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# Making sense of nonsense: A qualitative investigation of how brainrot content serves generation Z's media needs

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ABSTRACT

Brainrot refers to low-quality content saturating digital spaces and the cognitive deterioration resulting from consuming it. Through semi-structured interviews with 24 participants aged 13-26, this study examines the functions that brainrot serves for Gen Z. Users report that brainrot facilitates aesthetic experience through deliberate absurdity, enables resistance to attention economy exploitation, supports generational in-group formation, and provides escapism from digital oversaturation. Importantly, the findings suggest that social media infrastructure, coupled with the spread of GenAI tools, induce mental states of brainrot which precede and shape content creation, rather than consumption of brainrot content causing cognitive decline. Gen Z uses brainrot as a subversive strategy to reclaim agency within oversaturated media environments, challenging deficit-based framings of digital youth culture. This study therefore introduces the concept of *anti-gratification* - a previously untheorized media need where users actively seek content that rejects productivity and meaning-making.

## 1. Introduction

Youth media innovation is frequently accompanied by technopanics - from comics in the 1950s, television in the 1970s, video-games in the 1990s and the internet in the early 2000s (Drotner, 1999; Wartella, 2008). Moral authorities often criticize new media forms, warning about their impact on young minds (Orben, 2020). However, it is now the affected generation itself, Gen Z, who creates and consumes the very content they critique by labeling it "brainrot" (Kukreja et al., 2025). Selected as Oxford's Word of the Year for 2024, the term refers to (1) the flood of low-quality content saturating digital spaces and (2) the perceived cognitive deterioration resulting from consuming this non-challenging material (Oxford University Press, 2024). Its announcement triggered media alarm, with brainrot being framed as a danger to user health and "the problem of the century" (Yazgan, 2025). This warning is not entirely new. Two centuries ago, Henry Thoreau critiqued society's preference for simplistic thinking over complex ideas (McPherson, 2025; Thoreau, 1995). The word brainrot originated in his book "Walden", which describes what happens to minds when curiosity instincts are suppressed (Thoreau, 1995). His diagnosis finds its modern equivalent in today's digital habits.

Brainrot content is characterized by deliberate absurdity and surreal AI-generated aesthetics. Examples include viral videos featuring anthropomorphized objects with descriptive nomenclature (e.g., "Ballerina Cappuccina" - a dancing cappuccino, or "Chimpanzini Bananini" - a chimpanzee-banana hybrid), the "Skibidi Toilet" series depicting singing toilets, and AI-generated religious imagery such as Jesus composed entirely of pink shrimp (Placido, 2024). These videos typically feature fast-paced editing, repetitive audio loops, and intentionally low-effort production. The content often employs recursive self-reference, where "the joke is that there is no joke," creating a meta-entertainment framework that subverts traditional narrative expectations (see section 4.1.2 for detailed participant descriptions). Importantly, low-quality and AI-generated content overlap, but are not equivalent: not all low-quality content is AI-generated, and not all AI-generated content is low-quality. The New York Times noted that attempting to define brainrot "will most likely make you seem very uncool" (Gupta, 2025); nonetheless, for the purposes of this study, we define "brainrot content" as a genre of deliberately low-effort, absurd short-form videos. While this often includes AI-generated material, the term is used here to capture the cultural phenomenon and user practices around such content more broadly, rather than to imply that all brainrot is produced by generative AI.

Adolescents engage with virtual spaces more intensively than ever

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with the percentage of teenagers who "almost never" read literature risen from 15% in the 1980s to 50% in 2024 (Burn-Murdoch, 2025; Rothwell, 2023). While concerns about declining literacy rates persist, scholars debate whether these patterns indicate a complete shift to "post-literate culture" or rather a transformation in how textual and visual media are integrated in digital environments (O'Connor, 2024). The generation that distinctively embodies this shift is Gen Z, which has faced unprecedented technological exposure during their upbringing (Prensky, 2001). This study examines brainrot within this evolving media landscape without presuming a categorical rejection of text-based engagement.

Since its launch to the public in 2022, generative AI (GenAI) further complicates this issue as it allows users to outsource core cognitive activities like reading, writing, and calculating, challenging the status of these skills as stable cultural techniques. It also enabled instantaneous content creation, leading to a saturation of digital spaces with surreal imagery that may have passed as contemporary art just a few years ago (Placido, 2024).

Several studies have examined correlations between excessive social media use and changes in brain regions responsible for attention, decision-making, and emotional regulation, with some research identifying behavioral patterns including reduced memory and diminished life satisfaction (Chiossi et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2025; Solly et al., 2022). This reflects a tragedy of the commons scenario where a limited resource, individual attention is depleted at societal cost (Handfield, 2024; Heitmayer, 2024; Özpence, 2024), which then manifests, for example, in declining educational outcomes across high-income countries (Burn-Murdoch, 2025; Yilmaz & Aktürk, 2025).

While this work highlights the societal burden of digital overexposure, little is known about the cultural and psychological functions that brainrot content might fulfil on an individual level. In particular, there is a lack of research on why Gen Z engages with this form of media and what role it plays in their digital routines. This paper addresses this gap through qualitative interviews with 24 Gen Z participants aged 13-26, examining their lived experiences with brainrot content. Our analysis reveals that brainrot serves multiple functions including in-group formation, resistance to attention economy exploitation, and escapism, while simultaneously creating tensions between perceived agency and loss of control. These findings have implications for HCI research on designing healthier social media platforms, understanding algorithmic content curation, and developing interventions that respect youth agency while addressing structural platform design issues.

This study contributes to HCI literature by: (1) providing empirical evidence of how platform design and algorithmic curation shape user behavior and content consumption patterns, (2) introducing the concept of "anti-gratification" as a novel framework for understanding user motivations in attention-economy contexts, (3) offering design implications for social media platforms that balance user agency with well-being, and (4) demonstrating how qualitative methods can capture nuanced youth perspectives often missing from quantitative studies of technology use.

## 2. Theoretical background

This section establishes the theoretical foundation for examining brainrot as a media phenomenon. We begin with Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory as our primary analytical framework (Blumer & Katz, 1974; Katz et al., 1973) and then examine how contemporary platform capitalism reshapes the information environment in which media needs are formed and satisfied. Finally, we position brainrot within this evolving media landscape, combining peer-reviewed sources with grey literature such as newspaper articles to capture the development of the phenomenon and early stage research (Pappas & Williams, 2011).

### 2.1. Uses and gratifications theory: from active selection to constrained agency

Uses and Gratifications theory posits that users actively select media to satisfy pre-existing psychological needs (Blumer & Katz, 1974). (Katz, Haas, and Gurevitch, 1973) identified five fundamental needs that media consumption fulfills: cognitive needs (acquiring information and understanding), affective needs (emotional and aesthetic experiences), personal integrative needs (self-confidence and status), social integrative needs (connection with others), and tension release needs (escape and diversion). This framework positions audiences as active agents who evaluate media options and choose those most likely to achieve their goals.

Media engagement, from the printing press to early internet platforms, was characterized by proactive seeking out of information (Eisenstein, 1980; Postman, 1985). However, contemporary digital environments challenge the foundational assumptions of U&G theory in three critical ways: First, algorithmically-driven platforms increasingly push content to users rather than users pulling content, often bypassing conscious selection (Rixen et al., 2023). Second, platform design creates cognitive states that may generate new media needs rather than simply satisfying pre-existing ones (Gong & Yang, 2024). Third, infinite scroll interfaces and autoplay functionality sustain consumption beyond the point of need satisfaction, suggesting that platforms may manufacture demand as much as fulfill it.

These shifts raise fundamental questions about user agency within attention economies. While U&G theory assumes users bring needs to media encounters and exercise choice in satisfying them, platform capitalism enables a double extraction, simultaneously harvesting user attention for profit and repurposing engagement data to construct data-driven user profiles (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Srnicek, 2017). Building on Marx's analysis of commodified social relations (Marx, 1867), scholars have identified attention itself as a commodity in digital markets (Fuchs, 2012; Heitmayer, 2025a; Smythe, 1977). When platform infrastructure shapes the cognitive conditions in which media choices occur, user agency becomes constrained in ways classical U&G theory does not fully account for.

### 2.2. Platform capitalism and the transformation of usage patterns

The commercialization of information fundamentally altered media ecosystems from pull-based information seeking to push-based content delivery, where algorithmically curated feeds maximize engagement (Easter, 2021; Rixen et al., 2023).

Platform capitalism enables this transformation by restructuring how content achieves visibility. Information hierarchies no longer privilege importance but rather optimize for attention capture (Lischka & Garz, 2023). As engagement-driven business models fuel high-volume content production, creators compete for user attention to remain visible (Davenport & Beck, 2001; McKinsey & Company, 2025). This competition manifests as a tragedy of the commons where individual attention, a limited cognitive resource, becomes depleted at societal cost (Handfield, 2024; Heitmayer, 2025a).

These dynamics create environments where passive consumption becomes increasingly likely. Early criticism has noted the potential of the culture industry for societal deception, audience distraction, illusion of choice, and the suppression of critical engagement with social and political realities (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2015). Infinite feeds and algorithmic recommendation systems have been shown to make users more susceptible to biases and manipulation (Moravec et al., 2020), and businesses leverage viral trends and pay for attention capture (Theodorakopoulos et al., 2025). The growing information volume leads to content simplification and pre-processing, embedding creator assumptions and interests into the information architecture itself (Germano, 2008).

Yet, Hall (1981) highlighted popular culture as a space for

participation, negotiation, and even resistance. Contemporary negotiation occurs within algorithmically structured environments that privilege visibility and cultural reuse, giving rise to remix culture (Lessig, 2008). Jenkins (2006) describes such remixes as convergence points where producer and consumer roles overlap, allowing audiences to participate in determining cultural significance. One prominent form of contemporary participation are memes: they are cultural units that replicate through imitation, competing for attention and memory following evolutionary principles (Dawkins, 1976; Ermakov & Ermakov, 2021). Online, this process is accelerated through the sharing and remixing of content, and commonly manifests as humorous 'viral videos' that spread across digital platforms (Ford et al., 2021).

This positions contemporary media use as occurring at the intersection of structural constraint and participatory possibility. Users operate within choice architectures designed to maximize engagement, yet they simultaneously negotiate, appropriate, and subvert these structures through creative practice. Understanding media phenomena in this context requires attending to both the constraints platforms impose and the agency users exercise within those constraints.

### 2.3. Positioning brainrot within uses & gratifications theory

Within the landscape of platform capitalism and participatory culture described above, brainrot presents three challenges for traditional U&G theory. First, as established in the introduction, brainrot refers to a genre of low-quality social media content and a cognitive state that arises from the consumption of this content (Owens, 2025; Oxford University Press, 2024). This dual nature blurs both boundary and directionality between need and need satisfaction, i.e., does the need precede content selection, or does platform infrastructure create the cognitive conditions that generate new needs? Moreover, brainrot's virality is sustained by algorithms that amplify attention-capturing content (Holtermann, 2025). This raises questions about whether engagement reflects active user choice or passive exposure to algorithmically surfaced content.

Second, brainrot content is unserious and cognitively or developmentally unbeneficial, fostering intentionally non-productive engagement (Owens, 2025). Media coverage portrays brainrot predominantly negatively, as harmful to mental health and cognitive function (Rufo, 2024; Stibi, 2025). Initial findings support concerns about the brain's preference for fast, surface-level exposure (Sage, 2025) and an associated cognitive decline (Yousef et al., 2025). Studies identify correlations between excessive social media use and changes in brain regions governing attention, decision-making, and emotional regulation, with behavioral patterns including reduced memory and diminished life satisfaction (Chiossi et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2025; Solly et al., 2022). Yet, this pathological framing coexists with brainrot's popularity with millions of posts under associated hashtags (Ofcom, 2025; Roy, 2024). This disconnect between deficit-based media and research framings, and active user engagement suggests current theoretical frameworks may not capture why users find brainrot appealing, or challenge the assumption that users seek content that provides something valuable in the first place.

Third, brainrot's potential for manipulation adds further complexity. The genre adapts cultural aesthetics by blending clichés with AI-generated accents, creating geographically coded material such as *Italian brainrot* (Gupta, 2025; Hunt, 2025). This particular subgenre raised questions as content featuring simulated bombing attacks in Gaza emerged, making salient how satirical formats can be weaponized for political messaging (Stibi, 2025). Brainrot thus blurs boundaries between parody and reality for Gen Z adolescents whose media literacy skills are still developing (Leshem, 2016; Pennycook et al., 2018). Such examples raise questions about whether users engage with brainrot despite these risks, unaware of them, or through some other relationship between agency and structural influence not well theorized in classical U&G approaches.

### 2.4. Structural influences on agency for Gen Z

GenAI is reshaping many aspects of life into uncertain directions (OpenAI, 2025; Polyportis, 2024; Sun et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2022) and exerts pressure on the social, political, and economic forces that impact a generation's values, lifestyles, and work attitudes (Parry & Urwin, 2011). For Gen Z, the technological zeitgeist is particularly formative as digital systems structure their cultural frameworks, fears, and goals (Atay, 2024).

Gen Z exhibits shorter attention spans than previous generations (Diz, 2021; Mahapatra et al., 2022), spending approximately 3 h daily on social media. Nearly half report being online "almost constantly" and finding it harder to concentrate on movies because of a desire to look at their phones (Faverio et al., 2025; Ofcom, 2025; Statista, 2024). Togetherness for Gen Z increasingly involves *simultaneous play*, engaging with different digital activities while co-present (Fisu et al., 2025).

Favoring digital communication over face-to-face contact can deteriorate conversational skills including active listening and conflict resolution (Visser & Terblanche, 2025), which are critically important in geopolitically volatile contexts (Murphy, 2020). Gen Z thus exhibits heightened awareness of global crises, feels overwhelmed by them, and reports growing collective unease while lacking adequate support systems (Arora et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2025). Digitalization and globalization intensify exposure to wars, climate disruptions, and economic instability, with social media making these events less abstract and more emotionally charged (Chu et al., 2024). Nearly 50% of adolescents now believe social media harms people their age, up from 32% in 2022 (Faverio et al., 2025).

Despite growing awareness of mental health downsides, users appear unable to break their online habits. Digital consumption is deeply embedded in daily routines, forming a digital habitus reinforced through social and technological structures that normalize distraction (Aagaard, 2021; Heitmayer, 2021, 2022; Heitmayer & Lahlou, 2021; Oulasvirta et al., 2012). As Culkin, (1967) observed, "we shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us." Technology thus shapes behavior by reinforcing norms, reflecting Foucault's (1976) concept of biopower, where power operates through the management of bodies. In the context of social media, automatic use establishes compulsive behaviors like doom scrolling, the consumption of overwhelming content beyond usefulness (Brown & Brooks, 2025; Buchanan et al., 2021; Wood & Rünger, 2016). Such patterns shrink cognitive flexibility, weaken emotional regulation, and create dependency loops which are difficult to break (Heitmayer, 2021, 2025b; Çekiç et al., 2024).

If Gen Z media use occurs within constraints created by platform design, we cannot simply apply U&G theory as though users freely select from equivalent options. Instead, we must examine how gratifications function within structurally constrained environments where the relationship between user agency and platform infrastructure remains contested.

### 2.5. Research gap and study objectives

Previous research conceptualizes brainrot as a behavioral phenomenon quantified through cognitive load, fatigue, emulation, and depersonalization (Gan et al., 2025; Yilmaz & Aktürk, 2025). Studies link brainrot to emotional desensitization, negative self-concept, and impaired executive functioning (Lakilaki, 2025; Yousef et al., 2025). This has prompted calls for educational and regulatory support, and interventions (Bhagwath, 2025; Kukreja et al., 2025; Yazgan, 2025).

Prior HCI research extensively documents problematic social media usage patterns (Arness & Ollis, 2023), attention fragmentation (Chiossi et al., 2023), and algorithmic influence on user behavior (Rixen et al., 2023). However, this literature predominantly frames youth engagement through deficit lenses such as addiction, distraction, or manipulation, without exploring how young users themselves understand and actively negotiate their social media use.

Studies of meme culture and participatory media (Ford et al., 2021; Jenkins, 2006) provide frameworks for understanding user-generated content but predate the AI-generated aesthetics characterizing brainrot. U&G theory assumes users seek content fulfilling identifiable needs, but brainrot's intentional rejection of meaning challenges this framework. While Owens (2025) offers important theoretical grounding by conceptualizing brainrot as a "genre of participation," empirical investigations of Gen Z's lived experiences remain scarce.

This study addresses this gap by centering youth voices and examining what brainrot means to those engaging with it most actively. By investigating the functions brainrot serves from participants' perspectives, we contribute a more nuanced understanding of how platform design, algorithmic curation, and generative AI intersect with user agency and wellbeing. Specifically, we ask: **What functions does brainrot serve for Gen Z?**

This question allows us to examine whether brainrot represents entirely new forms of media gratification, extensions of existing U&G categories under novel conditions, or evidence that platform capitalism has fundamentally altered the relationship between users, needs, and media that U&G theory was developed to explain.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory design to center Gen Z's experiences of brainrot as a digital cultural phenomenon. An inductive approach was chosen, given that brainrot is an emerging, under-theorized concept circulating primarily in youth-dominated digital subcultures. The study operates within a constructivist paradigm, recognizing reality as socially constructed and open to multiple interpretations. While the term brainrot may carry pathologizing connotations, participants were invited to define its meaning on their own terms. This avoids *unacknowledged normativity* - the tendency to treat negatively framed concepts as empirically neutral rather than recognizing their embedded value judgments (Aagaard, 2025).

### 3.2. Data collection and analysis

Ethical approval was granted from the London School of Economics psychology ethics committee and a police background check to work with minors was obtained. Informed consent was sought from participants aged 18 and over prior to data collection. Participants under 18 required parental consent and provided informed assent. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty or explanation. This right was emphasized in the consent forms and verbally before each interview. Interviews were audio-recorded with explicit consent. Participants were assigned numerical identifiers to protect their identities, and any identifying information was removed from the transcripts.

Participants residing in Germany and the United Kingdom aged 13 to 26 who used at least one social media account actively and were familiar with the term brainrot or able to bring examples of content they associated with the concept were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews (median age 18.5 years, 41.7% of participants (n = 10) were underage; 58.3% female and 41.7% male). Initial participants were recruited through social media and personal contacts. During the interviews, participants were asked who they typically share brainrot content with, which led to the recruitment of additional participants via snowball sampling. Participants were asked to bring an example of what brainrot means to them and to reflect on the phenomenon prior to the interview. All participants reported encountering brainrot content regularly in their feeds, though consumption patterns varied from occasional viewing to dedicated seeking-out of such content. To ensure a shared understanding of the phenomenon under study and to operationalize AI-generated brainrot content, all participants were shown a video from the "Skibidi toilet" series (Gerasimov, 2023) as an example of "brainrot" online prior to the interview, which served as a common reference point throughout the interview process. While systematic age-group analysis was beyond this study's scope, preliminary observations suggested potential developmental differences. Underage participants tended toward shorter interview durations and were more likely to reference transgressive content (discussed further in Section 4.1.3). Adult participants more frequently articulated meta-reflections on their consumption patterns and expressed concerns about younger users, potentially reflecting both developmental maturation and temporal distance from early adolescent experiences with social media. Future research should systematically examine how brainrot engagement varies across developmental stages.

Interviews were conducted between June 15th and July 1st, 2025. Data saturation was reached after 24 interviews (Saunders et al., 2018). Interviews lasted 54min on average (ranging from 30 to 90min) and were conducted online and in person based on participant preference. Interviews were conducted in English and German; German transcripts were translated verbatim. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Christou, 2022). Two researchers were involved in the coding process. After initial independent coding, the lead researcher coded the transcripts, consulting with the co-author on ambiguous passages. Those passages were discussed iteratively between both researchers until consensus was reached. Data was clustered manually, with the semi-structured interview guide providing orientation for this process. After familiarization with the data, initial codes were formed and arranged into potential themes. The lead researcher manually highlighted and grouped thematically related segments across transcripts to support the development of potential themes. Subsequently, MAXQDA was used to support the organization and ordering of themes rather than for automated coding. Following Attride-Stirling's thematic network framework, a thematic map was developed, moving from organizing themes to basic codes (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

### 3.3. Reflexivity

Reflexivity about recognizing and leveraging researcher subjectivity is a productive part of the qualitative research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Being in my twenties, I, the lead researcher, navigate similar online environments and life stages as my participants, positioning me within what could be considered an insider-outsider dynamic. This proximity helped build trust and fostered openness during interviews, as participants often assumed shared cultural knowledge. Although, shared experience does not imply neutrality, it enabled me to combine insider empathy with analytical distance while remaining alert to how my positioning shaped data collection.

My familiarity with some brainrot content felt natural, but encountering unfamiliar examples sometimes left me feeling unprepared, as if I should have known more. Rather than viewing these gaps as limitations, they became analytically productive moments. When I did not recognize content, participants were compelled to explain more thoroughly, revealing assumptions about generational knowledge and highlighting how even minor differences in content exposure can create distance within seemingly homogeneous digital communities. These moments of unfamiliarity also demonstrated the rapid cultural turnover in digital spaces. When I shared my own examples, they were sometimes labeled as "old", signaling how quickly cultural references age online.

I began this research with ambivalence toward brainrot specifically and social media generally. Having grown up with smartphones and experiencing my own struggles with compulsive checking and attention fragmentation, I recognize both the connectivity these technologies enable and the cognitive costs they impose. My initial expectation was that participants would frame brainrot primarily negatively - as time-wasting or harmful. I was surprised by the nuance participants brought: their simultaneous criticism and embrace of brainrot, their awareness of manipulation alongside their continued engagement, and

their articulation of genuine functions this content serves. This required me to interrogate my own deficit-oriented assumptions about "low-quality" content and remain open to participants' more complex framings.

I also entered this research concerned about technology's role in attention fragmentation and worried about uncritical celebration of digital culture. These beliefs likely influenced my sensitivity to participants' expressions of concern and loss of control. However, they also risked causing me to overlook or minimize participants' expressions of agency, creativity, and community-building through brainrot. Regular reflexive journaling and peer debriefing helped me notice when my interpretations were skewing toward pathologizing rather than understanding participants' perspectives on their own terms.

Conversations with underage participants tended to be shorter, raising questions about whether this reflected attention patterns shaped by online habits, developmental factors, or the power dynamics inherent in the research relationship. Despite my relatively small age gap with participants, younger interviewees may have still perceived me as an authority figure, potentially constraining their responses. Yet participants demonstrated reflection when given appropriate scaffolding, challenging assumptions about digital natives' capacity for introspection.

## 4. Findings

The thematic network reveals four primary themes through which participants understand and engage with brainrot: (1) conceptualizations of the phenomenon itself, including its structural preconditions and aesthetic characteristics; (2) initial motivations for engaging with brainrot content; (3) ongoing gratifications that sustain engagement; and (4) perceived effects and consequences. Across themes, participants expressed profound ambivalence, simultaneously critiquing and enjoying brainrot, recognizing its manipulative elements while valuing its functions, and expressing concern about effects while continuing engagement. This ambivalence, rather than representing confusion or contradiction, reflects participants' sophisticated navigation of an attention economy they feel trapped within yet resistant toward. The following sections elaborate each organizing theme and its constituent basic themes.

The thematic network consists of eleven basic themes, grouped into four organizing themes, which converge into the global theme (Fig. 1). Participants discussed (1) what brainrot meant for them and (4) its effects and consequences. While participants report increasingly habitual and passive engagement, participants still reported (2) initial motivations and uses as well as (3) continued gratifications that align with U&G theory (Blumer & Katz, 1974).

### 4.1. Conceptualizing the brainrot phenomenon

To understand brainrot's functions, the analysis establishes the genres' foundational conditions before examining its defining characteristics. Hence, the first basic theme begins with the technological and cultural preconditions that enabled brainrot's emergence and then analyzes its core characteristics and aesthetic properties.

#### 4.1.1. Structural preconditions: cognitive state and GenAI

GenAI democratizes content production. It has become "*so accessible that it's the key tool to even make these brainrot videos in the first place*" (P9). AI-generated videos introduce surreal aesthetics that diverge from man-made media and reshape the format of online content. Additionally, it generates an information surplus which intensifies competition for user attention regarding where, how, and for how long they focus.

> *"Everyone gets a brainrot feeling after scrolling long enough. You're chronically online, which makes you watch whatever, what you see is not a priority anymore. And no one can sit through a movie, yet binge brainrot*

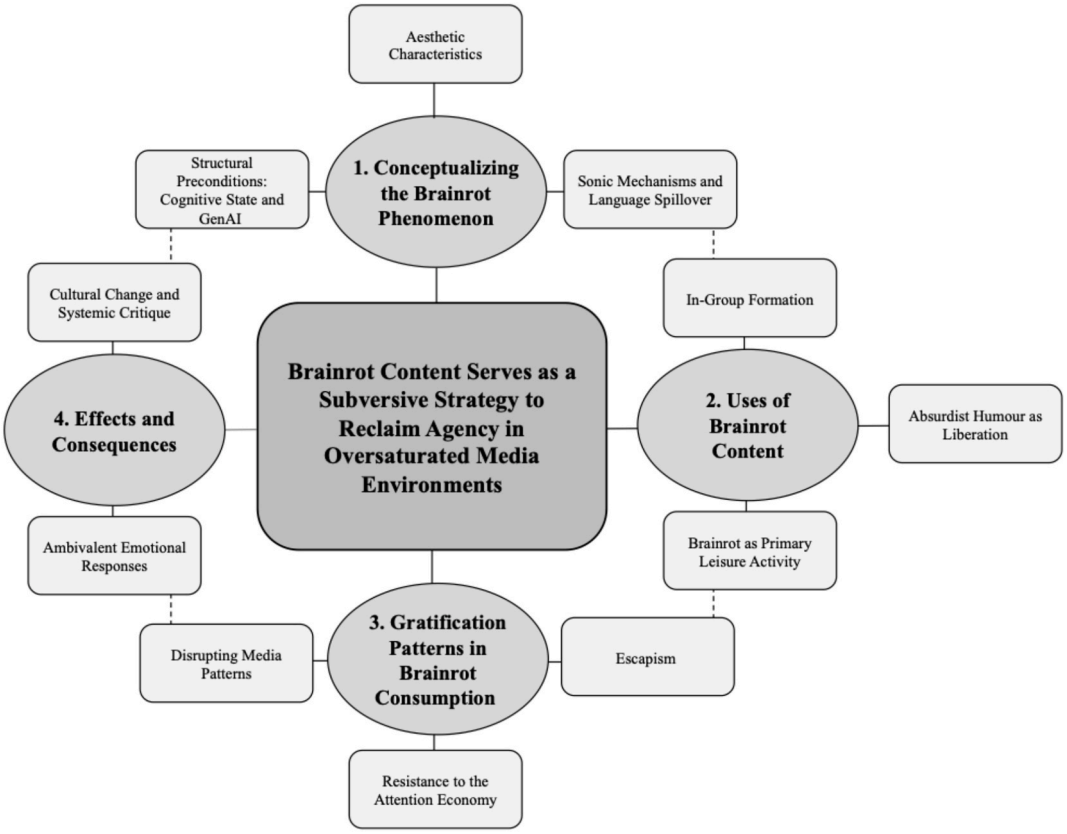


**Fig. 1.** Thematic network.

*for hours. It's the iPad kid effect, having stimulation but intensively"*. (P5)

Scrolling emerges as a habitual pattern that constitutes an activity in itself. Brainrot feeds into this automatic response, where "*you just go on autopilot, it's not like you're getting anything from the videos your seeing*" (P17). At the same time, participants feel overwhelmed by the overabundance of content they encounter and "*only scroll for the sake of scrolling and then become overstimulated, brainrotted*" (P10). As a result, brainrot must be understood as a cognitive state which is shaped by prolonged digital exposure and hyperavailability via smartphones. The mental state described by participants existed before the brainrot genre appeared in online feeds. Brainrot content is consequential, resulting from this state of mind.

#### 4.1.2. Aesthetic characteristics

Brainrot content has distinctive aesthetic properties that align with participants' preference for absurdist media. It resembles "*a dream that's completely crazy and doesn't make sense*" (P17), characterized by "*surreal characters, a crocodile as a bomber plane, or like a camel with a fridge, or a dancer as a cappuccino*" (P6). This genre of fast-paced, overstimulating social media content, primarily produced by Gen Z audiences, employs deliberately absurd visual elements featuring anthropomorphic objects with descriptive nomenclature reflecting their visual characteristics.

Brainrot's paradoxical nature emerges from its emptiness and density - while there is "*no real storyline or purpose*" viewers experience that "*it feels like a lot (…) there is much happening in those videos"* (P5). The content is often comedic, low-effort, and perceived as more entertaining the less effort it involves "*it has no real value and is almost meant to make you dumber*" (P9). At its core, brainrot content rests upon a combination of "*randomness, an essence of deep sarcasm*" (P11), and "*the normalization of senselessness*" (P15). This creates a meta-entertainment framework wherein, "*the joke is that there is no joke*" (P2), establishing a self-referential comedic structure that subverts traditional narrative expectations.

#### 4.1.3. Sonic mechanism and linguistic spillover

> *"Brainrot is when you see memes, and then you start using their language all the time. You stop using normal words and start using slang"*. (P6)

A central mechanism of brainrot content lies in its audio-based stimulation. "*While images, such as the AI-morphed objects are famous, the audio is what sticks*" (P8), making sound stimuli key in extending the life cycle of brainrot content. Unlike its visual elements, which remain screen-bound, brainrot's recurring sounds and phrases are reused, remixed, and recontextualized across platforms and eventually begin to circulate in offline spaces, spoken and referenced in physical interactions. Multiple participants mentioned repetitive phrases, that became embedded in their everyday language "*without even understanding what those terms really mean*" (P15). This linguistic spillover acts as an early indicator of how deeply the phenomenon is embedding itself into social life.

Underage participants identified a transgressive dimension in brainrot content, where anthropomorphic characters serve as proxies for expressing socially unacceptable speech. This mechanism reduced barriers to norm-violating behavior by creating psychological distance between the user and the content. The plausible deniability afforded by AI-mediated expression creates what one participant described as a space where rule-breaking becomes permissible: "*It's a bit funny because it breaks the rules, but the AI says it, not you*" (P1). However, this perceived immunity from social consequences can mask serious cultural transgressions, as evidenced by the same participant's realization that AI-generated audio contained blasphemous content that, within Italian cultural contexts, represents "*the worst thing that you could do*" (P1) and could result in educational sanctions such as expulsion. Female participants demonstrated restraint, "*because it's inappropriate for a female, to swear, while boys can*" (P2), indicating the influence of gender-specific social expectations. Notably, three underage females (P4/P9/P10), extended the boundaries of their definition of brainrot to include hypersexualized content.

### 4.2. Uses of brainrot content

Given that "media is always a response to something" (P23), the proliferation of brainrot content across digital platforms indicates substantial underlying demand. This section examines what drives this demand and why users actively choose to engage with brainrot content.

#### 4.2.1. In-group formation

Brainrot content can serve as a social bonding mechanism. Participants described it as a shared generational code, which "*parents just wouldn't understand and even if you explain it, they still wouldn't get it*" (P5). References to content seen online act as a marker for group membership and generational boundaries are established through shared cultural markers. Within these boundaries, low-threshold signaling systems develop. They function as digital slang that appears meaningless but carries weight through collective recognition and generates "*a sense of belonging*" (P16).

Hence, brainrot is a participation genre, where users do not need creativity, skill, or even speak the same language. This flattened mode of engagement allows for widespread inclusion where individuals "*don't have to be funny but you just have to know what's funny by being online*" (P9). Another reason for brainrot's popularity is that "the humor is deeply tied to feeling like you are part of an inside joke. It's because brainrot gives you the sense that you're in on something. You feel like you are part of it, and others aren't" (P17).

#### 4.2.2. Absurdist humor as liberation

> *"Brainrot just makes me happy. I think others find it funny because it's unexpected and you just can't tell what's going to happen next in the video and don't really understand it and that creates a kind of surprise effect. (…) The moment there's a message behind it, it stops being funny."* (P8)

While absurd and nonsensical humor was once seen as childish by participants, it has now become normalized among them. Moreover, several participants noted that brainrot content is not funny initially, but humor emerges as content keeps appearing and others engage with it too. Hence, comedic elements play a central role in facilitating social bonding and create a collective loop where shared recognition replaces the need for conventional jokes.

#### 4.2.3. Brainrot as primary leisure activity

Overstimulation has become a routine part of participants' daily lives. Rather than engaging in skill-building or offline social activities, consuming brainrot has become a primary leisure activity for Gen Z to fill unstructured time as "*it just fills the free gaps in a day without even thinking about it*" (P10). The habitual nature of this consumption provides a sense of routine, yet often lacks personal development or mastery typically associated with hobbies (Stebbins, 2001). As such, it may provide momentary relief but lacks restorative and identity-forming qualities, and it perpetuates the cognitive fragmentation that makes traditional, slower-paced leisure activities feel increasingly inaccessible or unsatisfying for participants.

> *"I'm scared I won't find something I'm actually good at mainly because I don't really have any hobbies. I guess brainrot is my hobby. Also, there is no more time during the day once you start watching."* (P12)

### 4.3. Gratification patterns in brainrot consumption

The functions outlined below sustain brainrot as a hobby by creating

a reinforcing cycle where users return to consume brainrot content to meet psychological needs. This reveals the interconnectedness of usage behaviors and gratification processes.

#### 4.3.1. Escapism

Watching brainrot represents a conscious rejection of responsibility to engage with reality. Participants find the deliberate lack of meaning liberating because "*there are a lot of expectations on people these days, people tend to stress themselves too much, and they look more now than ever for ways to just escape the stress*" (P15). Brainrot functions as an accessible cognitive anesthetic with meaninglessness becoming its therapeutic value. Participants described brainrot consumption as an intentional mental shutdown and self-reward, with one noting how brief exposure offered complete cognitive disconnection during routine tasks (P22). Hence, brainrot provides a space where users can temporarily disconnect from responsibilities and even emotions. This escapist function extends to protective information avoidance, exemplified by one participant's complete unawareness of the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict despite extensive social media usage, which their father endorsed as beneficial given current world conditions (P8).

#### 4.3.2. Resistance to the attention economy

Participants recognize that they are being manipulated to spend more time on digital platforms and that companies profit from their engagement but feel trapped within the system. They therefore reframe the consumption of deliberately worthless material as rebellion and digital autonomy. This defensive response positions brainrot as subversive because it offers nothing valuable to commercial interests. Instead of leaving digital spaces, which participants consider impossible, they choose content that is worthless to advertisers. As one participant explained:

> *"You'll watch something anyway, so why not brainrot? It's actually better than an ad because it doesn't demand anything from you"* (P11).

Additionally, users perceive meaningless content as "*anti-content*" that disrupts monetization: "*If everything is content now, then brainrot is anti-content. It's the only way to be free online, which is to do something so stupid it can't be monetized*" (P19). However, this resistance remains within the attention economy's boundaries rather than challenging its exploitative structure; while providing psychological comfort, it still sustains platform engagement.

#### 4.3.3. Disrupting media patterns

Brainrot's speed and sensory stimulation fits the needs of participants after sustained periods of paying attention to social media content. Its extreme absurdity creates a jarring contrast that momentarily breaks automatic scrolling:

> *"I was on TikTok and saw videos from friends, outfit posts, but scrolled through them fast, it was boring. But when a brainrot video showed up it was the first one that made me stop and watch it all, it was more satisfying, maybe because it was more chaotic."* (P1)

It also facilitates critical self-reflection by making participants more aware of their viewing choices and the absurdity of their consumption. This results in moments of clarity, prompting users to interrupt their habitual scrolling behaviors. However, the heightened stimulation of brainrot can also make it more engaging than conventional posts, thereby disrupting patterns in a second, contradictory way, i.e., by making standard content seem even more boring in comparison. This dual disruption, breaking scrolling trances and deepening engagement, reflects brainrot's fundamentally ambiguous role in participants' media diets.

### 4.4. Effects and consequences

Exposure to brainrot does not remain without impact, as several participants describe scrolling until they fall asleep or watching it because they have nothing better to do, calling the process "*death scroll*" (P4). This ties back to the underlying usage habitus and points to a tension between voluntary participation and perceived loss of control.

#### 4.4.1. Ambivalent emotional response

On one hand, participants associate brainrot with moments of enjoyment marked by absurdity, "*because it's so stupid that you just have to laugh*" (P7). On the other hand, participants report feeling drained, numb, and restless, despite not having done anything physically or cognitively demanding except scrolling. Some participants also linked watching brainrot content to sleep disruption, noting that it made them feel "*so sucked in and addicted*" (P2) just before going to bed. This may reinforce Gen Z's label as the sleepless generation (Zanella et al., 2025), linking yet another negative societal outcome to the attention economy.

Moreover, several participants expressed feeling guilt and even shame in relation to their inability to resist watching content. This recognition of lost time highlights participant's media ambivalence and a concern for younger users:

> *"These kids almost, self-harm. They know it's not good for them, but it gives that little hit and escape. And you just kind of ride it out, like, the same way you do with any other vice."* (P24)

Participants do not primarily fear content-related harm, such as misinformation, nor the above-mentioned psychological effects, but notice a feeling of being less capable of engaging with the offline world as "*it gets harder to talk to people who aren't online like you*" (P4). They also note a growing sense of "*emptiness and the disappearance of meaningful activities*" (P9) in their lives. Importantly, participants rarely framed themselves as the primary consumers. Instead, they often described others, siblings or peers as more deeply immersed. For example, "*People on TikTok know it's bad for them, but they do it anyway*" (P14). This reflects a third-person effect - the belief that others are more afflicted than oneself (Davison, 1996).

#### 4.4.2. Cultural change and systemic critique

While seemingly apolitical, participants recognize that brainrot's innocuous format holds manipulation risks, noting that content is "*masked through humor and irony, is light-hearted, and can easily become a Trojan horse*" containing dangerous messages that are "*skewed right wing sometimes*" (P17). They expressed concerns about subliminal influence and unconscious audience manipulation, and multiple participants referred to a viral video that was perceived as politically incorrect.

Participants further perceive brainrot as a permanent cultural transformation rather than a fleeting trend. They observe brainrot's broader societal implications, noting its integration into early childhood development, as even toddlers recognize and request brainrot-themed merchandise (Susarla, 2025).

Additionally, brainrot's aesthetic is reshaping digital content expectations, with mainstream media and advertising adopting this style to maintain relevance. Across interviews, participants articulated a growing sense of helplessness regarding their media behavior, mentioning that being online a lot is *"(…) not our fault but top-down from Zuck and Elon - the ones that want you in it*" (P23). A recurring motive here is the lack of regulation in digital spaces. Participants repeatedly emphasized that habits persist not because they lack awareness, but because the environment sustains them.

> *"Before the government regulated the tobacco industry, everyone was smoking, even though they knew it was bad. Because the environment encouraged and allowed for that to happen. Yeah, the doctors would smoke. Now we need to get into a state where the environment shifts so young people's habits shift. But I think the innovation and the agency that young people feel from brainrot is a good thing.".* (P21)

The tension between participants' concerns about manipulation and statements like P21's reflects the complexity of their relationship with

brainrot rather than simple contradiction. Participants hold multiple truths simultaneously: they recognize structural manipulation while valuing moments of creative agency; they critique brainrot's effects while appreciating its functions; they feel trapped by platform design while exercising choice within constraints. P21's comment specifically highlights that even within concerning systems, Gen Z finds ways to assert creativity and community, not as freedom from the system but rather tactical maneuvering within it. Participants understand that brainrot can be both a site of manipulation (especially concerning political messaging and younger children) and a space for resistant creativity (in how they personally engage). This sophisticated, non-binary understanding challenges research framings that position youth as either victims of technology or empowered digital natives - participants are both and neither.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Rupturing hyperreality

Due to its accessibility, recognizability, and shared references, brainrot aligns with pop-culture characteristics by enabling common codes to circulate across heterogeneous audiences (Kidd, 2017). Nevertheless, brainrot parodies the polished surface of pop-culture on social media through absurd and low-quality aesthetics (4.1.2), offering a critique from within its own channels. This extends the critique by Horkheimer and Adorno, who conceptualized the culture industry as a mechanism of distraction, where content is standardized to sustain passive consumption (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2015). Their critique gains relevance within contemporary media environments shaped by simulation and commodification. Baudrillard argues that society is increasingly governed by images that no longer refer to any external reality but instead simulate reality itself (Baudrillard, 1995). As the boundary between original and copy dissolves, simulations remain. What emerges is *hyperreality*, a state in which representations replace what they depicted (Baudrillard, 1995). Within this logic, algorithmically optimized content and curated influencer personas increasingly shape visual culture (Ren, 2025; Sharma & Kumar, 2024).

The findings demonstrate that brainrot content deliberately emphasizes rather than conceals its artificiality. This represents a new stage of hyperreality, a simulation that acknowledges and performs its own artificiality, creating what could be termed 'meta-hyperreality.' Only because brainrot content is visibly "*fake*" (P4) does it achieve authenticity: "*everyone knows it's generated, so it feels less manipulative than posts that act like they're just normal life*" (P14). The deliberate absurdity of brainrot disrupts dominant media aesthetics of polished content and establishes a novel mode of post-ironic truth where Gen Z locates authenticity in the ironic and the self-deconstructive. Wallace anticipated the emergence of post-irony as a cultural corrective (Wallace, 1993). He critiqued irony, which had come to dominate late capitalist media and shielded individuals from sincerity and vulnerability. Brainrot content with its seeming meaninglessness is perceived as a form of such sincerity, because it no longer pretends to offer depth where there is none. Participants resonated with this sentiment, describing brainrot as a "*break in the system*" (P9).

This break extends beyond the domain of simulation to challenge the order of digital spaces. social media platforms impose order through algorithmic classification systems that organize and discipline user behavior (Lee & Wei, 2020). Brainrot memes disrupt these systems by remixing contradictory symbols (Jenkins, 2006) and creating absurd hierarchies that expose the artificiality of such orders. This remix logic of brainrot operates within heterotopian spaces and creates alternative digital environments, supporting Foucault's notion that classification systems are historically contingent, culturally specific, and arbitrary, rather than natural (Foucault, 1970, 1986).

### 5.2. Brainrot and media needs

Katz and colleagues identified five fundamental needs that media consumption can fulfill: cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative, and tension release (Katz et al., 1973). The findings suggest that brainrot content corresponds to these needs but also introduces a new gratification category: *anti-gratification, i.e.* the need for content that explicitly rejects productivity, utility, or meaning-making.

#### 5.2.1. Cognitive needs: from information-seeking to information-avoidance

The findings reveal a fundamental inversion of cognitive needs: rather than seeking information, participants used brainrot to avoid it (4.1.1, 4.3.1). This extends U&G theory by revealing that cognitive needs can be satisfied through deliberate cognitive disengagement rather than engagement. In information-saturated environments, the need for cognitive rest becomes as salient as the need for cognitive stimulation. Traditional U&G theory conceptualized media primarily as a tool for acquiring something (information, emotional experience, social connection). Brainrot consumption serves a need to subtract, escape, or temporarily erase the accumulated cognitive load of constant information exposure. This protective information avoidance, exemplified by P8's complete unawareness of ongoing conflicts despite extensive social media use, represents a coping mechanism not well-accounted for in original U&G frameworks.

However, this adaptive response carries costs. Participants linked brainrot consumption to ego depletion, where self-regulatory resources become exhausted (Baumeister et al., 1998; Gan et al., 2025, p. 4.1.1). The finding that participants understand platform design as deliberately undermining their self-control (4.4.2) suggests cognitive needs are now shaped by infrastructure as much as by individual psychology. This challenges U&G theory's assumption that users freely select media to satisfy pre-existing needs, revealing instead how platform design can manufacture needs and constrain the options for satisfying them.

#### 5.2.2. Affective needs: pleasure in meaninglessness

Affective needs describe the pursuit of emotional or aesthetic experiences, including feelings of pleasure, excitement, and humor (Katz et al., 1973). Schopenhauer argued that humor emerges when abstract expectations collide with a concrete reality that violates them (Schopenhauer, 2019). Building on the idea, incongruity theory suggests that amusement results from a mismatch between what is expected and what actually occurs (Rod, 2007). In this sense, brainrot can be understood as an accelerated form of incongruity-based humor, where pleasure lies in unpredictability (Nijholt, 2020).

The findings support brainrot's function in satisfying affective needs but reveal a paradoxical form of aesthetic pleasure. Participants described brainrot as pleasurable specifically because of its meaninglessness and unpredictability (4.2.2). This explicit rejection of meaning as a prerequisite for humor represents a significant extension of how U&G theory conceptualizes affective gratification. Traditional approaches assume media satisfies emotional needs by providing meaningful emotional experiences (drama, inspiration, catharsis). Brainrot inverts this by offering emotional satisfaction through the explicit absence of meaning.

The aesthetic characteristics described by participants (4.1.2) draw on absurdity traditions from the avant-garde movements, particularly Dadaism, and postmodern practices such as pastiche (Hopkins, 2004; Jameson, 1992). However, brainrot's AI-enabled production and democratization of GenAI tools distinguishes it from these precedents. The finding that brainrot employs a meta-entertainment framework where "the joke is that there is no joke" (P2) suggests that Gen Z has developed appreciation for recursive self-reference and ontological humor that earlier generations may not have valued.

The findings also reveal affective needs operating at a collective rather than purely individual level. The humor in brainrot content emerges lies in others' engagement with it (4.2.2), indicating that

emotional gratification derives partly from participation in shared cultural experiences rather than from the content's intrinsic qualities. This collective dimension aligns with recent work on affective publics (Papacharissi, 2016) and demonstrates that shared meaninglessness, rather than political sentiment alone, can constitute affective communities.

The findings further indicate a shift in online content ecosystems, where AI-generated material increasingly supplants human-produced content. This perception resonates with the Dead Internet Theory, a conspiracy theory which posits that much of today's online activity is no longer generated by humans but by automated systems (Muzumdar et al., 2025). It further connects to Baudrillard's simulation theory and his early warning, that AI would create mental substitutes for a species without genuine thought capacity (Baudrillard, 1993; Sommerer, 2025). GenAI content now represents a system of signs detached from human origin which ultimately leads to a death of meaning (Sommerer, 2025) – one of the characterizing features of brainrot according to participants.

#### 5.2.3. Personal and social integrative needs: bonding through cognitive states

The findings reveal that brainrot satisfies both personal and social integrative needs simultaneously through a novel mechanism: shared experience of cognitive states rather than shared interpretation of content. Participants described feeling comfortable sharing brainrot content specifically within friendships characterized by psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). Within these peer groups, knowledge about brainrot content functions as in-group currency, cultural capital, and generational knowledge that marks social distinction from other groups (Bourdieu, 1986). However, what distinguishes brainrot from other forms of media-based social bonding is that membership derives not from understanding the content but from having experienced the mental state it reflects. P17's reference to being "in on something" operates at a meta-level: the something is not the content itself but the cognitive experience of information overload that precedes and shapes brainrot consumption. This extends U&G theory by showing that social and integrative needs can be satisfied through shared states of consciousness rather than shared interpretation of media texts.

Language functions as in-group currency not through semantic content but through performative participation (4.1.3). This represents a shift from meaning-based social bonding (where shared understanding creates connection) to participation-based bonding (where co-presence in the same cognitive-cultural space creates connection), reflecting environments where meaning is secondary, and attention becomes the dominant logic. Brainrot builds social capital within specific peer groups through shared references and in-jokes (4.2.1). However, this same mechanism creates barriers to "*talk[ing] to people who aren't online like you*" (P4), suggesting brainrot strengthens in-group bonds while potentially weakening broader social communication skills. This challenges the traditional U&G theory assumption that media use supplements rather than displaces other forms of social connection. The finding that brainrot becomes a primary leisure activity (4.2.3) that crowds out face-to-face interaction represents a departure from the initial promise of social media platforms to facilitate interpersonal connection and communication (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Participants don't consume brainrot primarily to connect with specific individuals but rather to participate in generational culture and manage their cognitive states. Social sharing happens, but it is secondary to individual consumption.

#### 5.2.4. Tension release needs: escapism from digital life through digital media

Participants described brainrot consumption as a conscious rejection of engagement with the pressures of reality (4.3.1). This aligns with traditional understandings of tension-release as escape from external stressors. However, the findings reveal a more complex form of tension release: escape from digital oversaturation through more digital consumption. Participants described brainrot as relief not just from offline stressors but from the cognitive demands of navigating algorithmically curated, commercially driven social media environments (4.3.2). The finding that brainrot functions as "anti-content" (P19) that "doesn't demand anything from you" (P11) suggests users seek relief from the attention economy's manipulative tactics through content that refuses to participate in monetization.

This creates a double bind: participants use brainrot to escape digital exhaustion while remaining within the digital infrastructures that create that exhaustion (4.4.1). This challenges U&G theory's assumption that tension-release media provide genuine restoration. Critically, the finding that participants recognize brainrot provides only temporary relief, while perpetuating cognitive fragmentation and making traditional, slower-paced leisure activities feel increasingly inaccessible (4.2.3), reveals a trap within the tension-release mechanism. Brainrot satisfies the immediate need for cognitive rest while undermining the capacity for deeper restoration that traditional leisure provides. This suggests U&G theory needs expansion to account for gratifications that satisfy needs in the short term while potentially intensifying them in the long term.

The findings also reveal tension release operating at a generational scale in response to broader social crises (Siirilä & Salonen, 2024). Participants discussed brainrot consumption as a media-conditioned response to uncertainty (4.3.1). Entertainment media have historically served escapism during social crises: during the Great Depression, Disney's Donald Duck, a figure who constantly failed, offered emotional relief by turning social conditions into laughter (Dorfman & Mattelart, 2018; Horkheimer & Adorno, 2015; Jensen, 1989). Brainrot content fulfills a similar function: It offers escapism, allowing users to disconnect and relieve the pressures of productivity and self-optimization (Owens, 2025), while simultaneously capturing how digital life feels under conditions of information excess. It reflects what Durkheim termed anomie, where weakened social structures leave individuals seeking meaning through repetitive, ultimately unsatisfying activities rather than purposeful engagement (Durkheim, 1897).

While Donald Duck was a top-down corporate product, brainrot is user-generated and memetically spread. Both reflect emotional states shaped by their environments; today driven by the attention economy and algorithms. Gen Z uses brainrot as a protective mechanism against manipulation and marketing (4.3.1), potentially constituting an affective public organized around collective resistance to digital exploitation (Papacharissi, 2016).

#### 5.2.5. Anti-gratification: the need for meaninglessness

The findings reveal a form of media gratification not captured by Katz et al.'s original framework (Katz et al., 1973), anti-gratification, where users actively seek content that explicitly rejects the provision of traditional media values such as information, narrative coherence, aesthetic refinement, or productive engagement. Anti-gratification differs from tension-release in important ways. While tension-release assumes media provides something positive (relaxation, pleasure, distraction), anti-gratification describes the gratification derived from media that refuses to provide anything at all (4.2.2). As P8 articulated, the value of brainrot emerges precisely from the absence of value. This represents a fundamentally new relationship between user and content.

Three findings support anti-gratification as a distinct category: First, participants explicitly described brainrot's meaninglessness as its therapeutic value (4.3.1). Rather than consuming content despite its lack of meaning, they consumed it because of this absence. This inverts traditional media selection logic where users choose content that offers something (information, emotion, connection) in favor of content that offers nothing. Second, participants framed brainrot consumption as resistance to attention economy exploitation (4.3.2). Third, the finding that brainrot has no value yet is actively sought out suggests users derive satisfaction from the explicit rejection of self-improvement, learning, or productivity. In an environment saturated with content claiming to add

value (educational posts, inspirational content, skill-building tutorials), brainrot offers relief by proudly offering nothing. This represents gratification through negation rather than provision.

This concept extends U&G theory by recognizing that in oversaturated media environments, absence can be as gratifying as presence. It also suggests that platform capitalism may have created conditions where traditional gratifications (learning, emotional engagement, social connection) become burdensome rather than satisfying, generating demand for content that refuses to gratify in conventional ways.

### 5.3. Theoretical implications

The findings reveal concerning patterns in how brainrot consumption shapes cognitive and creative capacities. Digital stimulation can disrupt identity formation by eliminating unstructured for self-exploration (Haidt, 2024), creating habits routines marked by cognitive fatigue and loss of meaning (4.4.1). As platform algorithms reward affectively salient, low-complexity content, structural barriers to sustained critical thinking develop, which echoes Thoreau's (1995) original concerns and fosters anti-intellectualism and superficiality (Hofstadter, 2012; Postman, 1985).

#### 5.3.1. Brainrot as cognitive state precedes brainrot as content

Traditional media effects research operates on an implicit causality: exposure to certain content types produces corresponding mental states or behavioral outcomes. The findings from this study invert this causal relationship. Participants described how a "brainrot feeling" emerged from structural features of platforms rather than from specific content types (4.1.1). Extended scrolling sessions produced cognitive states characterized by reduced selectivity, autopilot consumption, and decreased awareness of content quality. Critically, these descriptions positioned the mental state as temporally prior to encounters with brainrot content itself.

This suggests that platform infrastructure, through design choices such as infinite scroll, autoplay functionality, and algorithmically curated feeds, generates cognitive conditions that subsequently shape both content preferences and production patterns. Brainrot content does not cause cognitive decline in this framework. Rather, cognitive states induced by sustained platform engagement create demand for content that matches those depleted attention capacities. The content is consequential, an outcome of structural conditions rather than their cause. This challenges media effects models that locate agency primarily within individual users making content choices. When platform design systematically shapes cognitive baselines, content selection occurs within constraints that users neither chose nor fully control. Participants recognized this dynamic, articulating awareness that their consumption patterns reflected environmental shaping rather than pure individual preference (4.4.1, 4.4.2).

This contribution also helps explain paradoxes evident in the data. Participants expressed concern about effects while feeling unable to change behavior and demonstrated sophisticated awareness of manipulation while continuing to participate. These apparent contradictions resolve when understood through the lens of infrastructural determinism: participants recognize that their consumption reflects cognitive states produced by platform design rather than content causing those states. Their ambivalence (4.4.1.) stems from being trapped within structural conditions they can critique but not easily escape.

#### 5.3.2. Anti-gratification as a media need in attention economies

The second theoretical contribution introduces anti-gratification as a conceptual framework for understanding media use patterns not captured by existing theory. Anti-gratification exposes limitations in how users can resist attention economy structures. While participants framed engagement with meaningless content as subversive (4.3.2), positioning it as content that cannot be monetized or commodified, this resistance operates entirely within platform boundaries. Brainrot consumption still generates engagement metrics, contributes to algorithmic training, and sustains the attention economy infrastructure participants claim to resist. Anti-gratification thus represents "incorporated resistance": opposition that platforms can absorb and profit from without fundamental threat to their business models.

This paradox suggests that user agency in attention economies operates under severe constraints. Participants experience anti-gratification as liberating, as a form of control reclaimed from commercial manipulation. Yet this experienced liberation may coexist with structural capture. This reveals how contemporary platform capitalism can accommodate and even cultivate apparent resistance, integrating opposition into its operating logic rather than being disrupted by it.

#### 5.3.3. Platform design manufactures needs rather than merely satisfying them

Beyond inverting traditional media effects causality, the findings challenge a foundational assumption in Uses and Gratifications theory: that users bring pre-existing needs to media encounters which media then satisfy with varying degrees of success. The findings suggest platform infrastructure does not simply satisfy needs but actively generates them.

Participants highlighted the structural features of social media platforms (e.g., infinite scroll, autoplay, and algorithmically curated feeds) as creating experiences of autopilot consumption, reduced selectivity, and compulsive continuation beyond the point of satisfaction (4.1.1, 4.4.2). These platform-induced states then generated new needs, such as the need for cognitive rest (4.3.1) and content matching depleted attention capacities (4.1.2). This pattern of need generation through infrastructure design has implications for how we theorize user agency in digital environments. Traditional U&G theory positions users as active selectors who choose media to achieve their goals. This framework assumes a degree of autonomy: users have needs, evaluate media options, and select those most likely to satisfy their objectives. However, when platform infrastructure shapes cognitive states that subsequently generate media needs, this selection process becomes constrained in ways the theory does not fully account for.

Participants demonstrated awareness of manipulation (4.4.2), exercised selective sharing within trusted contexts (4.2.1), and employed tactical resistance strategies such as curating their feeds through platform tools. Yet these behaviors operated within choice architectures designed to maximize engagement regardless of which specific options users select. Participants wanted to stop consuming brainrot (4.4.1) yet continued because environmental conditions sustained the behavior despite conscious intent otherwise. Rather than positioning users as either fully autonomous or fully determined, these findings support a view of constrained agency where meaningful choice exists but operates within structural limitations that users neither control nor escape simply through awareness or intention.

The rise of GenAI combined with the platformization of culture create an ecosystem for brainrot content. As it becomes more dominant, platforms increasingly rely on AI-generated media to meet user demand for overstimulation. Reduced engagement with human-depicting content decreases exposure to appearance-based social comparison triggers, potentially mitigating associated mental health risks (Rodgers & Laveway, 2023). However, if GenAI is used to produce hyperrealistic content, that surpasses the uncanny valley, the distinction between the real and the simulated may erode further, intensifying psychological risks. These implications raise questions about educational approaches that can maintain critical thinking capacities in hyper stimulating digital environments. They also highlight the need for policy interventions that address the structural factors driving the attention economy toward ever-more-intensive stimulation.

### 5.4. Design implications

Current platforms optimize for engagement metrics that

inadvertently create the cognitive conditions participants described as brainrot state. The challenge for designers and researchers lies in developing alternatives that respect user agency while addressing the infrastructural factors that manufacture harmful needs. This section proposes four design directions grounded in the study's findings.

#### 5.4.1. Attention management

Platform design currently treats engagement as a unitary good to be maximized, without differentiating between engaged attention and depleted scrolling. The findings reveal that prolonged platform use generates distinctive cognitive states characterized by reduced selectivity and autopilot consumption (4.1.1). These states create demand for increasingly intense stimulation, establishing feedback loops where platforms must continually escalate content intensity to maintain user attention. Breaking this cycle requires platforms to attend to users' cognitive states rather than simply maximizing time on platform.

Designers might develop features that recognize signs of cognitive depletion through behavioral indicators such as rapid content switching without interaction, declining engagement depth, or extended sessions without breaks. When these patterns emerge, platforms could respond by automatically adjusting content intensity, introducing natural stopping points, or surfacing calmer material. Such interventions would treat cognitive capacity as a finite resource requiring management rather than something to be depleted for commercial gain.

Making attention expenditure visible represents another design opportunity (Heitmayer, 2025a). Participants reported losing track of time in the brainrot state (4.2.3), suggesting real-time feedback about attention investment might support more intentional use. Platforms could integrate attention awareness into the core interface, helping users notice when their engagement shifts from purposeful to habitual, treating attention as a resource worth monitoring and managing similar to how fitness applications make physical activity visible.

Platforms might also enable users to set their own content intensity preferences in advance, rather than defaulting to algorithmic optimization for maximum engagement. Users could specify desired stimulation ranges, content diversity requirements, or session duration targets, giving them structural support for consumption patterns they endorse reflectively even if they struggle to maintain them in the moment (4.4.1).

#### 5.4.2. Algorithmic transparency and control

Participants recognized algorithmic amplification as central to their brainrot consumption while simultaneously feeling manipulated by opaque recommendation systems (4.4.2). Design interventions might focus on making algorithmic decision-making legible and controllable without requiring users to become technical experts.

Transparency features could show users why specific content appears in their feeds, distinguishing between different amplification mechanisms. Content algorithmically boosted based on past engagement patterns differs from paid promotional material, which differs again from content surfaced due to broader popularity. Making these distinctions visible would help users understand what forces shape their media environment and enable more informed decisions about what to trust and engage with. Such transparency need not require deep technical understanding; simple contextual labels explaining "you're seeing this because" would represent a significant improvement over current opacity.

Beyond transparency, platforms should provide granular controls over algorithmic behavior. Users might specify whether they want algorithms to optimize for engagement time, content diversity, similarity to past consumption, or other criteria they define as valuable. This acknowledges that users have varied and sometimes conflicting preferences: some value algorithmic discovery while others prefer more restricted curation. Rather than imposing a single model, platforms could offer users control over how they want their feeds constructed.

#### 5.4.3. Collective agency tools

Individual self-control proved consistently insufficient for participants, who reported guilt about their consumption while feeling unable to change it (4.4.1). This failure of individual willpower is not surprising given that platforms deliberately design against self-regulation through features like infinite scroll and autoplay. The findings suggest, however, that participants successfully regulated their behavior in certain social contexts, particularly within trusted peer groups (4.2.1). This points toward collective rather than individual tools as potentially more effective intervention points.

Platforms might enable peer groups to establish shared norms and mutual accountability structures. Friend groups could collectively set limits on certain content types, establish shared usage targets, or create mutual check-in systems where members support each other in maintaining intended consumption patterns. This leverages the social bonding functions that make brainrot appealing while redirecting social influence toward self-protective rather than engagement-maximizing ends.

Beyond simple accountability, platforms could facilitate "social circuit breakers" mechanisms through which users signal that they need support interrupting harmful patterns and trusted contacts can provide that support. A user recognizing they have entered what participants termed death scroll (4.4.1) could explicitly request intervention from friends, who might then send encouraging messages, suggest alternative activities, or simply check in. This acknowledges that resistance requires support rather than willpower alone, while respecting user autonomy by making such interventions opt-in rather than imposed.

Community-generated alternatives to algorithmic feeds represent another collective approach. Rather than each user individually curating their feed, groups might collectively surface content, vote on what merits attention, or create shared viewing experiences that distribute editorial responsibility. This would provide an alternative to the binary choice between algorithmically driven feeds that optimize for engagement and individually curated feeds that require unsustainable vigilance. Collective curation could offer a middle path that respects participant desires for both agency and community (4.4.2).

#### 5.4.4. Alternative success metrics

Perhaps the most fundamental design challenge lies in how platforms measure success. Current metrics privilege engagement time, click-through rates, and other indicators that align with advertising revenue but not necessarily with user wellbeing. The findings suggest these metrics actively create harmful cognitive conditions (5.3.1), establishing incentive structures that reward platforms for depleting user attention. Addressing this requires developing alternative metrics that capture dimensions of user experience beyond simple time-on-platform.

Platforms might measure and optimize for user-reported satisfaction rather than engagement duration alone. Post-session prompts asking users whether they found their time well-spent could provide data for algorithmic optimization toward experiences users themselves endorse. This would acknowledge the disconnect participants described between momentary pleasure and reflective satisfaction (4.4.1), treating the latter as the more important optimization target. Such an approach would require platforms to accept that optimal user experience might involve less rather than more time spent, representing a significant shift from current business models.

Content diversity represents another potential metric. Rather than maximizing time spent with any single content type, platforms could optimize for exposure to varied stimulation levels throughout a session. This responds to the finding that brainrot consumption creates desensitization requiring ever-more-extreme content (4.3.3). Diversity metrics would incentivize platforms to prevent users from spiraling into increasingly narrow consumption patterns, instead maintaining broader content exposure that preserves rather than depletes attention capacity.

Platforms might also track users' capacity to engage with slower-paced, less stimulating content over time, treating sustained attention

span as a metric worth preserving rather than something to be exploited and depleted. If a user's ability to engage with longer-form content declines, this could trigger interventions such as feed adjustments or direct notifications. This would make explicit what current platforms leave implicit: that platform design choices have cognitive consequences that accumulate over time, and platforms bear some responsibility for those consequences.

These four design directions share a common logic: they shift primary responsibility from individual users to platform infrastructures. This aligns with participants' explicit calls for systemic rather than individual-level change (4.4.2) and with the theoretical insight that platforms manufacture problematic needs rather than simply satisfying pre-existing ones (5.3.3). While individual agency remains important, the findings demonstrate that agency operates within constraints designed by platforms. Interventions addressing only user behavior while leaving infrastructure unchanged are unlikely to succeed, whereas designs reshaping the choice architecture itself might enable users to exercise agency in ways that support rather than undermine their wellbeing. Ultimately, addressing brainrot requires recognizing it as an infrastructural problem demanding infrastructural solutions, not merely a failure of individual self-control (Chater & Loewenstein, 2022).

### 5.5. Limitations and future research

This study presents an early evaluation of the cultural impact of brainrot and is not without limitations. First, definitional boundaries around brainrot content remain unclear. While we provided a working definition (low-quality content saturating digital spaces and associated cognitive states), participants definitions varied considerably: some defined it strictly as specific content types (e.g., low-quality content, AI-generated surreal videos), others used it to describe any prolonged scrolling state. This definitional fluidity is itself a finding: brainrot's meaning is contested and evolving. However, this creates analytical challenges as tensions in our findings may reflect participants describing different phenomena under the same label. Future research should systematically map the taxonomy of content users classify as brainrot and examine whether different subtypes serve distinct functions.

Second, this study's reliance on self-reported consumption patterns may not capture the full extent of brainrot's effects (Araujo et al., 2017; Boase & Ling, 2013; Kobayashi & Boase, 2012), particularly because most participants exhibited third-person effect bias. Moreover, these findings represent a specific moment in a rapidly evolving digital culture and may not transfer across time periods. Brainrot as observed in June-July 2025 may evolve as platforms change algorithms, new GenAI capabilities emerge, or cultural trends shift. Research should also focus on younger audiences such as Generation Alpha, who were exposed to GenAI-driven, short-form media environments at an even earlier age and may thus find traditional, and importantly educational, content increasingly unstimulating relative to their conditioned attention baseline.

Third, social media platforms shape how brainrot is experienced: Underage participants cited TikTok as the platform they used most, while adults more often referenced Instagram. Although both host similar content, differences in format, algorithms, and usage habits may influence how brainrot is perceived. It may therefore be useful to concretely investigate the impacts of platforms and algorithms on user experiences with brainrot content.

Fourth, this study's sample is culturally homogeneous and predominantly reflects Western European perspectives. Yet, brainrot's reliance on humor suggests that its meaning may vary across geographic regions, shaped by differences in language, platform access, and local content trends. Cross-regional comparative studies could examine how aesthetics and interpretations differ across national and cultural contexts.

Fifth, unlike hyperreality, brainrot does not aim to conceal the absence of the real but embraces being surreal. This raises the question: If brainrot no longer simulates the real and distorts it, what stage of Baudrillard's (1995) simulation does it occupy? Baudrillard proposed four stages: (1) reflection of reality, (2) perversion of reality, (3) masking the absence of reality, and (4) bearing no relation to reality whatsoever. Brainrot appears to simultaneously occupy stages 3 and 4 - it masks reality's absence through ironic performance while bearing no relation to reality in its content. However, brainrot's self-aware artificiality may represent a fifth, post-simulation stage where the simulation acknowledges itself as simulation. This theoretical positioning warrants dedicated philosophical analysis. Future research could explore whether brainrot signals a media saturation point. Ultimately, the question emerges whether the attention economy will suffer from its own success by creating a crisis of attention loss where people stop engaging in the way the system requires.

## 6. Conclusion

Media representations suggest that brainrot content creates mental decline (Oxford University Press, 2024; Roy, 2024). This study suggests a reverse direction of causality - the structural logic of social media platforms themselves precedes brainrot content and shape how it is used. Brainrot content is a logical consequence of the system. How it is perceived varies depending on the level of immersion in the content: For those users with limited exposure, brainrot appears as a pathological cognitive state linked to overconsumption. For highly immersed users, such as this study's participants, brainrot content serves functions invisible to ‘outsiders’, offering relief, structure, shared cultural reference points, and a sense of control within an otherwise disempowering system. While participants frame brainrot as “intentionally unmarketable” and resistant to commercialization, brainrot content still generates engagement metrics that platforms monetize through advertising. Brainrot thus appears more as a resistance to traditional advertising integration than genuine escape from platform capitalism. This paradox is central to brainrot's function: users experience it as a liberation from commercial logic while remaining entirely within commercial infrastructures. The resistance is real in participants' experience but may be ultimately constrained or co-opted by platform economics. This tension warrants further investigation into how platforms and brands adapt to or appropriate resistance aesthetics.

Our findings demonstrate four key insights:

1. Brainrot holds user attention through stimulation intensity that conventional content cannot match. Paradoxically, its surreal aesthetic makes it feel more authentic.
2. As social media transforms from a democratic space for knowledge and connection into a commercial infrastructure where attention is monetized, brainrot responds by embracing nonsense and irony as “anti-content”. It remains intentionally unmarketable and stripped of conventional meaning but creates a paradoxical sense of liberation - users still participate in the attention economy but reject its commercial premises.
3. Brainrot fosters social bonding among those who have previously experienced the “brainrot state”. This shared cognitive condition becomes a marker of in-group identity and cultural capital.
4. Brainrot is a refuge from visual saturation, performative demands of hyper-curated media, and from real-world crises and offline instability.

Despite recognizing these functions, participants asked for systemic, top-down change as brainrot exposes an underlying structural problem. Since individual self-regulation alone is insufficient for sustained behavioral change (Arness & Ollis, 2023), systemic reforms, rather than individuals willpower may be required to alleviate the challenge brainrot poses for users.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Anna Götzfried:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Maxi Heitmayer:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

## Informed consent

The author(s) confirm that written informed consent has been obtained from the involved participants or if appropriate from the parent, guardian, power of attorney of the involved participants; and, they have given approval for this information to be published in this research paper.

Complete written informed consent was obtained from the participants for the publication of this study and accompanying images.

## Declaration of ethical approval

The authors declare that ethical approval was obtained from the London School of Economics psychology ethics committee prior to commencement of data collection.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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