

B1 TEENS

Behind the Screen

How apps trick you — and using the passive voice

B1 Intermediate | Grammar | Reading | 40 min

★ Lesson Objectives

- ✓ Read about how apps are designed to keep you hooked
- ✓ Learn vocabulary for technology, psychology and manipulation
- ✓ Form and use passive voice in present and past simple
- ✓ Understand when and why to use passive instead of active
- ✓ Discuss screen time, digital wellbeing and manipulation
- ✓ Write about processes and systems using the passive voice

1 Before You Read

- ▶ How many hours a day do you spend on your phone?
- ▶ Have you ever picked up your phone 'just for a second' and lost an hour?
- ▶ Do you think apps are designed to help you or to keep you scrolling?

2 Reading: Hooked by Design

Hooked by Design

You open Instagram to check one notification. Thirty minutes later, you're still scrolling. You didn't plan to spend that long -- so what happened? The answer is simple: you were tricked. Not by a person, but by a system -- a system that was carefully designed to keep you on the app for as long as possible.

Social media apps are built using techniques from behavioural psychology. Every feature -- from the infinite scroll to the red notification badge -- is designed to exploit the way your brain works. When you receive a like, a small amount of dopamine is released in your brain. Dopamine is the "feel-good" chemical -- it's the same substance that is produced when you eat chocolate or win a game. Your brain is programmed to seek more of it, so you keep checking your phone, hoping for another hit.

This system was not invented by accident. It was created deliberately by teams of designers and psychologists. Former Google engineer Tristan Harris, who is often called "the conscience of Silicon Valley," has spoken publicly about how these techniques are used. "Your attention is being sold to advertisers," he explained. "You are not the customer -- you are the product." According to Harris, billions of dollars are spent every year to make apps more addictive. Features like autoplay, suggested content and push notifications are all designed to pull you back in.

The effects on teenagers are especially concerning. A 2023 report by the American Psychological Association found that teenagers who spend more than three hours a day on social media are twice as likely to experience anxiety and depression. Sleep patterns are disrupted because screens are used late at night. Homework is affected because concentration is broken by constant notifications. Friendships are damaged because real conversations are replaced by quick messages and reactions.

So what can be done? Digital wellbeing expert Dr. Nadia Osman suggests three strategies. First, notifications should be turned off for non-essential apps. Second, screen time limits should be set and respected. Third, phones should not be kept in the bedroom at night. "These apps are designed by some of the smartest engineers in the world," she says. "You are not expected to resist them on your own. The system needs to be changed -- and until it is, you need to protect yourself."

3 Vocabulary

Word	Definition	Example
notification	alert from an app	"Hundreds of notifications a day."
scroll	move content on screen	"Spent an hour scrolling TikTok."
exploit	use unfairly for advantage	"Apps exploit how brains work."
dopamine	brain chemical for pleasure	"Likes release dopamine."
addictive	makes you want more	"Designed to be addictive."
deliberately	done on purpose	"Created deliberately."
conscience	sense of right and wrong	"Conscience of Silicon Valley."
advertiser	company that pays for ads	"Attention sold to advertisers."
autoplay	next video starts automatically	"Autoplay keeps you watching."
anxiety	feeling of worry	"Can increase anxiety."
disrupt	to interrupt or disturb	"Sleep patterns disrupted."
concentration	ability to focus	"Notifications break concentration."
resist	stop yourself from doing something	"Hard to resist checking phone."
manipulation	controlling unfairly	"Psychological manipulation."

Word	Definition	Example
screen time	time spent looking at screens	"Over 5 hours a day."
digital wellbeing	healthy relationship with tech	"Schools should teach this."

Collocations: push notification • screen time • digital wellbeing • social media addiction • infinite scroll • designed to • pay attention • turn off notifications

4 Grammar: The Passive Voice (Present & Past Simple)

Present Simple Passive: "Every feature is designed to exploit how your brain works."

Present Simple Passive: "Dopamine is released in your brain."

Past Simple Passive: "This system was not invented by accident."

Past Simple Passive: "It was created deliberately by teams of designers."

Tense	Active	Passive
Present Simple	They design the apps.	The apps are designed.
Past Simple	They created the system.	The system was created.
Present (neg.)	They don't sell data.	Data is not sold.
Past (neg.)	They didn't plan it.	It was not planned.

When Do We Use the Passive?

1. **Action > agent:** "Dopamine is released." (who releases it is not important)

2. **Unknown agent:** "My phone was stolen." (we don't know who)

3. **Processes:** "Data is collected, analysed, and sold to advertisers."

4. **Formal writing:** "The experiment was conducted in 2023."

⚠ Common Mistakes

~~The app was design to be addictive.~~ → was designed (past participle)

~~English is speak all over the world.~~ → is spoken (irregular pp)

~~The homework was did by students.~~ → was done (done, not did)

5 Match the Halves

#	Active	Passive
1	They design apps to be addictive.	Apps are designed to be addictive.
2	Engineers created the notification system.	The system was created by engineers.
3	Millions use Instagram daily.	Instagram is used by millions daily.
4	Someone stole my phone.	My phone was stolen.
5	They don't sell your data.	Your data is not sold.
6	A psychologist wrote the report.	The report was written by a psychologist.
7	People speak English worldwide.	English is spoken worldwide.
8	They built the first iPhone in 2007.	The first iPhone was built in 2007.
9	Companies collect user data.	User data is collected every day.
10	Nobody invited me.	I was not invited.

6 Comprehension Quiz

1. Why do you keep checking your phone?

Answer: Dopamine is released when you get likes

2. 'You are not the customer' means...

Answer: Your attention is sold to advertisers

3. 2023 report on teenagers found...

Answer: 3+ hours doubles risk of anxiety/depression

4. Dr. Osman says phones should not be kept...

Answer: In the bedroom at night

5. 'The app was designed by engineers.' Tense?

Answer: Past Simple Passive

6. Why passive in 'English is spoken worldwide'?

Answer: Action is more important than who does it

7. Passive of 'They built the first iPhone in 2007'?

Answer: The first iPhone was built in 2007.

8. Which is WRONG?

Answer: English is speak all over the world.

7 Fill in the Blanks

Word Bank: is designed • are sold • was created • is released • were built • are collected • was written • is not kept

1. Every feature _____ to keep you scrolling.
2. Dopamine _____ when you get a like.
3. The notification system _____ by psychologists.
4. User data _____ by apps every second.
5. Your attention and data _____ to advertisers.
6. The first smartphones _____ in the early 2000s.
7. The mental health report _____ by psychologists.
8. Your phone _____ in the bedroom at night.

Answers: 1. is designed • 2. is released • 3. was created • 4. are collected • 5. are sold • 6. were built • 7. was written • 8. is not kept

8 Speaking & Writing

◆ Discussion Questions

Should apps be redesigned to be less addictive?

Should there be a law limiting screen time for teenagers?

Have you ever tried a digital detox?

Which app is most addictive and why?

'You are the product.' Do you agree?

◆ Example Dialogue

A: Did you know apps are designed to be addictive?

B: Yeah, dopamine is released every time you get a like. It's like a drug!

A: And our data is collected and sold to advertisers.

B: Notifications should be turned off by default.

A: I agree. Phones shouldn't be allowed in classrooms either.

B: The real problem is how apps are built. The system needs to be changed.

Writing Task

Write 80-120 words. Use at least 5 passive voice sentences:

Option A: Describe how social media works using passive. How is content shown? How is data used?

Option B: Write rules for healthy phone use at school using passive.

9 Active or Passive? — The Game

Interactive game available online. 10 active/passive transformation challenges!

#	Question	Answer
1	'They design apps.' → Passive?	Apps are designed.
2	'The report was written.' Active or passive?	Passive
3	'Someone stole my bike.' → Passive?	My bike was stolen.
4	'English is spoken worldwide.' → Active?	People speak English worldwide.
5	'Companies collect data.' → Passive?	Data is collected.
6	'System was not invented by accident.' Agent?	'by accident' is the key info
7	'Billions are spent on addictive apps.' Who?	Companies (passive hides agent)
8	'My phone ___.' (steal, past)	was stolen
9	'The first iPhone ___.' (build, past)	was built
10	Which can't be passive?	She laughed loudly. (intransitive)

10 Review Checklist

- ✓ I can understand a text about app design and manipulation
- ✓ I can use vocabulary for technology and psychology
- ✓ I can form passive voice in present and past simple
- ✓ I know when and why to use passive over active
- ✓ I can discuss screen time and digital wellbeing
- ✓ I can write about processes using the passive voice

Congratulations!

You have completed this lesson: Behind the Screen