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Geotechnology in the Age of AI: The Convergence of Geotechnical Data Analytics and Machine Learning

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Abstract

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, particularly machine learning (ML), with geotechnical engineering is transforming the landscape of infrastructure development and maintenance. This abstract explores the confluence of geotechnical data analytics and machine learning, illustrating how this synergy enhances predictive modeling and risk assessment in geotechnical applications. Recent advancements in sensor technology and data acquisition methods have resulted in the generation of vast amounts of geotechnical data. These datasets, characterized by their volume, variety, and velocity, present a unique opportunity for the application of machine learning techniques. Machine learning algorithms, particularly deep learning, have demonstrated exceptional capability in identifying patterns and making predictions from large, complex datasets. When applied to geotechnical data, these algorithms can significantly improve the accuracy of predicting soil behavior, foundation performance, and potential geohazards. This paper reviews several case studies where machine learning models have been successfully implemented in geotechnical engineering. These include the use of convolutional neural networks for the classification of soil types, the application of recurrent neural networks for predicting landslide susceptibility, and reinforcement learning for optimizing the design of tunneling projects. The results from these studies indicate that machine learning not only enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of geotechnical investigations but also contributes to safer and more cost-effective engineering solutions. In conclusion, the convergence of geotechnical data analytics and machine learning heralds a new era in geotechnology. By harnessing the power of AI, geotechnical engineers can tackle complex challenges with greater precision, ultimately leading to more reliable and resilient infrastructure systems. This interdisciplinary approach not only pushes the boundaries of traditional geotechnical engineering but also sets a new standard for future research and practice in the field.

Keywords: Geotechnical Engineering; Machine Learning; Data Analytics; Predictive Modeling; AI in Infrastructure; Risk Assessment; Sensor Technology

Abbreviations: AI: Artificial Intelligence, CNNs: Convolutional Neural Networks, ICA: Independent Component Analysis, NDVI: Normalized Difference Vegetation Index, PCA: Principal Component Analysis, RNNs: Recurrent Neural Networks, SVR: Support Vector Regression, SVM: Support Vector Machines

1. Introduction

Geotechnology, a vital discipline encompassing environmental sciences, drilling, and hydroelectric applications, plays a pivotal role in the realm of geotechnical engineering. As the world embraces the transformative power of Artificial Intelligence (AI), the integration of AI-driven data analytics and machine learning into geotechnology has emerged as a groundbreaking frontier. This convergence

holds immense potential to revolutionize the industry, fostering sustainability, efficiency, and safety across diverse sectors [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6].

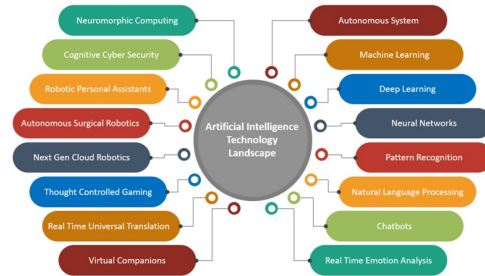


Figure 1. Data Strategy and Integration for Artificial Intelligence.

The fusion of geotechnical data and advanced algorithms is poised to redefine traditional approaches as described in Figure 1. AI-driven platforms like DAARWIN enable real-time monitoring data analysis, empowering engineers to minimize risks, save time, and maximize profits through precise assessments of soil behavior. By harnessing the computational prowess of AI, geotechnology can unlock innovative solutions, optimizing designs, reducing material consumption, and mitigating environmental impacts like CO₂ emissions associated with construction activities [7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13].

2. Geotechnical Data Sources

Geotechnical data sources encompass a wide range of information vital for AI-driven analysis and modeling in the field. These sources can be broadly categorized as follows:

1. **Remote Sensing Data:** Satellite imagery and aerial photography provide valuable insights into terrain features, vegetation patterns, and surface characteristics. Data gathered through remote sensing contains specific information called features, such as average reflectance of a canopy or maximum height [14].
2. **Field Investigations and Surveys:** Geotechnical engineers rely on field investigations, including soil sampling, borehole logging, and geophysical surveys, to obtain data on subsurface conditions, soil properties, and geological formations [15].
3. **Laboratory Testing:** Soil and rock samples undergo various laboratory tests to determine their physical, chemical, and mechanical properties, such as shear strength, permeability, and compressibility [16].
4. **Structural Monitoring:** Sensors and monitoring systems installed on structures, foundations, and slopes provide real-time data on deformations, stresses, and environmental conditions, enabling predictive maintenance and risk assessment [17].
5. **Historical Records and Reports:** Existing geotechnical reports, borehole logs, and construction records offer valuable insights into past projects and site conditions, aiding in the analysis and interpretation of new data [18].
6. **Standardized Data Formats:** Initiatives like DIGGS (Data Interchange for Geotechnical and Geoenvironmental Specialists) [19] aim to standardize the electronic transfer and storage of geotechnical data, facilitating data exchange and interoperability among various stakeholders.
7. **Online Repositories and Databases:** Several online repositories and databases, such as those maintained by scientific publishers like ScienceDirect [20] and Elsevier, provide access to geotechnical research papers, case studies, and data sets.

Accessing and integrating data from these diverse sources is crucial for training AI algorithms and



Figure 2. AI in Geotechnical Engineering.

developing accurate predictive models. However, challenges arise in ensuring data quality, consistency, and interpretability, as well as overcoming potential access limitations or proprietary restrictions on certain data sources [21], as illustrated in Figure 2.

Geotechnical professionals must collaborate with data scientists and AI experts to curate and preprocess these data sources effectively, enabling the development of robust AI-driven solutions for geotechnical engineering applications [22].

3. Data Preprocessing and Cleaning

Data preprocessing and cleaning are crucial steps in preparing geotechnical data for effective analysis and modeling using machine learning algorithms. This process involves several techniques to handle missing values, outliers, and inconsistencies, as well as transforming the data into a format suitable for the chosen algorithms [23]-[24]. The following techniques are commonly employed:

1. **Imputation:** Missing data is a common issue in geotechnical datasets, and imputation techniques are used to fill in these gaps. Methods like mean/median imputation, regression imputation, or more advanced techniques like multiple imputation can be employed, depending on the nature and extent of missing data.
2. **Handling Outliers:** Outliers can significantly impact the performance of machine learning models. Techniques like winsorization, trimming, or robust statistical methods can be used to identify and handle outliers appropriately, either by removing them or replacing them with more representative values.
3. **Log Transformation:** Many geotechnical variables, such as soil strength or permeability, exhibit a skewed distribution. Log transformation can help normalize these variables, making them more suitable for analysis and modeling.
4. **One-Hot Encoding:** Categorical variables, such as soil types or geological formations, need to be converted into a numerical format for machine learning algorithms. One-hot encoding is a common technique used for this purpose, creating binary columns for each category.
5. **Scaling:** Machine learning algorithms can be sensitive to the scale of input features. Techniques like min-max scaling or standardization (z-score normalization) are used to rescale the features to a common range, ensuring that no single feature dominates the analysis due to its scale.

The specific combination of preprocessing techniques employed depends on the characteristics of the geotechnical data and the requirements of the chosen machine learning algorithms. For example, linear models may be more sensitive to outliers, while tree-based models can handle them better. Additionally, it is essential to maintain a consistent preprocessing pipeline for both training and testing data to avoid introducing biases or inconsistencies in the modeling process [25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30].

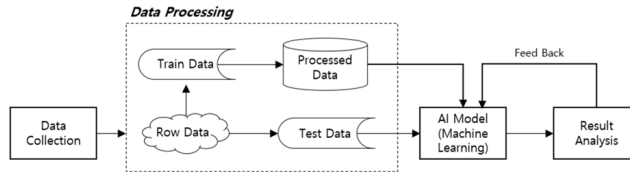


Figure 3. Blockchain-Based Data-Preserving AI Learning Environment Model.

From the above Figure 3, it can be observed that geotechnology professionals collaborate closely with data scientists to identify the most appropriate preprocessing techniques and ensure that the data is cleaned and transformed effectively, laying the foundation for accurate and reliable machine learning models

4. Feature Engineering and Selection

Feature engineering and selection play a pivotal role in enhancing the performance and interpretability of machine learning models in the field of geotechnology. These techniques are crucial for transforming raw data into meaningful features that can effectively capture the underlying patterns and relationships [31, 32].

4.1 Feature Engineering

Feature engineering, or feature extraction, is the process of creating new, more informative features from the original data. This technique is particularly valuable in domains like remote sensing, where engineered features, such as the Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI), can provide insights into vegetation health and density [33]. Some key aspects of feature engineering include:

- **Spatial Feature Engineering:** This process involves developing additional information from raw data using geographic knowledge. Key types of spatial features that can be engineered include:
 - Spatial summary features (e.g., counting nearby features)
 - Interpolated features (e.g., point interpolation using k-nearest neighbors)
 - Proximity features (e.g., polygon-to-point mapping)
- **Feature Creation and Transformation:** This involves generating new features through mathematical operations, such as ratios, logarithms, or polynomial expansions, on existing features.
- **Feature Extraction:** Techniques like Principal Component Analysis (PCA) or Independent Component Analysis (ICA) can be used to extract new, uncorrelated features from the original feature set.

4.2 Feature Selection

Feature selection is the process of identifying and retaining the most relevant features from the available feature set, while discarding redundant or irrelevant ones. This approach can improve

model interpretability, reduce computational complexity, and enhance overall performance [34, 35, 36, 37]. Key aspects of feature selection include:

- **Filter Methods:** These techniques rank features based on their statistical properties or correlation with the target variable, without considering the machine learning model itself.
- **Wrapper Methods:** These methods evaluate subsets of features by training and testing a specific machine learning model, selecting the subset that yields the best performance.
- **Hybrid Methods:** These combine aspects of filter and wrapper methods, leveraging the strengths of both approaches.

The choice of feature engineering and selection techniques should be guided by the specific characteristics of the geotechnology problem at hand, such as the nature of the input variables, the modeling objectives, and the computational resources available [38, 39, 40, 41]. Table 1 shows an example.

Table 1. Feature engineering selection techniques

Feature Engineering Tools	Description
FeatureTools	A Python library for automated feature engineering
AutoFeat	A tool for automating feature engineering and selection
TsFresh	A Python package for extracting features from time series data
OneBM	A tool for benchmarking feature engineering techniques
ExploreKit	A Python library for exploratory data analysis and feature engineering

Properly engineered and selected features can significantly improve the accuracy of predictive models and provide valuable insights into the underlying geotechnical processes, ultimately enhancing decision-making and risk management in 'environmental sciences', 'drilling', 'hydroelectric', 'geotechnical engineering', 'geotechnology', 'geotechnical', 'environmental management' [42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48].

5. Machine Learning Algorithms

In the realm of geotechnology, a diverse array of machine learning algorithms are employed to tackle complex problems and uncover valuable insights from geotechnical data. The choice of algorithm depends on the specific task at hand, the nature of the data, and the desired outcomes. Here are some commonly used machine learning algorithms in this domain:

1. **Supervised Learning Algorithms:**
 - **Regression Algorithms:** Linear Regression, Support Vector Regression (SVR), Random Forest Regression, and Gradient Boosting Regression are used for predicting continuous variables, such as soil strength, settlement, or groundwater levels.
 - **Classification Algorithms:** Logistic Regression, Support Vector Machines (SVM), Decision Trees, and Random Forests are employed for classifying geotechnical data into discrete categories, like soil types or rock formations.
2. **Unsupervised Learning Algorithms:**
 - **Clustering Algorithms:** K-Means, DBSCAN, and Hierarchical Clustering are used for grouping geotechnical data based on similarities, enabling the identification of patterns and anomalies.
 - **Dimensionality Reduction Techniques:** Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and t-SNE

are used to reduce the dimensionality of high-dimensional geotechnical data, facilitating visualization and improving model performance.

3. **Deep Learning Algorithms:**

- **Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs):** Employed for image recognition tasks, such as identifying geological features from satellite imagery or detecting cracks and defects in structures.
- **Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs):** Utilized for time series forecasting and prediction, like predicting groundwater levels or monitoring slope deformations over time.
- **Autoencoders:** Used for anomaly detection and data denoising, helping identify outliers or remove noise from geotechnical data.

4. **Ensemble Learning Algorithms:**

- **Random Forests:** A powerful ensemble technique that combines multiple decision trees, providing robust predictions and handling high-dimensional data effectively.
- **Gradient Boosting Machines (GBM):** An ensemble method that iteratively trains weak models and combines them to create a strong predictive model, often used for regression and classification tasks.

The selection of the appropriate algorithm is guided by factors such as the complexity of the problem, the size and quality of the available data, and the desired trade-off between model accuracy, interpretability, and computational efficiency. The detailed description is given in Table 2.

Table 2. Key factors for selection of the appropriate algorithm

Algorithm	Strengths	Limitations
Linear Regression	Simple, interpretable	Limited to linear relationships
Support Vector Machines	Effective for high-dimensional data, robust to outliers	Sensitive to parameter tuning, computationally expensive for large datasets
Decision Trees	Interpretable, handles non-linear relationships	Prone to overfitting, sensitive to data quality
Random Forests	Robust to outliers, handles high- dimensional data	Limited interpretability, can be computationally expensive
Neural Networks	Powerful for complex, non-linear problems	Requires large datasets, can be opaque ("black box")
Gradient Boosting	High predictive accuracy, handles diverse data types	Prone to overfitting, limited interpretability

It’s important to note that the selection and application of machine learning algorithms ingeotechnologyoften involve close collaboration between domain experts and data scientists, ensuring that the algorithms are tailored to the specific requirements and constraints of the problem at hand [49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54].

6. Model Evaluation and Validation

Evaluating and validating machine learning models is a critical step in ensuring their reliability and effectiveness for geotechnical applications. This process involves assessing the model’s performance,

generalization capabilities, and robustness using various techniques and metrics. Here are some commonly employed methods for model evaluation and validation in the field of geotechnology:

1. **Hold-out Validation:** In this approach, the available data is split into two subsets: a training set and a test set. The model is trained on the training set, and its performance is evaluated on the unseen test set. This method provides an unbiased estimate of the model's generalization ability.
2. **Cross-Validation:** Cross-validation is a powerful technique that involves partitioning the data into multiple folds or subsets. The model is trained on a combination of these folds and evaluated on the remaining fold(s). This process is repeated for all possible combinations, and the results are averaged to obtain a more reliable estimate of the model's performance.
 - **k-fold Cross-Validation:** The data is divided into k equal-sized folds, and the model is trained and evaluated k times, with each fold serving as the test set once.
 - **Leave-One-Out Cross-Validation (LOOCV):** A special case of k -fold cross-validation, where k is equal to the number of data points. Each data point is used as the test set once, while the remaining points are used for training.
3. **Performance Metrics:** Various performance metrics are employed to evaluate the quality of the machine learning models, depending on the nature of the problem and the algorithm used. Some commonly used metrics include:
 - **Regression Metrics:** Mean Squared Error (MSE), Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE), Mean Absolute Error (MAE), and R-squared (R^2) are used to assess the accuracy of regression models in predicting continuous variables.
 - **Classification Metrics:** Accuracy, Precision, Recall, F1-score, and Area Under the Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC-AUC) curve are used to evaluate the performance of classification models in predicting discrete classes.
4. **Residual Analysis:** Residual analysis involves examining the residuals (the difference between the observed and predicted values) to identify potential biases, violations of assumptions, or patterns that may indicate issues with the model's fit.
5. **Sensitivity Analysis:** Sensitivity analysis is used to assess the impact of input variable changes on the model's output. This technique helps identify the most influential variables and can guide feature selection or engineering efforts.
6. **Model Interpretability:** While some machine learning models, like linear regression or decision trees, are inherently interpretable, others, like neural networks, can be opaque or "black-box" models. Techniques like feature importance analysis, partial dependence plots, and SHAP (SHapley Additive exPlanations) values can be employed to enhance the interpretability of complex models.
7. **External Validation:** In addition to internal validation techniques, it is crucial to validate the model's performance on external, unseen data from different sources or environments. This step ensures that the model can generalize well to real-world scenarios and is not overfitted to the training data.

The choice of evaluation and validation techniques depends on the specific requirements of the geotechnical application, the available data, and the trade-offs between model accuracy, interpretability, and computational complexity. Rigorous model evaluation and validation are essential for building trust in machine learning solutions and ensuring their safe and reliable deployment in the field of geotechnology [53, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60].

7. Interpretability and Explainability

Interpretability and explainability are crucial considerations when applying machine learning techniques to geotechnical data and problems. The unique characteristics of geotechnical data, such as its

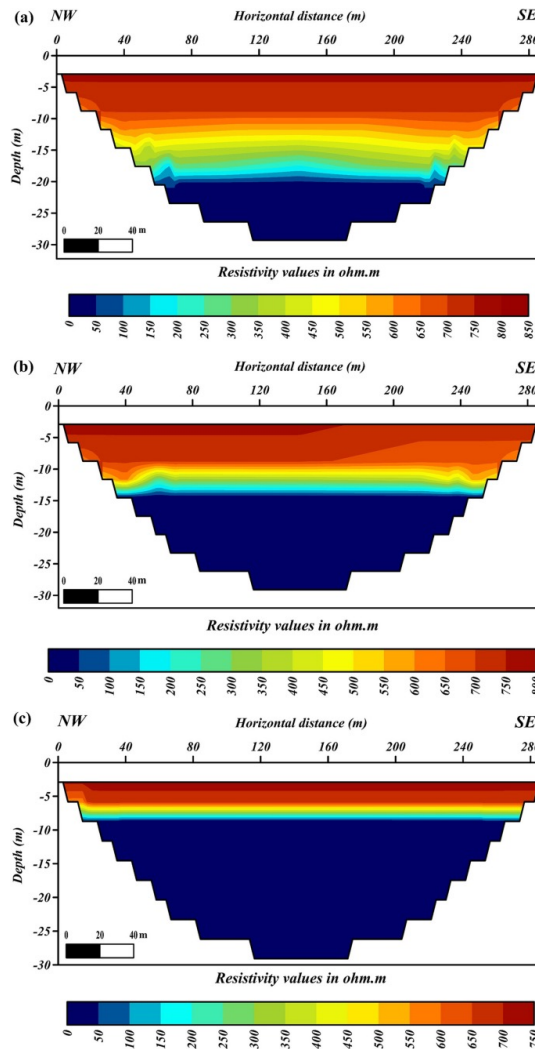


Figure 4. ERT and shallow seismic refraction for geotechnical investigation.

spatial variability, sparsity, site-specificity, and incompleteness, pose challenges for traditional machine learning approaches [61]. Additionally, decision-making in geotechnics has historically been based on physics and experience rather than a formal data-driven basis, making it more of an "art" than a "science" [62]. To address these challenges and unlock the full potential of machine learning in geotechnology, an interdisciplinary approach that integrates data, techniques, and perspectives from both geotechnical engineering and machine learning is needed. This integration aims to create a new field of "data-centric geotechnics" [63], where successful applications of machine learning strike a balance between data centrality, practical fit, and geotechnical context. The same is shown in Figure 4.

One key application area for data-centric geotechnics is Data-Driven Site Characterization (DDSC). DDSC aims to produce 3D stratigraphic maps and estimate engineering properties based on site investigation data and other relevant data sources [64]. Techniques like Potts models and Bayesian learning using training image databases can be employed for 2D/3D stratigraphic mapping, con-

sidering geological uncertainty which is given in Table 3. Machine learning can also be applied to model soil behavior, soil dynamics, landslides, tunneling, and mining applications. However, a key focus in these applications should be on improving the interpretability and generalizability of the models, ensuring that the insights gained are meaningful and applicable across different contexts.

Table 3. Data-Driven Site Characterization

Technique	Description
Potts Models	Used for 2D/3D stratigraphic mapping, accounting for spatial correlations and geological patterns.
Bayesian Learning	Utilizes training image databases to capture geological uncertainty and produce probabilistic stratigraphic models.

To enable progress in this field, several recommendations have been made [65]:

1. Develop collaborations between practitioners and researchers to work on real industry projects and address key issues such as data access, standardization, quality, protection, and education.
2. Explore techniques that enhance the interpretability and explainability of machine learning models, such as feature importance analysis, partial dependence plots, and SHAP (SHapley Additive exPlanations) values.
3. Investigate methods for improving the generalizability of machine learning models in geotechnics, ensuring that the models can adapt to different site conditions and data sources.

By addressing these challenges and leveraging the strengths of both geotechnical engineering and machine learning, the field of data-centric geotechnics can unlock new insights, improve decision-making processes, and ultimately contribute to more sustainable and efficient practices in the realm of geotechnology.

8. Case Studies and Applications

The integration of AI-driven data analytics and machine learning has enabled numerous innovative applications and case studies in the field of geotechnology. Here are some notable examples:

1. Slope Stability Monitoring and Prediction:

- Machine learning models, such as Random Forests and Gradient Boosting Machines, have been employed to analyze data from slope monitoring systems, including inclinometers, piezometers, and weather sensors.
- These models can predict the likelihood of slope failures, enabling proactive measures and minimizing risks to infrastructure and human safety.
- Case Study: The Hong Kong Geotechnical Engineering Office has developed an AI-based system for real-time monitoring and early warning of landslides, leveraging data from over 1,000 sensors across the city [66].

2. Subsurface Characterization and Soil Property Estimation:

- Techniques like Bayesian learning and Potts models have been applied to site investigation data, including borehole logs and geophysical surveys, to produce 3D stratigraphic maps and estimate soil properties.
- These models can account for geological uncertainty and spatial correlations, providing valuable insights for foundation design and construction planning.

- Case Study: Researchers at the University of Cambridge have developed a data-driven approach for site characterization, combining cone penetration test data with machine learning algorithms to estimate soil properties with improved accuracy [67].
3. **Tunnel and Underground Infrastructure Monitoring:**
 - Deep learning algorithms, such as Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), have been employed to analyze images and videos from tunnel inspections, enabling automated detection of cracks, spalling, and other defects.
 - Time series forecasting models, like Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs), can predict future deformations and stresses in tunnels and underground structures based on monitoring data.
 - Case Study: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has developed an AI-based system for monitoring the structural health of underground infrastructure, using data from sensors and visual inspections.
 4. **Geohazard Risk Assessment and Mitigation:**
 - Machine learning models have been applied to remote sensing data, geological information, and environmental factors to assess the risk of geohazards such as landslides, earthquakes, and sinkholes.
 - These models can identify high-risk areas, enabling proactive measures and informing land-use planning and disaster management strategies.
 - Case Study: Researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, have developed a machine learning framework for landslide susceptibility mapping, combining satellite imagery, topographic data, and historical landslide records [68].

These case studies demonstrate the potential of AI-driven data analytics and machine learning to enhance decision-making, improve safety, and optimize resource allocation in various geotechnical applications. As the field continues to evolve, interdisciplinary collaborations between geotechnical engineers, data scientists, and domain experts will be crucial for unlocking further innovations and addressing complex challenges in geotechnology.

9. Challenges and Limitations

While the integration of AI-driven data analytics and machine learning techniques holds immense potential for revolutionizing the field of geotechnology, several challenges and limitations must be addressed to fully harness their capabilities.

1. **Data Quality and Availability**
 - Geotechnical data can be sparse, incomplete, and subject to various sources of noise and uncertainty, posing challenges for machine learning algorithms that rely on high-quality, comprehensive datasets.
 - Access to relevant data can be limited due to proprietary restrictions, privacy concerns, or the lack of standardized data-sharing practices within the industry.
2. **Interpretability and Explainability**
 - Many advanced machine learning models, such as deep neural networks, can be opaque or "black-box" in nature, making it difficult to understand the reasoning behind their predictions or decisions.
 - In geotechnical applications, where safety and risk management are paramount, the ability to interpret and explain model outputs is crucial for building trust and ensuring responsible decision-making.
3. **Generalization and Transfer Learning**

- Geotechnical conditions can vary significantly across different sites and regions, making it challenging to develop machine learning models that can generalize effectively to unseen scenarios.
 - Transfer learning techniques, which involve transferring knowledge from one domain to another, may be necessary to overcome the limitations of site-specific data and improve model generalization.
4. Integration with Existing Workflows
 - Incorporating AI-driven solutions into existing geotechnical workflows and decision-making processes can be challenging, requiring changes in mindset, training, and organizational culture.
 - Effective collaboration between geotechnical engineers, data scientists, and domain experts is essential to ensure that AI solutions are practical, interpretable, and aligned with industry best practices.
 5. Computational Resources and Scalability
 - Advanced machine learning techniques, such as deep learning or ensemble methods, can be computationally intensive, requiring significant hardware resources and processing power.
 - As the volume and complexity of geotechnical data continue to grow, scalability challenges may arise, necessitating efficient data management and processing strategies.
 6. Regulatory and Ethical Considerations
 - The use of AI in geotechnical applications may raise ethical concerns related to data privacy, bias, and potential misuse or unintended consequences.
 - Regulatory frameworks and guidelines may need to be developed to ensure the responsible and ethical deployment of AI-driven solutions in the field of geotechnical engineering.

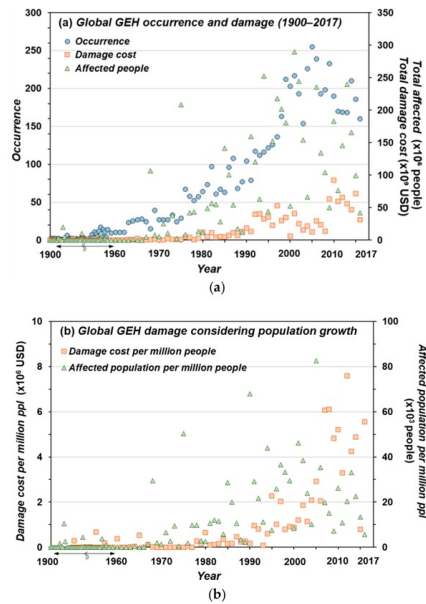


Figure 5. Global CO2 Emission-Related Geotechnical Engineering Hazards.

From the above mentioned results of Figure 5, and addressing these challenges will require concerted efforts from researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, fostering interdisciplinary collaborations, promoting data standardization and sharing, and developing robust validation and governance frameworks for AI applications in geotechnical engineering [69, 70].

10. Future Directions and Opportunities

The convergence of geotechnical data analytics and machine learning presents an exciting frontier for the field of geotechnology. By harnessing the power of AI, engineers can unlock innovative solutions, optimize designs, and mitigate environmental impacts across diverse sectors. From real-time monitoring and slope stability prediction to subsurface characterization and risk assessment, the applications of this convergence are vast and transformative.

While challenges such as data quality, interpretability, and regulatory considerations must be addressed, the potential benefits of AI-driven geotechnology are undeniable. Interdisciplinary collaborations and a data-centric approach will be crucial in overcoming these hurdles and paving the way for a more sustainable, efficient, and safe future in geotechnical engineering practices.

11. Conclusion

The convergence of geotechnical data analytics and machine learning represents a significant paradigm shift in the field of geotechnology. By integrating AI, particularly machine learning, into geotechnical practices, engineers can now harness vast amounts of data to predict and solve complex subsurface problems with unprecedented accuracy and efficiency. This synergy not only enhances predictive capabilities but also optimizes risk assessment and decision-making processes, leading to safer, more resilient infrastructure. The adoption of these advanced technologies facilitates a deeper understanding of geotechnical behavior, driving innovation in design and construction methodologies. As we move forward, it is crucial for industry professionals to continue embracing these tools, fostering an environment of continuous learning and adaptation. The future of geotechnology, enriched by AI, promises not only more sophisticated analytical techniques but also a transformation in the approach to geotechnical challenges, ultimately benefiting society through improved infrastructure reliability and sustainability.

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