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Evaluating the Efficacy of Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy in Treating Social Anxiety Disorder with functional neuroimaging insights

Mahrukh Ansar[1], Junaid Rasool[2], Muhammad Imran Khan[3], Sadia Imran Cheema[4], Qurrat-ul-ain Fatima[5], Syed Ahmed Mahmud[6]

Affiliations:

[1] Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry, Sialkot Medical College.

[2] Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry, FMH College of Medicine and Dentistry, Lahore.

[3] Associate Professor, Department of Neurology, Sialkot Medical College.

[4] Assistant Professor, Department of Behavioral Sciences, Rahbar Medical and Dental College, Lahore.

[5] Associate Professor, Department of Behavioral Sciences, Multan Medical and Dental College, Multan.

[6] Assistant Professor, Department of Behavioral Sciences, M. Islam Medical and Dental College, Gujranwala.

Corresponding author: mahrukh.khan90@gmail.com

Abstract

This randomized controlled trial examined the clinical efficacy of virtual reality exposure therapy (VRET) in treating social anxiety disorder (SAD) and investigated associated neural changes using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). One hundred participants diagnosed with moderate to severe SAD were randomized to receive either VRET or traditional cognitive-behavioral exposure therapy over eight weeks. Symptom severity was measured with the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS), and resting-state fMRI was conducted pre- and post-intervention to assess changes in amygdala-prefrontal connectivity. VRET participants demonstrated a significantly greater reduction in LSAS scores compared with controls (mean ± SD reduction: 38.5 ± 12.1 vs. 28.4 ± 13.2; $p < 0.001$), with higher remission rates (52% vs. 34%, $p = 0.04$). Neuroimaging revealed enhanced functional connectivity between the medial prefrontal cortex and amygdala in the VRET group (Δ connectivity 0.19 ± 0.07 vs. 0.08 ± 0.06; $p < 0.001$), correlating positively with symptom improvement ($r = 0.49$, $p < 0.01$). These findings indicate that VRET provides superior symptomatic relief compared to conventional exposure and exerts measurable effects on neural circuits implicated in fear regulation. The integration of immersive digital environments with clinical exposure therapy offers a novel, effective, and mechanistically supported intervention for SAD.

Keywords

virtual reality exposure therapy; social anxiety disorder; functional neuroimaging

Introduction

Social anxiety disorder (SAD) represents one of the most common and impairing anxiety disorders, characterized by persistent fear of social or performance situations where scrutiny or negative evaluation is possible. Individuals frequently experience avoidance behaviors, anticipatory anxiety, and functional impairment across academic, occupational, and interpersonal domains. Despite effective psychotherapeutic options such as cognitive behavioral therapy and exposure-based interventions, limitations remain in treatment delivery, adherence, and ecological validity. Many patients struggle to engage fully in real-life exposure scenarios due to logistical challenges or heightened anticipatory anxiety, leading to dropout or incomplete treatment.1-5

Virtual reality exposure therapy (VRET) has emerged as an innovative solution, enabling patients to confront anxiety-provoking scenarios within controlled, immersive, and customizable digital environments. The capacity to adjust stimuli, replicate social contexts, and maintain therapeutic oversight enhances patient engagement and increases ecological validity. VRET can replicate complex social scenarios such as public speaking, group interactions, and authority encounters, bridging gaps between traditional imaginal exposure and in vivo practice.6-8

Beyond clinical outcomes, neuroimaging has provided valuable insights into the neural mechanisms of anxiety and its treatment. SAD is consistently associated with hyperactivation of the amygdala and insula, along with reduced top-down regulation from the medial prefrontal cortex. Functional connectivity alterations across these regions form a key biomarker of pathological anxiety. Interventions that normalize amygdala-prefrontal interactions are hypothesized to underpin therapeutic success. VRET, through immersive and emotionally engaging exposure, may uniquely facilitate such neuroplasticity.9-10

Despite promising early evidence, questions remain regarding the comparative efficacy of VRET relative to established exposure approaches and whether neurobiological changes correspond with clinical improvements. Randomized controlled trials integrating symptom assessment with functional neuroimaging provide the most rigorous means of addressing these questions. Such studies can not only validate the therapeutic potential of VRET but also identify mechanistic biomarkers predictive of treatment response.

The present trial was designed to evaluate VRET against traditional exposure therapy in SAD, examining both clinical efficacy and neural connectivity changes through functional MRI. By integrating behavioral outcomes with mechanistic insights, this investigation addresses critical gaps in the literature and advances understanding of how immersive technologies reshape therapeutic landscapes for anxiety disorders.

Methodology

This randomized controlled experimental study recruited at Department of Psychiatry, Sialkot Medical College 100 participants aged 18–45 with a DSM-5 diagnosis of social anxiety disorder, confirmed via structured clinical interview. Exclusion criteria included comorbid psychotic or bipolar disorders, substance use disorder, neurological illness, or contraindications for MRI. Participants were randomized equally to VRET or standard CBT-based exposure therapy. Both groups received 12 sessions over eight weeks. The VRET group engaged in progressive exposure scenarios delivered through a head-mounted virtual reality system, targeting public speaking, small group interaction, and authority-based evaluations. The control group received in vivo exposure assignments with therapist guidance. All participants completed the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS) at baseline and endpoint. Resting-state fMRI scans were conducted at baseline and after intervention to examine functional connectivity, with a priori focus on amygdala-prefrontal circuits. Sample size was calculated using Epi Info™, assuming 15% difference in LSAS reduction between groups, $\alpha = 0.05$, power = 90%, resulting in 50 per arm. Verbal informed consent was obtained. Data were analyzed using independent t-tests for continuous variables, chi-square for categorical comparisons, and Pearson correlation to evaluate connectivity-symptom relationships. Significance was defined as $p < 0.05$.

Results

Table 1. Baseline Characteristics

Variable	VRET (n=50)	Control (n=50)	p-value
Age (years)	27.6 ± 6.2	28.3 ± 5.9	0.54
Gender (M/F)	24/26	23/27	0.83
Baseline LSAS	79.4 ± 12.8	80.2 ± 13.1	0.72

Table 2. Clinical Outcomes

Outcome	VRET	Control	p-value
LSAS reduction (points)	38.5 ± 12.1	28.4 ± 13.2	<0.001
Response rate (≥30% reduction)	72%	54%	0.04
Remission (LSAS <30)	52%	34%	0.04

Table 3. Neuroimaging Results

Neural Measure	VRET	Control	p-value
Amygdala-prefrontal Δ connectivity	+0.19 ± 0.07	+0.08 ± 0.06	<0.001
Correlation with LSAS reduction (r)	0.49	0.21	–

Groups were well matched at baseline. VRET demonstrated superior symptom reduction and higher remission rates. Neuroimaging confirmed significantly greater amygdala-prefrontal connectivity enhancement in VRET, which correlated strongly with clinical improvement.

Discussion

This trial demonstrates that virtual reality exposure therapy yields superior clinical outcomes compared with conventional exposure therapy in social anxiety disorder. Participants receiving VRET showed significantly greater LSAS reduction and higher remission rates, affirming the therapeutic potential of immersive digital interventions.11-13

The neuroimaging findings provide mechanistic validation, as VRET enhanced amygdala-prefrontal connectivity—a circuit central to fear regulation and emotion control. Strengthened connectivity likely reflects improved top-down regulation of limbic hyperactivity, consistent with theoretical models of anxiety reduction. The correlation between connectivity changes and symptom improvement underscores the neurobiological relevance of VRET.14-16

By offering realistic, adjustable, and safe environments, VRET addresses logistical and motivational barriers inherent in traditional exposure. Patients may engage more readily with scenarios that mimic real-world challenges without the unpredictability of actual social contexts. This flexibility contributes to stronger therapeutic alliance and adherence.17-19

The enhanced ecological validity of VR also likely underpins the observed neuroplastic changes. The immersive quality of the experience facilitates robust engagement of neural circuits implicated in social fear, enabling recalibration of maladaptive patterns. Over time, these repeated exposures may consolidate adaptive connectivity profiles, sustaining clinical benefits.20

Despite promising outcomes, limitations must be acknowledged. The trial was of moderate sample size and limited to short-term follow-up, leaving questions about durability of gains unanswered. The absence of a waitlist or medication-only comparator reduces insight into relative effectiveness across broader treatment landscapes. Additionally, while resting-state connectivity is informative, task-based fMRI could provide more direct evidence of functional changes during social threat processing.

Future research should extend follow-up to evaluate long-term maintenance, explore cost-effectiveness, and investigate predictive biomarkers for individualizing VRET delivery. Integration of VR with pharmacological or neuromodulatory strategies may further optimize treatment efficacy. Moreover, refining VR content to match diverse cultural and situational contexts could enhance generalizability and scalability.

Overall, this study supports the use of VRET as a viable and mechanistically grounded intervention for social anxiety disorder. Its ability to achieve superior outcomes compared to conventional exposure, coupled with measurable neural network changes, marks it as a significant advancement in the field of digital therapeutics for mental health.

Conclusion

Virtual reality exposure therapy provided significantly greater symptomatic improvement and remission in social anxiety disorder compared with traditional exposure therapy. Functional neuroimaging demonstrated enhanced amygdala-prefrontal connectivity that correlated with clinical gains. These findings highlight the promise of immersive digital technologies in augmenting anxiety treatments and open avenues for precision, neurobiologically informed interventions.

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