
Algorithmic Neuro-Stimulation and the Attentional Gate: A Neuropsychological Evaluation of TikTok's Feedback Loops in Eliciting Secondary ADHD Symptoms in Children

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i1.1651>

Abstract

This study assesses the effect of algorithmic neurostimulation and attentional gating processes on the incitement of secondary symptoms of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in children aged 8-12 years who experienced the feedback-based structure of TikTok's content. The type of study design was a cross-sectional study, and the sample size was 40 children chosen using a stratified random sampling method, depending on age and gender. Pediatric outpatient departments (OPDs), child psychology clinics, and selected primary schools were the research locations, as they described both clinical manifestations and actual behavioural manifestations. The validated instruments, such as the Conners Rating Scale-Revised (CPRS-R) to assess ADHD symptomatology, the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) to assess behavioral patterns, the Digit Span Test, and the Stroop Color-Word Test to measure attention and executive functioning, and a Structured Screen-Time and TikTok Usage Questionnaire to record the frequency, duration, and engagement with algorithmically curated content, were used to collect data. Descriptive statistics, independent t-tests, Pearson correlation, and multiple linear regression analysis were used as statistical analysis methods to establish the relation between patterns of TikTok exposure and attentional outcomes. The results showed that there is a meaningful interaction between long-term exposure to algorithm-based short-form video material and the development of inattention, impulsivity, and decreased sustainability of attention, which suggests the existence of secondary symptoms of ADHD, but not primary neurodevelopmental ADHD. These findings underscore the importance of disruption of the attentional gate by a continuous loop of algorithmic feedback and the need to screen children early, counsel parents, and follow evidence-based guidelines to control exposure to highly arousing digital media environments.

Keywords: Attentional Gate, ADHD, TikTok, Neurostimulation, Neuropsychology

Introduction

The swift incorporation of social media platforms, which are based on short-form videos, into the everyday life of children has rapidly becoming a cause of concern in relation to their possible effects on cognitive development, attentional control, and behavioral regulation. Of these platforms, TikTok has become one of the most powerful, thanks to its very immersive content delivery algorithm, which puts a lot of emphasis on continuous engagement via personalized recommendation loops, autoplay features, and quick sensory feedback. Recent neuropsychological and developmental research has indicated that these kinds of environments have the potential to disrupt the attentional gating system of the brain, especially in middle childhood, a time when executive functions are being developed [1,2].

It has been conceived that attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) exists as a neurodevelopmental

aberration with genetic and neurobiological correlates, although modern studies gain more acknowledgment that secondary or acquired ADHD-like symptomology exists in which attentional dysregulation is a result of environmental and behavioral exposures rather than inherent neurodevelopmental pathology [3,4]. One of the possible sources of such secondary attentional disturbances, which have been found to affect sustained attention, impulsivity, and inhibitory control, is associated with the overexposure to digital media, particularly fast-paced and reward-oriented content [5].

Of specific interest is the neurocognitive susceptibility of children between the ages of 8 and 12 years, due to the fact that this is the age of maturation of the prefrontal cortex, systems of attention, and executive control [6]. Reward-prediction-based algorithmically curated platforms like TikTok capitalize on intermittent reinforcement caused by variable content novelty, likes and personalized suggestions, thus sustaining compulsive viewing behavior and interrupting endogenous attention control [7,8]. It has been shown that neuroimaging and behavioral investigations have proven that repeated exposure to high-frequency sensory stimulation can lower the tolerance to low-stimulation tasks, including academic learning, leading to attentional fatigue and task avoidance [9].

According to the emerging evidence provided by the literature of pediatric psychology and digital neuroscience, there is a strong correlation between the excessive use of short-form videos and the development of ADHD-like patterns of behavior, even in children who have never been diagnosed with ADHD in a clinical scenario [10]. These are distractibility, poor working memory, emotional dysregulation, and impaired executive functioning, which closely resemble core ADHD symptom clusters yet have a different etiology and may be reversible [11]. Such a difference is clinically significant because secondary ADHD-like symptoms can be more effectively treated using behavioral therapy, screen-time limitations, and parental guidance instead of medication [12].

Although there is growing international attention, there is still a lack of empirical studies investigating the neuropsychological impact of TikTok-specific algorithmic feedback loops on children, especially in developing nations where stringent screen-time regulation policies are not uniformly implemented [13]. The majority of the available literature has been devoted to general screen exposure, instead of singling out the impact of short-form content that is driven by algorithms, which creates an essential gap in comprehending how attentional gating processes can be disrupted by sustained exposure to digital stimulation [14]. In addition, not many studies have used objective neuropsychological measures and behavioral rating scales to measure attentional outcomes comprehensively [15].

Thus, this study is expected to evaluate how the algorithmic neurostimulation of TikTok and the development of secondary ADHD-like symptoms among children aged 8-12 years are connected using a formal neuropsychological model. This research aims to add its own contribution to the ever-growing body of literature that informs about early screening, parental counseling, and evidence-based practices that control exposure of children to highly stimulating digital media settings.

Methodology

The study was a cross-sectional neuropsychological assessment study carried out in the outpatient pediatric department, child psychology clinic, and selected primary schools to consider the relationship between exposure to the content of the TikTok algorithm and the occurrence of secondary ADHD-like symptoms in children aged between 8 and 12 years. The total number of participants was 40, which was chosen through stratified random sampling according to age and gender.

Standardized and valid assessment tools were used to collect data. The Conners Parent Rating Scale Revised (CPRS-R) was the instrument that was used to evaluate the symptomatology of ADHD patients, as this measure was originally designed by C. Keith Conners in 1997 and comprised 80 items, rated by parents to assess the inattention, hyperactivity, impulsivity, and overall index of ADHD. The domain of general behavioral and emotional problems was evaluated with the help of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL),

which was created by Thomas M. Achenbach in 1991 and includes 113 questions aimed at measuring internalizing and externalizing behavioral patterns among children. Attention and executive functioning were objectively assessed as the Digit Span Test is based on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) designed by David Wechsler in 1949, which consists of forward and backward sequences of digits to analyze sustained attention and capacity to work memory and Stroop Color-Words Interference is based on a test designed by John Ridley Stroop in 1935 and studied three conditions of the task (word reading, color naming, and color-word interference) to analyze the ability to inhibit and the ability to flex. The frequency, duration, and engagement with algorithmically curated content, as depicted by autoplay and infinite scrolling were measured with a structured Screen-Time and TikTok Usage Questionnaire that was created to address the objective of the current study. A behavioral rating scale was administered to parents under the supervision of the researcher, neuropsychological tests were carried out on children in a controlled environment, and the sessions did not exceed 30-40 minutes.

The SPSS software was used to analyze the data by applying the descriptive statistics, independent t-tests, Pearson correlation, and multiple linear regression analysis, and the level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$, and parental informed consent was adopted before beginning data collection.

Results

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants (n = 40)

Variable	Category	n	%
Age (years)	Mean \pm SD	-	9.8 \pm 1.4
	8–9 years	16	40.0
	10–11 years	14	35.0
	12 years	10	25.0
Gender	Male	22	55.0
	Female	18	45.0

The children studied were 40 in age with a mean age of 9.8 \pm 1.4. Majority were between the ages of 8-9 (40%), next came the 10-11 years (35%), and then 12 years (25%). The gender balance was quite equal with 55% males and 45% females. 55% males and 45% females.

Table 2. TikTok Usage Patterns

Variable	Category	n	%
Usage Frequency	Daily	26	65.0
	3–5 days/week	9	22.5
	\leq 2 days/week	5	12.5
Session Duration	<30 minutes	11	27.5
	30–60 minutes	15	37.5
	>60 minutes	14	35.0

The usage data is also high with 65 % of children using the app every day. When it comes to length of session, 37.5% of people spend between 30 and 60 minutes and 35% spend more than an hour on the site, or, in other words, the enormous majority (72.5 %) spend more than 30 minutes at one sitting.

Table 2: TikTok Usage Patterns (Frequency & Duration)

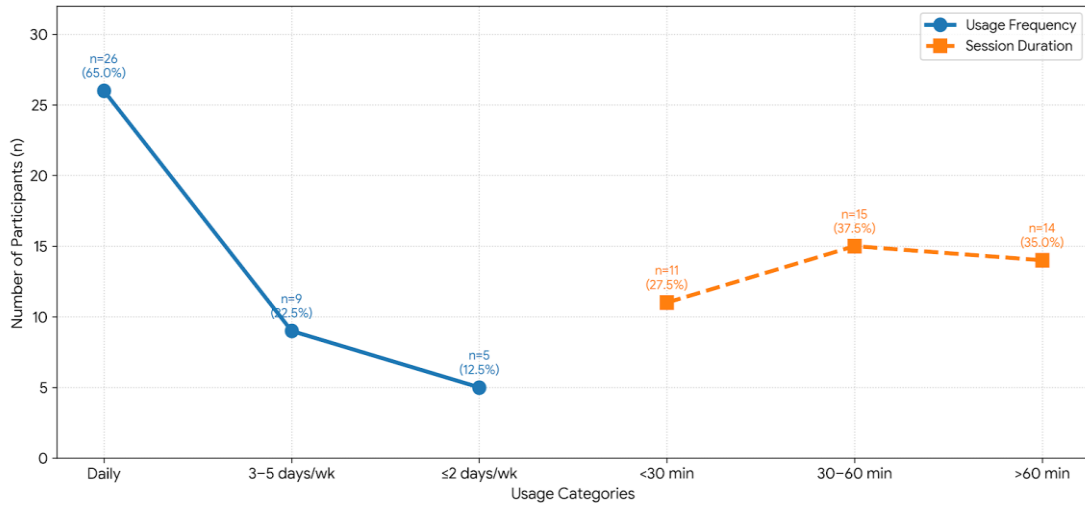


Table 3. CPRS-R ADHD Symptom Scores

Domain	Mean ± SD	Clinical Range (%)
Inattention	67.4 ± 8.9	42.5
Hyperactivity	61.2 ± 7.6	30.0
Impulsivity	64.8 ± 8.1	37.5
ADHD Index	66.1 ± 9.3	40.0

The symptoms are frightening as 40 percent of children reach the clinical range of the ADHD Index. The most significant clinical concern was the inattention of 42.5, 30, and 37.5 percent were the Hyperactivity and Impulsivity, respectively.

Table 3: CPRS-R ADHD Symptom Scores (Clinical Distribution)

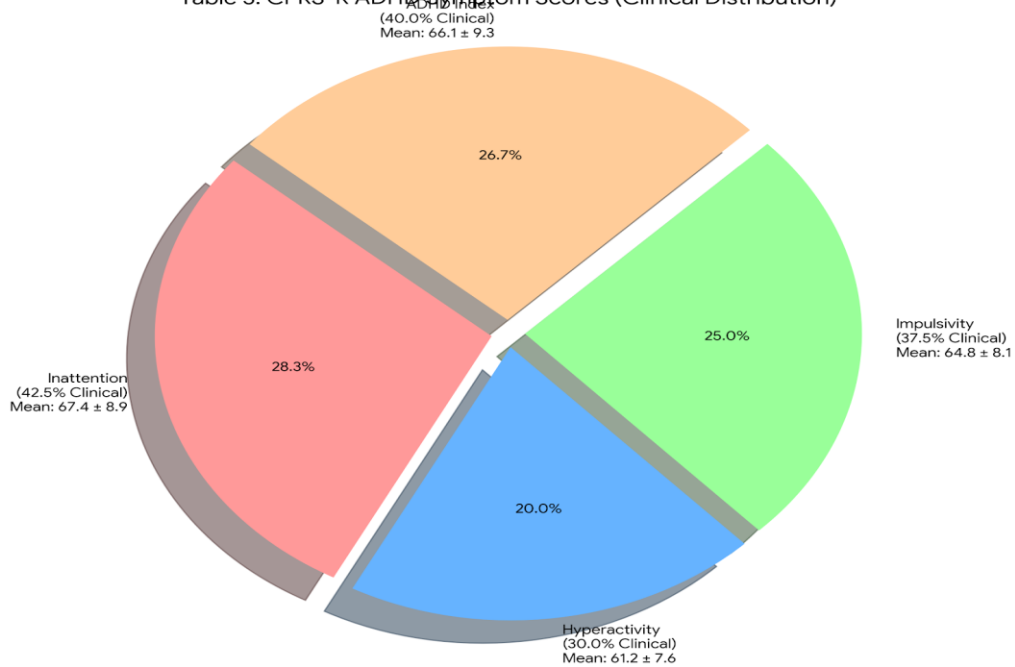


Table 4. Attention & Executive Function Tests

Test	Mean ± SD	Interpretation
Digit Span (Forward)	5.2 ± 1.1	Reduced attention
Digit Span (Backward)	3.6 ± 0.9	Impaired working memory
Stroop Interference (sec)	46.7 ± 8.4	Poor inhibitory control

Examinations show evident cognitive problems. A score of 3.6 + 0.9 signifying poor working memory in the Digit Span (Backward) test and the 46.7 seconds in the Stroop Interference test mean that the respondents lack strong inhibitory ability and cannot resist distracters.

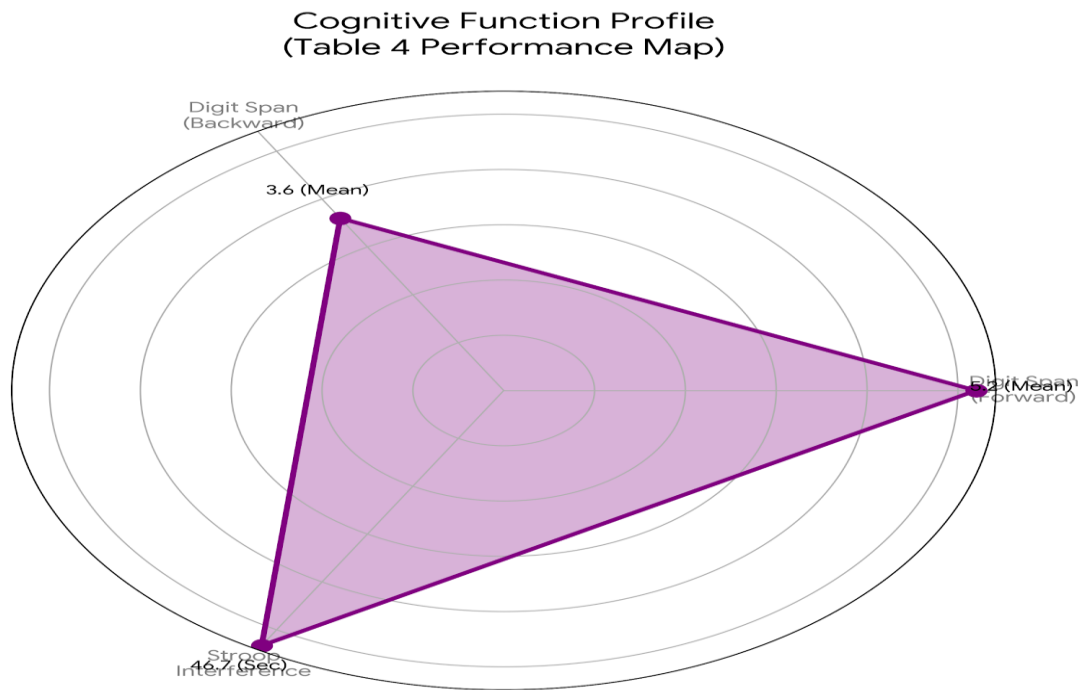


Table 5. Correlation Between TikTok Exposure & Attention

Variable	Inattention	Impulsivity	Digit Span
Daily TikTok Duration	0.61*	0.54*	-0.58*
Algorithmic Engagement	0.66*	0.59*	-0.63*

The relationship between TikTok and focus is highly negative. The Inattention is closely related to Algorithmic Engagement ($r = 0.66$) and Daily Duration ($r = 0.61$). On the other hand, increased TikTok usage is associated with lower Digit Span scores (-0.58) thus demonstrating that it negatively affects memory capacity.

**Table 5: Correlation Matrix
TikTok Exposure vs. Attention & Memory**

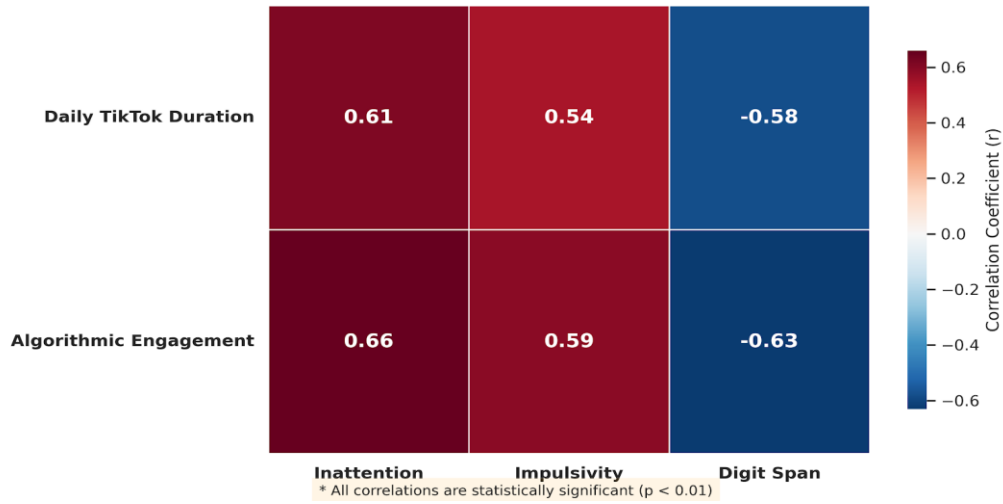
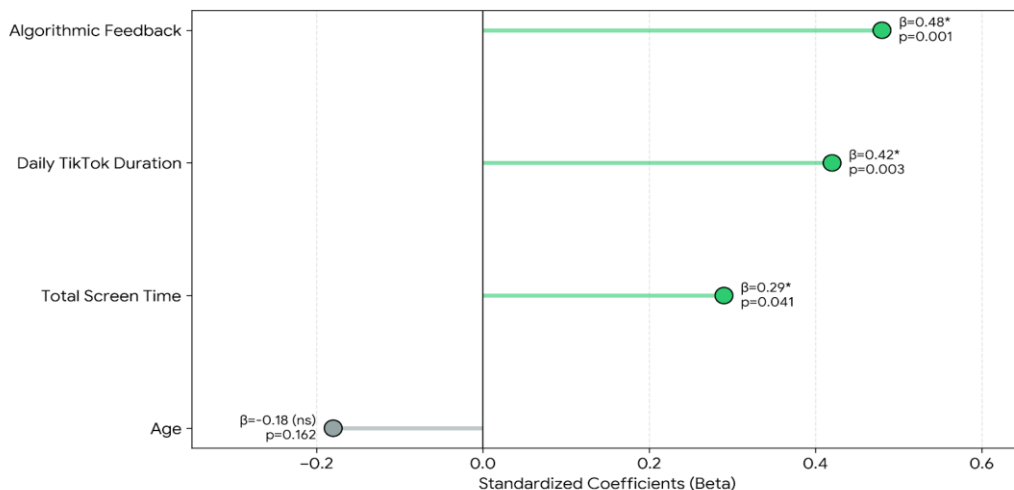


Table 6. Regression Analysis Predicting Inattention

Predictor	β	t	p
Daily TikTok Duration	0.42	3.21	0.003
Algorithmic Feedback	0.48	3.87	0.001
Total Screen Time	0.29	2.11	0.041
Age	-0.18	-1.42	0.162

Regression demonstrates that Algorithmic Feedback is the most powerful predictor of Inattention (with the value of 0.48 and $p = 0.001$) and then TikTok Duration. Although the effect of general screen time is significant ($p = 0.041$), age does not result in significant effects ($p = 0.162$), which demonstrates that TikTok peculiarities are the primary factor in causing focus problems.

Table 6: Regression Analysis Predicting Inattention
(Impact of Different Factors)



Discussion:

The current paper examined the neuropsychological influence of the feedback loop caused by the TikTok algorithm on attentional regulation in children, 8-12 years old, and found a strong correlation between the

duration of exposure to the short-form and highly stimulating digital content and the development of secondary ADHD-like symptoms. It was found that children with increased exposure to TikTok showed higher inattention, impulsivity, and lower levels of sustained attention, which confirmed the hypothesis that neuro-stimulating the environment may cause attentional dysregulations and not primary neurodevelopmental pathology. These findings are also in line with modern paradigms of attention that highlight the susceptibility of maturing executive control systems to externally instigated reward contingencies [16].

It is possible that the noted rise in inattention and impulsivity in frequent TikTok users can be attributed to the interference with the attentional gate, which is a neurocognitive process that helps to filter out irrelevant stimuli and focus on the goals. Algorithms provide us with frequent novelty and intermittent rewards that can override our brains to anticipate constant stimulation and thus become unable to tolerate cognitively challenging or low-reward activities [17,18]. According to the recent behavioral neuroscience, it is possible that daily exposure to these digital settings can undermine the top-down attentional control and boost the bottom-up stimulus-driven control, especially in children whose prefrontal regulatory mechanisms are still developing [19].

The deficiency in executive functioning, as manifested by a low level of Digit Span performance and a long period of Stroop interference, further proves the point that the exposure to the algorithms has an adverse impact on the working memory and inhibitory control. Other recent studies of cognitive variables in children also suggest a similar result, and it has been found out that the high activity of fast-paced digital media is linked with cognitive rigidity and poor response inhibition [20]. Such impairments reflect basic domains of ADHD symptoms, but the fact that the current sample has no prior clinical diagnosis supports the idea of secondary ADHD-like symptomatology that is mediated by the environment and reversible in nature [21].

There is a clinical difference between primary and secondary attentional disturbances. The secondary ADHD-like symptoms can be ameliorated through behaviour interventions, digital exposure control, and parental guidance, unlike neurodevelopmental ADHD, which is highly influenced by genetic factors and persistent [22]. More recent studies based on interventions have shown quantitatively significant improvements in attention span and executive functioning with systemized screen-time reduction, which confirms the modifiable quality of digitally induced attentional impairments [23].

The value of parental enlightenment and early screening in a child's environment is also highlighted by the findings of this research paper. Child psychologists and pediatric clinicians are now having to deal with children who are complaining of attention problems associated with excessive digital media use as opposed to underlying neurodevelopmental disorders [24]. The lack of awareness of such a difference can lead to the overdiagnosis of ADHD and unnecessary pharmacological therapy, which is why the assessment of digital exposure should be included in the routine clinical examination [25].

Although it has a contribution, the study has some limitations. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to make causal inferences, and the small scale of the sample limits generalizability. Also, the use of parent-reported measures is subject to bias in reporting. However, when the objective neuropsychological assessments are incorporated, the validity of the results becomes better. It is suggested that future longitudinal studies using neuroimaging methods and experimental research design will help to further clarify the neurocognitive outcomes of algorithm-driven digital platforms on child development in the long term [26,27]. In general, the research has presented some newly emerging evidence indicating that the algorithmic feedback processes on TikTok could have an effect of a contributory nature in disrupting attentional gating mechanisms among children, which results in secondary symptoms of ADHD. These results illustrate the pressing necessity of evidence-based guidelines, digital literacy programs, and interventions on the policy level to help save children from excessive exposure to immensely stimulating digital media environments.

Conclusion:

The results of the current study indicate that the sustained exposure to the short-form video content supported

by algorithms that TikTok uses is linked to the inattention, impulsivity, and poor sustained attention in children aged 8-12 years. These attentional disorders have been found to be secondary ADHD-like symptoms as a result of environmental neurostimulation, as opposed to primary neurodevelopmental ADHD. The executive functioning can be undermined by interference with the attentional gating mechanisms of such a developmentally critical stage through a continuous loop of feedback algorithms. It is important to identify such digitally induced changes as early as possible and to avoid the long-term cognitive and behavioral effects.

Limitations:

The research has a number of limitations which are supposed to be taken into account during the interpretation of outcomes. The cross-sectional design restricts the possibility of causally relating the exposure to TikTok and the outcomes of attention. The sample size used is relatively small, which limits externalization of the results to the general population. Also, the use of parent-reported measures can create an issue of reporting bias, and longitudinal follow-up could not be used, which restricts the interpretation of how long-term the noted ADHD-like symptoms persist or whether they were reversible.

Future Suggestions:

To gain a clearer insight into the causal mechanisms between exposure to algorithm-driven digital media and attentional regulation in children, future studies are advised to use longitudinal and experimental research designs. It should be noted that larger and more representative samples are preferable to increase the generalizability. Inclusion of neuroimaging and objective digital monitoring and tracking of usage could offer more understanding of the neurocognitive processes occurring. Also, studies that are intervention-based with the aim of screen-time regulation, parental guidance, and digital literacy programs are required to come up with evidence-based guidelines for protecting the cognitive and behavioral development of children.

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