

A robust brain network for sustained attention from adolescence to adulthood that predicts later substance use

Reviewed Preprint

v2 • July 18, 2024

Revised by authors

Reviewed Preprint

v1 • June 5, 2024

Yihe Weng, Johann Kruschwitz, Laura M Rueda-Delgado, Kathy Ruddy, Rory Boyle, Luisa Franzen, Emin Serin, Tochukwu Nweze, Jamie Hanson, Alannah Smyth, Tom Farnan, Tobias Banaschewski, Arun LW Bokde, Sylvane Desrivieres, Herta Flor, Antoine Grigis, Hugh Garavan, Penny Gowland, Andreas Heinz, Rüdiger Brühl, Jean-Luc Martinot, Marie-Laure Paillère Martinot, Eric Artiges, Jane McGrath, Frauke Nees, Dimitri Papadopoulos Orfanos, Tomáš Paus, Luise Poustka, Nathalie Holz, Juliane H Fröhner, Michael N Smolka, Nilakshi Vaidya, Gunter Schumann, Henrik Walter, Robert Whelan , IMAGEN Consortium

School of Psychology and Global Brain Health Institute, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland • Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy CCM, Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, corporate member of Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, and Berlin Institute of Health, Berlin, Germany • Collaborative Research Centre (SFB 940) “Volition and Cognitive Control”, Technische Universität Dresden, 01069, Dresden, Germany • School of Psychology, Queens University Belfast, Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK • Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience, Maastricht University, Maastricht, Netherlands • Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, Einstein Center for Neurosciences Berlin, 10117, Berlin, Germany • Bernstein Center for Computational Neuroscience, 10115, Berlin, Germany • Department of Psychology, University of Utah, USA • Department of Psychology, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA, USA; Learning Research & Development Center, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA, USA • Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, Central Institute of Mental Health, Medical Faculty Mannheim, Heidelberg University, Square J5, 68159 Mannheim, Germany • Discipline of Psychiatry, School of Medicine and Trinity College Institute of Neuroscience, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland • Centre for Population Neuroscience and Precision Medicine (PONS), Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience, SGDP Centre, King’s College London, United Kingdom • Institute of Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience, Central Institute of Mental Health, Medical Faculty Mannheim, Heidelberg University, Square J5, Mannheim, Germany • Department of Psychology, School of Social Sciences, University of Mannheim, 68131 Mannheim, Germany • NeuroSpin, CEA, Université Paris-Saclay, F-91191 Gif-sur-Yvette, France • Departments of Psychiatry and Psychology, University of Vermont, 05405 Burlington, Vermont, USA • Sir Peter Mansfield Imaging Centre School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham, United Kingdom • Physikalisch-Technische Bundesanstalt (PTB), Braunschweig and Berlin, Germany • Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale, INSERM U 1299 “Trajectoires développementales & psychiatrie”, University Paris-Saclay, CNRS; Ecole Normale Supérieure Paris-Saclay, Centre Borelli; Gif-sur-Yvette, France • Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale, INSERM U 1299 “Trajectoires développementales & psychiatrie”, University Paris-Saclay, CNRS; Ecole Normale Supérieure Paris-Saclay, Centre Borelli; Gif-sur-Yvette; and AP-HP. Sorbonne University, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital, Paris, France • Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale, INSERM U 1299 “Trajectoires développementales & psychiatrie”, University Paris-Saclay, CNRS; Ecole Normale Supérieure Paris-Saclay, Centre Borelli; Gif-sur-Yvette; and Psychiatry Department, EPS Barthélémy Durand, Etampes, France • Institute of Medical Psychology and Medical Sociology, University Medical Center Schleswig Holstein, Kiel University, Kiel, Germany • Departments of Psychiatry and Neuroscience, Faculty of Medicine and Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Sainte-Justine, University of Montreal, Montreal, Quebec, Canada • Departments of Psychiatry and Psychology, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada • Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, University Medical Centre Göttingen, von-Siebold-Str. 5, 37075, Göttingen, Germany • Department of Psychiatry and Neuroimaging Center, Technische Universität Dresden, Dresden, Germany • Centre for Population Neuroscience and Stratified Medicine (PONS), Department of Psychiatry and Neuroscience, Charité Universitätsmedizin Berlin, Germany • Centre for Population

Abstract

Substance use, including cigarettes and cannabis, is associated with poorer sustained attention in late adolescence and early adulthood. Previous studies were predominantly cross-sectional or under-powered and could not indicate if impairment in sustained attention was a predictor of substance-use or a marker of the inclination to engage in such behaviour. This study explored the relationship between sustained attention and substance use across a longitudinal span from ages 14 to 23 in over 1,000 participants. Behaviours and brain connectivity associated with diminished sustained attention at age 14 predicted subsequent increases in cannabis and cigarette smoking, establishing sustained attention as a robust biomarker for vulnerability to substance use. Individual differences in network strength relevant to sustained attention were preserved across developmental stages and sustained attention networks generalized to participants in an external dataset. In summary, brain networks of sustained attention are robust, consistent, and able to predict aspects of later substance use.

Teaser

A robust brain network for sustained attention at age 14 predicts cigarette and cannabis use from ages 14 to 23.

eLife assessment

This study presents an **important** finding on the relationship between brain activity related to sustained attention and substance use in adolescence/early adulthood with a large longitudinal dataset. The evidence supporting the claims of the authors is **convincing**. The work will be of interest to cognitive neuroscientists, psychologists, and clinicians working on substance use or addiction.

<https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.97150.2.sa4>

Introduction

Sustained attention is a critical cognitive process in daily life, playing a significant role in academic achievement, social communication, and mental health (Esterman and Rothlein, 2019¹) and can be defined as “the focus on performance on a single task over time, with the goal of explaining both the fluctuations within an individual as well as the individual differences in overall ability to maintain stable task performance” (p. 174)(Esterman and Rothlein, 2019¹). Sustained attention notably improves between the ages of 9 and 16 years-old (Thomson et al., 2022²), concomitant with cognitive maturation and brain development during adolescence

(Paus, 2005 [↗](#)). The functional neuroanatomy of sustained attention involves cingulate, prefrontal, and parietal cortices; supplementary motor area (SMA); frontal eye field; and cerebellum (Bauer et al., 2020 [↗](#); Pinar et al., 2018 [↗](#)).

Cross-sectional studies suggest that substance use during adolescence, including cigarette smoking (Treur et al., 2015 [↗](#)), alcohol consumption (Ueno et al., 2022 [↗](#)), and cannabis use (Wallace et al., 2019 [↗](#)), is associated with poorer sustained attention. For instance, adolescents (14-17 years-old) using cannabis a minimum of 4 days per week for at least the last 6 months showed impaired sustained attention in the Rapid Visual Information Processing Task (RVP), and in the Immediate Memory Task versus non-users (Dougherty et al., 2013 [↗](#)). Adolescents (12-17 years-old) in a high tetrahydrocannabinol (THC; the primary psychoactive component in cannabis) group exhibited lower accuracy on the RVP task than a low THC group (Shannon et al., 2010 [↗](#)). Cigarette users aged 18-29 years-old showed significant cognitive impairments in sustained attention than non-smokers in the RVP task (Chamberlain et al., 2012 [↗](#)). A systematic review of the next-day cognitive effects of heavy alcohol consumption demonstrated impairments in sustained attention during alcohol hangovers using meta-analysis (Yakir et al., 2007 [↗](#)). These findings highlight the negative associations between substance use and sustained attention.

Given the cross-sectional nature of the behavioural and neuroimaging studies above, it remains unclear if impaired sustained attention predates the initiation of substance use and/or if it is a consequence of substance use. Only one longitudinal study (Harakeh et al., 2012 [↗](#)) has examined the association between sustained attention and cigarette smoking, employing measurements across three-waves and involving a large sample of 1,797 adolescents. Poor sustained attention, unlike other neurocognitive functions such as working memory, attention flexibility, or perceptual sensitivity; was associated with the increased probability of adolescents subsequently initiating cigarette smoking between ages 11 and 13 and with a higher chance of being a daily smoker by age 16. Harakeh and colleagues' findings suggest that poor sustained attention may precede the onset of cigarette smoking. However, as their study was based on a behavioural level, the neural correlates underlying these associations remain untested.

Although lower sustained attention has been associated with subsequent cigarette smoking, individuals commonly engage in the concurrent use of multiple substances (Crummy et al., 2020 [↗](#)), perhaps due to shared pathological substrates for substance use. A meta-analysis identified common neural alterations in primary dorsal striatal, and frontal circuits, engaged in reward/salience processing, habit formation, and executive control across various substances (nicotine, cannabis, alcohol, and cocaine) (Thiele and Bellgrove, 2018 [↗](#)). Those involved in substance use often co-use both cannabis and cigarettes (Agrawal et al., 2012 [↗](#); Hindocha et al., 2016 [↗](#); Weinberger et al., 2018 [↗](#)). Agrawal et al. (2012) [↗](#) reported that 90% of cannabis users smoke cigarettes during their lifetime, and the widespread co-use of the two may be attributed to genetic sharing (Agrawal et al., 2010 [↗](#); Stringer et al., 2016 [↗](#)) and similar neural mechanisms (Klugah-Brown et al., 2020 [↗](#)).

Functional brain networks can predict various behavioural traits, such as substance use (Yip et al., 2019 [↗](#)) and sustained attention (Rosenberg et al., 2016 [↗](#)). Previous studies (e.g., (Rosenberg et al., 2018 [↗](#))) have used brain connectivity to develop predictive models of sustained attention that can be generalized to healthy and clinical populations. However, while behavioural changes in sustained attention have been documented and functional brain networks that predict substance use have been identified (Yip et al., 2019 [↗](#)), the underlying change in sustained attention brain networks from adolescence to adulthood and their relation to substance use are relatively less well described. Lower sustained attention has been accompanied by both stronger reductions in neural activity in the visual cortex, as well as stronger recruitment of the right supramarginal gyrus with increasing time on a sustained attention task with central cues in cigarette smokers as opposed to non-smokers (Vossel et al., 2011 [↗](#)). In a resting-state functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) paradigm, cannabis users aged 16-26 had stronger connectivity between the left

posterior cingulate cortex and the cerebellum, correlated with poorer performance on sustained attention/working memory and verbal learning measures (Ritchay et al., 2021 [↗](#)). Although most brain connectomic research has utilized resting-state fMRI data, functional connectivity (FC) during task performance has demonstrated superiority in predicting individual behaviours and traits, due to its potential to capture more behaviourally relevant information (Dhamala et al., 2022 [↗](#); Greene et al., 2018 [↗](#); Yoo et al., 2018 [↗](#)). Specifically, Zhao et al. (2023) [↗](#) suggested that task-related FC outperforms both typical task-based and resting-state FC in predicting individual differences. Hence, we applied task-related FC to predict sustained attention over time.

Previous studies found that FC patterns predicted individual differences in sustained attention (Chen et al., 2022 [↗](#); O'Halloran et al., 2018 [↗](#); Sripada et al., 2020 [↗](#)), yet relatively little is known about the relationship between brain activity related to sustained attention and substance use over time. A latent change score model can quantify bidirectional longitudinal relations between substance use and both behaviours and brain activity associated with sustained attention, shedding light on how substance use impacts sustained attention and its associated brain activity, and vice versa. In this study, we used task-fMRI from the IMAGEN dataset, a longitudinal study with >1,000 participants at each timepoint (ages 14, 19, and 23 years-old). We first obtained task-related whole-brain connectivity and then used connectome-based predictive modeling (CPM) to predict sustained attention from ages 14 to 23. Additionally, previous cross-sectional and longitudinal studies (Broyd et al., 2016 [↗](#); Harakeh et al., 2012 [↗](#); Lisdahl and Price, 2012 [↗](#)) have shown that there are linear relationships between substance use and sustained attention over time. We therefore employed correlation analyses and a latent change score model to estimate the relationship between substance use and both behaviours and brain activity associated with sustained attention. Given the substantial sample size and longitudinal design of Harakeh et al.'s study, we hypothesized that behavioural and predictive networks associated with lower sustained attention would predict increased substance use (particularly cigarette smoking) over time.

Results

1. Behavioural changes over time

Reaction time (RT) variability is a straightforward measure of sustained attention, with increasing variability thought to reflect poor sustained attention. RT variability can be defined as the intra-individual coefficient of variation (ICV), calculated as the standard deviation of mean Go RT divided by the mean Go RT from Go trials in the stop signal task. Lower ICV indicates better sustained attention. Participants' demographic information for all analyses is shown in **Table 1** [↗](#) (see also Tables S1-S2). A linear mixed model analysis showed significant fixed effects of age (i.e., timepoint) on ICV ($F_{1895.3} = 51.14$, $P < 0.001$) (**Fig. 1A** [↗](#)). Post-hoc analysis showed that ICV decreased with age: ICV at age 14 was significantly higher than ICV at ages 19 ($t = 6.535$, $P < 0.001$) and 23 ($t = 10.109$, $P < 0.001$). ICV at age 19 was also significantly higher than that at age 23 ($t = 4.768$, $P < 0.001$). The full results of the linear mixed model analysis are shown in Tables S3-S4. In addition, we found that individual differences in ICV were significantly correlated between the three timepoints (**Fig. 1B** [↗](#) and Table S5, all $P < 2.8e^{-7}$).

2. Cross-sectional brain connectivity

This study employed CPM, a data-driven neuroscience approach, to identify three predictive networks— positive, negative, and combined — to predict ICV from brain functional connectivity. CPM typically uses the strength of the predictive networks to predict individual differences in traits and behaviors. The predictive networks were obtained based on connectivity analyses of the whole brain. Specifically, we assessed whether connections between brain areas (i.e., edges) in a task-related functional connectivity matrix derived from generalized psychophysiological interaction analysis were positively or negatively correlated with ICV using a significance

	Age 14	Age 19	Age 23
<i>N</i> (Three timepoints)	2,148		
Sex (M/F)	1055/1093		
Age (Years)	14.4 ± 0.4	19 ± 0.7	22.6 ± 0.7
Mean FD (mm)	0.28 ± 0.32	0.18 ± 0.17	0.18 ± 0.12
GO RT (ms)	466.6 ± 80	400.7 ± 71.8	403.9 ± 73.8
ICV	0.234 ± 0.038	0.224 ± 0.051	0.217 ± 0.052
Stop RT (ms)	461.5 ± 114.8	360 ± 82.4	363.6 ± 78.2
SSD (ms)	319.3 ± 148.1	188.1 ± 132.4	190 ± 158.4
SSRT (ms)	217.8 ± 37.2	213.3 ± 43.3	216.2 ± 42.6
pOmission (%)	4.4 ± 10.5	2.6 ± 8.6	3.7 ± 11.1
pChoiceError (%)	4.7 ± 6.6	4.8 ± 4.7	5.2 ± 7.6
pCommission (%)	47.9 ± 6.3	47.5 ± 6	47.2 ± 6.9

Note: These data pertain to the participants included in the behavioural analyses. *N*, number of subjects; FD, framewise displacement of MR images; ICV, intra-individual coefficient of variation (assay for sustained attention); SSRT, stop signal reaction time; GO RT, reaction time in Go trials; Stop RT, reaction time in stop fail trials; SSD, stop signal delay; pOmission, probability of go omissions (no response); pChoiceError, probability of choice errors on Go trials; pCommission, probability of commission on Stop trials.

Table 1.

Demographic information of adolescents in the linear mixed model across three timepoints

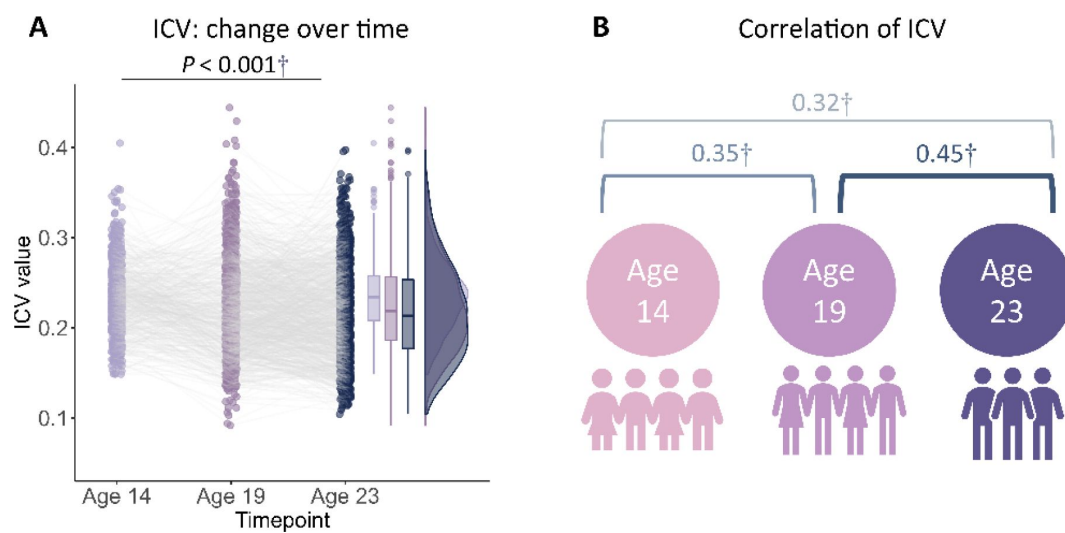


Fig. 1

Intra-individual coefficient of variation (ICV) changes over time. (A) ICV changes over time. (B) Correlation of ICV between timepoints within subjects. † , $P < 0.001$

threshold of $P < 0.01$. These positively or negatively correlated connections were regarded as positive or negative network, respectively. The network strength of positive networks (or negative networks) was determined for each individual by summing the connection strength of each positively (or negatively) correlated edge. The combined network was determined by subtracting the strength of the negative network from the positive network. We then built a linear model between network strength and ICV in the training set and applied these predictive networks to yield network strength and a linear model in the test set to calculate predicted ICV using k-fold cross validation.

Positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Go trials significantly predicted ICV: at age 14 ($r = 0.25$, $r = 0.25$, and $r = 0.28$, respectively, all $P < 0.001$) (**Fig. 2A**), at age 19 ($r = 0.27$, $r = 0.25$, $r = 0.28$, respectively, all $P < 0.001$) (**Fig. 2B**) and at age 23 ($r = 0.38$, $r = 0.33$, and $r = 0.37$, respectively, all $P < 0.001$) (**Fig. 2C**). The connectome patterns of predictive networks are shown in **Figs. 2D-I**. Fig. S2 summarizes the connectivity within and between functional networks and depicts their respective contribution to the predictive network. The above results were validated using 10-fold cross validation (CV); similar results were obtained when using 5-fold CV and leave-site-out CV (Table S6). The predictive networks had similar connectome patterns when different exclusion criteria for head motion were used (mean framewise displacement, mean FD $< 0.2 - 0.4$ mm) (Figs. S4-S6A). In addition, we found that network strength of positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Go trials was significantly correlated between the three timepoints (Table S7, all $P < 0.003$).

Positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Successful stop trials significantly predicted ICV: at age 14 ($r = 0.22$, $P < 0.001$; $r = 0.12$, $P = 0.017$; and $r = 0.20$, $P < 0.001$, respectively) (**Fig. 3A**), at age 19 ($r = 0.19$, $P < 0.001$; $r = 0.15$, $P = 0.001$; and $r = 0.18$, $P < 0.001$, respectively) (**Fig. 3B**), and at age 23 ($r = 0.24$, $r = 0.21$, and $r = 0.23$, respectively, all $P < 0.001$) (**Fig. 3C**). The connectome patterns of predictive networks are shown in **Figs. 3D-I**. Fig. S3 summarizes the connectivity within and between functional networks and the proportion of brain networks involved in the predictive network. We obtained similar results using a 5-fold CV and leave-site-out CV (Table S6). The predictive networks had similar connectome patterns when different exclusion criteria for head motion were used (mean FD $< 0.2 - 0.4$ mm) (Figs. S4-S6B). In addition, we found that network strength of positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Successful stop trials was significantly correlated between the three timepoints (Table S7, all $P < 0.001$).

To examine the specificity of sustained attention networks identified from CPM analysis, the correlations between the network strength of positive and negative networks and performances from a neuropsychology battery (CANTAB) (Fray et al., 1996) were calculated at each timepoint separately. All positive and negative networks derived from Go and Successful stop trials were significantly correlated with a behavioural assay of sustained attention – the RVP task – at ages 14 and 19 (all P values < 0.028). Age 23 had no RVP task data in the IMAGEN study. There were sporadic significant correlations between constructs such as delay aversion/impulsivity and negative network strength, for example, but the most robust correlations were with the RVP. Detailed information is shown in Supplementary materials and Table S12.

3. ICV prediction across time

Positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Go trials defined at age 14 predicted ICV at ages 19 ($r = 0.16$, $r = 0.14$, and $r = 0.16$, all $P < 0.001$) (**Fig. 4A**, top row) and 23 ($r = 0.20$, $r = 0.12$, and $r = 0.17$, all $P < 0.001$) (**Fig. 4A**, middle row) respectively. Likewise, positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Go trials defined at age 19 predicted ICV at age 23 ($r = 0.30$, $r = 0.26$, and $r = 0.31$, respectively, all $P < 0.001$) (**Fig. 4A**, bottom row).

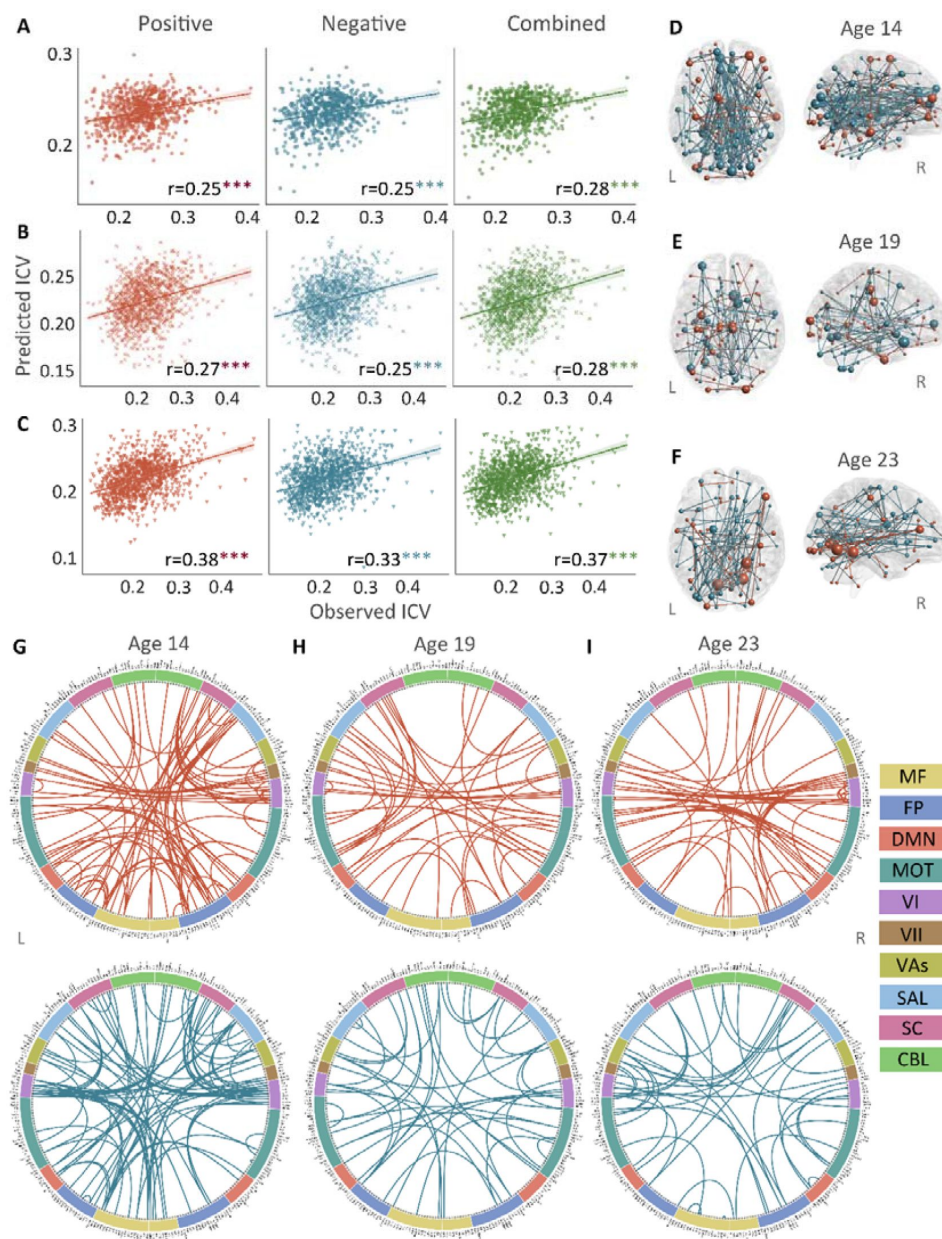


Fig. 2

The predictive performances and networks of intra-individual coefficient of variation (ICV) per timepoint derived from Go trials. Correlation between observed and predicted ICV in positive, negative, and combined networks at (Panel A) age 14, (Panel B) age 19, and (Panel C) age 23. Predictive networks for ICV are at (Panel D) age 14, (Panel E) age 19, and (Panel F) age 23. Connectome of positive and negative networks of ICV at (Panel G) age 14, (Panel H) age 19, and (Panel I) age 23. The edges depicted above are those selected in at least 95% of cross-validation folds. Red, blue, and green spheres/lines/scatters represent positive, negative, and combined networks separately. MF, Medial frontal; FP, Frontoparietal; DMN, Default mode; MOT, Motor; VI, Visual I; VII, Visual II; VAs, Visual association; SAL, Salience; SC, Subcortical; CBL, Cerebellar. R/L, right/left hemisphere. ***, $P < 0.001$.

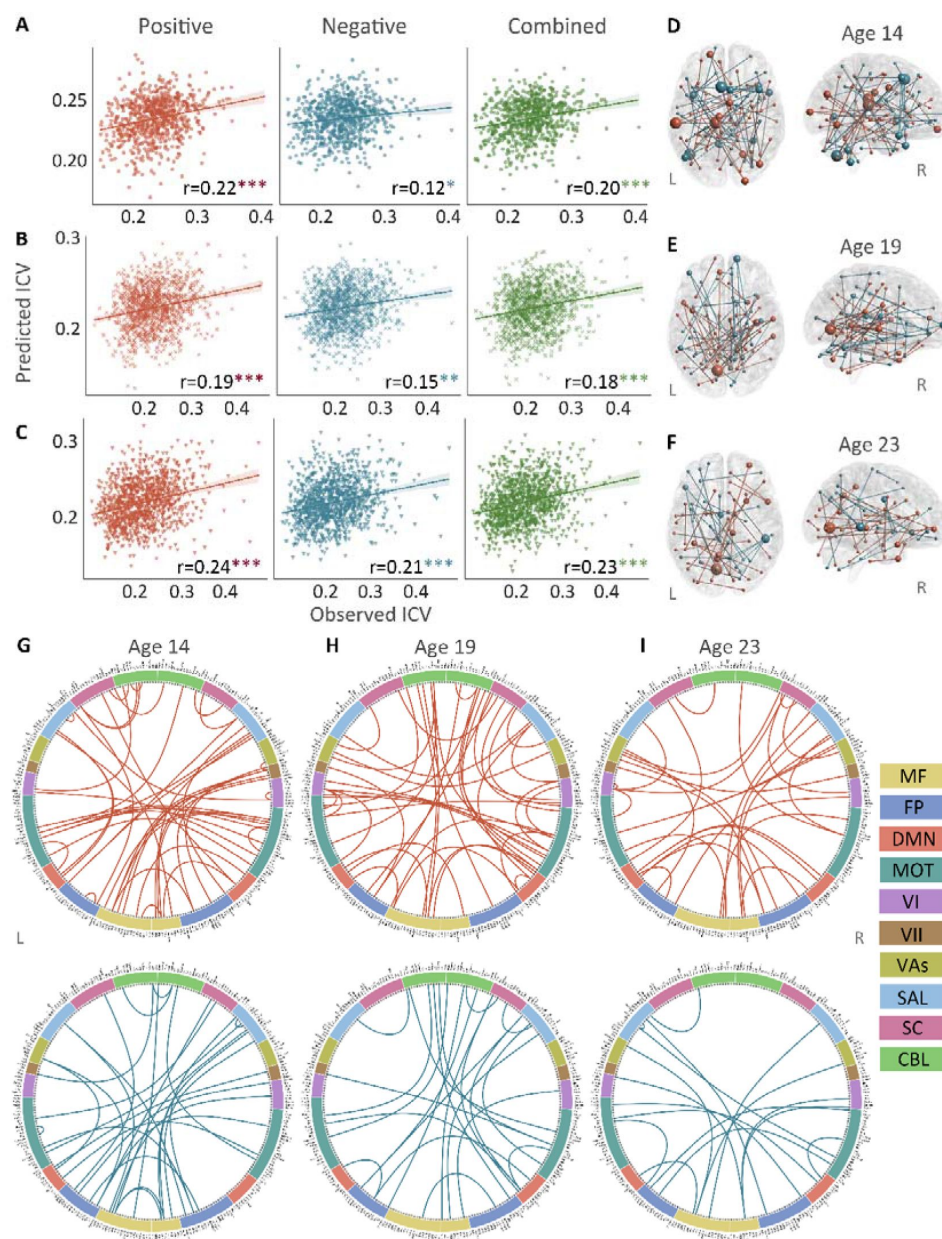


Fig. 3

The predictive performances and networks of intra-individual coefficient of variation (ICV) per timepoint derived from Successful stop trials. Correlation between observed and predicted ICV in positive, negative, and combined networks at (Panel A) age 14, (Panel B) age 19, and (Panel C) age 23. Predictive networks for ICV are at (Panel D) age 14, (Panel E) age 19, and (Panel F) age 23. Connectome of positive and negative networks of ICV at (Panel G) age 14, (Panel H) age 19, and (Panel I) age 23. The edges depicted above are those selected in at least 95% of cross-validation folds. Red, blue, and green spheres/lines/scatters represent positive, negative, and combined networks separately. MF, Medial frontal; FP, Frontoparietal; DMN, Default mode; MOT, Motor; VI, Visual I; VII, Visual II; VAs, Visual association; SAL, Salience; SC, Subcortical; CBL, Cerebellar. R/L, right/left hemisphere. *, $P < 0.05$; **, $P < 0.01$; ***, $P < 0.001$.

Positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Successful stop trials defined at age 14 predicted ICV at age 19 ($r = 0.11$, $r = 0.12$, and $r = 0.13$, all $P < 0.001$) (Fig. 4B, top row) and 23 ($r = 0.14$, $r = 0.15$, and $r = 0.15$, all $P < 0.001$) (Fig. 4B, middle row) respectively. Positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Successful stop trials defined at age 19 predicted ICV at age 23 ($r = 0.17$, $r = 0.16$, and $r = 0.17$, respectively, all $P < 0.001$) (Fig. 4B, bottom row).

4. Generalization of ICV brain networks

We tested if the predictive networks defined at age 23 in IMAGEN would generalize to an external dataset, namely STRATIFY ($N = \sim 300$), comprising individuals also aged 23. When applied to the whole STRATIFY sample, positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Go trials at age 23 in IMAGEN predicted ICV in STRATIFY ($r = 0.34$, $r = 0.34$, and $r = 0.35$, respectively, all $P < 0.001$) (Fig. 4C), as did networks derived from Successful stop trials ($r = 0.26$, $r = 0.22$, and $r = 0.26$, respectively, all $P < 0.001$) (Fig. 4D).

5. Factor analysis of substance use

Exploratory factor analysis on data from the Timeline Followback (TLFB) (Sobell et al., 1996), an instrument for measuring the consumption of alcohol, drugs, and smoking for participants, yielded two common factors at age 14 and three common factors at ages 19 and 23. According to the rotated factor loading analysis, at age 14, two common factors were identified, which we labeled as (i) *alcohol* and (ii) *cigarette and cannabis use (Cig+CB)*. At ages 19 and 23, three common factors were identified, which we labeled as (i) *alcohol*, (ii) *Cig+CB*, and (iii) *drug* (including cocaine, ecstasy, and ketamine) use. Additional details about this data reduction step are shown in Fig. S7 and Table S11.

6. Correlation between behaviour and brain to cannabis and cigarette use

We calculated the Spearman correlation between ICV/sustained brain activity and TLFB factor score per timepoint and across timepoints. Brain activity was measured by the strength of positive and negative networks predicting sustained attention. The P values were corrected by false-discovery rate (FDR) correction ($q < 0.05$). Figs. 5A-C summarizes the results showing the correlation between ICV/brain activity and Cig+CB per timepoint and across timepoints. Fig. 5A shows correlations between ICV and Cig+CB (Tables S14-15). ICV was correlated with Cig+CB at ages 19 ($Rho = 0.13$, $P < 0.001$) and 23 ($Rho = 0.17$, $P < 0.001$). ICV at ages 14 ($Rho = 0.13$, $P = 0.007$) and 19 ($Rho = 0.13$, $P = 0.0003$) were correlated with Cig+CB at age 23. Cig+CB at age 19 was correlated with ICV at age 23 ($Rho = 0.13$, $P = 9.38E-05$). Fig. 5B shows correlations between brain activity derived from Go trials and Cig+CB (Tables S18-19). Brain activities of positive and negative networks derived from Go trials were correlated with Cig+CB at age 23 (positive network: $Rho_p = 0.12$, $P < 0.001$; negative network: $Rho_n = -0.11$, $P < 0.001$). Brain activity of the negative network derived from Go trials at age 14 was correlated with Cig+CB at age 23 ($Rho_n = -0.16$, $P = 0.001$). Cig+CB at age 19 was correlated with brain activity of the positive network derived from Go trials at age 23 ($Rho_p = 0.10$, $P = 0.002$). Fig. 5C shows the correlations between brain activity derived from Successful stop and Cig+CB (Tables S18-19). Brain activities of positive and negative networks derived from Successful stop were correlated with Cig+CB at ages 19 (positive network: $Rho_p = 0.10$, $P = 0.001$; negative network: $Rho_n = -0.08$, $P = 0.013$) and 23 (positive network: $Rho_p = 0.13$, $P < 0.001$; negative network: $Rho_n = -0.11$, $P = 0.001$). No correlation between alcohol use and ICV/brain activity was found after FDR correction. Detailed results on the correlation between ICV/brain activity and substance use can be found in the supplementary materials (Tables S14-21).

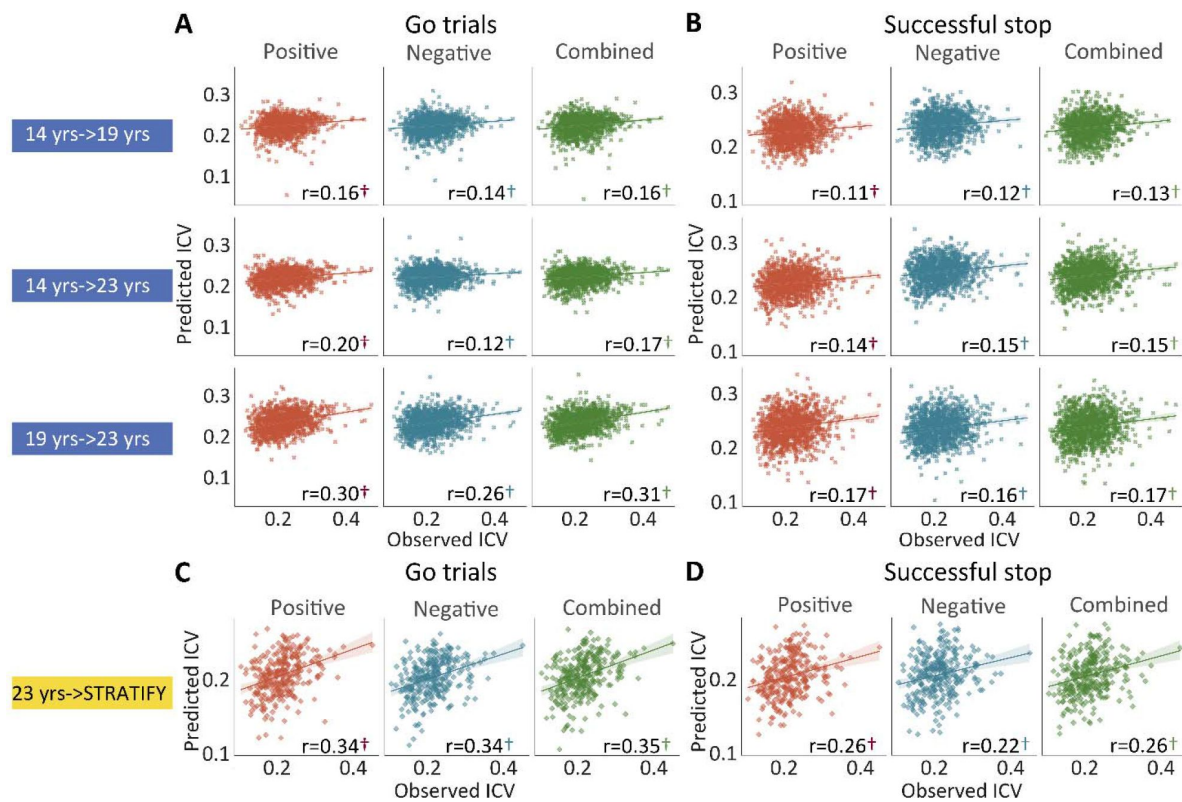


Fig. 4

The predictive performances of intra-individual coefficient of variation (ICV) across timepoints and generalization in STRATIFY. Predictive performances of ICV (Panel A) derived from Go trials and (Panel B) derived from Successful stop trials. The top, middle, and bottom rows of (A) and (B) panels show the predictive performance: using models defined at age 14 to predict age 19 (i.e., 14 yrs -> 19 yrs), using models defined at age 14 to predict age 23 (i.e., 14 yrs -> 23 yrs), and using models defined at age 19 to predict age 23 (i.e., 19 yrs -> 23 yrs) respectively. Generalization of predictive networks predicting ICV defined at age 23 in STRATIFY (i.e., 23 yrs -> STRATIFY) derived from (Panel C) Go trials and (Panel D) Successful stop trials. The red, blue, and green scatter represent positive, negative, and combined networks. † , $P < 0.001$.

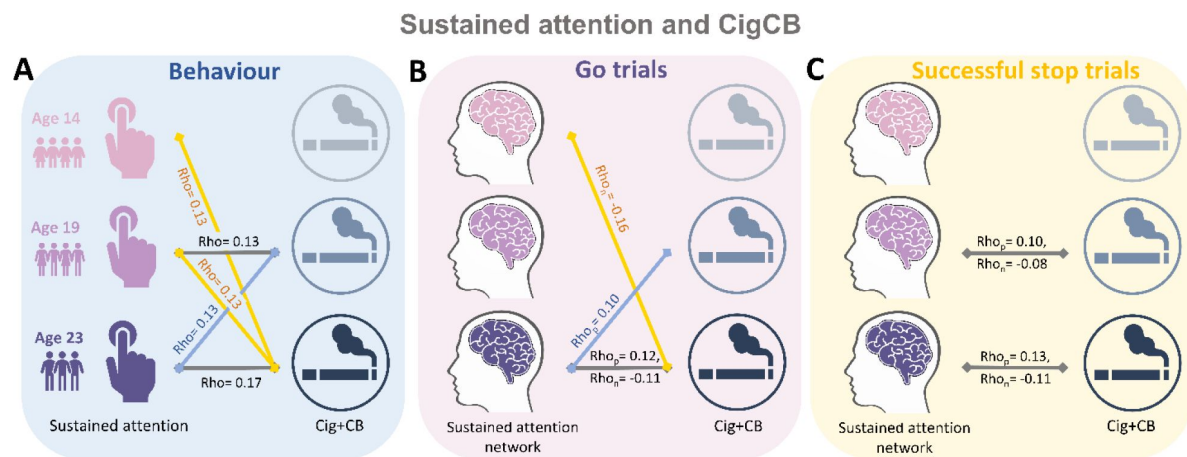


Fig. 5

Significant correlations between sustained attention and substance use across timepoints (FDR correction, $q < 0.05$). (A) Correlations between the intra-individual coefficient of variation (ICV) and cigarette and cannabis use (Cig+CB) across timepoints. Correlations between sustained attention network strength and Cig+CB across timepoints (B) derived from Go trials and (C) derived from Successful stop trials. Rho_p : r value between network strength of the positive network. Rho_n : r value between network strength of the negative network.

7. Bivariate latent change score model

We used a bivariate latent change score model to explore the relationship between substance use (specifically Cig+CB and alcohol use) and ICV/brain activity. This approach tests for bi-directional associations, examining how substance use at age 14 predicts changes in ICV/brain activity from ages 14 to 23 and vice versa (Fig. 6). Below, we present the findings regarding the lagged effects of substance use on ICV/brain activity and the lagged effects of ICV/brain activity on substance use (Table 2). The P values were corrected by FDR correction ($q < 0.05$).

7.1 Lagged effects of Cig+CB on changes in ICV and brain activity

We examined if Cig+CB use at age 14 predicted the changes in ICV or brain activity (i.e., predictive network strength) associated with sustained attention across ages 14-23. No significance was observed in the lagged effects of Cig+CB on changes in ICV and brain activity (all $P > 0.172$).

7.2 Lagged effects of ICV and brain activity on changes in Cig+CB

We examined if ICV or brain activity associated with sustained attention at age 14 predicted changes in Cig+CB use across ages 14-23. Behaviours and brain activity associated with poor sustained attention predicted a greater increase in subsequent cigarette and cannabis use. Specifically, higher ICV at age 14 predicted a greater increase in Cig+CB from ages 14 to 23 ($Std. \beta = 0.12, P < 0.001$). Higher sustained attention network strength for positive network derived from Go trials at age 14 predicted a greater increase in Cig+CB from ages 14 to 23 ($Std. \beta = 0.09, P = 0.006$). Lower sustained attention network strength for the negative network, also derived from Go trials at age 14, predicted a greater increase in Cig+CB from ages 14 to 23 ($Std. \beta = -0.09, P = 0.006$). No other lagged effects of brain activity on changes in Cig+CB remained significant after FDR correction (all $P > 0.047$). Fig. 7 illustrates the changes in raw scores of cigarette and cannabis use from the TLFB for individuals at age 14 with higher sustained attention (i.e., lower ICV, lower strength of positive network, or higher strength of negative network) and lower sustained attention (i.e., higher ICV, higher strength of positive network, or lower strength of negative network).

7.3 Association between alcohol use and ICV/brain activity

We examined if alcohol use at age 14 predicted changes in ICV or brain activity associated with sustained attention across ages 14-23, or vice versa. No significant results were found for the lagged effects of alcohol use on changes in ICV and brain activity, nor the lagged effects of ICV and brain activity on changes in alcohol use. The P values were insignificant after FDR correction (all $P > 0.011$).

Discussion

It is well known that increased substance use, including cigarettes and cannabis, is associated with poorer sustained attention in late adolescence and early adulthood (Chamberlain et al., 2012; Dougherty et al., 2013). However, previous studies, which were predominantly cross-sectional or under-powered, left a critical question unanswered. That is, was the impairment in sustained attention a predictor of substance-use or a marker of the inclination to engage in such behaviour? Using a substantial sample size, our results indicate that behaviour and brain connectivity associated with poorer sustained attention at age 14 predicted a larger increase in cannabis and cigarette smoking from ages 14-23. Furthermore, our findings highlight the robustness of the brain network associated with sustained attention over time, making the latter a potentially useful biomarker for vulnerability to substance use.

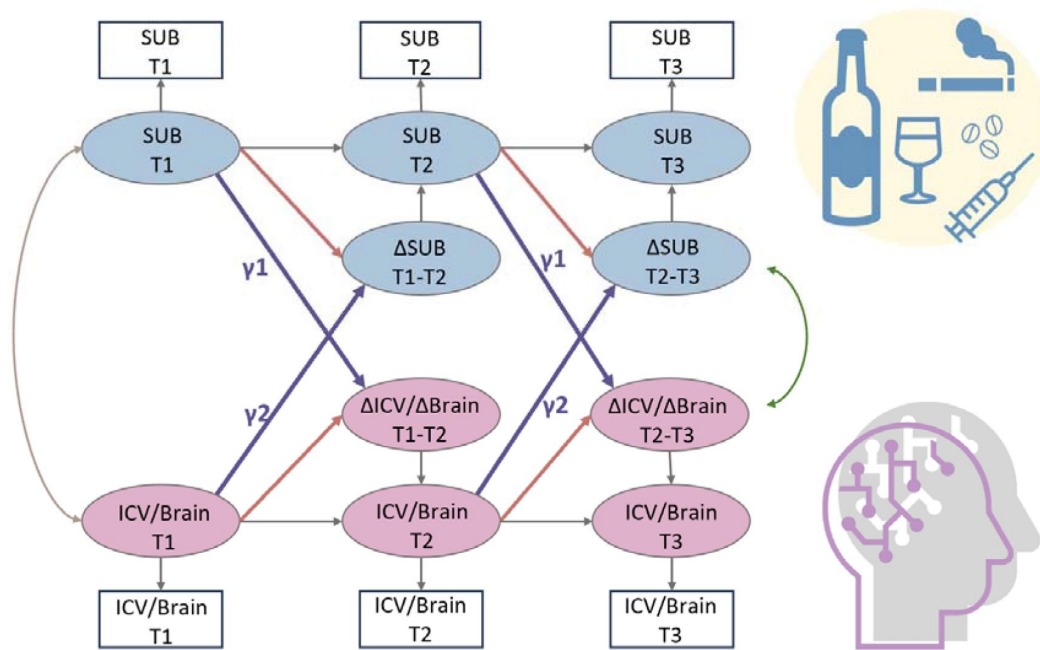


Fig. 6

A simplified bivariate latent change score model for substance use and ICV/brain activity. SUB, substance use (alcohol, cigarette and cannabis use); Brain, brain network strength of positive/negative network of sustained attention derived from Go trials/Successful stop trials. ICV, intra-individual coefficient of variation. T1, Timepoint 1 (age 14); T2, Timepoint 2 (age 19); T3, Timepoint 3 (age 23). γ_1 , lagged effects of substance use on ICV or brain activity. γ_2 , lagged effects of ICV or brain activity on substance use. The square/circle represents the observation/true score in the model.

Fig. 7

Cigarette and cannabis score in Timeline Followback changes in individuals with high sustained attention (High SA) and low sustained attention (Low SA) from ages 14 to 23. Participants were categorized into five equal groups based on the intra-individual coefficient of variation (ICV), strength of positive network, and strength of negative network at age 14. (A) Top ICV (Low SA) and bottom ICV (High SA) groups. (B) The top strength of the positive network (Low SA) and bottom strength of the positive network (High SA) groups derived from Go trials. (C) The top strength of the negative network (High SA) and bottom strength of the negative network (Low SA) groups derived from Go trials. Note that the higher strength of the negative network reflects lower ICV and higher sustained attention.

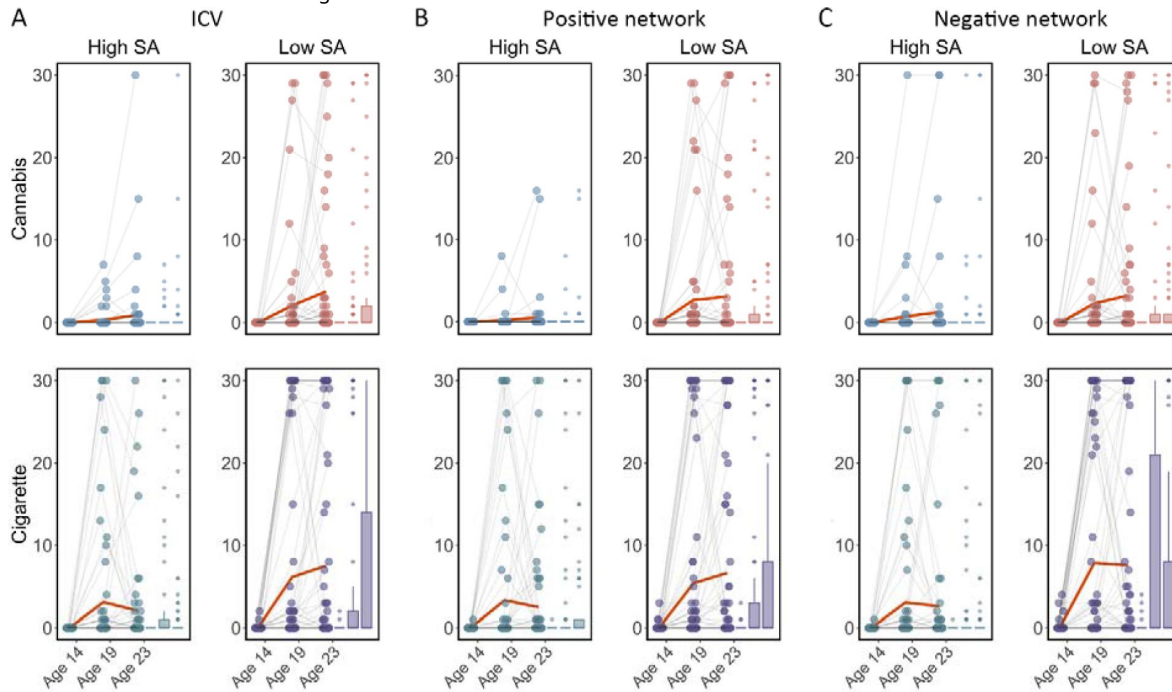


Table 2.

Bivariate latent change score model showing the bi-directional association between substance use and ICV/brain networks (False Discovery Rate corrected)

	Cig+CB		Alcohol use	
	Lagged effects of Cig+CB (γ_1)	Lagged effects of ICV/brain networks (γ_2)	Lagged effects of alcohol use (γ_1)	Lagged effects of ICV/brain networks (γ_2)
	Std. β (SE)	Std. β (SE)	Std. β (SE)	Std. β (SE)
ICV	0.017 (0.039)	0.117 (0.031)***	0.005 (0.029)	0.057 (0.030)
SA GT PosNet	-0.026 (0.030)	0.087 (0.032)**	0.025 (0.030)	0.022 (0.036)
SA GT NegNet	0.012 (0.026)	-0.094 (0.035)**	-0.012 (0.030)	-0.059 (0.034)
SA SS PosNet	0.005 (0.025)	0.070 (0.036)	0.101 (0.040)	0.046 (0.039)
SA SS NegNet	0.038 (0.028)	-0.061 (0.031)	-0.003 (0.035)	-0.069 (0.031)

Note: SA GT, sustained attention network derived from Go trials; SA SS, sustained attention network derived from Successful stop trials; PosNet/NegNet, positive/negative network strength; ICV, intra-individual coefficient of variation; Cig+CB, Cigarette and cannabis use. Bold fonts represent the P value that survived after the false discovery rate (FDR, $q < 0.05$) correction for multiple comparisons. **, $P < 0.01$; ***, $P < 0.001$.

Substance use and the sustained attention network

Our study applied a latent change score model on a large longitudinal dataset, testing the precedence between substance use and sustained attention. In contrast to prior research suggesting that substance use impaired sustained attention (Broyd et al., 2016; Figueiredo et al., 2020), our results indicate that lower sustained attention also predates substance use. A link between substance use and sustained attention is plausible, given the underlying neurobiology of this sustained attention. Substantial evidence from neuropharmacological studies in rats and humans has shown the modulatory role of neurotransmitters in sustained attention (Bloomfield et al., 2016; Granon et al., 2000; Marshall et al., 2019). Elevated dopamine and noradrenaline levels in the prefrontal cortex lead to improved sustained attention in a dose-dependent manner (Marshall et al., 2019). In humans, methylphenidate, a psychostimulant commonly used to treat ADHD, increases both noradrenaline and dopamine signalling and improves sustained attention (Dockree et al., 2017). Thus, poorer sustained attention may reflect a lower basal level of dopamine and noradrenaline. More importantly, studies in primates (Morgan et al., 2002; Nader et al., 2006), rodents (Dalley et al., 2007; Trifilieff et al., 2017), and humans (Casey et al., 2014; Trifilieff and Martinez, 2014; Volkow et al., 2006) have indicated that low basal dopamine levels are markers of vulnerability for increased drug administration. For example, Casey et al. (2014) demonstrated that blunted dopamine release may precede the development of addiction in humans. Nader et al. (2006) found a negative correlation between baseline D2 receptor availability and rates of cocaine self-administration in monkeys. Thus, these findings collectively suggest that sustained attention and its brain network could serve as a biomarker of vulnerability to substance use.

These results emphasize the specificity of sustained attention and its associated brain networks, rather than other cognitive abilities, for predicting substance use over time. Unlike sustained attention, no significant differences in cigarette and cannabis use were observed between individuals with lower and higher working memory at baseline during the Strategy working memory task (Table S23 and Fig. S8). Our results support the behavioural-only findings of a previous study (Harakeh et al., 2012), which found that individuals with poorer sustained attention, rather than other cognitive functions, were more likely to initiate smoking cigarettes. Our study goes further by showing that sustained attention brain networks can predict substance use in the future.

Neural associations between cigarette and cannabis use

We constructed composite scores of substance use. An exploratory factor analysis identified cigarettes and cannabis items as a common factor, aligning with previous studies (Ferland and Hurd, 2020; Hindocha et al., 2016; Weinberger et al., 2018) that indicate concurrent cannabis and cigarette use among users. A national survey in America indicated that 18–23% of cigarette smokers aged 12–17 met the criteria for cannabis use disorder, in contrast to only 2% of non-smoking youth (Weinberger et al., 2018). Another national online survey in the UK reported that 80.8% of cigarette smokers engage in cannabis consumption, indicating a prevalent practice of co-administering cannabis and tobacco through smoking (Hindocha et al., 2021). Shared genetic factors (Agrawal et al., 2010; Stringer et al., 2016) and similar neural associations (Wetherill et al., 2015) contribute to the co-use of cannabis and cigarettes. Stringer et al. (2016) demonstrated a strong and significant genetic correlation between lifetime cannabis use and lifetime cigarette smoking within a large cohort of 32,330 subjects, suggesting a high degree of genetic sharing between the two. Using neuroimaging techniques, Wetherill et al. (2015) indicated that individuals who used cannabis, smoked tobacco, or engaged in co-use exhibited larger gray matter volumes in the left putamen compared to healthy controls. Both nicotine and cannabis have similar effects on mesolimbic dopaminergic pathways engaged, modulating dopamine release in the striatum (Bossong et al., 2009; Dongelmans et al., 2021). Collectively, these findings suggest a similar neural association between cigarette and cannabis use.

Specificity and robustness of sustained attention networks

The brain networks we describe were specific to sustained attention. The strength of the sustained attention brain network was robustly correlated with RVP task performance, a typical sustained attention task, rather than other cognitive measures (Table S12). Importantly, as highlighted in a previous study (Cwiek et al., 2022 [DOI](#)), emphasizing the importance of generalization in an external dataset, our study found that the sustained attention network derived from Go trials and Successful stop trials generalized to an external dataset (See further discussion on the generalization in subgroups in STRATIFY in Supplemental materials).

We also replicated and extended the developmental pattern of sustained attention and its networks from mid-adolescence to young adulthood. A notable enhancement in sustained attention (i.e., decreased ICV) was observed from ages 14 to 23, as expected (Fortenbaugh et al., 2015 [DOI](#); Williams et al., 2005 [DOI](#)). Sustained attention networks derived from Go and Successful stop trials predicted behaviour at different timepoints, implying that individual differences in sustained attention and associated networks were preserved throughout development. Previously, in neurodiverse youth, attention networks in individuals remained stable across months to years (Horien et al., 2022 [DOI](#)). Rosenberg et al. (2020) [DOI](#) also illustrated that the same functional connections predicting overall sustained attention ability also forecasted attentional changes observed over minutes, days, weeks, and months. Here, we contribute to these insights by extending the understanding that attention-network stability is not only applicable to neurodiverse populations but also holds in a sizeable cohort of healthy participants. Furthermore, our findings indicate that sustained attention networks remain stable over several years, providing valuable insights into the potential for sustained attention to function as a robust and efficient biomarker for substance use. However, there are still some individual variabilities not captured in this study, which could be attributed to the diversity in genetic, environmental, and developmental factors influencing sustained attention and substance use. Future research should aim to explore these variabilities in greater depth to gain better understanding of the relationship between sustained attention and substance use.

In conclusion, robust sustained attention networks were identifiable from ages 14 to 23. Individual differences in sustained attention network strength were predictable across time. Poorer sustained attention and strength of the associated brain networks at age 14 predicted greater increases in cannabis and cigarette smoking from ages 14 to 23.

Materials and Methods

2.1 Participants

All neuroimaging data and behavioural data were obtained from the IMAGEN study. IMAGEN is a large longitudinal study that recruited over 2000 participants aged 14 to 23 in Europe (Kaiser et al., 2022 [DOI](#)). This study used the stop signal task fMRI data at ages 14, 19, and 23. In addition, we used an independent dataset STRATIFY as external validation for age 23. STRATIFY (N = ~300) is a sub-dataset within IMAGEN that recruits fMRI data from patients aged 23. The IMAGEN study conformed to the ethical standard outlined by the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by ethics committees at each site. Written informed consent was obtained from participants and their parents. We followed the exclusion criteria outlined in previous studies (O'Halloran et al., 2018 [DOI](#); Whelan et al., 2014 [DOI](#)). Participants were excluded from the CPM analysis if they had more than 20% errors on the Go trials (incorrect responses or responses that were too late) or if they had a mean framewise displacement (mean FD) > 0.5 mm. Finally, 717 subjects at age 14, 1081 subjects at age 19, and 1120 subjects at age 23 were used to predict ICV. In STRATIFY, 304 subjects were used to predict ICV.

2.2 Stop signal task

The stop signal task required subjects to respond to a Go signal (arrows pointing left/right) by pressing the left/right button while withholding their response if the Go signal was unpredictably followed by a stop signal (arrows pointing upwards). The Go signal was displayed on the screen for 1000 ms in the Go trials, while the stop signal appeared for 100-300 ms following the go signal on average 300 ms later in unpredictable stop trials. To adjust task difficulty dynamically, we used a tracking algorithm on the delay between the Go signal and stop signal (stop signal delay, SSD, 250-900 ms in 50 ms increments) (Verbruggen et al., 2019 [↗](#)), to produce 50% successful and 50% unsuccessful inhibition trials. The task at age 14 included 400 Go trials and 80 variable delay stop trials, with 3 and 7 Go trials between successive stop trials. The task at ages 19 and 23 consisted of 300 Go trials and 60 variable delay stop trials. Before the MRI scan, subjects also performed a practice session with a block of 60 trials to become familiar with the task. ICV is used to assess sustained attention in this task for each subject. ICV reflects short-term within-person variations in task performance (Verbruggen et al., 2019 [↗](#)). Specifically, ICV is computed by dividing the standard deviation of mean go RT by the mean go RT. Lower ICV indicates better sustained attention.

2.3 Self-Report Questionnaires

2.3.1 Puberty development scale (PDS)

The PDS, an 8-item self-report assessment, measures the pubertal development of adolescents (Petersen et al., 1988 [↗](#)). The PDS evaluates physical development using a 5-point scale where 1 corresponds to prepubertal, 2 to beginning pubertal, 3 to mid-pubertal, 4 to advanced pubertal, and 5 to post pubertal. In addition, the items are adapted for sex, such as voice changes for males or menarche for females.

2.3.2 Timeline Followback (TLFB)

We used the TLFB, a retrospective self-report instrument that uses a calendar method to evaluate prior substance use consumption over the past 30 days (Sobell et al., 1996 [↗](#)). The TLFB has strong reliability and validity for assessing alcohol consumption, and we used it to measure the use of alcohol, drugs, and smoking for subjects.

2.4 MRI acquisition and pre-processing

Functional MRI data of the stop-signal task in the IMAGEN study were collected at eight scan sites (London, Nottingham, Dublin, Mannheim, Dresden, Berlin, Hamburg, and Paris), and data in STRATIFY were collected at three scan sites (Berlin, two scanners in London) with 3T MRI scanners. The MR scanning protocols, cross-site standardization, and quality checks are further described in (Whelan et al., 2012 [↗](#)). All images were obtained using echo-planar imaging (EPI) sequence with the following parameters: repetition time (TR) = 2.2s, echo time (TE) = 30ms, flip angle = 75°, field of view (FOV) = 224 mm × 224 mm, data matrix = 64 × 64, slice thickness = 2.4 mm with 1 mm slice gap, voxel size = 3.5 × 3.5 × 4.38 mm, 40 transversal interleaved slices. The MRI data has 444 volumes at age 14 and 320-350 volumes at ages 19 and 23. Standardized hardware was used for visual stimulus presentation (Nordic Neurolab, Bergen, Norway) at all scan sites.

All fMRI data from the IMAGEN study were pre-processed centrally using SPM12 (Statistical Parametric Mapping, <http://www.fil.ion.ucl.ac.uk/spm/> [↗](#)) with an automated pipeline. The images were corrected for slice timing and then realigned to the first volumes to correct head motions. Subjects were excluded from the study if they had a mean FD > 0.5mm. Subsequently, the data were non-linearly transformed to the Montreal Neurological Institute Coordinate System (MNI)

space using a custom EPI template with the voxels resampled at $3 \times 3 \times 3$ mm resolution. Finally, the images were smoothed with a Gaussian kernel at a full-width-at-half-maximum (FWHM) of 5 mm.

2.5 Generalized psychophysiological interaction (gPPI) analysis

In this study, we adopted gPPI analysis to generate task-related FC matrices and applied CPM analysis to investigate predictive brain networks from adolescents to young adults. PPI analysis describes task-dependent FC between brain regions, traditionally examining connectivity between a seed region of interest (ROI) and the voxels of the whole rest brain. However, this study conducted a *generalized* PPI analysis, which is on ROI-to-ROI basis (Di et al., 2021 [DOI](#)), to yield a gPPI matrix across the whole brain instead of just a single seed region. First, we conducted a general linear model (GLM) analysis on the pre-processed fMRI data to examine brain activity during the stop signal task. Two separate GLMs were created for Go trials and Successful stop trials. The Go trials model included three task regressors (Go trials, Failed stop trials, and Successful stop trials) and 36 nuisance regressors, which accounted for factors such as head motion and the signal from white matter and cerebrospinal fluid. The 36 nuisance regressors are 3 translations, 3 rotations, mean white matter signal, mean cerebrospinal fluid signal, mean grey matter signal, their derivatives, and the squares of all these variables. Given the high frequency of Go trials in SST, it is common to treat Go trials as an implicit baseline, as in previous IMAGEN studies (D'Alberto et al., 2018 [DOI](#); Whelan et al., 2012 [DOI](#)). Hence, we built a separate GLM for Successful stop trials, which included two task regressors (Failed and Successful stop trials) and 36 nuisance regressors. All task regressors were modeled by convolving with the canonical hemodynamic response function (HRF) and high pass filtered (128 s). We then conducted a gPPI analysis across the entire brain using the Shen atlas with 268 regions (Shen et al., 2013 [DOI](#)) for both Go and Successful stop trials. The gPPI analysis involved deconvolving the time series of each ROI with the hemodynamic response function, multiplying it by the psychological variables of interest to yield a neural level PPI term, and convolving the resulting PPI term with the HRF to obtain the BOLD level PPI effects (Di and Biswal, 2019 [DOI](#)). Separate GLM models were used to estimate the PPI effect of each ROI for Go trials and Successful stop trials, regressing the eigenvariate of the seed ROI. The GLM of the Go trials included 1 regressor of another ROI eigenvariate, 3 regressors of task condition, 3 regressors of the PPI effects, and one contrast term (Equation 1 [DOI](#)). The GLM of Successful stop trials included 1 regressor of another ROI eigenvariate, 2 regressors of task condition, 2 regressors of the PPI effects, and one contrast term (Equation 2 [DOI](#)), shown as follows:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * X_{physio} + \beta_2 * X_{psycho(SS)} + \beta_3 * X_{psycho(FS)} + \beta_4 * X_{psycho(GO)} + \beta_5 * X_{psycho} * X_{psycho(SS)} + \beta_6 * X_{psycho} * X_{psycho(FS)} + \beta_7 * X_{psycho} * X_{psycho(GO)} + \epsilon \quad (1)$$

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * X_{physio} + \beta_2 * X_{psycho(SS)} + \beta_3 * X_{psycho(FS)} + \beta_4 * X_{psycho} * X_{psycho(SS)} + \beta_5 * X_{psycho} * X_{psycho(FS)} + \epsilon \quad (2)$$

Note: SS, Successful stop trials; FS, Failed stop trials; GO, Go trials.

Where y is the time series of seed ROI, X_{physio} is the time series of another ROI, X_{psycho} is the task design term, and ϵ is the residual term. The generalized PPI analysis was performed across each ROI from the Shen atlas, resulting in a 268×268 PPI matrix for each subject derived from Go trials and Successful stop trials separately. The matrices were transposed and averaged with the original matrices to yield symmetrical matrices (Di et al., 2021 [DOI](#)), and prepared for further analysis.

2.6 Connectome-based predictive modeling

2.6.1 ICV prediction

CPM is a data-driven method that can examine individual differences in brain connectivity (Shen et al., 2017 [DOI](#)). CPM identifies pairwise connections between brain regions most highly correlated with a given phenotype. Using the PPI matrix, we employed CPM to predict ICV, for ages 14, 19, and

23. The CPM analysis process includes feature selection, model building, and validation (Fig. S1). We applied cross-validation to divide all participants into training and testing sets. (i) First, we used partial correlation to calculate the relationship between each edge in the gPPI matrix and behavioural phenotype while controlling several covariates in the training set. These covariates included ages, genders, mode-centered PDS (at age 14 only), mean FD, and scan sites, regarded as a dummy variable. The r value with an associated P value for each edge was obtained, and a threshold $P = 0.01$ (Feng et al., 2024 [DOI](#); Ren et al., 2021 [DOI](#); Yoo et al., 2018 [DOI](#)) was set to select edges. The positive or negative correlated edges in feature selection were regarded as positive or negative networks. (ii) Second, we calculated network strength for each subject in the training set by summing the selected edges in the gPPI matrix for both positive and negative networks. We also estimated the network strength of a combined network by subtracting the strength of the negative from the strength of the positive network. (iii) Finally, we constructed predictive models based on the assumption of a linear relationship between network strength of the positive, negative, and combined networks, and behavioural phenotype in the training set. The covariates were also adjusted in this linear model. The network strengths for each subject in the testing set were calculated and input into the predictive model along with the covariates to predict each network's behavioural phenotypes.

2.6.2 Three cross-validation schemes

We used three CV schemes to test the robustness of predictive performance: k-fold (10-fold and 5-fold) and leave-site-out CV. For the k-fold CV, we randomly divided subjects into ten or five approximately equal-sized groups. For each fold, we trained the model on nine or four groups, respectively, and used it to predict the behavioural phenotype of the remaining group. We then assessed the predictive performance by comparing the predicted and observed values. For the leave-site-out CV, we divided subjects into eight groups based on their scan site. To account for the random splits of the k-fold CV, we repeated the process 50 times and calculated the average predictive performance for both the 10-fold and 5-fold CV (Lichenstein et al., 2021 [DOI](#)). In addition, we set a 95% threshold for selecting edges present in at least 48 out of 50 iterations to visualize the results. We also ran the CPM analysis with mean FD thresholds of 0.2, 0.3, and 0.4 mm to account for the influence of head motion on the predictive performance. Furthermore, we conducted the CPM analysis using a range of thresholds for feature selection and observed similar results across different thresholds (See supplementary materials Table S8). The main text shows the results of the 10-fold CPM. The 5-fold CPM and leave-site-out CV results are shown in supplementary materials.

2.6.3 Prediction across timepoints and STRATIFY

To assess the ability of models developed at one timepoint to predict ICV at different timepoints, we applied predictive models developed at ages 14 and 19 to predict ICV at subsequent timepoints. Specifically, we used predictive models (including the parameters and selected edges) developed at age 14 to predict ICV at ages 19 and 23. We first calculated the network strength using the gPPI matrix at age 19 or 23 based on the selected edges identified from CPM analysis at age 14. We then used the linear model parameters (slope and intercept) from CPM analysis at age 14 to fit the network strength and predict ICV at age 19 or 23. Finally, we evaluated the predictive performance by calculating the correlation between the predicted and observed values at age 19 or 23. Similarly, we applied models developed at age 19 to predict ICV at age 23. In addition, we examined the generalizability of predictive models at age 23 by applying them to the STRATIFY dataset, which also includes subjects who were 23 years old. Furthermore, we estimated the predictive performances of ICV across patient groups in the STRATIFY. The correlation between the residual network strength of predictive networks and ICV was calculated across groups in the STRATIFY. The covariates, including age, sex, and mean FD, were regressed for network strength before the correlation analysis. It is worth noting that when applying models developed at one timepoint to predict at another timepoint or to generalize to a different dataset, the model was built using all subjects from the timepoint at which the model was developed.

2.7 Statistical analysis

2.7.1 Exploratory Factor Analysis

To explore the underlying structure of adolescent substance use, we performed an exploratory factor analysis using principal component extraction (Gaskin and Happell, 2014 [↗](#)) on TLFB using Predictive Analytics Software (SPSS) version 20. Factor analysis explores the underlying structure of a set of observed variables without imposing a preconceived structure on the outcome. We used six items at age 14 and nine items at ages 19 and 23 of TLFB, including alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, cocaine, ecstasy, and ketamine (as shown in Table S11). We excluded items assessing the use of other drugs due to high proportions of missing data, standard deviations close to 0, or a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) statistic for individual variables below 0.5, considered the minimum value for a sample to be adequate. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy was 0.66 at age 14, 0.81 at age 19, and 0.77 at age 23. In addition, all Bartlett's tests of sphericity were significant (Age 14: $\chi^2(15) = 5137.067, P < 0.001$; Age 19: $\chi^2(36) = 5031.641, P < 0.001$; Age 23: $\chi^2(36) = 5106.265, P < 0.001$), indicating that there was an underlying correlation structure, and that factor analysis was appropriate. We rotated the factors using the varimax method with kaiser normalization to make it easier to discern the underlying measured constructs.

2.7.2 Linear mixed model

We constructed a linear mixed model to examine the change in ICV over time using the *lme4* and *lmerTest* packages in RStudio (version: 1.4; <http://www.rstudio.com/> [↗](#)) and R (version 4.1.1; <https://www.r-project.org/> [↗](#)). The timepoint was the fixed effect of interest in the model, while the subject was a random effect. Several covariates, including sex, scan sites, mode-center PDS, and age at 14, were also included as fixed effects in the models. The linear mixed model is shown as follows:

$$\text{ICV} \sim \text{Timepoint} + \text{Sex} + \text{Scan site} + \text{Mode_center PDS} + \text{Age at 14} + (1|\text{Subject}) \quad (3)$$

2.7.3 Correlation between network strength and substance use

To examine the relationship between ICV/brain activity and substance use, we correlated the network strength of predictive networks with the factor scores of substance use at each timepoint and across all three timepoints separately. To control for potential confounders, we calculated residual network strength and residual factor scores by regressing the effects of age, sex, mean FD, scan sites, and mode-centered PDS for age 14. We used partial correlation to assess the association between residual network strength and residual TLFB and used an FDR correction ($q < 0.05$) for the multiple correlations.

Furthermore, we employed a three-wave bivariate latent change score model using the *lavvan* package in R and R studio to detect the linear change over time. This model allows us to quantify the longitudinal bidirectional influence between substance use and ICV over time (Nweze et al., 2023 [↗](#)). Specifically, it facilitated an understanding of whether substance use predicted ICV and its brain activity, and vice versa. The key feature of this model is its ability to assess linear increases or decreases within the same construct across two adjacent waves. Change scores were calculated by regressing the observable score at a given timepoint from the previous timepoint (e.g., $\Delta \text{Cig+CB}$ in T1–T2 or $\Delta \text{Cig+CB}$ in T2–T3, where T1 = Timepoint 1, T2 = Timepoint 2, and T3 = Timepoint 3). Additionally, cross-lagged dynamic coupling (i.e., bidirectionality) was employed to explore individual differences in the relationships between substance use and linear changes in ICV/brain activity, as well as the relationship between ICV/brain activity and linear change in substance use. The model accounted for covariates such as age, sex and scan sites. For more details about the latent change score model, refer to the reference (Nweze et al., 2023 [↗](#)).

As Fig. 6 shows, the latent change score model was specifically applied to examine the association between substance use and behaviours and brain activity associated with sustained attention. We focused on the relationship between the network strength of positive and negative networks, derived from Go and successful stop trials, and two types of substance use (Cig+CB and alcohol use). Notably, drug use data were excluded as adolescents at age 14 have no drug score. A total of 10 models were performed, and all model fit indices met the predefined criteria: CFI > 0.92, RMSEA < 0.05, and SRMR < 0.03. An FDR correction ($q < 0.05$) was applied for multiple correlations. It is worth noting that all the correlations between substance use and sustained attention were conducted using the same sample across three timepoints.

2.7.4 Permutation test

For the CPM analysis, we used a permutation test to assess the significance of the predictive performance, which is the correlation between the observed and predicted values. To generate a null distribution of these correlation values, we randomly shuffled the correspondence of the behavioural data and the PPI matrix of all subjects and reran the CPM pipeline with the shuffled data 1000 times. Based on this distribution, we set a threshold of $P < 0.05$ to determine the significance level at 95% for the predictive performance using 10-fold, 5-fold, and leave-site-out CV.

To estimate the significance of the predictive performance across timepoints and the external validation in the STRATIFY dataset, we shuffled the predictive values 1000 times. Then, we correlated the shuffled values with observed values to yield a null distribution of predictive correlation values. We also set a threshold of $P < 0.05$ to determine the significance level at 95% for the predictive performance across timepoints and generalization in STRATIFY.

Acknowledgements

This work received support from the following sources: the European Union-funded FP6 Integrated Project IMAGEN (Reinforcement-related behaviour in normal brain function and psychopathology) (LSHM-CT-2007-037286), the Horizon 2020 funded ERC Advanced Grant ‘STRATIFY’ (Brain network based stratification of reinforcement-related disorders) (695313), Human Brain Project (HBP SGA 2, 785907, and HBP SGA 3, 945539), the Medical Research Council Grant ‘c-VEDA’ (Consortium on Vulnerability to Externalizing Disorders and Addictions) (MR/N000390/1), the National Institute of Health (NIH) (R01DA049238, A decentralized macro and micro gene-by-environment interaction analysis of substance use behaviour and its brain biomarkers), the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Biomedical Research Centre at South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust and King’s College London, the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF grants 01GS08152; 01EV0711; Forschungsnetz AERIAL 01EE1406A, 01EE1406B; Forschungsnetz IMAC-Mind 01GL1745B), the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG grants SM 80/7-2, SFB 940, TRR 265, NE 1383/14-1), the Medical Research Foundation and Medical Research Council (grants MR/R00465X/1 and MR/S020306/1), the National Institutes of Health (NIH) funded ENIGMA (grants 5U54EB020403-05 and 1R56AG058854-01), NSFC grant 82150710554 and European Union funded project ‘environMENTAL’, grant no: 101057429. Further support was provided by grants from: -the ANR (ANR-12-SAMA-0004, AAPG2019 -GeBra), the Eranet Neuron (AF12-NEUR0008-01 -WM2NA; and ANR-18-NEUR00002-01 -ADORE), the Fondation de France (00081242), the Fondation pour la Recherche Médicale (DPA20140629802), the Mission Interministérielle de Lutte-contre-les-Drogues-et-les-Conduites-Addictives (MILDECA), the Assistance-Publique-Hôpitaux-de-Paris and INSERM (interface grant), Paris Sud University IDEX 2012, the Fondation de l’Avenir (grant AP-RM-17-013), the Fédération pour la Recherche sur le Cerveau; the National Institutes of Health, Science Foundation Ireland (16/ERC/D/3797), U.S.A. (Axon, Testosterone and Mental Health during Adolescence; R01 MH085772-01A1) and by NIH Consortium grant U54 EB020403, supported by a cross-NIH alliance that funds Big Data to Knowledge Centres of Excellence.

ImagenPathways “Understanding the Interplay between Cultural, Biological and Subjective Factors in Drug Use Pathways” is a collaborative project supported by the European Research Area Network on Illicit Drugs (ERANID). This paper is based on independent research commissioned and funded in England by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Policy Research Programme (project ref. PR-ST-0416-10001), China Scholarship Council—Trinity College Dublin Joint Scholarship Programme (202006750028). The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the national funding agencies or ERANID.

Author contributions

R.W., J.K., L.R., and K.R. conceptualized this study. T.B., G.J.B., A.L.W.B., C.B., F.M.C., P.J.C., H.F., M.F.-B., J.G., H.G., P.G., A.H., B.I., K.M., J.-L.M., F.N., T.P., M.R., C.L., Z.P., M.-L.P.-M., M.N.S., A.S., M.R. and T.W.R. acquired the data. Y.W. processed and analysed the data. R.B., L.F., J.K., E.S., T.N. and J.H. contributed to data analyses and interpreted the results with Y.W. and R.W.. Y.W. and R.W. wrote the manuscript. All authors edited the paper and gave final approval before submission.

Competing interests

Dr. Banaschewski served in an advisory or consultancy role for Actelion, Hexal Pharma, Lilly, Lundbeck, Medice, Novartis, Shire. He received conference support or speaker's fee by Lilly, Medice Novartis and Shire. He has been involved in clinical trials conducted by Shire & Viforpharma. He received royalties from Hogrefe, Kohlhammer, CIP Medien, Oxford University Press. The present work is unrelated to the above grants and relationships. Dr Walter received a speaker honorarium from Servier (2014). The other authors report no biomedical financial interests or potential conflicts of interest.

Data and materials availability

IMAGEN data are available from a dedicated database: <https://imagen2.cea.fr>. Custom code that supports the findings of this study is available from the corresponding author upon request. All data needed to evaluate the conclusions in the paper are present in the paper and/or the Supplementary Materials. Additional data related to this paper may be requested from the authors.

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Editors

Reviewing Editor

Xilin Zhang

South China Normal University, Guangzhou, China

Senior Editor

Floris de Lange

Donders Institute for Brain, Cognition and Behaviour, Nijmegen, Netherlands

Reviewer #1 (Public Review):

This study explored the relationship between sustained attention and substance use from ages 14 to 23 in a large longitudinal dataset. They found behaviour and brain connectivity associated with poorer sustained attention at age 14 predicted subsequent increase in cannabis and cigarette smoking from ages 14-23. They concluded that the brain network of sustained attention is a robust biomarker for vulnerability to substance use. The big strength of the study is a substantial sample size and validation of the generalization to an external dataset. In addition, various methods/models were used to prove the relationship between sustained attention and substance use over time.

<https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.97150.2.sa3>

Reviewer #2 (Public Review):

Weng and colleagues investigated the relationship between sustained attention and substance use in a large cohort across three longitudinal visits (ages 14, 19, and 23). They employed a stop signal task to assess sustained attention and utilized the Timeline Followback self-report questionnaire to measure substance use. They assessed the linear relationship between sustained attention-associated functional connections and substance use at an earlier visit (age 14 or 19). Subsequently, they utilized this relationship along with the functional connection profile at a later age (age 19 or 23) to predict substance use at those respective ages. The authors found that connections in association with reduced sustained attention predicted subsequent increases in substance use, a conclusion validated in an external dataset. Altogether, the authors suggest that sustained attention could serve as a robust biomarker for predicting future substance use.

This study by Weng and colleagues focused on an important topic of substance use prediction in adolescence/early adulthood.

<https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.97150.2.sa2>

Reviewer #3 (Public Review):

Summary:

Weng and colleagues investigated the association between attention-related connectivity and substance use. They conducted a study with a sizable sample of over 1,000 participants, collecting longitudinal data at ages 14, 19, and 23. Their findings indicate that behaviors and brain connectivity linked to sustained attention at age 14 forecasted subsequent increases in cigarette and cannabis use from ages 14 to 23. However, early substance use did not predict future attention levels or attention-related connectivity strength.

Strengths:

The study's primary strength lies in its large sample size and longitudinal design spanning three time-points. A robust predictive analysis was employed, demonstrating that diminished sustained attention behavior and connectivity strength predict substance use, while early substance use does not forecast future attention-related behavior or connectivity strength.

Weaknesses:

It's questionable whether the prediction approach (i.e., CPM), even when combined with longitudinal data, can establish causality. I recommend removing the term 'consequence' in the abstract and replacing it with 'predict'. Additionally, the paper could benefit from enhanced rigor through additional analyses, such as testing various thresholds and conducting lagged effect analyses with covariate regression.

<https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.97150.2.sa1>

Author response:

The following is the authors' response to the original reviews.

Reviewer #1 (Recommendations For The Authors):

Although the manuscript is well organized and written, it could be largely improved and therefore made more plausible and easier to read. See my point-by-point comments listed below:

(1) The introduction section is a bit overloaded with some unnecessary information. For example, the authors discussed the relationship between neurotransmitters in the prefrontal and striatum and substance use/sustained attention. However, the results are related to neither the neurotransmitters nor the striatum. In addition, there is a contradictory description about neurotransmitters there, Nicotine/THC leads to increased neurotransmitters, and decreased neurotransmitters is related to poor sustained attention. Does that mean that the use of Nicotine/THC could increase sustained attention?

Thanks for this insightful question. We understand your concern regarding the seemingly contradictory statements about neurotransmitters and sustained attention. Previous studies have shown that acute administration of nicotine can improve sustained attention (Lawrence et al., 2002; Potter and Newhouse, 2008; Valentine and Sofuoglu, 2018; Young et al., 2004). On the other hand, the acute effects of smoking cannabis on sustained attention are mixed and depend on factors such as dosage and individual differences (Crean et al., 2011). For instance, a previous study (Hart et al., 2001) found that performance on a tracking task, which requires sustained attention, was found to improve significantly after smoking cannabis with a high

dose of THC, albeit in experienced cannabis users. However, chronic substance use, including nicotine and cannabis, has been associated with impaired sustained attention (Chamberlain et al., 2012; Dougherty et al., 2013).

To address your concerns and improve clarity and succinctness of the Introduction, we have removed the description of neurotransmitters from the Introduction. This revision should make the introduction more concise and focus on the direct relationships pertinent to our study.

(2) It is a bit hard to follow the story for the readers because the Results section went straight into detail. For example, the authors directly introduced that they used the ICV from the Go trials to index sustained attention without basic knowledge about the task. Why use the ICV of Go trials instead of other trials (i.e., successful stop trials) as an index of sustained attention? I suggest presenting the subjects and task details about the data before the detailed behavioral results. The results section should include enough information to understand the presenting results for the readers, rather than forcing the reader to find the answer in the later Methods section.

We appreciate your suggestion to provide more context about the task and ICV before diving into the detailed behavioural results.

We used the ICV derived from the Go trials instead of Success stop trials as an index of sustained attention, based on the nature of the stop-signal task and the specific data it generates. Previous studies have indicated that reaction time (RT) variability is a straightforward measure of sustained attention, with increasing variability thought to reflect poorer ability to sustain attention (Esterman and Rothlein, 2019). RT variability is defined as ICV, calculated as the standard deviation of mean Go RT divided by the mean Go RT from Go trials (O'Halloran et al., 2018). The stop signal task includes both Go trials and stop trials. During Go trials, participants are required to respond as quickly and accurately as possible to a Go signal, allowing for the recording of RT for calculating ICV. In contrast, stop trials are designed to measure inhibitory control, where successful response inhibition results in no RT or response recorded in the output. Therefore, Go trials are specifically used to assess sustained attention, while Stop trials primarily assess inhibitory control (Verbruggen et al., 2019).

We acknowledge the importance of providing this contextual information within the Results section to enhance reader understanding. We have added this information before presenting the behavioural results on Page 6.

Results

(1) Behavioural changes over time

Reaction time (RT) variability is a straightforward measure of sustained attention, with increasing variability thought to reflect poor sustained attention. RT variability is defined as intra-individual coefficient of variation (ICV), calculated as the standard deviation of mean Go RT divided by the mean Go RT from Go trials in the stop signal task. Lower ICV indicates better sustained attention.

(3) The same problem for section 2 in the Results. What are the predictive networks? Are the predictive networks the same as the networks constructed based on the correlation with ICV? My intuitive feeling is that they are the circular analyses here. The positive/negative/combined networks are calculated based on the correlation between the edges and ICV. Then the author used the network to predict the ICV again. The manipulation from the raw networks (I think they are based on PPI) to the predictive network, and the calculation of the predicted ICV are all missing. The direct exposure of

the results to the readers without enough detailed knowledge made everything hard to digest.

We thank the Reviewer for the insightful comment. We agree with the need for more clarity regarding the predictive networks and the CPM analysis before presenting results. CPM, a data-driven neuroscience approach, is applied to predict individual behaviour from brain functional connectivity (Rosenberg et al., 2016; Shen et al., 2017). The CPM analysis used the strength of the predictive network to predict the individual difference in traits and behaviours. CPM includes several steps: feature selection, feature summarization, model building, and assessment of prediction significance (see Fig. S1).

During feature selection, we assessed whether connections between brain areas (i.e., edges) in a task-related functional connectivity matrix (derived from general psychophysiological interaction analysis) were positively or negatively correlated with ICV using a significance threshold of $P < 0.01$. These positively or negatively correlated connections are regarded as positive or negative network, respectively. The network strength of the positive network (or negative network) was determined in each individual by summing the connection strength of each positively (or negatively) correlated edge. The combined network was determined by subtracting the strength of the negative network from the positive network. Next, CPM built a linear model between the network strength of the predictive network and ICV. This model was initially developed using the training set. The predictive networks were then applied to the test set, where network strength was calculated again, and the linear model was used to predict ICV using k-fold cross-validation. Following your advice, we have updated it in the Results section to include these details on Page 7.

Results

(2) Cross-sectional brain connectivity

This study employed CPM, a data-driven neuroscience approach, to identify three predictive networks—positive, negative, and combined—that predict ICV from brain functional connectivity. CPM typically uses the strength of the predictive networks to predict individual differences in traits and behaviors. The predictive networks were obtained based on connectivity analyses of the whole brain. Specifically, we assessed whether connections between brain areas (i.e., edges) in a task-related functional connectivity matrix derived from generalized psychophysiological interaction analysis were positively or negatively correlated with ICV using a significance threshold of $P < 0.01$. These positively or negatively correlated connections were regarded as positive or negative network, respectively. The network strength of positive networks (or negative networks) was determined for each individual by summing the connection strength of each positively (or negatively) correlated edge. The combined network was determined by subtracting the strength of the negative network from the positive network. We then built a linear model between network strength and ICV in the training set and applied these predictive networks to yield network strength and a linear model in the test set to calculate predicted ICV using k-fold cross validation.

(4) The authors showed the positive/negative/combined networks from both Go trials and successful stop trials can predict the ICV. I am wondering how the author could validate the specificity of the prediction of these positive/negative/combined networks. For example, how about the networks from the failed stop trials?

We appreciate the opportunity to clarify the specificity of the predictive networks identified in our study. Here is a more detailed explanation of our findings and their implications.

To validate the specificity of the sustained attention network identified from CPM analysis, we calculated correlations between the network strength of positive and negative networks and performances from a neuropsychology battery (CANTAB) at each timepoint separately.

CANTAB includes several tasks that measure various cognitive functions, such as sustained attention, inhibitory control, impulsivity, and working memory. We found that all positive and negative networks derived from Go and Successful stop trials significantly correlated with a behavioural assay of sustained attention – the rapid visual information processing (RVP) task – at ages 14 and 19 (all P values < 0.028). Age 23 had no RVP task data in the IMAGEN study. There were sporadic significant correlations between constructs such as delay aversion/impulsivity and negative network strength, for example, but the correlations with the RVP were always significant. This demonstrates that the strength of the sustained attention brain network was specifically and robustly correlated with a typical sustained attention task, rather than other cognitive measures. The results are described in the main text on Page 8 and shown in Supplementary materials (Pages 1 and 3) and Table S12.

In addition, we conducted a CPM analysis to predict ICV using gPPI under Failed stop trials. Our findings showed that positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Failed stop trials significantly predicted ICV: at age 14 ($r = 0.10$, $P = 0.033$; $r = 0.19$, $P < 0.001$; and $r = 0.17$, $P < 0.001$, respectively), at age 19 ($r = 0.21$; $r = 0.18$; and $r = 0.21$, all $P < 0.001$, respectively), and at age 23 ($r = 0.33$, $r = 0.35$, and $r = 0.36$, respectively, all $P < 0.001$). Similar results were obtained using a 5-fold CV and leave-site-out CV.

Our analysis further showed that task-related functional connectivity derived from Go trials, Successful Stop trials, and Failed Stop trials could predict sustained attention across three timepoints. However, the predictive performances of networks derived from Go trials were higher than those from Successful Stop and Failed Stop trials. This suggests that sustained attention is particularly crucial during Go trials when participants need to respond to the Go signal. In contrast, although Successful Stop and Failed Stop trials also require sustained attention, these tasks primarily involve inhibitory control along with sustained attention.

Taken together, these findings underscore the specificity of the predictive networks of sustained attention. We have updated these results in the Supplementary Materials (Pages 3-5 and Page 7):

Method

CPM analysis using Failed stop trials

We performed another CPM analysis using Failed stop trials using gPPI matrix obtained from the second GLM, described in the main text. The CPM analysis was conducted using 10-fold CV, 5-fold CV and leave-site-out CV.

Results

CPM predictive performance under Failed stop trials

Positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Failed stop trials significantly predicted ICV: at age 14 ($r = 0.10$, $P = 0.033$; $r = 0.19$, $P < 0.001$; and $r = 0.17$, $P < 0.001$, respectively), at age 19 ($r = 0.21$; $r = 0.18$; and $r = 0.21$, all $P < 0.001$, respectively), and at age 23 ($r = 0.33$, $r = 0.35$, and $r = 0.36$, respectively, all $P < 0.001$). We obtained similar results using a 5-fold CV and leave-site-out CV (Table S6).

Discussion

Specificity of the prediction of predictive networks

We found that task-related function connectivity derived from Go trials, Successful stop trials, and Failed stop trials successfully predicted sustained attention across three timepoints. However, predictive performances of predictive networks derived from Go trials were higher than those derived from Successful stop trials and Failed stop trials. These results suggest that sustained attention is particularly crucial during Go trials when participants need to respond

to the Go signal. In contrast, although Successful Stop and Failed Stop trials also require sustained attention, these tasks primarily involve inhibitory control along with sustained attention.

(5) The author used PPI to define the connectivity of the network. I am not sure why the author used two GLMs for the PPI analysis separately. In the second GLM, Go trials were treated as an implicit baseline. What does this exactly mean? And the gPPI analysis across the entire brain using the Shen atlas is not clear. Normally, as I understand, the PPI/gPPI is conducted to test the task-modulated connectivity between one seed region and the voxels of the whole rest brain. Did the author perform the PPI for each ROI from Shen atlas? More details about how to use PPI to construct the network are required.

Thank you for your insightful questions. Here, we'd like to clarify how we applied generalized PPI across the whole brain using the Shen atlas and why we used two separate GLMs for the gPPI analysis.

Yes, PPI is conducted to test the task-modulated connectivity between one seed region and other brain areas. This method can be both voxel-based and ROI-based. In our study, we performed ROI-based gPPI analysis using Shen atlas with 268 regions. Specifically, we performed the PPI on each seed region of interest (ROI) to estimate the task-related FC between this ROI and the remaining ROI (267 regions) under a specific task condition. By performing this analysis across each ROI in the Shen atlas, we generated a 268×268 gPPI matrix for each task condition. The matrices were then transposed and averaged with the original matrices, which yielded symmetrical matrices, which were subsequently used for CPM analysis.

Regarding the use of two separate GLMs for the gPPI analysis, our study aimed to define the task-related FC under two conditions: Go trials and Successful stop trials. The first GLM including Go trials was built to estimate the gPPI during Go trials. However, due to the high frequency of Go trials in the stop signal task, it is common to regard the Go trials as an implicit baseline, as in previous IMAGEN studies (D'Alberto et al., 2018; Whelan et al., 2012). Therefore, to achieve a more accurate estimation of FC during Successful stop trials, we built a second GLM specifically for these trials. Accordingly, we have updated it in the Method Section in the main text on Page 16.

Method

2.5 Generalized psychophysiological interaction (gPPI) analysis

In this study, we adopted gPPI analysis to generate task-related FC matrices and applied CPM analysis to investigate predictive brain networks from adolescents to young adults. PPI analysis describes task-dependent FC between brain regions, traditionally examining connectivity between a seed region of interest (ROI) and the voxels of the whole rest brain. However, this study conducted a generalized PPI analysis, which is on ROI-to-ROI basis (Di et al., 2021), to yield a gPPI matrix across the whole brain instead of just a single seed region.

Given the high frequency of Go trials in SST, it is common to treat Go trials as an implicit baseline in previous IMAGEN studies (D'Alberto et al., 2018; Whelan et al., 2012). Hence, we built a separate GLM for Successful stop trials, which included two task regressors (Failed and Successful stop trials) and 36 nuisance regressors.

(6) Why did the author use PPI to construct the network, rather than the other similar methods, for example, beta series correlation (BSC)?

Thanks for your question. PPI is an approach used to calculate the functional connectivity (FC) under a specific task (i.e., task-related FC). Although most brain connectomic research

has utilized resting-state FC (e.g., beta series correlation), FC during task performance has demonstrated superiority in predicting individual behaviours and traits, due to its potential to capture more behaviourally relevant information (Dhamala et al., 2022; Greene et al., 2018; Yoo et al., 2018). Specifically, Zhao et al. (2023) suggested that task-related FC outperforms both typical task-based and resting-state FC in predicting individual differences. Therefore, we chose to use task-related FC to predict sustained attention over time. We have updated it in the Introduction on Page 5.

Introduction

Although most brain connectomic research has utilized resting-state fMRI data, functional connectivity (FC) during task performance has demonstrated superiority in predicting individual behaviours and traits, due to its potential to capture more behaviourally relevant information (Dhamala et al., 2022; Greene et al., 2018; Yoo et al., 2018). Specifically, Zhao et al. (2023) suggested that task-related FC outperforms both typical task-based and resting-state FC in predicting individual differences. Hence, we applied task-related FC to predict sustained attention over time.

(7) In the section of 'Correlation analysis between the network strength and substance use', the author just described that 'the correlations between xx and xx are shown in Fig5X', and repeated it three times for three correlation results. What exactly are the results? The author should describe the results in detail. And I am wondering whether there are scatter plots for these correlation analyses?

We'd like to clarify the results in Fig. 5. Fig. 5 illustrates the significant correlations between behaviour and brain activity associated with sustained attention and Cigarette and cannabis use (Cig+CB) after FDR correction. Panel A shows the significant correlation between behaviour level of sustained attention and Cig+CB. Panels B and C show the correlations between brain activity associated with sustained attention and Cig+CB. While Panel B presents the brain activity derived from Go trials, Panel C presents brain activity derived from Successful stop trials. In response to your suggestion, we have described these results in detail on Page 9. We also have included scatter plots for the significant correlations, which are shown in Fig. 5 in Supplementary materials (Fig. S10).

Results

(6) Correlation between behaviour and brain to cannabis and cigarette use

Figs. 5A-C summarizes the results showing the correlation between ICV/brain activity and Cig+CB per timepoint and across timepoints. Fig. 5A shows correlations between ICV and Cig+CB (Tables S14-15). ICV was correlated with Cig+CB at ages 19 ($Rho = 0.13$, $P < 0.001$) and 23 ($Rho = 0.17$, $P < 0.001$). ICV at ages 14 ($Rho = 0.13$, $P = 0.007$) and 19 ($Rho = 0.13$, $P = 0.0003$) were correlated with Cig+CB at age 23. Cig+CB at age 19 was correlated with ICV at age 23 ($Rho = 0.13$, $P = 9.38E-05$). Fig. 5B shows correlations between brain activity derived from Go trials and Cig+CB (Tables S18-19). Brain activities of positive and negative networks derived from Go trials were correlated with Cig+CB at age 23 (positive network: $Rho_p = 0.12$, $P < 0.001$; negative network: $Rho_n = -0.11$, $P < 0.001$). Brain activity of the negative network derived from Go trials at age 14 was correlated with Cig+CB at age 23 ($Rho_n = -0.16$, $P = 0.001$). Cig+CB at age 19 was correlated with brain activity of the positive network derived from Go trials at age 23 ($Rho_p = 0.10$, $P = 0.002$). Fig. 5C shows the correlations between brain activity derived from Successful stop and Cig+CB (Tables S18-19). Brain activities of positive and negative networks derived from Successful stop were correlated with Cig+CB at ages 19 (positive network: $Rho_p = 0.10$, $P = 0.001$; negative network: $Rho_n = -0.08$, $P = 0.013$) and 23 (positive network: $Rho_p = 0.13$, $P < 0.001$; negative network: $Rho_n = -0.11$, $P = 0.001$).

(8) Lastly, the labels of (A), (B) ... in the figure captions are unclear. The authors should find a better way to place the labels in the caption and keep them consistent throughout all figures.

Thank you for this valuable comment. We have revised the figure captions in the main text to ensure the labels (A), (B), etc., are placed more clearly and consistently across all figures.

Reviewer #2 (Public Review):

While the study largely achieves its aims, several points merit further clarification:

(1) Regarding connectome-based predictive modeling, an assumption is that connections associated with sustained attention remain consistent across age groups. However, this assumption might be challenged by observed differences in the sustained attention network profile (i.e., connections and related connection strength) across age groups (Figures 2 G-I, Fig. 3 G_I). It's unclear how such differences might impact the prediction results.

Thank you for your insightful comment. We'd like to clarify that we did not assume that connections associated with sustained attention remain completely consistent across age groups. Indeed, we expected that connections would change across age groups, due to the developmental changes in brain function and structure from adolescence to adulthood. Our focus was on the consistency of individual differences in sustained attention networks over time, recognising that the actual connections within those networks may change. However, we did show that there is some consistency in the specific connections associated with sustained attention over time. Notably, this consistency markedly increases when comparing ages 19 and 23, when developmental factors are less relevant. We support our reasoning above with the following analyses:

(1) Supplementary materials (Pages 2 and 5), relevant sections highlighted here for emphasis.

Method

Comparison of predictive networks identified at one timepoint versus another

Steiger's Z value was employed to compare predictive performances of networks identified at different timepoints. This analysis involved comparing the R values derived from networks defined at distinct ages to predict ICV at the same age. For example, we compared the r values of brain networks defined at age 14 when predicting ICV at 19 (i.e., positive network: $r = 0.25$, negative network: $r = 0.25$, combined network: $r = 0.28$) with those R values of brain networks defined at age 19 itself (i.e., positive network: $r = 0.16$, negative network: $r = 0.14$, combined network: $r = 0.16$) derived from Go trials using Steiger's Z test (age 14 → age 19 vs. age 19 → 19). Similarly, comparisons were made between networks defined at age 14 predicting ICV at age 23 and those at age 23 predicting ICV at age 23 (age 14 → age 23 vs. age 23 → 23), as well as between networks defined at age 19 predicting ICV at age 23 and those at age 23 predicting ICV at age 23 (age 19 → age 23 vs. age 23 → age 23). These comparisons were performed separately for Go trials and Successful Stop trials.

Results

Comparison of predictive performance at different timepoints

For positive, negative, and combined networks predicting ICV derived from Go trials at age 19, the R values were higher when using predictive networks defined at 19 than those defined at 14 ($Z = 3.79$, $Z = 3.39$, $Z = 3.99$, all $P < 0.00071$). Similarly, the R values for positive, negative, and combined networks predicting ICV derived from Go trials at age 23 were higher

when using predictive networks defined at age 23 compared to those defined at ages 14 ($Z = 6.00$, $Z = 5.96$, $Z = 6.67$, all $P < 3.47 \times 10^{-9}$) or 19 ($Z = 2.80$, $Z = 2.36$, $Z = 2.57$, all $P < 0.005$).

At age 19, the R value for the positive network predicting ICV derived from Successful stop trials was higher when using predictive networks defined at 19 compared to those defined at 14 ($Z = 1.54$, $P = 0.022$), while the negative and combined networks did not show a significant difference ($Z = 0.85$, $P = 0.398$; $Z = 2.29$, $P = 0.123$). At age 23, R values for the positive and combined networks predicting ICV derived from Successful stop trials were higher when using predictive networks defined at 23 compared to those defined at 14 ($Z = 3.00$, $Z = 2.48$, all $P < 3.47 \times 10^{-9}$) or 19 ($Z = 2.52$, $Z = 1.99$, all $P < 0.005$). However, the R value for the negative network at age 23 did not significantly differ when using predictive networks defined at 14 ($Z = 1.80$, $P = 0.072$) or 19 ($Z = 1.48$, $P = 0.138$).

These results indicate that some specific pairwise connections associated with sustained attention at earlier ages, such as 14 and 19, are still relevant as individuals grow older. However, some connections are not optimal for good sustained attention at older ages. That is, the brain reorganizes its connection patterns to maintain optimal functionality for sustained attention as it matures.

(2) Consistency of Individual Differences:

We found individual differences in ICV were significantly correlated between the three timepoints (Fig. 1B). In addition, we calculated the correlations of network strength of predictive networks predicting sustained attention derived from Go trials and Successful trials between each timepoints. We found that the correlations of network strength for predictive networks (derived from Go trials and Successful trials) were also significant (all $P < 0.003$). We have updated these results in the main text (Pages 7-8) and Supplementary Materials (Table S7).

(2) Cross-sectional brain connectivity

In addition, we found that network strength of positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Go trials was significantly correlated between the three timepoints (Table S7, all $P < 0.003$).

In addition, we found that network strength of positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Successful stop trials was significantly correlated between the three timepoints (Table S7, all $P < 0.001$).

(3) Predictive networks across timepoints: Predictive networks defined at age 14 were successfully applied to predict ICV at ages 19 and 23. Similarly, predictive networks defined at age 19 were successfully applied to predict ICV at age 23 (Fig. 4). These results reflect the robustness of the brain network associated with sustained attention over time.

(4) Dice coefficient analysis: We calculated the Dice coefficient to quantify the similarity of predictive networks across the three timepoints. Connections in the sustained attention networks were significantly similar from ages 14 to 23 (Table S13), despite relatively few overlapping edges over time (as discussed in Supplementary Materials on Page 6).

(5) Global brain activation: Based on these findings, we indicate that sustained attention relies on global brain activation (i.e., network strength) rather than specific regions or networks (see also (Zhao et al., 2021)).

In summary, brain network connections undergo change and are not completely consistent across time. However, individual differences in sustained attention and its network are consistent across time, as we found that 1) the brain reorganizes its connection patterns to maintain optimal functionality for sustained attention as it matures. 2) ICV and network

strength of sustained attention network were significantly correlated between each timepoint. 3) Sustained attention networks identified from previous timepoints could predict ICV in the subsequent timepoint. 4) Dice coefficient analysis indicated that the edges in the sustained attention networks were significantly similar from ages 14 to 23. 5) Sustained attention networks function as a global activation, rather than specific regions or networks.

(2) Another assumption of the connectome-based predictive modeling is that the relationship between sustained attention network and substance use is linear and remains linear over development. Such linear evidence from either the literature or their data would be of help.

Thanks for your valuable suggestion. We'd like to clarify that while CPM assumes a linear relationship between brain and behaviour (Shen et al., 2017), it does not assume that the relationship between the sustained attention network and substance use remains linear over development.

Our approach in applying CPM to predict sustained attention across different timepoints was based on previous neuroimaging studies (Rosenberg et al., 2016; Rosenberg et al., 2020), which indicated linear associations between brain connectivity patterns and sustained attention using CPM analysis. These findings support the notion of a linear relationship between brain connectivity and sustained attention. In this study, we performed CPM analysis to identify predictive networks predicting sustained attention, not substance use and used the network strength of these predictive networks to represent sustained attention activity.

To examine the relationship between substance use and sustained attention, as well as its associated brain activity, we conducted correlation analyses and utilized a latent change score model instead of CPM analysis. This decision was informed by cross-sectional studies (Broyd et al., 2016; Lisdahl and Price, 2012) that consistently reported linear associations between substance use and impairments in sustained attention. Additionally, longitudinal research by (Harakeh et al., 2012) indicated a linear relationship between poorer sustained attention and the initiation and escalation of substance use over time.

Given these previous findings, we assumed a linear relationship between sustained attention and substance use. Our analyses included calculating correlations between substance use and sustained attention, as well as its associated brain activity at each timepoint and across timepoints (Fig. 5). Furthermore, we employed a three-wave bivariable latent change score model, a longitudinal approach, to assess the relationship between substance use and behaviour and brain activity associated with sustained attention (Figs. 6-7). We have added more information in the Introduction to make it more clear on Page 6.

Introduction

Additionally, previous cross-sectional and longitudinal studies (Broyd et al., 2016; Harakeh et al., 2012; Lisdahl and Price, 2012) have shown that there are linear relationships between substance use and sustained attention over time. We therefore employed correlation analyses and a latent change score model to estimate the relationship between substance use and both behaviours and brain activity associated with sustained attention.

(3) Heterogeneity in results suggests individual variability that is not fully captured by group-level analyses. For instance, Figure 1A shows decreasing ICV (better-sustained attention) with age on the group level, while there are both increasing and decreasing patterns on the individual level via visual inspection. Figure 7 demonstrates another example in which the group with a high level of sustained attention has a lower risk of substance use at a later age compared to that in the group with a low level of sustained attention. However, there are individuals in the high sustained attention group who have

substance use scores as high as those in the low sustained attention group. This is important to take into consideration and could be a potential future direction for research.

Thanks for this valuable comment. We appreciate your observation regarding the individual variability that is not fully captured by group-level analyses to some degree. Fig. 1A shows the results from a linear mixed model, which explains group-level changes over time while accounting for the random effect within subjects. Similarly, Fig. 7 shows the group-level association between substance use and sustained attention. We agree that future research could indeed consider individual variability. For example, participants could be categorized based on their consistent trajectories of ICV or substance use (i.e., keep decreasing/increasing) over multiple timepoints. We agree that incorporating individual-level analyses in the future could provide valuable insights and are grateful for your suggestion, which will inform our future research directions.

The above-mentioned points might partly explain the significant but low correlations between the observed and predicted ICV as shown in Figure 4. Addressing these limitations would help enhance the study's conclusions and guide future research efforts.

We have updated the text in the Discussion on Page 13:

Discussion

However, there are still some individual variabilities not captured in this study, which could be attributed to the diversity in genetic, environmental, and developmental factors influencing sustained attention and substance use. Future research should aim to explore these variabilities in greater depth to gain better understanding of the relationship between sustained attention and substance use.

Reviewer #3 (Public Review):

Weaknesses: It's questionable whether the prediction approach (i.e., CPM), even when combined with longitudinal data, can establish causality. I recommend removing the term 'consequence' in the abstract and replacing it with 'predict'. Additionally, the paper could benefit from enhanced rigor through additional analyses, such as testing various thresholds and conducting lagged effect analyses with covariate regression.

Thank you for your comment. We have replaced “consequence” by “predict” in the abstract.

Abstract

Previous studies were predominantly cross-sectional or under-powered and could not indicate if impairment in sustained attention was a predictor of substance-use or a marker of the inclination to engage in such behaviour.

Reviewer #3 (Recommendations For The Authors):

(1) The connectivity analysis predicts both baseline and longitudinal attention measures. However, given the high correlation in attention abilities across the three time-points, it's unclear whether the connectivity predicts shared variations of attention across three time points. It would be insightful to assess if predictions at the 2nd and 3rd-time points remained significant after controlling for attention abilities at the initial time point.

Thanks for your comments. We performed the CPM analysis to predict ICV at the 2nd and 3rd timepoint, controlling for ICV at age 14 as a covariate. We found that controlling for ICV at age 14, positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Successful stop trials defined at age 14 still predicted ICV at ages 19 and 23. In addition, positive, negative, and combined

networks derived from Successful stop trials defined at age 19 predicted ICV at age 23. In addition, positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Go trials defined at age 19 still predicted ICV at age 23, after controlling for ICV at age 14. However, positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Go trials defined at age 14 had lower predictive performances in predicting ICV at ages 19 and 23, after controlling for ICV at age 14. Notably, controlling for ICV at the initial timepoint did not significantly impact the performances of predictive networks derived from Successful stop trials. Accordingly, we have added this analysis and the results in the Supplementary Materials (Pages 3 and 5).

Method

Prediction across timepoints controlling for ICV at age 14

To examine whether connectivity predictors shared variations of sustained attention across timepoints, we applied predictive models developed at ages 14 and 19 to predict ICV at subsequent timepoints controlling for ICV at age 14. Specifically, we used predictive models (including parameters and selected edges) developed at age 14 to predict ICV at ages 19 and 23 separately. First, we calculated the network strength using the gPPI matrix at ages 19 and 23 based on the selected edges identified from CPM analysis at age 14. We then estimated the predicted ICV at ages 19 and 23 by applying the linear model parameters (slope and intercept) obtained from CPM analysis at age 14 to the network strength. Finally, we evaluated the predictive performance by calculating the partial correlation between the predicted and observed values at ages 19 and 23, controlling for ICV at age 14. Similarly, we applied models developed at age 19 to predict ICV at age 23, also controlling for ICV at age 14. To assess the significance of the predictive performance, we used a permutation test, shuffling the predicted ICV values and calculating partial correlation to generate a random distribution over 1,000 iterations.

Results

Predictions across timepoints controlling for ICV at age 14

Positive and combined networks derived from Go trials defined at age 14 predicted ICV at ages 19 ($r = 0.10$, $P = 0.028$; $r = 0.08$, $P = 0.047$) but negative network did not ($r = 0.06$, $P = 0.119$). Positive network derived from Go trials defined at age 14 predicted ICV at age 23 ($r = 0.11$, $P = 0.013$) but negative and combined networks did not ($r = 0.04$, $P = 0.187$; $r = 0.08$, $P = 0.056$). Positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Go trials defined at age 19 predicted ICV at age 23 ($r = 0.22$, $r = 0.19$, and $r = 0.22$, respectively, all $P < 0.001$).

Positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Successful stop trials defined at age 14 predicted ICV at age 19 ($r = 0.08$, $P = 0.036$; $r = 0.10$, $P = 0.012$; $r = 0.11$, $P = 0.009$) and 23 ($r = 0.11$, $P = 0.005$; $r = 0.13$, $P = 0.005$; $r = 0.13$, $P = 0.017$) respectively. Positive, negative, and combined networks derived from Successful stop trials defined at age 19 predicted ICV at age 23 ($r = 0.18$, $r = 0.18$, and $r = 0.17$, respectively, all $P < 0.001$).

(2) In the Results section, a significance threshold of $p = 0.01$ was used for the CPM analysis. It would be beneficial to test the stability of these findings using alternative thresholds such as $p = 0.05$ or $p = 0.005$.

We appreciate this insightful comment. We appreciate the suggestion to test the stability of our findings using alternative significance thresholds. Indeed, we have already conducted CPM analyses using a range of thresholds, including 0.1, 0.05, 0.01, 0.005, 0.001, 0.0005, and 0.0001 (see Table S8 in supplementary Materials). The results were similar across different thresholds. Following prior studies (Feng et al., 2024; Ren et al., 2021; Yoo et al., 2018) which used $P < 0.01$ for feature selection, we chose to focus on the threshold of $P < 0.01$ for our main

analysis. Following your suggestion, we have highlighted this in the Method section on Pages 17-18.

Method

2.6.1 ICV prediction

The r value with an associated P value for each edge was obtained, and a threshold $P = 0.01$ (Feng et al., 2024; Ren et al., 2021; Yoo et al., 2018) was set to select edges.

2.6.2 Three cross-validation schemes

In addition, we conducted the CPM analysis using a range of thresholds for feature selection and observed similar results across different thresholds (See Supplementary Materials Table S8).

(3) Could you clarify if you used one sub-sample to extract connectivity related to sustained attention and then used another sub-sample to predict substance use with attention-related connectivity?

Thank you very much for the question. We used the same sample to extract the brain network strength and estimated the correlation with substance use using both the Spearman correlation and latent change score model across three timepoints. We controlled for covariates including sex, age, and scan site at the same time. Accordingly, we have clarified this in the Method section on Page 20. We note that the CPM analyses were conducted using cross-validation, plus a leave-site-out analysis.

Method

2.7.3 Correlation between network strength and substance use

It is worth noting that all the correlations between substance use and sustained attention were conducted using the same sample across three timepoints.

(4) Could you clarify whether you have regressed covariates in the lagged effects analysis of part 7?

Thanks for this question. Yes, we confirmed that we controlled the covariates including age, sex and scan sites in the latent change score model. We have described them more clearly now in the Method section (Page 18).

Method

2.7.3 Correlation between network strength and substance use

Additionally, cross-lagged dynamic coupling (i.e., bidirectionality) was employed to explore individual differences in the relationships between substance use and linear changes in ICV/brain activity, as well as the relationship between ICV/brain activity and linear change in substance use. The model accounted for covariates such as age, sex and scan sites.

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<https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.97150.2.sa0>