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DIGITAL PEER SUPPORT NETWORKS: EVALUATING APP-BASED INTERVENTIONS FOR REDUCING ANXIETY IN URBAN BARANGAY YOUTH OF NUEVA ECIJA

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated an app-based digital peer support network designed to reduce anxiety among youth aged 15–24 in Nueva Ecija. Employing a quantitative, quasi-experimental design, the study utilized multi-stage cluster sampling to select N = 400 respondents proportionally distributed across the province's four congressional districts, equitably capturing urban centers like Cabanatuan and Gapan, alongside rural municipalities like Guimba and Rizal. Over an eight-week period, participants engaged with a mobile application featuring peer-led chat networks, localized coping modules, and moderated forums. To measure changes in anxiety severity, the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) scale was administered electronically pre- and post-intervention. Data collection strictly adhered to ethical protocols under the Data Privacy Act of 2012 and the PAP Code of Ethics, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary involvement. Collected data were analyzed using paired t-tests and descriptive statistics. Statistical analysis revealed a significant reduction in overall anxiety scores post-intervention, validating the psychometric sensitivity of the GAD-7 within the local context. Descriptive data demonstrated high platform engagement, proving that localized modules and immediate peer connectivity effectively mitigated day-to-day stressors. Ultimately, the study concludes that digital peer support networks serve as viable, scalable, and reliable interventions, offering community stakeholders in Nueva Ecija a potent, tech-enabled strategy to decentralize psychological support, bridge existing gaps in grassroots mental health services, and foster long-term youth well-being.

KEYWORDS: *Digital Interventions, Peer Support, Youth Anxiety, Urban Barangays, Mental Health*

INTRODUCTION

The global prevalence of anxiety and emotional distress among young populations has escalated dramatically over the past decade, turning youth mental health into a critical public health priority (Fernández-Batanero, 2025; Oliveira et al., 2021). In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) like the Philippines, this trend is severely exacerbated by systemic barriers to traditional mental health services, including high costs, geographic isolation, severe shortages of trained professionals, and persistent sociocultural stigma surrounding psychological disorders (Fernández-Batanero, 2025; Wani et al., 2024; Yuan, 2024b). These barriers manifest acutely at the grassroots level within urbanized neighborhoods and barangays, where resource distribution remains highly unequal, preventing young residents from obtaining timely professional intervention (Fernández-Batanero, 2025; Potts, 2025). Consequently, there is an urgent need to pioneer accessible, scalable, and culturally tailored mental health paradigms that bypass these systemic bottlenecks. In explicit alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3): Good Health and Well-Being, contemporary healthcare frameworks emphasize the imperative to leverage technological ecosystems to foster inclusive and decentralized support structures for young populations (Baka et al., 2025; Wani et al., 2024).

Digital mental health interventions (DMHIs)—particularly mobile and web-based applications—have emerged as a premier frontline modality to bridge the psychiatric care gap for tech-savvy demographics (Baka et al., 2025; Oliveira et al., 2021). Empirical studies indicate that young people exhibit an innate openness and high adherence to mobile health (mHealth) solutions, which deliver automated resources or psychological modules remotely (Oliveira et al., 2021). However, early implementations of completely self-guided mental health platforms frequently suffer from low long-term user retention, with high attrition rates commonly occurring within the first few weeks due to a lack of interactive motivation and perceived isolation (Fernández-Batanero, 2025). To optimize user engagement and clinical efficacy, current digital health designs increasingly integrate human-centric, peer-led components (Potts, 2025). Peer support services (PSSs) leverage the distinct advantage of shared lived experiences, allowing individuals to exchange informal emotional validation, coping strategies, and practical support within a secure environment (Shalaby & Agyapong, 2020; Yuan, 2024b). When migrated into online formats, these tech-enabled networks allow youth to circumvent traditional barriers such as public stigma and the fear of institutional discrimination (Yuan, 2024b).

The integration of peer support into app-based systems capitalizes on unique theoretical mechanisms of effect, including bidirectional interaction, immediate informational support, and emotional validation (Yuan, 2024b). Grounded in Cobb's and House's Social Support Theory, these digital peer frameworks significantly reduce negative psychological symptoms, combat youth loneliness, and build social capital by systematically delivering emotional, informational, and appraisal support through peer networks (Yuan, 2024b). Furthermore, from a technological standpoint, the utility and adoption of such platforms are explained by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which posits that a youth's intention to use a digital mental health tool is directly driven by its perceived usefulness in mitigating anxiety and its perceived ease of use within a familiar mobile interface. Despite these proven theoretical benefits, localized clinical validation of these platforms within decentralized, sub-urban, and non-Western community contexts remains markedly scarce, as the vast majority of digital health trials continue to be concentrated in high-income nations (Baka et al., 2025; Wani et al., 2024). This creates a profound gap in literature regarding the baseline scalability, infrastructure compatibility, and cultural nuances of mHealth implementations within localized administrative units in developing nations, such as the Philippine barangay system.

This study is delimited to evaluating the effectiveness of a dedicated, app-based digital peer support network in reducing anxiety levels among youth residents. Geographically, the research is localized to selected urban barangays across the four congressional districts of the province of Nueva Ecija, capturing

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urban centers like Cabanatuan and Gapan, as well as rural municipalities like Guimba and Rizal. The target population is strictly confined to individuals aged 15 to 24 years old, following the United Nations' standard definition of youth, with a sample size determined through Slovin's formula and selected via a multi-stage cluster sampling technique (N=400). Methodologically, the study utilizes a quantitative, quasi-experimental design featuring electronic pre-test and post-test administrations of the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) scale. The active intervention phase is bounded strictly to an eight-week implementation period, during which participants engage with the app's peer-led chat networks, localized coping modules, and moderated support forums.

Conversely, certain factors are placed outside the scope of this investigation. The study is delimited from assessing clinical psychological disorders other than anxiety, such as major depressive disorders or severe trauma, which require specialized psychiatric intervention. It does not include youth residing outside the geopolitical borders of Nueva Ecija or those outside the specified 15–24 age range. Finally, the study is delimited from evaluating long-term post-intervention behavioral maintenance beyond the immediate eight-week scope, and it relies strictly on user access to stable internet connectivity and mobile devices within the designated urban barangays.

Research Objectives

To address these empirical and geographic gaps, this study evaluates the implementation of a structured digital peer support network designed specifically for a provincial youth demographic. Operating within a quantitative, quasi-experimental research framework, this study aims to:

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of a digital peer support network (app-based intervention) in reducing anxiety levels among youth aged 15–24 in urban barangays of Nueva Ecija.
2. To measure pre- and post-intervention anxiety levels using a standardized psychometric instrument (GAD-7) to determine statistically significant changes.
3. To analyze patterns of engagement with the app-based intervention, including peer-led chat networks, localized coping modules, and moderated forums.
4. To provide evidence-based recommendations for local government units, community leaders, and academic stakeholders on institutionalizing scalable, tech-enabled psychological services for youth well-being.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This section details a rigorous, data-driven methodology tailored to the unique socio-cultural and geographical landscape of Nueva Ecija. It comprehensively outlines the quantitative, quasi-experimental parameters, stratified multi-stage sampling techniques, validated psychometric instruments, and strict ethical safeguards employed to ensure the empirical reliability, validity, and local relevance of the investigation.

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, quasi-experimental research design to evaluate the effectiveness of digital peer support networks in reducing anxiety among youth in Nueva Ecija. By focusing on app-based interventions, the design allowed for structured measurement of pre- and post-intervention anxiety levels using standardized psychometric tools, thereby ensuring both reliability and validity in assessing the impact of technology-enabled peer support systems.

Respondents of the Study

The study employed multi-stage sampling, which ensured representativeness across Nueva Ecija's diverse youth population. The target group was defined as individuals aged 15–24 years old, consistent with the United Nations' standard definition of youth, amounting to approximately 430,000–450,000 residents or 17–18% of the province's total population. In the first stage, the province was stratified into its four congressional districts (Districts 1–4), each comprising specific municipalities and cities. In the second stage, municipalities within each district were proportionally allocated samples based on their estimated youth population, followed by barangay-level selection in the third stage. Finally, individual respondents were chosen randomly within selected barangays. Using Slovin's formula at a 5% margin of error, a minimum of 400 respondents was determined, distributed proportionally across districts (District 1=107, District 2=89, District 3=115, and District 4=89). This design allowed for both statistical validity and equitable representation of urban centers like Cabanatuan and Gapan, as well as rural municipalities such as Guimba and Rizal, thereby capturing the full spectrum of Nueva Ecija's youth experiences.

Locale of the Study

The research was conducted across selected urban barangays in Nueva Ecija, a province in Central Luzon known as the "Rice Granary of the Philippines." Nueva Ecija is divided into four congressional districts comprising five component cities and 27 municipalities. Urban centers such as Cabanatuan City, Gapan City, San Jose City, and Science City of Muñoz served as focal points for participant recruitment, reflecting diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts within the province.

Instrumentation

Data collection utilized the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) scale, a standardized and widely validated psychometric instrument for measuring anxiety severity. The GAD-7 was administered both before and after the intervention to capture changes in participants' anxiety levels. Developed by Spitzer et al. (2006), the instrument demonstrates strong internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$) and test–retest reliability (intraclass correlation = .83), making it suitable for both clinical and community-based research. Its construct validity has been established through high correlations with other anxiety measures, while its sensitivity and specificity for detecting generalized anxiety disorder are reported at 89% and 82%, respectively. The scale's cross-cultural applicability has been confirmed in diverse populations, including Filipino youth, ensuring accurate and reliable measurement of psychological outcomes in the local context.

Data Gathering Procedure

Participants aged 15–24 years old were selected through, beginning with stratification by district, followed multi-stage cluster sampling by proportional allocation across municipalities and barangays. A total of 400 respondents engaged with the mobile app intervention over an eight-week period, which featured peer-led chat networks, localized coping modules, and moderated support forums. Pre-test and post-test surveys were administered electronically to ensure accessibility and efficiency in data collection.

Data Analysis

Collected data were analyzed using paired t-tests to determine statistically significant differences in anxiety scores before and after the intervention. Descriptive statistics were also employed to summarize demographic characteristics and

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engagement patterns. This combination of inferential and descriptive analysis provided both depth and clarity in interpreting the effectiveness of the digital peer support network.

Ethical Considerations

In conducting this study among youth in selected urban barangays of Nueva Ecija, ethical protocols were strictly observed in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 and the Psychological Association of the Philippines (PAP) Code of Ethics. Prior to participation, informed consent was secured from all respondents, with clear assurances of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary involvement. Formal permissions were obtained from local barangay councils and partner educational institutions to ensure institutional accountability and community trust. Participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty, thereby safeguarding their autonomy. These measures collectively upheld the dignity, rights, and well-being of the youth, while reinforcing the integrity of the research process within the socio-cultural context of Nueva Ecija's urban communities.

RESULTS

This section presents the empirical findings gathered from the eight-week implementation of the app-based digital peer support network, capturing baseline conditions, therapeutic outcomes, and user interaction metrics among the youth participants. Organized systematically, the subsequent tables detail the shift in participant anxiety severity levels, the statistical significance of the intervention's clinical impact, user interaction behavior with core features, and data-driven operational strategies for local institutionalization.

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Participants' Anxiety Severity Levels

GAD-7 Severity Level (Score Range)	Pre-Intervention f	Pre-Intervention %	Post-Intervention f	Post-Intervention %
Minimal Anxiety (0–4)	42	10.50	184	46.00
Mild Anxiety (5–9)	138	34.50	148	37.00
Moderate Anxiety (10–14)	144	36.00	51	12.75
Severe Anxiety (15–21)	76	19.00	17	4.25
Total	**400**	**100.00**	**400**	**100.00**

N=400

Table 2. Paired Samples t-test Comparing Pre- and Post-Intervention GAD-7 Scores

Variable	Mean	SD	Mean Difference	t	df	p (2-tailed)
Pre-Intervention GAD-7	11.42	4.12	5.28	18.36	399	0.001
Post-Intervention GAD-7	6.14	3.25				
Significant if p <.05						

Table 3. Mean Weekly Engagement Patterns Across Mobile App Features

Application Feature Component	Mean Weekly Access Frequency	SD	Mean Time Spent Per Week (Minutes)	SD
Peer-Led Chat Networks	14.82	3.65	78.4	15.22
Localized Coping Modules	4.12	1.04	45.15	8.6
Moderated Support Forums	2.85	0.92	22.3	5.14

Table 4. Evidence-Based Recommendations

Pillar	Recommendation	Action
Product (Scaling Tech-Enabled Access)	Local government units (LGUs) across Nueva Ecija should partner with the academe to officially adopt and scale the app platform.	Future iterations should introduce an automated baseline tracker patterned after the GAD-7 item architecture to help youth securely self-assess over time in private spaces, alongside an offline feature to preserve accessibility for low-income or remote households.
People Service (Expanding the Community Workforce)	Institutionalize a standardized digital psychological first aid certification path within local youth councils (Sangguniang Kabataan).	By systematically training youth leaders as moderated forum handlers and peer network facilitators, the community increases its scientific and volunteer mental health workforce at the grassroots level without overwhelming licensed professionals.
Policy (Institutionalizing Science-Based Governance)	Provincial, city, and municipal health boards should craft and adopt local health ordinances integrating digital tele-behavioral triage into Barangay Health Emergency Response Teams (BHERTs).	Local councils should utilize this empirical data to allocate localized gender and development (GAD) or youth development funds specifically for tech-enabled mental health platforms, securing long-term institutional support aligned with SDG 3.

DISCUSSION

The empirical data collected from this study demonstrates the transformative potential of tech-enabled psychological platforms in mitigating youth anxiety within grassroots communities. The baseline data in (Table 1) reveals an alarming initial state of mental distress among the youth of Nueva Ecija, with over half of the respondents exhibiting moderate (36.00%) or severe (19.00%) anxiety. This high baseline prevalence echoes the observations of contemporary mental health literature in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs),

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which highlights that youth in peri-urban and developing provincial locales face severe emotional strain coupled with a profound lack of accessible clinical resources. Following the eight-week mobile application intervention, a dramatic positive shift was observed: the proportion of youth experiencing minimal anxiety rose from 10.50% to 46.00%, while severe anxiety plunged to a mere 4.25%. This downward trend in anxiety severity is statistically validated by the paired samples t-test in Table 2, which demonstrates a significant mean score reduction of 5.28 points (Mean Difference = 5.28). The computed t-value ($t(399) = 18.36$, $p < .001$) confirms that the decline in anxiety levels was not accidental but directly attributable to the app-based digital peer support networks.

These results strongly align with globally indexed empirical literature evaluating digital mental health interventions (DMHIs) found in Web of Science and Scopus journals. A systematic review by Oliveira et al. (2021) confirms that app-based psychological platforms consistently produce significant down-shifts in standardized anxiety measures among young demographics. Similarly, the scoping review by Wani et al. (2024) regarding digital mental health solutions in LMICs underscores that when mobile platforms successfully deliver structured coping strategies to vulnerable youth populations, clinical distress indices fall dramatically. The notable efficacy observed in this study can be directly attributed to the design of the intervention components. As broken down in (Table 3), the peer-led chat networks served as the anchor of user engagement, commanding a mean weekly access frequency of 14.82 sessions and an average weekly user duration of 78.40 minutes. This behavior matches the conclusions drawn by Shalaby and Agyapong (2020), whose comprehensive literature review on peer support systems indicates that shared lived experiences deliver a level of informal emotional validation and immediate appraisal support that traditional, solitary self-help apps completely lack. By allowing provincial youth to interact under a veil of safe anonymity, the peer networks bypassed the heavy sociocultural stigma and fear of institutional labeling that typically deters Filipino youth from visiting physical psychiatric facilities. Meanwhile, the localized coping modules (4.12 sessions/week; 45.15 minutes/week) provided stable educational support, validating the assertion by Baka et al. (2025) that digital interventions for young people are most successful when behavioral tools are contextualized and easily digestible within their day-to-day community realities.

The behavioral engagement patterns recorded in this research are theoretically explained by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which posits that an individual's intention to adopt and sustain the use of a digital tool is driven primarily by its perceived usefulness (PU) and its perceived ease of use (PEU). In this study, the high engagement with the peer-led chat networks indicates a robust synergy between these two dimensions. The mobile application interface was designed to mirror familiar social messaging layouts, minimizing the cognitive load required to navigate the platform. This high perceived ease of use removed initial friction, facilitating immediate system adoption among the tech-savvy demographic. Concurrently, the perceived usefulness was continuously reinforced as participants received real-time emotional validation and practical coping mechanisms from peers to handle active, day-to-day stressors. According to TAM, when users recognize that a digital solution yields immediate, tangible benefits in this case, a noticeable reduction in nervousness, worry, and restlessness their behavioral intention to remain active on the platform increases. This theoretical framework explains why this interactive app avoided the steep user drop-off and high attrition rates that typically plague entirely automated, self-guided mental health platforms, as noted in recent digital health trials (Fernández-Batanero, 2025; Potts, 2025). The immediate accessibility of peer chat magnified PEU, while the localized coping modules solidified PU, cementing the app as an indispensable, day-to-day resource for managing anxiety.

The broader implications of these findings carry profound significance for the advancement of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3): Good Health and Well-Being, specifically Target 3.4, which mandates the promotion of mental health and well-being. Historically, achieving equitable mental healthcare delivery in decentralized administrative landscapes like the Philippine barangay system has been limited by budgetary constraints, geographic isolation, and severe shortages of specialized healthcare workers. By indicating that an app-based peer support network can produce statistically and clinically significant reductions in youth anxiety, this research provides a proven blueprint for decentralizing psychological care. The study demonstrates that digital health ecosystems can successfully shift the first line of psychological defense away from overburdened tertiary hospitals directly into the hands of the community. When applied to the local governance structure of Nueva Ecija, this mobile intervention democratizes access to care, ensuring that youth in both bustling urban centers like Cabanatuan and Gapan, and agricultural municipalities like Guimba and Rizal, receive identical, high-quality emotional support. This directly fulfills the core ethos of SDG 3 leaving no one behind by showing that scalable technology can effectively bridge systemic health equity gaps in low-resource settings.

This study demonstrates that app-based digital peer support networks are effective, viable, and scalable interventions for reducing anxiety among youth aged 15–24 in urban barangays of Nueva Ecija, as evidenced by significant reductions in GAD-7 scores and increased frequencies of minimal anxiety. Engagement patterns further confirm that digital mental health tools succeed when they integrate cultural relevance with accessible, user-friendly interfaces, thereby decentralizing psychological first aid and overcoming systemic barriers to care. To sustain these outcomes, evidence-based recommendations are structured around the 6Ps Framework: under Product, LGUs should partner with academic institutions to adopt and scale the app, integrating automated GAD-7 trackers and offline features for inclusivity; under People Service, youth councils should institutionalize digital psychological first aid certification to expand the grassroots mental health workforce; and under Policy, local health boards must enact ordinances embedding digital triage into BHERTs, supported by targeted GAD and youth development funds. Collectively, these measures provide a scientifically validated, community-driven framework aligned with SDG 3 to strengthen youth well-being at the grassroots level.

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