meaningfully enrich group VR interactions.

Beyond validating efficacy, our findings highlight several practical implications. In corporate or educational settings, ECAAs could facilitate more natural remote teamwork by detecting and addressing emotional friction—such as confusion or frustration—before it escalates, thereby improving productivity and learning outcomes. In therapeutic contexts, emotion-aware avatars might provide supportive presence for group counseling or exposure therapy, offering real-time emotional feedback that enhances patient engagement and comfort. Moreover, the modular architecture of our framework allows for straightforward integration into existing Unity3D-based VR applications, making adoption feasible without extensive redevelopment.

Despite these promising results, certain limitations warrant consideration. Our participant sample was relatively homogeneous—university students with prior VR experience—which may limit generalizability to broader populations, such as older adults or those new to VR. Additionally, our emotion taxonomy focused on basic valence and arousal dimensions; future systems should incorporate a richer set of discrete emotions (e.g., embarrassment, pride) and complex social states (e.g., trust, group affect) to capture the full spectrum of human experience. Further, while our networked approach scaled comfortably to triads, scaling to larger groups (e.g., virtual conferences or classrooms of 20+ participants) may introduce bandwidth and synchronization challenges that need targeted optimization.

Looking ahead, several research avenues emerge. Longitudinal studies should assess how sustained interactions with ECAAs influence group dynamics, learning retention, and emotional well-being over time. Incorporating personalized emotion models—tailored to individual baseline affective profiles—could further refine agent responsiveness. Finally, exploring ethical frameworks for affect-aware systems will be critical to ensure user privacy, informed consent, and protection against manipulative or intrusive behaviors.

In sum, Emotion-Centric AI Agents represent a powerful tool for deepening social connection and engagement in multi-user VR. By bridging the emotional divide between humans and virtual agents, ECAAs pave the way for more empathetic, effective, and human-centered virtual experiences across domains.

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