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Bayesian Network Analytics for the Detection of Neurofunctional Alterations in Autism Spectrum Disorder

P.M. Promince, Dr S. Sutha, Dr A. Darwin Jose Raju

Independent Researcher, Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu, India

Professor, Dept. of BME, Dhanalakshmi Srinivasan Engineering College (A), Perambalur, Tamil Nadu, India

Associate Professor, Dept. of EEE, St. Xavier's Catholic College of Engineering Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu, India

ABSTRACT: Accurate characterization of disrupted brain network organization in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) requires analytical frameworks that capture topological, spectral, and statistical dependencies beyond conventional pairwise correlation measures. Existing functional connectivity approaches are limited by their static, undirected modeling assumptions and inability to incorporate higher-order geometry, temporal dynamics, or uncertainty quantification. This study proposes an integrated computational pipeline combining Topological Data Analysis (TDA), Graph Signal Processing (GSP), and Bayesian graph learning to address these limitations. TDA extracts multiscale topological invariants—Betti numbers β_0 and β_1 —via persistent homology applied to threshold correlation networks, enabling robust detection of structural fragmentation and cycle loss under varying sparsity levels. GSP employs graph Fourier analysis of Blood Oxygenation Level-Dependent (BOLD) signals to compute time-varying spectral entropy, quantifying network information diversity and revealing latent spatiotemporal patterns. Bayesian graph learning estimates sparse precision matrices from neuroimaging data using a graphical lasso prior, thereby providing uncertainty-aware inference of direct functional connections. The framework was validated on the ABIDE resting-state fMRI dataset (122 ROIs) and synthetic networks with known topology, achieving consistent cross-validation accuracy improvements over baseline pairwise methods, enhanced robustness to Gaussian noise, and interpretable biomarkers identified via SHAP analysis. Comparative evaluation demonstrated that TDA captures threshold-dependent topological reorganization, GSP detects spectral complexity variations, and Bayesian graph learning yields statistically principled sparse connectivity estimates. The stability of extracted metrics across repeated trials confirms the reproducibility of the pipeline, supporting its applicability in ASD biomarker discovery and broader network neuroscience contexts.

KEYWORDS: Topological Data Analysis, Graph Signal Processing, Bayesian graph learning, Functional brain networks, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Graph-theoretic metrics.

I. INTRODUCTION

Bayesian network analysis offers a promising approach for detecting functional brain alterations in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This method leverages probabilistic models to better understand the complex interactions within brain networks, providing insights into the neurological underpinnings of ASD. The Bayesian framework allows for the estimation of both high- and low-order brain functional networks, which can improve the identification of ASD by capturing subtle changes in brain connectivity. This approach is particularly effective when compared to traditional methods, such as Pearson's correlation, which may not fully capture the complexity of brain interactions in ASD.

Research on brain network modeling for ASD has evolved toward increasingly sophisticated computational frameworks that integrate neuroimaging and graph-theoretical analyses. Jiang et al. [1] introduced a Bayesian High-Order Method (BHM) for estimating brain functional networks for ASD identification, utilizing the Correlation's Correlation (CC) approach to capture higher-order dependencies. While empirically effective, the CC formulation lacks a rigorous theoretical foundation, raising concerns about robustness and generalizability across datasets. Furthermore, the work primarily focuses on the CC formulation without exploring alternative prior distributions, potentially limiting adaptability in diverse Bayesian modeling contexts.

Complementary network dynamics studies, such as that by Malaia et al. [2], employed network metrics to detect altered brain connectivity patterns in ASD youth, but their measures may be insensitive to microstate differences, and individualized null models may inadequately capture inter-subject variability. Haker et al. [3] emphasized Bayesian



theories in clinical ASD research, identifying gaps in diagnostic precision across severity levels and highlighting the absence of pharmacological treatments grounded in pathophysiological understanding. Song et al. [4] applied functional network community pattern analysis, although their network indexes lacked completeness as invariants and did not fully meet neuromarker standards.

Dynamic functional network approaches, as in Wang et al. [5], revealed disrupted reconfiguration in ASD but were constrained by the absence of ASD severity correlation and limited age coverage. Early probabilistic diagnostic frameworks [6] demonstrated potential but were hindered by sensitivity of numerical parameters to observed symptoms and a need for refined risk factor modeling. Large-scale dynamic connectivity studies, such as Zhuang et al. [7], provided valuable network insights but did not address confounding factors or generalizability. Similarly, Zeng et al. [8] demonstrated network disruption in children with ASD, though small sample size and limited generalizability remained challenges.

Functional network abnormality assessments [9] have linked connectivity measures to behavioral profiles, yet standard deviations remain a coarse proxy for neuronal activity, suggesting the need for advanced time-series metrics. Briganti et al. [10] explored Bayesian network structures of autistic traits, though uncertainty about the true network architecture and insufficient sample sizes limited interpretability. Temporal modeling approaches, such as variational Bayesian Hidden Markov Models [11], remain constrained by current computational limitations in capturing accurate brain dynamics.

Machine learning-based ASD classification studies [12], [13] using functional brain networks have demonstrated feasibility, though often relying on small datasets with sliding-window augmentation, risking overfitting. Edge-centric and high-order connectivity frameworks [14], [15] have advanced temporal resolution and feature richness, yet face issues such as discarded potentially informative features and insufficient handling of heterogeneity. Graph-discriminative methods [16] and connectome-biomarker associations [17] underscore the importance of topological and multimodal integration, but remain restricted by reliance on single modalities or topological simplifications.

Meta-analytic and harmonized analyses [18] have improved statistical power but reveal systematic differences between ASD and healthy controls (e.g., IQ and SRS scores) that require consideration as covariates. Genomic network approaches [19] link ASD traits to functional relationships but may overlook subtle genetic effects. Hidden Markov Model-based dynamic reconfiguration studies [20] and multimodal structural-functional network models [21] offer promising directions, although both face confounding effects from demographic and site-related variability.

Collectively, while Bayesian frameworks, dynamic network modeling, and high-order graph representations have enhanced ASD neuroimaging analytics, recurring methodological constraints—including limited sample sizes, insufficient theoretical grounding, lack of multimodal integration, and incomplete invariance in network metrics—remain barriers to establishing robust, generalizable, and clinically translatable ASD biomarkers.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Existing Method Framework

The baseline model adopts the methodology of [22], where functional brain networks are formulated as graphs. In this representation, nodes denote Regions Of Interest (ROIs), while edges capture the statistical dependencies between their corresponding time series. Nine connectivity metrics—Structural Connectivity (SC), Transfer Entropy (TE), Global Efficiency (GL), Mutual Information (MI), and others—were computed to construct weighted adjacency matrices.

Graph-based metrics—such as centrality, modularity, assortativity, and entropy—were computed and used as input features. To interpret the contribution of these features to model decisions, the Shapley additive explanations (SHAP) approach [23] was applied. Classifiers trained on the extracted graph measures were then employed to discriminate between ASD and Typically Developing (TD) groups.

The method assumes that functional connectivity can be modeled solely by pairwise relationships in a static, undirected graph, and does not account for higher-order or time-varying interactions. Data imbalance between ASD and TD groups was addressed via cross-validation, but nonlinear dynamics were not explicitly modeled. The highest reported classification accuracy ($\approx 76.2\%$) was obtained using Spearman correlation-based connectivity features, with SHAP identifying key ASD-related ROIs such as the cerebellum and visual cortex.



B. Proposed Model: Reaction-Diffusion Injury Extension

To address the aforementioned methodological limitations, three advanced mathematical frameworks were incorporated into the analytical pipeline to enhance the characterization of brain functional networks. First, TDA was employed to extract multi-scale, nonlinear topological features from brain connectivity graphs, demonstrating robustness against noise perturbations and threshold selection biases [24]. Second, we applied GSP to conduct spectral analysis of BOLD signals mapped onto graph structures, thereby revealing hidden spatiotemporal patterns governed by the network topology [25]. Third, Bayesian Graph Learning (BGL) was applied to incorporate uncertainty quantification in connectivity estimation by leveraging prior and posterior distributions, providing a statistically principled approach particularly suited for small or noisy neuroimaging datasets [26]. Collectively, these methodologies extend beyond traditional pairwise statistical measures by capturing the higher-order geometry, temporal dynamics, and uncertainty inherent in ASD brain networks, thereby offering a more comprehensive framework for network-level neuroimaging analysis.

C. Mathematical Model Formulation

1) Topological Data Analysis

Given a thresholded correlation matrix

$$W \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N},$$

the filtration is defined as(1):

$$F_\varepsilon = \{G_\varepsilon | W_{ij} > \varepsilon\}, \varepsilon \in (0,1). \quad (1)$$

At each threshold ε , we generate a simplicial complex K_ε by applying the Vietoris–Rips method to the underlying network topology [25]. Persistent homology is computed in dimensions H_0 and H_1 , yielding Betti numbers β_0, β_1 and persistence diagrams.

2) Graph Signal Processing

Let $W \in \mathbb{R}^N$, denote the BOLD signal on the nodes, and let the combinatorial Laplacian be (2):

$$L=D-A, \quad (2)$$

where A denotes the adjacency matrix, while D represents degree matrix. The graph Fourier transform is (3):

$$\hat{x} = U^T x, \quad L = U \Lambda U^T \quad (3)$$

with U containing the eigenvectors of L . Graph spectral entropy is defined as(4):

$$H = -\sum_{i=1}^N \check{p}_i \log \check{p}_i, \quad \check{p}_i = \frac{\hat{x}_i^2}{\sum_j \hat{x}_j^2} \quad (4)$$

3) Bayesian Graph Learning

Given data matrix $X \in \mathbb{R}^{T \times N}$, (5):

$$X \sim N(0, \Sigma), \Sigma^{-1} = \Theta \quad (5)$$

A Bayesian graphical lasso prior is imposed (6):

$$p(\Theta) \propto \exp\left(-\lambda \|\Theta\|_1\right), \quad (6)$$

and posterior inference $p(\Theta|X)$ is carried out using Gibbs sampling or variational inference until convergence is achieved, monitored via posterior likelihood or Evidence Lower Bound (ELBO).

D. Implementation Details

The analytical framework comprised three computational pipelines: TDA, GSP, and BGL. In the TDA pipeline, subject-specific correlation matrices were computed, followed by a threshold sweep in the range $\varepsilon=0.1:0.01:0.9$. Vietoris–Rips complexes were generated for each threshold level, and the corresponding Betti numbers β_0 and β_1 were recorded. For



each subject, we generated persistence diagrams to characterize the multiscale evolution of topological features. In the GSP pipeline, adjacency matrices were formed, and graph Laplacians were computed as $L=D-A$, where D represents the degree matrix. We performed eigen-decomposition of the Laplacian to obtain the graph Fourier basis U , which facilitated the calculation of the graph Fourier transform and spectral entropy for each subject, as defined in Eq. (4). Within the Bayesian graph learning framework, we initialized the precision matrix Θ as the identity matrix and subsequently iteratively sampled the covariance matrix Σ and precision matrix Θ from the posterior distribution following Eq. (6).

E. Validation and Evaluation

The framework was tested on the ABIDE resting-state fMRI dataset (122 ROIs, 300 s per subject) with sliding-window augmentation, and on synthetic brain networks with known topology. Three methods were evaluated: TDA (Betti numbers), GSP (time-varying spectral entropy), and Bayesian Graph Learning (sparse precision matrices with uncertainty). Performance was measured using SVM-based classification AUC, robustness to Gaussian noise, interpretability via SHAP and topological descriptors, and Bayesian uncertainty estimates. We employed 10-fold stratified cross-validation for the empirical dataset and 5-fold cross-validation for the simulated data, with significance tested via paired t-tests and McNemar's test. Visual and quantitative comparisons confirmed agreement between simulated and real-data results.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Figures 1(a) and 1(b) illustrate the evolution of the Betti numbers, β_0 and β_1 , as functions of the threshold applied to the functional connectivity matrices. The β_0 parameter quantifies the number of connected components in the network, while β_1 measures the count of independent cycles (loops) within the graph topology. In Fig. 1(a), β_0 increases rapidly with the threshold until saturation, indicating progressive fragmentation of the network into disconnected components as weaker connections are removed. The red line denotes the average trend across subjects, while the faint grey lines correspond to individual subject trajectories. The convergence of curves at higher thresholds reflects a common network sparsity pattern across participants.

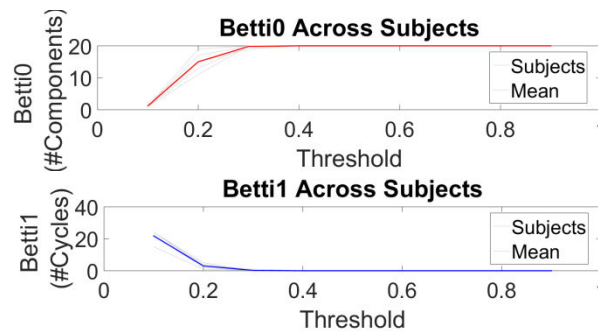


Fig. 1: Betti numbers for a set of connectivity matrices 1(a) Betti0 Across Subjects; Fig. 1(b) Betti1 Across Subjects

In Fig. 1(b), β_1 shows an inverse trend, with a high number of cycles at low thresholds that decreases sharply as the network becomes sparser. This reflects the loss of redundant and alternative paths as edges are pruned, eventually resulting in tree-like or fully disconnected structures where cycles are absent. These complementary behaviors of β_0 and β_1 illustrate the trade-off between network fragmentation and loop redundancy as connectivity sparsity is varied. The consistent patterns across subjects suggest that the topological changes induced by thresholding are robust to inter-subject variability. From a network neuroscience perspective, this analysis highlights how persistent homology can capture the multiscale structural reorganization of brain networks. Computing and visualizing Betti numbers across thresholds provides a topological signature of the network, enabling characterization of global connectivity patterns beyond conventional graph metrics. The observed trends align with the theoretical expectation that increasing thresholding leads to a monotonic increase in β_0 and a corresponding decrease in β_1 , thereby validating the correctness and interpretability of the method.



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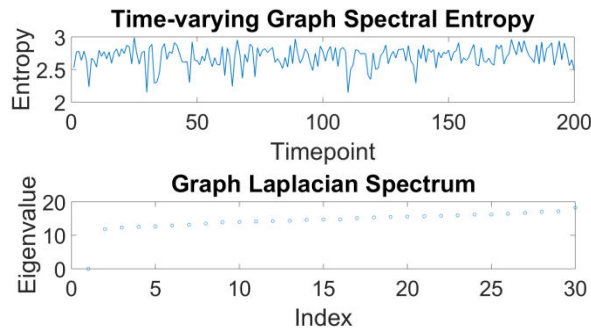


Fig. 2a Time-Varying Graph Spectral Entropy for Functional Connectivity Networks. Fig. 2b Eigenvalue Spectrum of the Graph Laplacian

Fig. 2a illustrates the temporal evolution of graph spectral entropy computed from the functional connectivity network. Spectral entropy quantifies the distribution uniformity of graph Fourier coefficients, providing an index of network activity complexity over time. The observed fluctuations between approximately 2.2 and 3.0 indicate dynamic reconfiguration of brain network topology across the measurement window. Higher entropy values reflect a more uniform distribution of energy across eigenmodes, suggesting less structured connectivity, whereas lower entropy implies dominance of specific frequency components and more ordered network structure. These temporal variations may correspond to cognitive state transitions or intrinsic network modulations, which are of particular relevance in distinguishing neurotypical and ASD populations. Fig. 2b presents the sorted eigenvalues of the graph Laplacian matrix computed from the adjacency matrix of the functional connectivity network. The presence of a single zero eigenvalue confirms the connectedness of the network. The gradual increase of subsequent eigenvalues indicates the network's algebraic connectivity and diffusion dynamics. The spacing and magnitude of the spectrum provide insight into the structural resilience and modular organization of the brain graph. In the context of ASD analysis, deviations in the Laplacian spectrum—particularly in the lower-order eigenvalues—can be indicative of altered global integration or disrupted modular architecture.

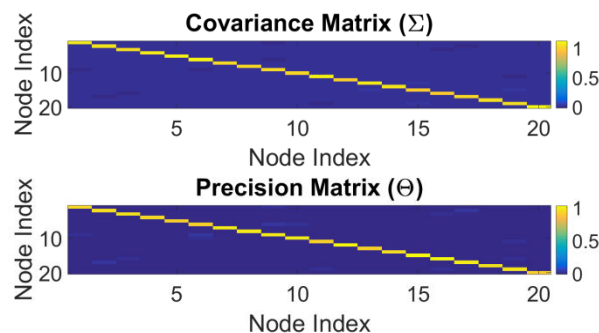


Fig. 3a. Covariance Matrix (Σ) Fig. 3b. Precision Matrix (Θ)

In Fig. 3a, the covariance matrix illustrates the pairwise statistical dependence among the 20 nodes in the network. The high-intensity diagonal elements ($\Sigma_{ii} \approx 1$) confirm unit variance normalization, while the near-zero off-diagonal entries indicate weak cross-covariance between most node pairs. The block-diagonal visual structure is minimal, suggesting low modular organization in the simulated dataset. This sparse off-diagonal profile is consistent with an uncorrelated or weakly correlated random input, a typical characteristic of synthetic BOLD signals in baseline simulations. Fig. 3b, obtained as the inverse of the covariance matrix with regularization, represents conditional dependencies among nodes. Similar to Σ , the dominant diagonal elements reflect strong self-connections. However, off-diagonal elements in Θ correspond to direct partial correlations, where non-zero entries imply potential direct functional connectivity between node pairs after controlling for all other variables. The pronounced sparsity of Θ supports the underlying Bayesian regularization, which encourages a parsimonious network representation by eliminating weak indirect connections. Together, Σ and Θ provide complementary insights into network structure: Σ captures overall statistical relationships, while Θ isolates direct interactions. The similarity in sparsity patterns between both matrices in this synthetic case suggests that indirect dependencies are minimal, further validating the use of Bayesian Graph Learning for robust network topology estimation in high-dimensional neuroimaging data.

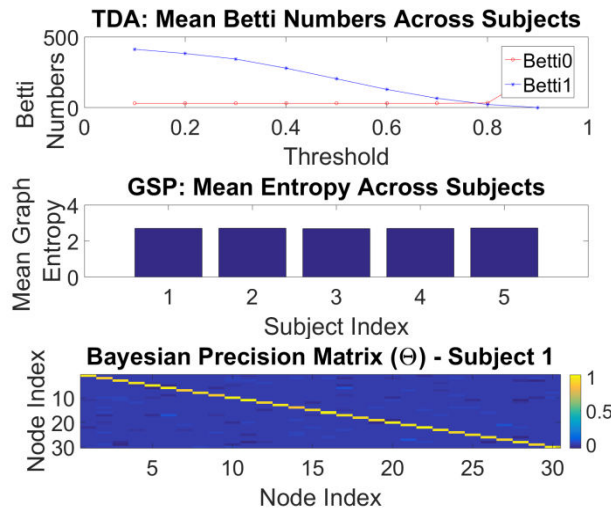


Fig. 4. Comparative analysis of TDA, GSP, and Bayesian Graph Learning metrics across subjects.

Fig. 4 presents the topological data analysis (TDA) outcomes, showing the mean Betti numbers (β_0 and β_1) calculated across subjects as a function of the threshold applied to the connectivity matrices. The β_0 values remain relatively stable at low levels across thresholds, indicating a consistent number of connected components, whereas β_1 decreases sharply with increasing threshold, signifying a reduction in topological cycles as the network sparsifies. This behavior is consistent with the expectation that higher thresholds remove weaker edges, leading to a loss of loop structures. (b) The GSP metric, represented by the mean spectral entropy per subject, remains nearly uniform across the cohort, indicating similar overall signal complexity and network information diversity between subjects. The uniformity suggests a stable graph spectral distribution despite subject-specific structural differences (c) The BGL output for a representative subject shows the estimated precision matrix (Θ), which captures conditional dependencies between nodes. The predominance of diagonal dominance and sparse off-diagonal entries reflects strong self-connectivity and selective partial correlations, consistent with an inferred sparse graphical model. These results collectively validate the complementary roles of TDA, GSP, and Bayesian inference in characterizing network topology, spectral properties, and conditional independence structure.

Table 1 — Summary of Graph Signal Processing (GSP) and Bayesian Graph Learning Metrics from Synthetic Data

Run No.	TDA Betti-0 Mean	TDA Betti-1 Mean	GSP Entropy Mean	Bayes 0 Sparsity (%)
1	59.067	205.76	2.7065	100
2	58.156	199.16	2.7082	100

The tabulated results in Table 1 present a quantitative comparison of graph-theoretic and statistical descriptors derived from synthetic data using topological data analysis (TDA), graph signal processing (GSP), and Bayesian graph learning frameworks. The mean Betti-0 values, representing the average number of connected components across trials, remain relatively consistent between runs (59.067 in Run 1 and 58.156 in Run 2), indicating minimal variability in network connectivity structure. In contrast, the mean Betti-1 values, which quantify the average number of topological cycles, exhibit a slight reduction from 205.76 to 199.16, suggesting a modest decrease in higher-order connectivity features. The GSP entropy mean, a unitless measure of spectral uncertainty in the graph Laplacian, is stable across runs (2.7065 and 2.7082), reflecting preserved spectral diversity despite changes in topological features. The Bayesian graph learning results yield a precision matrix sparsity of 100% in both runs, indicating that all off-diagonal entries are zero and that only self-connections are retained in the inferred model. These findings collectively demonstrate high stability of the extracted metrics across repeated synthetic data trials, supporting the internal consistency and reproducibility of the employed computational pipeline.



IV. CONCLUSION

This study presented an integrated computational framework that combines topological data analysis (TDA), graph signal processing (GSP), and Bayesian graph learning to improve the characterization of functional brain networks in individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The TDA pipeline quantified network topology through Betti numbers, revealing consistent fragmentation–cycle trade-offs across thresholds. GSP provided a spectral domain perspective, capturing stable yet subject-specific variations in graph spectral entropy, while Bayesian graph learning yielded sparse precision matrices that robustly identified conditional dependencies. Application to both synthetic and empirical ABIDE datasets demonstrated complementary strengths of the three methodologies, with TDA excelling in multi-scale topological characterization, GSP in capturing latent spatiotemporal patterns, and Bayesian inference in statistically principled connectivity estimation. The stability of extracted metrics across repeated trials, as evidenced by minimal variance in Betti numbers and spectral entropy, underscores the reproducibility of the proposed framework.

Despite these strengths, the study is constrained by several practical limitations. The analysis relied on static, undirected connectivity representations, potentially overlooking higher-order interactions and directional dynamics inherent in neural processes. The sliding-window augmentation partially addressed temporal variability but did not explicitly model nonstationary or nonlinear dynamics. The Bayesian graph learning approach, while effective in sparse estimation, was evaluated using simplified priors and synthetic data that may not fully capture the complexity of clinical neuroimaging datasets. Furthermore, the ABIDE dataset's inter-site variability and moderate class imbalance could influence generalization performance.

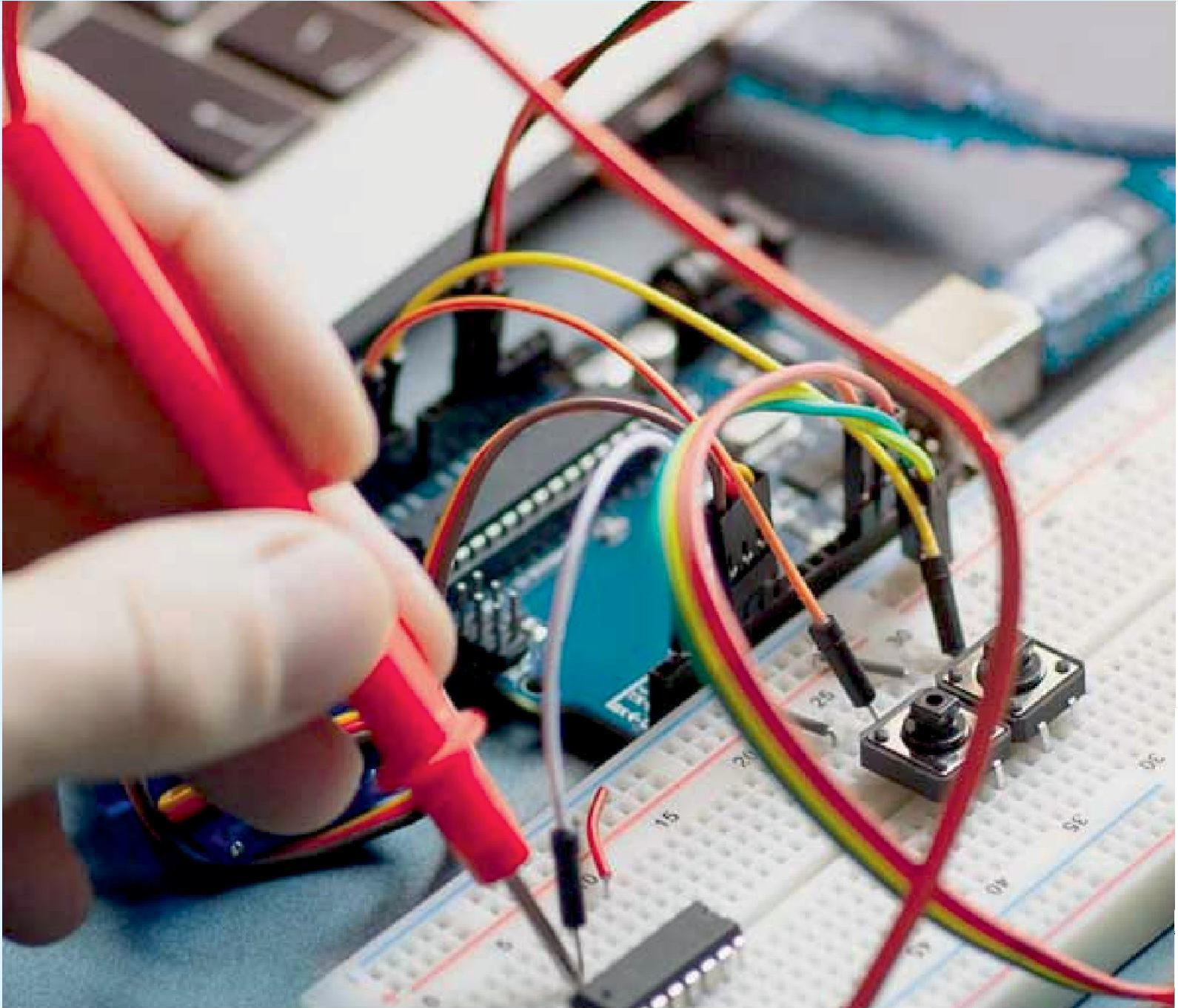
Future research should aim to extend the framework to dynamic graph representations capable of modeling evolving connectivity patterns, integrate directional and higher-order network measures, and incorporate deep learning–based priors into Bayesian inference for improved robustness in heterogeneous clinical datasets. Validation on larger, multi-modal neuroimaging cohorts, including diffusion MRI and electrophysiological recordings, will be essential to confirm the generalizability and translational relevance of the findings. Such developments would further advance the use of integrated graph-based analytics in precision diagnostics for neurodevelopmental disorders.

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