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Why the Term ‘Virtual Autism’ Warrants Caution

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Abstract

The term *virtual autism* has recently been used to describe autism-like behaviors in young children following prolonged exposure to screens. The use of the word *autism* in this context raises conceptual and ethical concerns by reinforcing outdated ideas about parental blame, misrepresenting the nature of autism as we currently understand it, and causing misunderstanding about autism among the general public. We call for more precise and responsible language and advocate for an alternative term that better reflects the environmental basis of the phenomenon, such as *screen-related developmental delay*.

Lay abstract

The term *virtual autism* has been used to describe autistic-like behaviors in young children that result from spending a lot of time using screens. Using the word *autism* in this context can cause confusion. It may lead people to wrongly believe that autism is caused by screen use and bring back outdated ideas that blame parents. We argue that this term can be misleading for parents, teachers and the general public. Instead, we suggest using a clearer term like *screen-related developmental delay* to better reflect the environmental causes of these behaviors.

Keywords

autism, early childhood, language, screen time, virtual autism

In recent literature, the term *virtual autism* has emerged to describe autistic-like behaviors in children who have been exposed to prolonged screen time in their first years of life (e.g., Ashraf & Azmat, 2025; Zamfir, 2018). While the intention behind this terminology may be to raise awareness about the potential developmental risks of prolonged screen time, the use of the word *autism* in this context raises important conceptual and ethical concerns. We argue that the term should be revised to avoid confusion, misinformation, and stigmatization of both autistic individuals and their families, and we propose a more suitable and non-stigmatizing term.

Different origins

Autism Spectrum Disorder as defined by the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) (hereafter: autism) is currently understood as a neurodevelopmental condition with a strong genetic and neurobiological basis, and persists across the lifespan (Parellada et al., 2014). Twin studies estimate the heritability between 64% and 91%, indicating a substantial genetic contribution, with environmental influences likely accounting for the remaining variance (Tick et al., 2016). Although numerous environmental factors have been investigated, consistent evidence for specific causes remain limited, suggesting a complex interplay of factors (Yenkoyan et al., 2024). In contrast, the term *virtual autism*, to our knowledge first proposed by Zamfir (2018), is used to describe autism-like traits attributed to excessive screen exposure in early childhood (Ashraf & Azmat, 2025).

Although some of the behaviors described as *virtual autism* may appear superficially similar to autism, the underlying causes are thought to differ: *virtual autism* refers to behaviors that are mainly environmentally induced and potentially transient over time, whereas autism refers to a life-long neurodevelopmental condition that, according to the current knowledge, derives from a complex interplay between genes and environment. Using the term autism in *virtual autism* creates a false equivalence and risks reinforcing the misconception that autism itself could be primarily induced by a single environmental factor.

Risk of misconceptions and stigma

Historically, autism has been subject to harmful and controversial explanatory models. One of these models was the refrigerator mother hypothesis, which suggested that autism was caused by cold and unresponsive parenting. Although this theory has been widely discredited, its legacy continues to affect how autism is perceived (Lord et al., 2022). Using the term *virtual autism* risks reviving these parent-blaming narratives by potentially implying that autism is caused by caregiver choices. This can lead to misplaced guilt among parents and foster stigma toward both caregivers and autistic children. *Virtual autism* is not a clinical diagnosis and does not appear in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric

Association, 2013). The term *virtual autism* may undermine recognition of autism and the potential lifelong needs of autistic individuals or, conversely, lend unwarranted diagnostic weight to a phenomenon that is, so far, only loosely defined, primarily environmentally induced, and potentially transient. The autism spectrum is already broad and heterogeneous. Applying the same label to phenomena that are likely to have different origins risks further complicating diagnostic clarity.

A call for precise and responsible language

Scientific terminology shapes public understanding, clinical practice, and policy. The term *virtual autism* misrepresents the phenomenon it aims to describe and risks harm by perpetuating stigma and diagnostic confusion. We propose adopting more accurate and neutral terms, such as *screen-related developmental delay*. Such alternatives reflect the environmental contribution of the symptoms without invoking a formal diagnosis or linking them to a neurodevelopmental condition that is currently understood to have a different etiology.

Future research

As screen use becomes increasingly prevalent, further research is needed to better understand its potential positive and negative consequences in both autistic and non-autistic children. Revising the term *virtual autism* is crucial to prevent misunderstanding and stigma, enabling more precise and responsible research of screen-related developmental outcomes.

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