



Review Article

## Reelity or Reality: A Scoping Review on the Effects of Short Form Social Media Content on Adolescents

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*“The difference between technology and slavery is that slaves are fully aware that they are not free” – Nassim Nicholas Taleb*

**Abstract:** Short videos on apps such as Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts are now a central activity for many adolescents who spend their time online. They are quick, engaging, and frequently customized by algorithms to continue viewing. Though they provide instant gratification, increasing research indicates that they can also influence how adolescents concentrate and regulate their emotions. This review examines studies that investigate the relationship between short-form video consumption and two important aspects of adolescent mental health: attention and mood regulation. The article also identifies areas where further research is required. By synthesizing existing evidence, this review aims to facilitate further scholarly work and stimulate informed debate about the digital practices influencing young people.

**Keywords:** Mental Health, Adolescents, Psychological Well-Being, Social Media, Digital Addiction

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## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of short-form video platforms like Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts have brought a new era of consumption online, especially among adolescents, who constitute a very vulnerable group to the pervasive influence of such platforms (Bahtar, 2023; Xie et al., 2023). The platforms, on the grounds of their easy-to-consume, algorithm-governed content, have reformed the shape and nature of social interaction and participation among young people, presenting benefits as well as limitations to their social growth and well-being (Hamilton et al., 2021; Magaldi et al., 2020). Adolescents can no longer imagine living their lives without the incorporation of social media into them, an omnipresent element that has now become a part of their lifestyle (Khalaf et al., 2023). The speed and interconnectivity of short-form content, that of grabbing eyeballs within the short span of a few seconds, can create changed forms of interaction, probably skewed towards shallowness and spectacle and away from mature and intellectual discussion (Al-Ansi et al., 2023). The pervasive spread of social media across the lives of adolescents necessitates that practitioners create tools to experiment with the potential flaws that may be concealed in social media, which same being adopted as a new force influencing the overall well-being of adolescents (Gupta et al., 2022). The fast consumption of short-form material can also lead to what is referred to as "displaced behavior, "where teens, faced with difficult situations, might choose the immediate gratification of such sites over better coping strategies.

But the psychological consequences of this trend are a cause for concern and a subject of interest to researchers, parents, and policymakers. A lot of the cognitive and emotional development of this generation is accomplished on the internet and on cell phones. In one survey, about seventy-five percent of teens now own cell phones (Pew Research Center 2015). Short-form content has become a prevailing fad in the current digital age defined by its brevity and ability to communicate focused information in a condensed period of time. Primarily defined as videos shorter than 60 to 90 seconds, this content is tailored to the declining attention span of current audiences and the rapid consumption habits characteristic of social media sites. The mode of interpersonal communication has been greatly changed post-COVID-19, and short video content has emerged as an ideal way of socialization and entertainment. Instagram Reels, YouTube shorts, TikTok (which is prohibited in India), and others have changed the mode of communication, interaction, and socialization of the masses. Adolescents are the most vulnerable to the impact of short video content because it is a product of the interaction of development variables, social pressure, emotional engagement, and a lack of critical media literacy. These factors establish a context through which they tend to be affected by the psychological impact of the content they consume (Li,2024).

As increasing numbers of adolescents are on social media, this paper will critically analyze and review literature on the effect of short-form video content on attention span, leading to mood deregulation. It will also explore the shapes that dictate attention spans, mood swings, and social interactions. This paper will explore how it influences the current scenario of psychological impairments, such as decreased attention span and low mood.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Attention span**

A study by Chiossi et al.(2023) suggests that individuals who engage with platforms like TikTok (short-form media content) negatively impair participants' performance in prospective memory tasks. Research significantly shows that excessive consumption of short-form video content negatively affects adolescents' attention spans.

In India, Radha Pranathi and Ann Mary Jacob (2024) conducted a study to investigate the relationship between addiction to short-form videos and attention span among young adults aged 18–25 years. The study established a moderate negative correlation between addiction to short-form videos and attention span, indicating that repeated high exposure to fast media is associated with poorer attentional ability. Mediation analysis revealed that stress partially mediates this process, indicating that cognitive overload due to short-form video viewing influences working memory and attention.

### **Mood Regulation and Emotional Well-being**

The highly addictive character of short-form videos has been attributed to mood dysregulation in teenagers. Overuse has been found to go hand-in-hand with elevated rates of anxiety and depression. According to a study by Smith et al. (2023), teenagers who spent more time on sites such as TikTok had higher anxiety and depression levels, which implies a strong effect on mood regulation.

Furthermore, the promoted material tends to project ideal lifestyles that promote social comparisons in negative terms and poor self-esteem. This pressure towards compliance can perpetuate mood instability and help sustain negative self-perspectives.

In India, Kumar et al. (2024) studied the cognitive and behavioral impacts of short-form video watching among adolescents. The researchers observed that overuse of apps such as TikTok and YouTube Shorts had been linked with lower cognitive functions, such as attention and memory. Adolescents who used these apps for longer periods showed greater impulsivity and lesser self-control and faced behavioral problems and poor performance at school.

## **Gender Differences**

Johnson et al. (2023) found that the mediating role of attentional bias on the relationship between short-form video addiction and depression was much stronger among female adolescents than in males.

In India, Sharma et al. (2024) conducted a study on gender differences in the impact of the consumption of short-form videos among adolescents. The research indicated that female adolescents were more vulnerable to mood disturbances and attention-related problems as a result of excessive use of platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels. The conformity pressure to the idealized representation of life on these platforms was more pronounced among female adolescents on their self-esteem and emotional well-being.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

In the contemporary world, social media is an essential part of an individual's life, which floated as a mode of recreation among adolescents in the late 90s, and in time turned out to be a "necessity" among adolescents. The transition of social media from being a platform to connect with people across the globe to being a source of instant gratification and entertainment shows the evolution of social media. The post-COVID world witnessed a surge in the usage of short-form social media content like Instagram Reels and YouTube shorts, which has reshaped digital media consumption, particularly among adolescents. The short nature of the videos and rapid scrolling leads to cognitive impairment and sensory overload, deteriorating attention span. The addictive properties of short-form videos also contribute to compulsive behaviour and such addiction has been associated with mood deregulation with adolescents reporting higher levels of irritability and mood swings and also the relentless quest for novelty and stimulation can lead to emotional deregulation. This change in media consumption is a source of serious concerns regarding its effects on the mental health of an adolescent. Despite the increasing pieces of evidence showing these issues, there is a dearth of systematic studies exploring the relationship between short-form videos, attention span and mood deregulation in adolescents. It is important to understand the relationship and its implications for creating effective interventions and guidelines to reduce the negative impacts of short-form social media content on adolescents. Hence, this paper attempts to bridge this gap by a systematic review of the literature to understand the relationship and its influences.

## **OBJECTIVES**

1. To study the influence of short-form social media videos on the mental health of adolescents, focusing on decreased attention span leading to mood deregulation.

2. To study the novel factors leading to the deterioration of attention span among adolescents.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was undertaken to examine existing literature on the emerging effects of short-form social media videos on adolescent mental health and to propose informed recommendations derived from these insights. A systematic review design was employed, adopting an exploratory and qualitative approach. Secondary data were sourced from academic databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed and Scispace, focusing on peer-reviewed articles, research papers and reports published between 2019 and 2025. While previous studies investigating the relationship between social media and mental health have frequently relied on broad analytical frameworks such as the *Uses and Gratifications Theory*, *Social Comparison Theory*, and *Cognitive Overload Framework*. These works have generally employed systematic or scoping reviews that treat social media as a monolithic entity. Consequently, they often overlook the distinctive engagement patterns, algorithmic exposure and affective immediacy associated with short-form video platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts. The present research critically engages with these methodological traditions by acknowledging their strengths in mapping user motivation and behavioral patterns, yet diverges from them by emphasizing the temporality and neuropsychological dimensions of short-form content consumption. In doing so, this paper refines the methodological and conceptual lens through which adolescent mental health is examined in the context of rapid, visually stimulating media environments. It thereby contributes to the evolving scholarly debate by synthesizing contemporary findings through a focused and differentiated perspective that bridges existing theoretical gaps.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The landscape of social media usage has significantly altered post-COVID-19, with Short-form content taking the center stage and being a widely used feature of social media. It has become a dominant source of entertainment and recreation for all age groups. TikTok, a short video filming app, became very popular in India, but when it was banned by the government due to security reasons, many digital creators were trying different platforms. Then Meta-owned Instagram took this opportunity and introduced short videos called “Reels” in 2019. After that, the trend of shooting reels has increased among youngsters on Facebook and Instagram, followed by YouTube Shorts. It has both pros and cons, mainly affecting the mental health of individuals.

As per a study conducted by Barnhart in 2022 the number of people using social media is shown below:

- Demographics and usage of YouTube: More than 2 billion people aged 15-35 years were monthly active. Females were 46% and males were 54%, and they spent 30 minutes on YouTube every day.
- Demographics and usage of Instagram: Monthly active users were 2 billion, and they were 25-34 years old. There were 48.4% females and 51.8% males, and they spent 29 minutes per day. (Barnhart, 2022)

The number of Instagram users has increased because of trending reels. India is a country with a higher percentage of Google searches for Instagram reels. Nine out of 10 users watch videos weekly. Meta had given reports that 46.1% were females and 53.9% were males, wherever 10.9% of children above thirteen were the Instagram reels audience. Reels had become Instagram's fastest-growing feature. The worldwide popularity of Reels has more than that of Instagram stories. (Beveridge, 2022)

More use of mobiles causes stress and mental illness among teenagers. It also creates addiction among them. Teenagers use social media networking till late at night and do not sleep timely. Sleeplessness causes insomnia among teenagers. (Singh et al, 2019)

Adolescents are more prone to the ill effects of the Short-form content due to a combination and unique interplay of neurodevelopmental, psychological and social factors. In the adolescence stage, an individual is not fully developed, he/she go through a lot of changes both physically and mentally, so it gets easily influenced by the type of content they consume and the feature of short form content is curated in such a way that adolescents are bound to get addicted to it if exposed for prolonged period of time. It not only hampers the cognitive functioning of an adolescent like memory or attention but also his/her social behavior which leads to disturbed interpersonal relationships even affecting physiological health like disrupted sleep patterns or visual issues etc, the short, recurrent nature of such content may distort emotional regulation and reduce resilience to boredom or frustration in offline environment (Turel et al., 2019). This type of content often leads to passive and mindless scrolling and over time, it contributes to low mood and communication difficulties. It is extremely important to involve parental guidance and support for adolescents to look after their Social media activity and to make sure that their kids do not get addicted to such Social Media features. This paper focuses on two main objectives, which are discussed below:

**Objective 1: To study the influence of short-form social media content on the mental health of adolescents, focusing on decreased attention span leading to mood deregulation**

As per recent empirical evidences, there has been growing concerns that engaging with short-form video platforms excessively such as Instagram reels, TikTok and YouTube shorts affects the cognitive and emotional functioning of the adolescents adversely. Studies by Pranathi et al. (2025) and Jacob et al. (2025) indicate that rapid, high-stimulus short-form videos can reduce certain attentional capacities by inducing cognitive overload and elevated stress responses, ultimately impairing sustained focus and executive control. According to the findings of a cohort analysis, significantly higher levels of inactive behaviour were shown by adolescent users, suggesting age-specific vulnerability to attentional disruption. Similarly, a 2024 empirical study (PMC) found that problematic short-video use was linked to reduced self-control and executive dysfunction which are considered to be the core cognitive substrates of sustained attention. Field reports, such as a *Times of India* case of a 17-year-old student exhibiting academic decline due to excessive short-video use, further illustrate how these psychological and cognitive consequences manifest in real-world adolescent behavior-though such cases often remain underreported in India due to limited awareness and clinical documentation.

Experimental research on *digital switching*, the frequent skipping between short videos, suggests a causal link between fragmented viewing and reduced sustained attention, as habitual switchers report greater boredom and diminished focus (PubMed, 2024). This cognitive fragmentation aligns with neuropsychological evidence that repeated exposure to fast-paced, high-reward stimuli conditions the brain to seek constant novelty, thereby weakening top-down attentional control (Montag & Walla, 2016; Rothbart & Posner, 2005).

This attentional instability often co-occurs with emotional dysregulation. Algorithmically driven short-form content evokes rapid emotional shifts and encourages social comparison, leading to anxiety, low self-esteem and mood fluctuations (Nesi et al., 2018; Huang, 2017; Sherman et al., 2016). Compulsive scrolling behaviours are reinforced by adolescents' heightened dopaminergic sensitivity (Galván, 2013), while exposure to negative or comparative material may elevate cortisol levels, intensifying stress and irritability (Boers et al., 2019).

Collating these findings, scoping a well as systematic reviews, reveals that features of short form videos such as algorithmic reinforcement, scrolling infinitely and rapid pacing of rewards leads to greater fragmentation of attention and predicts poor emotional-wellbeing among the adolescents. Secondary consequences such as academic underperformance, insomnia, procrastination etc have also been reported leading to mood dysregulation (Xie, 2023; Jiang & Yoo, 2024; Zhang, 2024).

However, despite the consistency of these associations, current evidence is constrained by several methodological limitations. Most available studies are cross-sectional or use short follow-up periods, making it difficult to infer causality or exclude reverse associations (e.g., that adolescents with existing attentional deficits may gravitate toward high-stimulation media). Measurement heterogeneity is also considerable, researchers differ in operationalizing “short-form use,” ranging from screen-time duration to algorithmic engagement indices thus complicating meta-analytic synthesis. Furthermore, many studies rely on convenience samples rather than representative adolescent cohorts, and few address cultural or platform-specific differences (TikTok vs. Reels vs. Shorts). Mechanistic studies, particularly longitudinal neurocognitive or neuroimaging research linking short-form exposure to enduring attentional and affective impairments, remain sparse.

In response to these gaps, the present systematic review limits its inclusion criteria to studies published between 2019 and 2025 that explicitly operationalize short-form video exposure. It applies a structured critical appraisal of study design, bias, and measurement reliability, distinguishing between cross-sectional correlations and experimental or longitudinal findings. By synthesizing behavioral, sleep, and neurocognitive evidence, the review evaluates the plausibility of an attention-mood dysregulation pathway specific to short-form video consumption.

Overall, the converging evidence suggests that while short-form videos may temporarily enhance arousal and engagement, chronic exposure contributes to attentional decline, compulsive behaviour and emotional instability among adolescents. These findings underscore the need for longitudinal and cross-cultural research to establish causal pathways and to inform policy, digital literacy programs and interventions promoting healthy media use among youth in the digital era.

## **Objective 2: To study the novel factors leading to the deterioration of attention among adolescents**

Recent research has highlighted several novel factors contributing to the deterioration of attention spans among adolescents, particularly due to the consumption of short-form video content. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram employ recommendation algorithms that deliver a continuous stream of personalized content, reinforcing passive engagement and instant gratification. This design encourages compulsive viewing habits, making it increasingly challenging for adolescents to focus on less stimulating tasks, such as studying or face-to-face interactions (Xie, Zhao, & Sun, 2023).

In addition, short-form videos often present rapid sequences of emotionally contrasting stimuli, which can lead to emotional overload. This overstimulation may cause mental fatigue and impair the brain's capacity to maintain focus and process information effectively. Research indicates that excessive consumption of such content can negatively affect sleep quality and increase social anxiety among adolescents (Jiang, Zhang, & Li, 2024).

Mechanisms of artificial social feedback, including likes, comments and views, act as external validators that perpetuate a compulsive dependency on digital endorsement. This pressure not only diverts attention to social comparison but also undermines concentration as adolescents continuously monitor for feedback. Over time, such dynamics can contribute to self-esteem issues and self-doubt. Furthermore, short-form video app addiction has been linked to higher academic anxiety and lower engagement, with mindfulness mediating some of these effects (Li, Chen, & Wang, 2024).

Continuous engagement with short-form videos also reduces opportunities for downtime or mind-wandering, which are essential for mental consolidation and attentional restoration. The absence of these restorative periods further diminishes the capacity for sustained attention. For example, frequent exposure to short video reels has been shown to significantly reduce attention spans and impair academic performance among undergraduate students (Haliti-Sylaj & Sadiku, 2024).

Overall, the interplay of algorithmic reinforcement, emotional overstimulation, social validation pressures and reduced cognitive restoration contributes to the deterioration of attention spans among adolescents. This is not merely a result of increased screen time, but a complex interaction between digital media design and developing cognitive processes. Addressing these factors requires strategies such as promoting digital literacy, encouraging balanced media consumption and fostering environments that support cognitive and emotional well-being.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This paper is a contribution to the literature of effects of short form social media videos like Reels or Shorts on adolescents focusing on reduced attention span and mood deregulation from an academic perspective. This study was subject to a number of limitations, to begin with, the study was based on secondary data which limited the capacity to customize data collection to the particular goals of this study. Secondly, there was lack of relevant academic literature specifically targeting some areas of the research question like effects of short form social media videos on adolescence majority of the papers are done on adult population but the field of child and adolescence hugely lacks research on this topic, due to the deficiency of relevant literature it was difficult to establish a solid theoretical framework and recognize

frameworks, thirdly the research could have facilitate a more in-depth data analysis with sufficient amount of time but it couldn't hence the study could not dive into some broad aspects of the subject matter.

## CONCLUSION

This study, therefore, explored the multifaceted impact of short-form social media content on adolescents' mental health, cognitive functioning and psychosocial development. The findings indicate that algorithmically driven reward cycles and the constant availability of personalized content contribute significantly to the deterioration of attention spans, fostering habits of passive engagement and instant gratification. Rapid sequences of emotionally contrasting stimuli, such as humor followed by tragedy, were shown to overload cognitive and emotional resources, leading to mental fatigue and reducing the capacity for sustained focus. Furthermore, mechanisms of artificial social feedback, including likes, comments and views, were found to perpetuate compulsive checking behaviors, heightening social comparison and negatively affecting self-esteem. The study also revealed that reduced opportunities for downtime or mind-wandering, which are essential for attentional restoration and mental consolidation, further exacerbate difficulties in maintaining prolonged attention. Taken together, these findings highlight the complex interplay between digital media design, cognitive processes and psychosocial factors, demonstrating how short-form video consumption can simultaneously shape attention, emotional regulation and social behaviors in adolescents. By providing a comprehensive understanding of these mechanisms, this study underscores the importance of recognizing both the cognitive and emotional consequences of pervasive social media use during a critical developmental period.

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