

# Neural Profiling With fNIRS of Operator Performance in Teleoperated Human-Like Social Robot Interactions

David Achancaray<sup>1</sup>, Javier Andreu-Perez<sup>2</sup>, and Hidenobu Sumioka<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract**—Social robot teleoperation is a skill that must be acquired through practice with the social robot. Mobile neuroimaging and human-computer interface performance metrics permit the gathering of information from the operators’ systemic and behavioral responses associated with their skill acquisition. Profiling the skill levels of social robot operators using this information can help improve training protocols. In this study, thirty-two participants performed real-world social robot teleoperation tasks. Brain function signals from the prefrontal cortex (PFC), and behavioral data from interactions with the system were collected using functional near-infrared spectroscopy (fNIRS). Participants were divided into two groups (high and low performance) based on an integrative metric of task efficiency, workload, and presence when operating the social robot. Significant differences were found in the operation time, width, and multiscale entropy of the hemoglobin oxygenation curve of the operator’s PFC. Functional connectivity in the PFC also depicted differences in the low- and high-performance groups when connectivity networks were compared and in the leaf fraction metrics of the functional networks. These findings contribute to understanding the operator’s progress during teleoperation training protocols and designing the interface to assist in enhancing task performance.

**Index Terms**—Telerobotics and teleoperation, social HRI, neural profile, human-centered robotics, humanoid robot systems.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

SOCIAL interactions shape human behavior. However, limitations, such as mobility, safety, or cultural context, might affect people’s social development. Teleoperation of a humanoid robot could be an alternative to overcome these issues for a dyadic (robotic avatar-human) interaction [1], [2], [3], [4]. Nevertheless, the operator’s performance is influenced by human factors, such as emotions, mental state, and workload [5]. These factors can be reflected in brain activity due to the involvement of cognitive and affective processes during social interactions [6]. A neural analysis to determine the operator’s performance profile might provide an understanding of neural mechanisms related to teleoperation skills [7].

There are many techniques to record brain activity, such as electroencephalography (EEG) and functional near-infrared spectroscopy (fNIRS). EEG is the most used non-invasive technique owing to its high temporal resolution and affordable cost. fNIRS is a promising non-invasive technique owing to its high spatial resolution. fNIRS is more robust compared to EEG for motor artifacts and more resilient to electromagnetic interference than EEG [8]. It makes it suitable for recording the operator’s brain activity [7].

This technology measures the concentration changes of hemoglobin oxygenation (HbO) and hemoglobin deoxygenation (HbR) at multiple cortex locations [9]. Activated brain regions reach an increase in HbO and a decrease in HbR. This effect is known as the hemodynamic response [10].

Recently, technological advances in fNIRS have allowed the analysis of relationships between brain activity and cognitive processes in virtual and outside environments. These applications were focused on naturalistic environments (real-world situations) and social cognitive tasks. The prefrontal cortex (PFC) is known as the brain’s cognitive center [7]. The PFC is a large brain region that supports cognitive processes related to voluntary and self-initiated behavior in response to situations with no predetermined limits. These processes are attention control, concentration, decision-making, social processing, and anxiety. They are affected by stress and workload. fNIRS fits effectively with studies about monitoring PFC activity due to its practical features [10], [11].

In this work, we decoded the fNIRS-based neural profile of the operator’s performance during teleoperated social interactions by fNIRS data features and functional connectivity in

PFC. These interactions were contextualized in the reception of a clinic, where a questioner asked for information to the human-like social robot, which was operated remotely to execute actions and answer questions. In addition, performance metrics, workload, and presence were assessed. This profiler can be useful in human-robot interaction to estimate the level of the operator's trust. It might also trigger some autonomous control and correct the operator if necessary. The main highlights of this work are the following:

- To the best of our knowledge, the first study of neuro-monitoring of the hemodynamic response in PFC of the operators' performance in a social scenario using a humanoid robotic avatar.
- Significant differences and relationships in robot interaction metrics and PFC responses were found among high- and low-performing operators.

Our research question was: How can neural profiling using fNIRS of PFC activity and functional connectivity help in distinguishing between high- and low-performance operators during teleoperated human-like social robot interactions?

The hypotheses are described as follows:

- H1: There are significant differences in the hemodynamic response between high- and low-performance operators during teleoperated social interactions.
- H2: Functional connectivity patterns in the PFC differ between high- and low-performance groups.
- H3: Neural profiling using fNIRS data can effectively predict and distinguish operator performance levels.

This article proceeds as follows: in Section II, related work is outlined; in Section III, the materials and methods are detailed; in Section IV, the results of the analysis are elucidated; in Section V, these results are discussed and contextualized with the current literature; in Section VI, the limitations are mentioned; and finally, Section VII summarizes the findings and concludes the article.

## II. RELATED WORKS

Regarding fNIRS, several cognitive processes and mental state detection have been approached based on fNIRS in the PFC. The most common features extracted from fNIRS data were the mean, variance, skewness, kurtosis, slope, amplitude, and zero-crossing [6]. The HbO level was higher in the combined gait and cognitive tasks than in the walking task alone [12]. The multiscale entropy of HbO also was a complexity index in a visual memory task [13]. Another feature was the power spectrum, which was a neuromarker of deception (spontaneous) behavior during a poker game and a mental stress index during a modified Stroop color word task. This feature was higher under demanding conditions [14]. Other feature was the laterality index, which was used to distinguish the short-term effect of meditation in attention control during the Stroop color word task [15].

Cognitive processes require synchronized information flow within specialized functional networks in the brain. This mechanism underlying brain coordination is known as functional connectivity [16]. Cognitive tasks, such as a pattern recognition

test, increased functional connectivity based on the hemodynamic response compared to the resting state. Network metrics distinguished the mental workload of both states [17]. Neural synchrony also was an important technique to evaluate engagement and task complexity. HbO/HbR wavelet transform coherence to measure team engagement in a simulation of crisis event management training of a team of anesthesiologists [18], and Brain prefrontal-motor connectivity was more resilient in senior surgical residents under temporal demand [11].

Regarding teleoperation, the latency affected functional connectivity based on fNIRS. The latency increased mental demand, anxiety, and complexity in operators during motion planning and control tasks. Functional connectivity increased within and between the PFC and motor cortex. This effect was mitigated with haptic feedback by reducing the average functional connectivity in all networks [7], [19]. However, HbO and HbR levels did not detect workload variations in a teleoperated ring-on-a-wire task [20]. In a gaming context (comparable to teleoperation), a reduced HbO level in the cortex indicated an attentional demand increase. This HbO level decrease was also a successful performance indicator on attending-demanding distraction tasks [21]. Another gaming work estimated the gamer's expertise based on spectroscopy time series and emotion prediction from facial expressions by training a multimodal supervised deep-learning model [22]. This framework might support the game design based on the gamer's neural response.

Finally, the difference between HbO and HbR levels in the PFC predicted the participant's performance in a variant go-stop task and different workload conditions, which incorporated 3 different types of trials (Go, Ignore, and Inhibit) [23]. The PFC activity reveals relevant information related to task strategy and skill acquisition. Thus, fNIRS data features and network metrics provide a set of biomarkers to model a neural profile. They could estimate the operator's expertise or performance level in teleoperated social tasks.

## III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

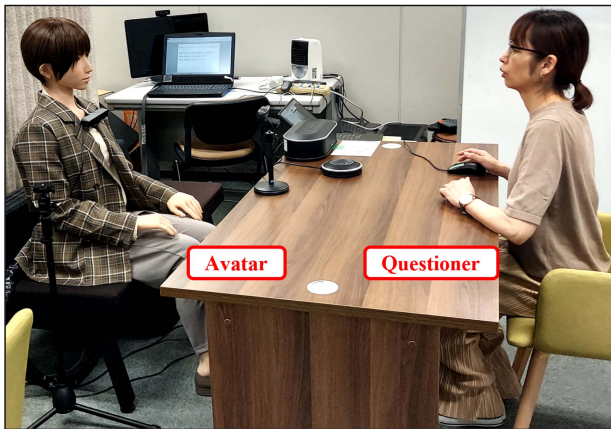
In the following section, we will outline the participant cohort (III-A) used for this experiment, the hardware (III-B), and the experimental settings (III-C). This will be followed by the performance and physiological indices used (Sections III-D and III-E) in the analysis (III-F).

### A. Participants

Thirty-two healthy participants, 18 males and 14 females, participated in this experiment. Participants were between 19 and 36 years old (Mean = 23.16 and SD = 4.27) and did not belong to a specific working sector. All the participants were right-handed. They had no background in neurological diseases and no experience in teleoperation systems. Before the experiment, each participant signed an informed consent form. This document was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Advanced Telecommunications Research (ATR) Institute International (Japan). In addition, participants received an economic compensation of ¥/4,000 (US\$/27.00 approximately).



(a)



(b)

Fig. 1. Teleoperation of the robotic avatar “Erica” for performing social tasks. (a) The operator was manipulating the humanoid robotic avatar “Erica” through the teleoperation interface in the local environment. (b) The questioner was interacting with the robotic avatar in the remote environment.

### B. Experimental Setup

All the participants carried out experiments using the humanoid robot “Erica” for teleoperated social tasks [1]. Participants manipulated the avatar “Erica” by a teleoperation interface in a local environment (Fig. 1(a)). An individual (questioner) interacted with each participant through the robotic avatar in a remote environment (Fig. 1(b)). Erica’s teleoperation interface allows her to perform facial expressions of emotions, such as sad (negative) and happy (positive). This interface also allows her to execute hand (left and right) movements, such as palm up, pointing, palm side, and raising hand. In addition, the teleoperation interface has an auto-option to express emotions based on the embedded audio and image processing. The teleoperation interface was shown on a 24-inch touchscreen, which eased the avatar Erica’s manipulation. Another 24-inch screen was used in the remote environment, which showed the question list to the questioner. Each screen was connected to a PC. Both PCs had the following features: Windows 11 operating system, Intel Core i7-11700 CPU at up to 4.9 GHz, 32 GB RAM, and Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070 GPU. An interface for synchronizing the social task stages was developed in Python and superposed to Erica’s teleoperation interface. This interface ran on both PCs, captured the mouse’s events caused by the operator and

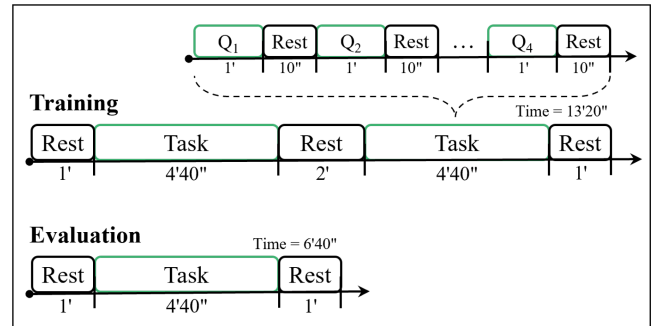


Fig. 2. Timeline of the training and evaluation sessions. The social task consisted of 4 questions ( $Q_1, \dots, Q_4$ ) asked by the questioner to the operator. Then, the operator answered each question and executed actions.

questioner, and sent this data by the lab streaming layer (LSL<sup>1</sup>) system. Additionally, this interface was communicated by TCP to the open app LabRecorder.<sup>2</sup> LabRecorder received and saved the data streamed through the LSL system. The brain activity was recorded by a fNIRS device WOT-HS (NeU Corporation). This device acquired the hemoglobin response from 34 optodes and was mounted in the participant’s PFC. The space between optodes were 21 mm and 32 mm. The wavelengths of LED<sup>3</sup> sources were 730 nm and 855 nm and the sampling rate was 10 Hz.

### C. Experimental Procedure

The experiment consisted of performing communication tasks. This social task had verbal and non-verbal sections as a face-to-face interaction between two persons. Participants teleoperated a receptionist robot (avatar) to answer questions (verbal section) and carry out actions (non-verbal section). These actions were emotions and hand movements. The robotic avatar was located in a room in the ATR building in Kyoto, which emulated the human-robot interaction in the entrance of the ATR building, but in the context of a clinic’s reception for this experiment.

Each participant performed a training session and an evaluation session (Fig. 2). Before the training session, participants took a working memory test (digit span memory test) because they should memorize the behavioral rules according to the type of question that will be asked to the robotic avatar during the sessions. In the working memory test, they had to memorize sequences of 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 digits [24]. We used the Digit Span Tester<sup>4</sup> to evaluate the participants. Then, they memorized the behavioral rules (Table I) for 2 minutes and were evaluated with a test for 1 minute. We assigned weights to the type of question empirically; the ATR lab staff, who assisted during the experiments, rated the complexity of questions between 1 and 5. These mean scores were assigned as question weights. Next, participants had a practical session, which was similar to the

<sup>1</sup>LSL: <https://github.com/scen/labstreaminglayer>

<sup>2</sup>LabRecorder: <https://github.com/labstreaminglayer/App-LabRecorder>

<sup>3</sup>LED: Light-emitting diode.

<sup>4</sup>Digit Span Tester: <https://sourceforge.net/projects/digits-pantester>

TABLE I  
BEHAVIORAL RULES (NON-VERBAL) FOR THE OPERATOR BY THE TYPE  
OF QUESTIONS

Type of Question	Weight	Emotion	Hand Movement
Location	2.0	Auto	Pointing
Health insurance validity	4.5	Positive/Negative	Palm side
Availability	2.5	Auto	Palm up
Complaint	3.0	Auto	Palm side
Greeting	1.0	Positive	Raise hand

training session, but it consisted of 2 or 4 questions, depending on whether they understood the procedure.

The training session consisted of two blocks of social tasks and three blocks of resting. Each social task block had four questions and a break between them. The questioner asked the participant these questions. Then, the participants responded to them verbally and non-verbally. Participants answered the questions using the information located next to the touchscreen (Fig. 1(a)); the questioner asked for doctors' availability, health insurance, department's location, complaints, and greetings. The question lists were created randomly and shown on a screen to the questioner. The same number of questions were pooled from each category across participants. After the training session, participants answered workload and presence tests. The NASA-TLX workload test [25], which rated six task load subscales (mental demand, physical demand, temporal demand, performance satisfaction, effort, frustration) between 1 and 10 and provided an overall workload score. Then, each subscale score was normalized between 0 and 1. The presence test was the adapted Slater-Usoh-Steed (SUS) questionnaire [26], [27] to our study. The SUS test consists of six questions ( $q_i, i = 1, \dots, 6$ ) rated on a scale of 1 to 7, and the mean score provides an overall presence score. This test assessed the feeling of being in a virtual environment ( $q_{P1} = \text{mean}(q_1, q_4)$ ), if it becomes the dominant reality ( $q_{P2} = \text{mean}(q_2, q_6)$ ), and if it is remembered as a real place ( $q_{P3} = \text{mean}(q_3, q_5)$ ).

The evaluation session had one block of social tasks and two blocks of resting. In addition, participants watched a black screen during the resting blocks of both sessions.

#### D. Performance Metrics

We considered 3 metrics for assessing the operator's performance. These metrics were the operation time, verbal answer score, and non-verbal answer score. Since errors increase under high cognitive load, that could produce a slow response, resulting in low performance [28]. The operation time (OT) is the total time of the operator's response. It was measured from the questioner ending the question until the operator finished the verbal and non-verbal answers. Then, the normalized operation time ( $OTn$ ) was calculated as shown in (1). The verbal answer score was 0 or 1 if the provided information by the operator was wrong or correct, respectively. The non-verbal answer score was 0 if the executed actions (emotion and hand movement) were wrong, 0.5 if an executed action was correct at least, and 1 if both executed actions were correct.

$$OTn_i = OT_i/W_i, \quad (1)$$

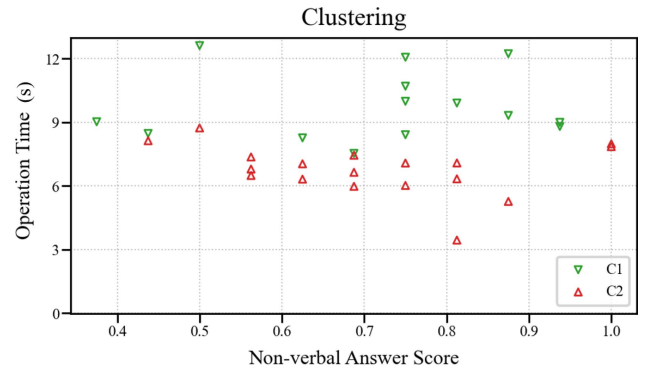


Fig. 3. Separability visualization (operation time vs. non-verbal answer score) of the groups (C1 and C2) generated by the GMM Clustering. These groups were associated with low and high performance, respectively.

where,  $i$  is the number of question in a session,  $OTn_i$  is the normalized  $OT_i$ , and  $W_i$  is the question's weight according to Table I.

Next, a Gaussian mixture model (GMM) was trained for clustering using the training session data. This GMM separated the participants into 2 groups: C1 and C2 (Fig. 3), which we searched to associate with low- and high-performance. The GMM had 2 components and was trained with the mean  $OTn$ , mean verbal answer score, mean non-verbal answer score, working memory test score, workload test score, and presence test score of each participant. The Davies-Bouldin clustering index was 0.798. This index indicated that the clusters were well-separated.

#### E. Hemodynamic Response

The HbO and HbR signals for 34 channels (optodes) were computed from fNIRS data by using the modified Beer-Lambert Law [29]. Both signals were filtered to remove artifacts by a six-order Butterworth bandpass filter with cutoff frequencies of 0.05 Hz and 0.4 Hz. The signal-to-noise ratio (SNR) was evaluated in all signals; then, signals with SNR below 15 were discarded. Next, the HbO and HbR signals were segmented by finding the first positive peak during the operation time, in which the time limits of this peak defined the time interval for signal segments. Then, we computed several features of both signals. These features were the amplitude peak (maximum), mean, variance, skewness, kurtosis, width (or period), area under the curve (AUC), laterality index, and multiscale entropy. The mean of each feature for valid channels was used in the analysis. Next, the features of both GMM groups were compared statistically.

#### F. Analysis

Performance groups were statistically compared using performance metrics, test scores, fNIRS features, and connectivity network metrics. We applied the Shapiro-Wilk (S-W) test to verify the normal distribution of features. When the normal distribution was verified, a t-test was used for pairwise comparisons. The significance level was 5%. When the data deviated from a normal distribution, a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U (MWU) test was adopted to find the statistically significant differences between pairwise comparisons. The significance

TABLE II  
SUMMARY OF METRICS USED IN THE ANALYSIS

Type	Metrics	Definition
Performance	Normalized operation time	Time to complete a response
	Verbal answer score	Correct response score
	Non-verbal answer score	Correct behavioral action score
Workload Test	Mental demand,	Self-reported rating of
	Physical demand,	NASA-TLX workload
	Temporal demand,	test's subscales
	Performance satisfaction,	
	Effort, Frustration	
	Overall workload	Overall rating
Presence Test	Six questions	Self-reported rating of SUS
		presence test's questions
	Subscales: $qP_1$ , $qP_2$ , $qP_3$	Mean of score pairwise
	Overall presence	Mean rating
HbO Signal Features	Amplitude peak	Positive peak's maximum
	Mean, Variance,	Statistical metrics
	Kurtosis, Skewness	
	Width	Duration of the positive peak
	AUC	Area under the positive peak
	Laterality index	Hemispheric dominance
	Multiscale entropy	Complexity of the signal
	Degree	Number of links of a node
	Betweenness centrality	Normalized number of shortest paths between two nodes
	Network-based statistic	Identification of common connections or patterns between groups under different conditions
Network-Wise Functional Connectivity	Diameter	Normalized largest distance between two nodes
	Leaf fraction	Normalized leaf number, where the leaf number is the number of nodes with only one connection
	Tree hierarchy	Characterization of an optimal topology
	Kappa	Broadness measure of the degree distribution

level was also 5%. In addition, the Spearman correlation with a significance level of 5% was applied to find associations between metrics. In this analysis, correlation ( $\rho$ ) levels were defined, such as strong ( $0.7 \leq |\rho| \leq 1$ ), moderate ( $0.4 \leq |\rho| < 0.7$ ), and weak ( $0.1 \leq |\rho| < 0.4$ ).

The functional connectivity analysis was carried out by calculating the adjacency matrix using the weighted phase lag index (WPLI) metric. WPLI is a more robust version of the phase lag index (PLI) metric to overcome field spread, noise, and sample-size bias issues. WPLI and PLI estimate the phase difference between signals for a specific frequency band [30]. In brain network analysis by graph theory, it is important to identify relevant connections. Usually, a threshold of connection weights is used. However, choosing an arbitrary threshold yields poor reproducibility and limited interpretation of results. A solution to the ‘‘thresholding problem’’ is the Minimum spanning tree (MST), which is a method that generates a subgraph based on the minimization of the sum of the weights [31]. The MST is unique, reliable, and reproducible. In addition, conventional network topology metrics can be applied to characterize the MST. We computed graph metrics in node-wise, edge-wise, and network-wise categories of low- and high-performance group networks [32], [33], [34], [35]. All metrics are summarized in Table II.

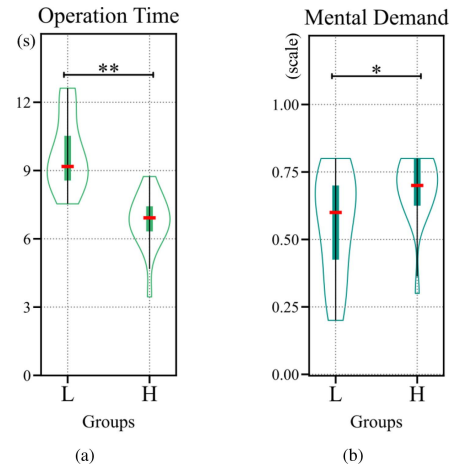


Fig. 4. Comparison of metrics from participants with low (L) and high (H) performance in the training session. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , Median: red line. (a) Mean normalized operation time. (b) Mental demand.

## IV. RESULTS

The results are presented as follows: the statistical results from the questionnaires are detailed in Section IV-A. In Section IV-B, we outline the differences among various hemodynamic signal descriptors, concluding with an analysis of functional connectivity in the PFC (Section IV-C).

### A. Performance Metrics and Test Scores

The comparison of performance metrics between groups in the training session is shown in Fig. 4(a). t-test revealed statistical differences between groups in the mean  $OT_n$  ( $t(30) = 5.982$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). There were no statistical differences between groups in the evaluation session. Regarding the workload test, t-test found statistical differences between groups in the mental demand subscale ( $t(30) = -2.335$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ), which is shown in Fig. 4(b). There were no statistical differences between groups in the presence test.

Regarding correlations, The working memory score and the frustration subscale were moderately correlated ( $\rho = 0.64$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), which could be contradictory.

### B. fNIRS Features

The fNIRS features for both groups in the training session are shown in Fig. 5(a) and (b). t-test revealed statistical differences between groups in HbO-width ( $t(30) = -2.389$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ) and HbO-multiscale entropy ( $t(30) = -2.824$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

No statistically significant differences were found among any fNIRS features in the HbR chromophore. In addition, the effort subscale was moderately correlated with the HbO multiscale entropy ( $\rho = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), which could evidence the complexity of neural networks under demanding conditions. Additionally, the GMM clustering of participants was used to combine performance metrics and fNIRS features as HbO-width vs. normalized operation time, which is shown in Fig. 6. This scatter plot showed the separability of groups and the potential of HbO-width as a performance indicator.

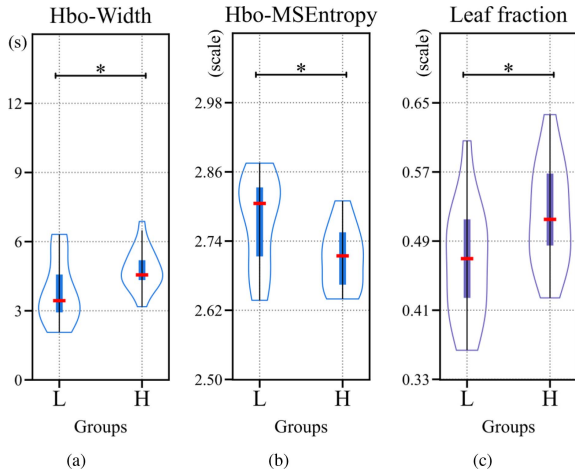


Fig. 5. Comparison of HbO features and MST metrics of functional connectivity from participants with low (L) and high (H) performance in the training session. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , Median: red line. (a) Hbo-Width. (b) Hbo-Multiscale entropy (MSEntropy). (c) MST Leaf fraction.

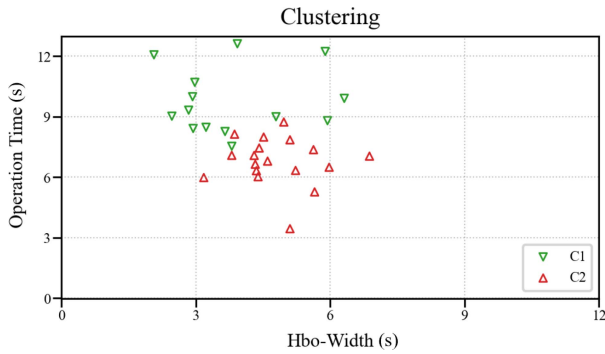


Fig. 6. Scatter plot of HbO-width vs Operation time in the training session.

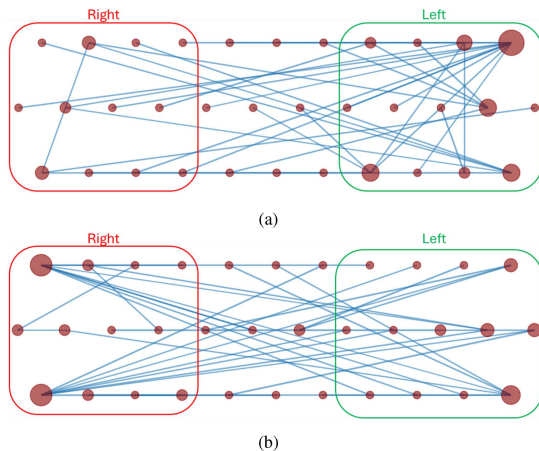


Fig. 7. Degree of functional connectivity network based on fNIRS. (a) Low-performance group. (b) High-performance group.

### C. Functional Connectivity

The degree for low- and high-performance groups is shown in Fig. 7. The node size depended on the number of connections. HbO was used to compute functional connectivity, as statistical differences were found exclusively with this chromophore (Section IV-B). The relevant brain areas had more

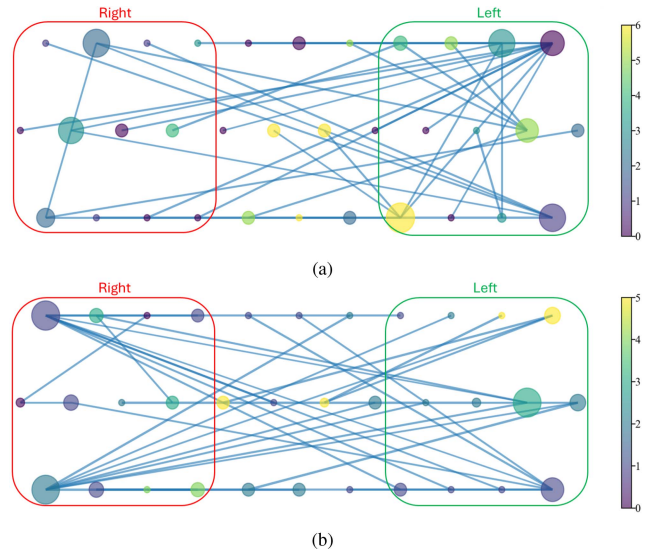


Fig. 8. Betweenness centrality of functional connectivity network based on fNIRS. (a) Low-performance group. (b) High-performance group.

connections during the task performance. These regions were concentrated in the PFC left region for the low-performance group, and in the PFC right region and lower left for the high-performance group. The betweenness centrality for low- and high-performance groups is shown in Fig. 8. The node size depended on the betweenness centrality value. In addition, the color map showed subnetworks in the PFC. The number of relevant nodes for global communication (“hub nodes”) and subnetworks found in the PFC were greater for the low-performance group than for the high-performance group. The network-based statistic found the connectivity patterns (dark blue squares) of the networks of low- and high-performance groups (Fig. 9). This figure also showed disconnections between groups in most PFC network edges. Color masks were superposed to highlight the intra- and inter-hemisphere relationships between PFC regions. The network-wise metrics for both performance groups are shown in Fig. 5(c). t-test revealed statistical differences between groups in leaf fraction ( $t(30) = -2.480, p = 0.02$ ). The “hub nodes” had a more relevant role in network communication in the high-performance group than in the low-performance group.

## V. DISCUSSION

In this work, we have demonstrated that performance metrics and physiological data can be helpful in discriminating between operators of a social robot while operating the robot in a real scenario. In terms of performance scores, the operation time of actuating the robot was significantly lower for the low-performance group versus the high-performance group. Participants were not informed in real-time that they made a mistake in order to avoid post-error behaviors such as cognitive tunneling effects. Studies have shown that errors can increase under high cognitive load or multitasking, especially when tasks are performed too slowly, leading to lapses in attention and performance [28]. In a dual-task experiment, Strobach et al. [28] showed that prolonged

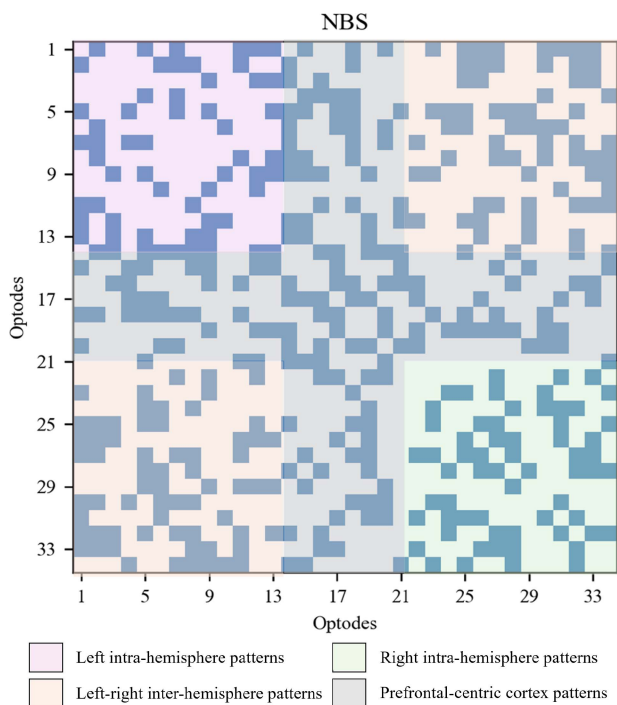


Fig. 9. Network-based statistic (NBS) of functional connectivity between performance groups based on fNIRS signals from 34 optodes. Intra- e Inter-hemisphere relationships between PFC regions are highlighted.

engagement with a task due to multitasking can increase errors due to divided attention and reduced focus on individual tasks. It is possible that for social robot operators, the uncertainty in the task can induce general anxiety to maintain engagement with the interlocutor [36], resulting in a higher response time and a more rushed response when in doubt. Despite the evidence in the state of the art, we found slight and non-statistical differences between both groups in our study.

Two metrics were found to be significant in discriminating both groups regarding the physiological prefrontal brain response. The first significant difference is the width of the HbO with the response, which is higher in the high-performance group than in the lower group. Research using fNIRS showed that during decision-making tasks, such as the Iowa Gambling Task and the Balloon Analog Risk Task [37], there were significant increases in HbO in the PFC. Also, the PFC showed more significant hemodynamic changes in free-choice decision-making. This may indicate that the PFC is prominently recruiting in an effort to make voluntary decisions and subsequent actions [38]. We noticed that the higher-performance group exhibited a prolonged HbO response and higher entropy, suggesting greater PFC engagement as expected for this type of task. In contrast, the lower-performance group did not engage the PFC as prominently.

Lastly, multivariate connectivity metrics revealed differences in PFC functional networks, particularly in the leaf fraction metric. Although a lower leaf fraction has frequently been associated with higher cognitive performance [39], in decision-making scenarios, increased specialized connectivity, indicating

a higher leaf fraction, has been observed to support executive functions required for making decisions, such as evaluating options and inhibiting impulsive responses [40]. This may explain the finding that higher-performing individuals exhibit a higher leaf fraction. Additionally, participants did not feel excessively loaded according to the NASA-TLX test (Section IV-A), where a more integrated network might have been beneficial in contexts of higher cognitive load. Nevertheless, although this pattern was more prominent in the trial-based data, the PFC is likely to undergo network task adaptation, shifting between higher and lower leaf fraction states as needed, which has been suggested to be effective for decision-making [39]. For example, before deliberating on potential responses for the social robot, the operator's brain might shortly increase integration (lower leaf fraction) to process information more holistically. In contrast, during the execution of a decision, more specialized connectivity (higher leaf fraction) may predominate to ensure the robot is controlled in the correct sequence. For this hypothesis, future work could focus on exploring these reconfiguration dynamics.

## VI. LIMITATIONS

The study's limitation is that it only monitored the PFC area. While it was sufficient for the profiling objectives, investigating the interaction between different brain areas could have revealed other ways of profiling and led to a better understanding of how specific cognitive functions, such as motor skills and sensory information processing, influence the operator's profile. Future research will involve expanding the range of sensor modalities and their coverage. It will also include introducing interventions to enhance the learning abilities of robotic operators based on this profiling data.

## VII. CONCLUSION

An experiment of operator control of a social robot in a real task was performed. The experiment consisted of a simulation of a clinical receptionist where a participant requested some information, and the operator needed to operate the robot with an indicated protocol that the operator needed to remember. The operator interaction with the robot and cognitive responses of the PFC captured by fNIRS were monitored. Participants were analytically clustered into two groups: low and high performance, based on the integration of their performance metrics and self-reported workload and presence ratings. The results suggest univariate differences in HbO levels in signal width and multiscale entropy. Additionally, the multivariate channel-wise functional connectivity metric leaf fraction was found to be different in low- and high-performing operators. These findings are valuable for understanding training protocols for operators and for enhancing human-computer interaction in human-robot docking and mutual or assisted operation. Specifically, the robot's ability to trust operator commands based on their estimated performance level can be improved, contributing to more effective and reliable control systems. Future research could focus on dynamic or real-time performance measures, as well as integrating neuromodulation techniques to enhance the operators' knowledge acquisition and training processes.

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