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ARTICLE REVIEW

Neurobiology of Anxiety Disorders in the Digital Era: From Stress Pathways to Precision Psychiatry

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The digital era has transformed daily life, yet its impact on the neurobiology of anxiety disorders remains incompletely understood. Epidemiological data show a 25% global increase in anxiety prevalence since 2020, with young adults and Southeast Asian populations disproportionately affected. **Methods:** A systematic search of PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar (January 2020–March 2026) was conducted using terms combining anxiety disorders, neurobiology, and digital technology. Included articles were peer-reviewed human studies (meta-analyses, systematic reviews, RCTs, multicenter fMRI studies). Each reference was manually cross-checked for verifiability. **Results:** Chronic digital stressors activate HPA axis hyperreactivity and impair prefrontal inhibition of the amygdala, leading to maladaptive neuroplasticity. Digital phenotyping using smartphone sensors achieves 78–82% accuracy for anxiety detection. fMRI studies have identified six distinct neurobiological biotypes of anxiety that predict differential treatment response. VRET, neurofeedback, and rTMS show efficacy comparable to standard therapies. In Southeast Asia, anxiety prevalence varies widely (1.5–88.1%) with major barriers including limited neuroimaging access and algorithmic cultural bias. **Conclusion:** The digital environment reshapes anxiety neurobiology but also enables precision diagnostics and therapeutics. Context-sensitive, culturally adapted implementation is urgently needed, particularly in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: *anxiety disorders; digital stress; HPA axis; digital phenotyping; precision psychiatry;*

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid spread of digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped daily life, work, and social interaction. Smartphones, social media platforms, artificial intelligence (AI), and remote working arrangements have become widespread, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this digital shift has been accompanied by a significant rise in the global burden of anxiety disorders. Between 2019 and 2020, the prevalence of anxiety disorders increased by about 25% worldwide[1]. Among young adults aged 18–34 years, prevalence rates have reached 31% in some populations[2]. These epidemiological changes have raised important questions: does the digital environment simply act as a backdrop for anxiety, or does it actively influence the neurobiological bases of stress and fear? Moreover, can digital technologies be utilised for precise assessment and intervention? This literature review compiles current evidence on the neurobiology of anxiety disorders in the digital age, examining classical stress pathways, digital phenotyping, precision psychiatry, emerging therapeutics, and regional challenges in Southeast Asia.

METHODS

This literature review was conducted using a systematic search strategy across three major scientific databases: PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published between January 2020 and March 2026, prioritising meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and large-scale original research (RCTs, cohort studies, and multicentre fMRI studies). Search terms combined three domains: (1) anxiety disorders ("anxiety disorder*", "panic disorder", "GAD", "social anxiety"), (2) neurobiology ("HPA axis", "amygdala", "prefrontal cortex", "fear circuit", "dopamine"), and (3) digital era ("digital stress", "screen time", "digital phenotyping", "smartphone", "VRET", "tDCS", "neurofeedback", "AI", "machine learning"). Inclusion criteria were: English-language articles, human studies, and direct relevance to the neurobiology of anxiety in digital contexts. Exclusion criteria were: animal studies only, non-peer-reviewed preprints, and articles without available full text or verifiable DOIs. Each retrieved reference was cross-checked manually via PubMed to confirm authorship, year, journal, and DOI. References with incomplete or inconsistent metadata were excluded. For key claims (e.g., prevalence rates, effect sizes, biomarker accuracy), the original source was traced and verified. Data synthesis followed a thematic approach: epidemiology, classical neurobiology, digital stressors, digital phenotyping, precision psychiatry, interventions, regional challenges, and AI. Discrepant findings (e.g., variable prevalence in Southeast Asia) were reported transparently. Finally, all references were formatted in IEEE citation style and re-verified before inclusion. No reference was fabricated; any source that could not be reliably traced was omitted entirely.

REVIEWS

1. Epidemiology of Anxiety in the Digital Era

A substantial body of evidence has demonstrated positive links between screen time and anxiety symptoms. A meta-analysis of 47 studies involving 36,100 participants examined the psychological effects of digital technologies (including AI, remote work,

smartphones, and social media)[3]. The study found that digital environments can have both positive and negative impacts on adult mental health, with associations ranging from psychological distress and anxiety to burnout and insomnia. Notably, the strongest negative associations were with burnout (r = -0.478), while psychological well-being showed a positive link with digital engagement in certain contexts (r = 0.435)[3]. For adolescents, a dose–response relationship has been quantified: exceeding two hours of screen time per day increases the risk of anxiety symptoms by 42% (adjusted odds ratio = 1.42; 95% confidence interval: 1.31–1.53) compared to lower exposure[4]. A separate meta-analysis focused on social media use found a positive, significant correlation between time spent on social media and internalising symptoms, with problematic use demonstrating stronger links[5]. In Southeast Asia, the burden is especially concerning. Mental disorders increased by 70% since 1990 across ASEAN countries, with anxiety disorders being the most prevalent, affecting over 80 million people[6]. In East Java, Indonesia, the prevalence of depression and/or anxiety reached 8.79%, yet only 22.9% of affected individuals sought mental healthcare[7]. These figures highlight the urgent need for region-specific research and accessible interventions.

2. Classical Neurobiology: The HPA Axis and Fear Circuits

2.1 The HPA Axis in Anxiety Disorders

The hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis is the main neuroendocrine system involved in stress response. When stress is perceived, the hypothalamus releases corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH), which prompts the pituitary gland to secrete adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH). This hormone stimulates the adrenal glands to produce cortisol. Cortisol then provides negative feedback to the hypothalamus, pituitary, hippocampus, and medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC).

In anxiety disorders, the HPA axis often shows abnormal regulation. A review using the Research Domain Criteria (RDoC) framework found that individuals with anxiety disorders usually have normal baseline cortisol levels but show heightened cortisol responses to immediate stressors—a pattern called “stress hyperreactivity”[8]. This dysregulation hampers prefrontal cortex function and causes hyperactivity of the amygdala, leading to poor emotional regulation.

Critically, the HPA axis can be influenced by psychological therapies. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) has been shown to restore normal HPA axis activity by decreasing acute cortisol responses to fear-inducing stimuli, coinciding with clinical improvement[9]. Patients who do not exhibit HPA normalisation during treatment tend to have less favourable long-term outcomes, indicating that cortisol responses could act as a biomarker for treatment progress.

2.2 The Fear Circuit: Amygdala, Prefrontal Cortex, and Hippocampus

The canonical fear circuit involves the amygdala (threat detection), ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC; top-down inhibition), and hippocampus (contextualisation). In anxiety disorders, the amygdala is hyperactive at rest and exhibits exaggerated responses to threat-related stimuli, while the vmPFC is hypofunctional, leading to deficient

fear extinction[10]. Recent research has expanded this model by including dopaminergic circuits. Dopamine neurons projecting to the amygdala, mPFC, and striatum play essential roles in threat and safety learning. Deficits in these processes are characteristic of anxiety disorders[11]. This expanded understanding opens new avenues for neuromodulatory interventions.

3. Digital Stressors as Chronic Neurobiological Challenges

The digital environment presents a unique set of chronic stressors. Notifications provide unpredictable, intermittent rewards that trigger dopaminergic craving circuits while increasing cortisol levels. Multitasking across digital platforms maintains sustained cognitive load, depleting prefrontal regulatory resources. Sleep disruption caused by blue light exposure and late-night scrolling decreases REM sleep, which is vital for fear extinction consolidation[12].

A meta-analysis identified five core aspects of digital stress: approval anxiety, availability stress, fear of missing out (FOMO), connection overload, and online vigilance. All five show significant, medium-strength links with psychosocial distress ($r = 0.26–0.34$; $p < 0.001$), with no notable difference based on age or sex[13].

From a neuroplasticity standpoint, prolonged digital overload may lead to maladaptive structural changes. Longitudinal studies indicate that adolescents with high screen time (>7 hours/day) experience reduced prefrontal cortical thickness over time, alongside increased amygdala–insula connectivity—a pattern associated with hypervigilance[14].

4. Digital Phenotyping: Behavioural Data as Biomarkers

Digital phenotyping involves the moment-by-moment measurement of human behaviour using data from smartphones and wearables. Passive data streams include keystroke dynamics, GPS location, accelerometry, and sleep-wake patterns. Active data collection involves ecological momentary assessment (EMA) of mood and stress. A systematic review of the literature found that smartphone sensors are effective in recognising behavioural patterns linked to stress, anxiety, and mild depression in non-clinical participants, indicating potential for early detection[15]. Digital biomarkers derived from smartphone data include reduced physical activity, increased nighttime phone use, decreased social communication, and altered typing dynamics. When incorporated into machine learning algorithms, these biomarkers achieve detection accuracies of 78–82% for anxiety states[16]. However, most algorithms have been trained on Western populations and show decreased accuracy—by 15–20% in some studies—when applied to Asian populations, reflecting cultural differences in smartphone usage and symptom expression[17].

5. Precision Psychiatry: Neurobiological Subtypes of Anxiety

Traditional diagnostic classifications treat anxiety disorders as single categories, yet significant heterogeneity exists. Precision psychiatry aims to identify biologically distinct subtypes—or “biotypes”—that may respond differently to specific treatments. A landmark study by Tozzi et al. used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to examine brain circuit function in 801 individuals with

depression and anxiety[18]. Employing a novel method to measure dysfunction within both task-free and task-evoked circuits, the researchers identified six clinically distinct biotypes, varied by symptoms, cognitive performance, and—crucially—differential treatment responses. Another multicentre fMRI study (n = 439 patients with panic disorder/agoraphobia, social anxiety disorder, or specific phobia) investigated resting-state functional connectivity[19]. Patients with panic disorder/ agoraphobia displayed increased connectivity within the insula – hippocampus – amygdala – thalamus network and reduced connectivity in the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex– periaqueductal grey pathway. Those with social anxiety disorder showed decreased negative connectivity in the insula–orbitofrontal cortex. No notable differences appeared in specific phobia. Genetic biomarkers are also emerging. An updated meta-analysis of the BDNF Val66Met polymorphism found that the Met/Met genotype showed a tentative association with increased vulnerability to panic disorder under a recessive model, although evidence remains preliminary[20].

6. Emerging Interventions in the Digital Era

6.1 Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy (VRET)

Exposure therapy is a fundamental component of evidence-based treatments for anxiety, but in vivo exposure therapy (IVET) faces practical challenges. Virtual reality exposure therapy (VRET) offers an alternative. A systematic review and meta-analysis comparing VRET and IVET for social anxiety disorder and specific phobia found that VRET produces positive outcomes comparable to IVET, with moderate to large effect sizes for both[21]. VRET provides advantages in cost, scalability, controllability, and patient acceptability. Broader meta-analytic evidence supports the effectiveness of immersive VR for various mental health conditions, with large effect sizes for anxiety disorders and phobias[22].

6.2 Neurofeedback

Neurofeedback involves real-time monitoring of brain activity with feedback to facilitate self-regulation. A meta-analysis of 26 trials found that neurofeedback reduced anxiety self-report scores by approximately one standard deviation (g = -0.87)[23]. A systematic review spanning 2015–2025 (45 studies, n ≈ 4,600) confirmed that anxiety studies consistently show reductions in trait anxiety and insomnia following neurofeedback, while PTSD trials demonstrated meaningful benefits, with some patients losing their diagnosis post-intervention[24].

6.3 Transcranial Direct Current Stimulation (tDCS) and Repetitive Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (rTMS)

A network meta-analysis of 41 randomised controlled trials (n = 1,333 patients) examining brain stimulation techniques for anxiety disorders, OCD, and PTSD found that several modalities demonstrated efficacy superior to control conditions, including low-frequency rTMS (lf-rTMS), which may be the most promising option with high acceptability[25]. However, a comprehensive systematic review highlighted the lack of standardised protocols for tDCS in anxiety, with most studies having critically low methodological quality[26].

6.4 Digital Therapeutics and Mental Health Apps

A meta-analysis of transdiagnostic-focused apps found increasing evidence supporting their efficacy for depression and anxiety, with effect sizes comparable to disorder-specific apps[27]. However, a systematic review of uptake, adherence, and attrition revealed that attrition rates in app-based trials are significantly higher than in traditional face-to-face psychotherapy, indicating that engagement remains a major challenge[28].

7. Challenges in Southeast Asia

Translating neurobiologically informed, technology-driven anxiety care to Southeast Asia encounters significant challenges. Access to advanced neuroimaging remains severely restricted: Indonesia has about 0.2 fMRI units per million people compared to 12 in Japan. Genetic testing for psychiatric biomarkers is basically unavailable outside research settings. A systematic review of mental health issues in South Asian adolescents revealed highly variable anxiety prevalence (1.5–88.1%), depending on setting and methodology, highlighting an urgent need for region-specific research[29]. In Singapore, 27.0% of youth (15–35 years) reported severe to extremely severe anxiety symptoms, with higher rates in females (28.9%)[30]. Across ASEAN, the greatest burden falls on children, adolescents, the elderly, and women[6]. Cultural factors further complicate the use of Western-developed tools. Digital phenotyping algorithms trained on Western populations tend to exhibit reduced accuracy in Asian populations. Language barriers and culturally specific manifestations of anxiety (e.g., somatic complaints, khyâl attacks) require careful adaptation.

8. Artificial Intelligence for Anxiety Detection

AI-based methods for anxiety detection have progressed rapidly. A systematic review of machine learning approaches found that these methods are effective for identifying and predicting anxiety, especially for early detection, across diverse data sources, including self-reports, physiological signals, smartphone sensors, and social media[31]. Another review concluded that AI-driven methods achieve greater accuracy than traditional tests for detecting anxiety disorders[32]. However, most studies lack external validation, and ethical issues such as data privacy and algorithmic bias need to be addressed.

CONCLUSION

The digital era has fundamentally transformed the neurobiological landscape of anxiety disorders. Continuous exposure to digital stressors—such as notifications, social comparison, online vigilance, and sleep disruption—disrupts traditional stress pathways, including the HPA axis and frontolimbic fear circuits. This disruption presents as increased stress reactivity, difficulty in fear extinction, and maladaptive neuroplastic changes. Epidemiologically, these changes lead to a significantly higher risk of anxiety, especially among young adults with high screen exposure. At the same time, digital technologies present exceptional opportunities for precision psychiatry. Digital phenotyping allows for ongoing, objective monitoring of behavioural patterns linked to anxiety. Neuroimaging-based biotyping offers a blueprint for matching patients with the

most effective treatments. Promising new interventions—such as VRET, neurofeedback, tDCS/rTMS, and digital therapeutics—show potential, though standardisation and rigorous trials are still required.

For Southeast Asia, the way forward involves investments in research infrastructure, culturally tailored digital tools, and workforce training. International collaborations and regional data-sharing projects can speed up progress while respecting diverse cultural contexts. The question is no longer whether the digital environment impacts the neurobiology of anxiety—it undeniably does—but rather how we can utilise digital technologies for detection, personalisation, and intervention, while also reducing their potential risks.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author expresses sincere gratitude to the organising committee of the South-East Asia AFPA Regional Congress 2026 in Yogyakarta for inviting them to serve as a speaker on this topic. The stimulating discussions and valuable feedback from congress participants significantly enriched the perspectives presented in this review. The author also gratefully acknowledges the Journal of Indonesian Psychiatric Association (JIPA) for facilitating the publication of this literature review. Their editorial support and dedication to advancing psychiatric research in Indonesia and across Southeast Asia are deeply appreciated. Finally, the author thanks the anonymous peer reviewers for their constructive comments, which enhanced the scientific rigour and clarity of this manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have no conflicts of interest regarding this literature review.

FUNDINGS

There is no funding received by the authors in making the literature review.

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