

From The Screen to the Brain

- A Study in Phenomenology of "Brain Rot" due to Digital overkill -

من الشاشة إلى الدماغ

- دراسة في فينومينولوجيا "تَعَفَن الدماغ" بسبب الإفراط الرقمي -

Abdesselem GHERABI *¹

University of Relizane, abdesselem.gherabi@univ-relizane.dz

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Abstract:

The term "brain rot" describes the detrimental effects of overusing digital tech on mental well-being. These effects can change how we think, socialize, use language, communicate, and feel emotions. This research looked at the link between brain rot and the difficulties psychiatry faces in dealing with it. It aimed to review existing scientific work to find connections between the brain rot concept and the challenges in addressing it. The study also suggests ways to reduce the effects of brain rot and recommends creating public policies to encourage balanced technology use. Ultimately, it emphasizes the need for more studies to understand brain rot more fully.

Keywords: Screen; Brain; Phenomenology; Brain Rot; Digital overkill.

* Abdesselem GHERABI

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, technological advancement has brought about significant transformations in social and cultural dynamics. Among them, connectivity and the accelerated consumption of digital content that affect mental and emotional processes, in addition to modifying the way people interact with the world and process information, stand out.

In this contemporary context, the phenomenon of "brain rot" or "deteriorated mind" has gained relevance in discussions about mental health, especially in view of the consequences of the impact on younger generations and the relationship with excessive consumption and dependence on technology. According to the report by the Digital Research Institute of the United States, 68% of young adults said they felt overwhelmed by irrelevant and repetitive information on social networks.(Emran, 2024, p322)

The term "brain rot" initially emerged as an expression used to describe the effects of harmful habits on cognitive functioning and mental deterioration. In 2024, it gained prominence by being chosen as the word of the Year by the Oxford Dictionary and obtained more than 130 thousand registered searches throughout the year. Although currently the term is used to describe the negative effects of excessive consumption of digital content, its origin refers to the nineteenth century.(Düken, 2019, p145)

The expression was first used in 1854, in the book *Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau, with a distinct meaning, related to mental alienation, exhausting routine and disconnection with nature.(Griffiths, 2024, p52)

Over time, the term "brain rot" has acquired a meaning aligned with the cognitive and emotional challenges present in modernity. Currently, the concept is widely associated with

states of mental exhaustion, reduced ability to concentrate and weakened emotional engagement – phenomena often linked to overexposure to quick and superficial stimuli, such as short videos, memes and fragmented interactions promoted by digital platforms. Thus, the term "brain rot" reflects apprehensions about the way information is consumed in the digital world.

This scenario highlights the urgency of scientific investigations, since academic and clinical debates have directed increasing attention to the need for interventions that consider the impacts of digital technologies on mental health, especially those that propose strategies to mitigate their negative effects on psychological well-being. From this perspective, this article aims to map scientific productions in order to identify correlations with the "brain rot" phenomenon and the challenges involved in its approach. Thus, the research question listed is: what are the challenges that will be faced by psychiatry, according to the notes of scientific productions, in relation to the phenomenon "brain rot"?

Thus, this study contributes to the debate on the strategies that can be adopted to minimize the possible negative impacts of the "brain rot" phenomenon on people's mental health, since it refers to cognitive and behavioral changes interconnected to the intense and uncontrolled use of digital technologies. In addition, this theme is relevant because it presents itself as a challenge for psychiatry, considering that the current technological and social paradigm generates impacts on people's mental health and requires new approaches and intervention strategies, including education, the promotion of a more conscious use of digital technologies and the strengthening of emotional and cognitive self-regulation skills. Finally, this study can still subsidize public mental health policies and clinical practices, since professionals working in psychiatry face the challenging task of adapting diagnoses and treatments to the new forms of emerging mentalities and pathologies that technological advances have driven.

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2. Impact of Excessive Social Media Use: Cognitive Decline

Each year, Oxford University Press (OUP) conducts a global survey to identify its word of the year. "Brain rot" is emerging as a popular choice in the current year, its prominence driven by the digital age. OUP acknowledges that the term is a newcomer within this year's gathered information. However, OUP is providing further background. Historical evidence places the initial use of "brain rot" within Henry David Thoreau's 1854 book, *Walden or Life in the Woods*.(Qin, 2024, p16)

We share anxieties regarding technology's influence upon our cognitive functions, notably stemming from internet-enabled tools. Excessive engagement with social media platforms, for example, can lead to feelings of exhaustion. Increased online activity often fuels apprehension concerning potential impacts on mental well-being and concentration abilities. However, abstaining isn't the solution. Why?

Indeed, the term "brain rot" has seen a surge in usage throughout 2025. It's employed to encompass both the origin and the consequence of a specific digital phenomenon. Specifically, it points to the kind of underwhelming, insignificant material frequently encountered online, especially across various social media platforms. Furthermore, it describes the detrimental effects believed to arise from continuous exposure to this very content, affecting individuals and communities at large. The widespread use of this label demonstrates an awareness of contemporary social problems, particularly among the younger generations. Conversely, we find this phrase adopted as a lighthearted expression within the realm of online communication.

According to the Newport Institute's assessment, excessive screen exposure significantly contributes to a form of cognitive impairment often dubbed "brain rot." They assert that as screen usage extends, a cascade of adverse effects manifests, encompassing mental foginess, lethargy, diminished focus, and deterioration in cognitive abilities.

A body of research has emerged, prompted by the overindulgence in online content, that delves into the factors fueling this pattern and its resultant effects. This consumption, witnessing a steady rise, is progressively resembling an addiction. The potential for this, mirroring the perils of substance abuse, is documented across various platforms and technologies: television, Facebook, smartphones and the internet, technology in general, Instagram, Youtube, TikTok, and online gaming. Such addictions carry the risk of causing behavioral issues, particularly impacting children and adolescents. (Vinayak, 2024, p69)

Within the realm of current discussion, the connection between Social Network Use Disorder (SNUD) and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) frequently captures attention. The association between SNUD and FOMO displays a bidirectional influence, which subsequently correlates with an increased degree of cognitive decline. (Chiara, 2024, p176)

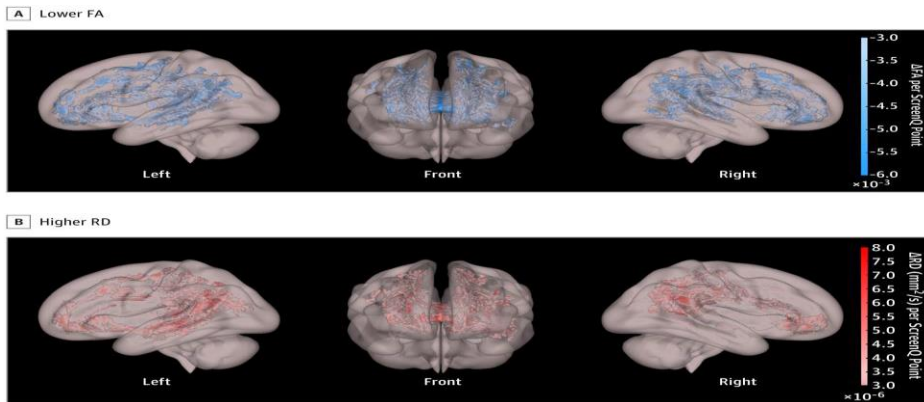
Digital technology significantly affects how we think when making choices. It's changed how we collect, handle, and assess information for decisions. These effects have both positive and possibly negative consequences. (Stiglitz, 2021, p31)

Highlighting digital distractions, argues that digital material, its consumers, and the technology itself – the digital reading environment – need consideration when e-reading. Essentially, when there's a strong reliance on social media, more frequent usage can inhibit or decrease. (Dilek, 2023, p37)

Sometimes, we feel sad watching people around us engrossed in their screens. Children who spend extended periods staring at screens are affected in their executive functions, as well as focus and concentration (Tamilarasu, 2023, p11). As time spent on social media increases, so does the likelihood of self-harm in the 14-year-old age group. (Young, 2019, p59) Loneliness, narcissism, impulsivity, and shyness are strongly associated with Facebook. (Marengo, 2022, p115)

Figure 1: Whole-brain analysis Diffusion Tensor Imaging (DTI) parameter maps.

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Source: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Aylin-Idikut->

Figure Caption: Within the white matter, there's a notable link between screen time (measured by ScreenQ scores) and decreased fractional anisotropy (FA; A), alongside elevated radial diffusivity (RD; B) across the entire brain. These links stayed significant after accounting for a child's age and household income ($P < .05$, corrected for familywise error). The color bar demonstrates the intensity of the correlation, showing how DTI parameters shift with each Screen Q score increased.

According to the study conducted by Hutton and colleagues (2020), illustrated in Figure 1, a sample of 47 preschoolers revealed a connection between increased use of screen media and a diminished microstructural quality within the white matter pathways of the brain. These neural tracts play a critical role in language development, cognitive control (executive functions), and the acquisition of early literacy competencies. Notably, the correlations observed persisted even after statistical adjustments to account for the age of the children involved and the income levels of their respective households.(Astam, 2024, p721)

3. SOCIAL MEDIA'S : A BENEFIT FOR AL

Numerous social media options exist, encompassing platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Telegram, along with a diverse array of social networking developers and messaging apps. Key players in the platform development arena include tech giants like Microsoft, Amazon, Apple, Google, Alphabet, and Meta. These entities are privately held and driven by the pursuit of profit maximization. Given the study's focus on individuals who engage with social media, the creators of these platforms will not be considered within its scope. (Sharma, 2019, p264)

In this exploration of online content, viewed through the lens of social media platforms, and inseparable from digitization and technology, a crucial first step is to establish the nature of the "good" under examination. A review of existing scholarship reveals a noticeable gap. Research dedicated to subjects such as information as a public good (Gerstorff, 2020, p25), social media and common cognitive goods (Sagar, 2021, p4), social media and the alignment with public goods (Selen, 2020, p200). social media as a free commodity, social media as a common-pool resource, and social media functioning as a public sphere is remarkably limited. (Handfield, 2024, p749)

The discourse on public goods has a long history, stretching from D. Hume and Adam Smith to later thinkers like E. Sax and K. Wicksel; indeed, Samuelson's perspective on the matter has found widespread agreement (Buttelmann, 2017, p45). anchored his understanding of goods on the concepts of 'non-rivalry' and 'non-excludability.' His framework posits that the division between private and collective consumption items hinges upon the nature of consumption itself. Goods yielding shared benefits where one person's consumption does not limit another's are termed collective goods. Conversely, goods capable of individual division are classified as private consumption goods. Focusing specifically on the characteristic of non-excludability, highlighted its significance in understanding public goods. identified five main categories reflecting the key attributes used in defining public

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goods: non-rivalry, free-riding, utility's subsequent attainment, collective consumption, and externalities.(Şenyiğit, 2019, p43)

A core tenet of market analysis involves assessing the provision of public goods, which often showcase the characteristics of Samuelsonian non-excludability, non-rivalry, and a consumption-driven nature. Television and radio transmissions exemplify this. These services, while not typically sold directly, are funded by advertising, which in turn allows for the exclusion of those unwilling to view the ads. A range of theories have attempted to resolve the inherent issues surrounding the public nature of such goods. However, our present digital economic landscape, a new world order, is fundamentally driven by the imperative of innovation (Kasparov, 2019, p65). This context defines the publicness of digital public goods, based on the nature of consumption/usage and user numbers.

Consequently, contrasting with digital private goods, even when priced at the initial point of consumer/user purchase (to cover production costs), the use/consumption and the extent of the consumers/users are not restricted.(Hayes, 2015, p51)

Digital advancements and the surge in digitalization significantly shape the public nature of offerings. These technologies not only introduce novel forms of goods and services, but also drastically alter how established ones are provided and utilized. Consequently, the traditional categorization of these offerings as private or public can shift. Specifically, innovative digital products like big data, artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, information and communication technology, software, blockchain, cloud computing, robotics, and cybersecurity are increasingly recognized as new types of public goods and services.(Markett, 2023, p880)

Stiglitz posits that the media serves to disseminate information, a characteristic of public goods. This arena, as he sees it, operates under the principle of Gresham's Law-where lower-

quality content could potentially supplant higher-quality content-and the superior ideas will ultimately triumph. We dispute this, particularly in the context of contemporary social media where, for instance, the concept of "brain rot" as a humorous expression (like a meme) among teenagers illustrates the incoherence and inapplicability of Gresham's Law.(Ortega, 2023, p150)

Social media's nature positions it as a public good because its consumption is essentially cost-free for users. Individuals simply need to own a privately held asset, such as a laptop or a mobile phone, which facilitates access. This demonstrates that social media aligns with public goods' characteristics: it's both non-rivalrous, as one person's use doesn't diminish availability for others, and non-excludable, since blocking access proves extremely difficult. The intention here is to draw attention to the adverse side effects generated by engaging in subpar online consumption on social media platforms. When it comes to rectifying these negative externalities, the public bears crucial obligations.(Liu, 2022, p1207)

Gal and Rubinfels posit that social media qualifies as a free good. In essence, a free good is one that has a zero social opportunity cost, where supply consistently meets or exceeds the level of demand. Free goods aren't typically subject to market valuation. A classic example is the air we breathe at the earth's surface - considered a free good, unlike air in environments such as underwater or mines, which do carry a cost. Such goods can be consumed without restriction by anyone.(Rubinfeld, 2016, p526)

Considering this viewpoint, the rise of the Internet has fueled a growing fascination with free goods and services. A substantial portion of the most sought-after goods and services accessible today are, in fact, offered without charge within the market. Social media platforms, for example, like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, along with resources like Wikipedia, exemplify this trend. This prevalence is understandable, particularly since the additional cost of delivering a digital online product often hovers near zero. Moreover, the

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creation of externalities by freely available resources also amplifies their appeal to the public. (Yeung, 2022, p901)

As established by Pomeroy and colleagues in 2020, social media is a shared resource. The researchers highlight how the COVID-19 outbreak spurred the digital transformation of all industries, stressing that internet access and fundamental digital provisions are universally accessible technologies, thereby qualifying as common goods. Moreover, as a direct outcome of digitalization and the resultant connectivity, social media presents features of non-rivalry and non-excludability, readily accessible in most locations. (Cheng, 2022, p11)

identifies internet trolling, pornography, and ideologies as harmful public goods. He defines a toxic public good as one that, in its consumption, generates adverse external effects, while also exhibiting all the qualities inherent to public goods themselves. Notably, even these detrimental goods frequently take the form of informational resources.

The excessive use of social media, deemed here as "polluted consumption," is fostering novel societal problems, including the concerning phenomenon of brain rot, which demands our attention. Previously, the urgency of formulating swift and efficacious policy responses to mitigate these problems, especially among the young, was highlighted. Currently, the notion of "social acceleration," intrinsically linked to our focus, presents a key area of concern for policymakers. Rosa examines social acceleration across three facets: technological advancements, the accelerating tempo of social transformation, and the escalating speed of life itself. (Rangaiah, 2022, p107)

Define social acceleration as the increasingly rapid compression of time associated with our social interactions and experiences. Therefore, it is pertinent to reiterate the critical need for policymakers to enhance both the effectiveness and speed of their decision-making processes by carefully reconsidering the impacts of social acceleration.

Driven by the speed of social acceleration, a pattern of over-reliance on social media is emerging. See Table 1 for a breakdown of the active user counts and organic traffic data related to 20 of the top social media platforms.

Table 1: Ranking of the 20 Most Popular Social Media Platforms (October 2025)

Ranking	Social Media Network	Monthly Active Users	Monthly Organic Traffic	Ranking	Social Media Network	Monthly Active Users	Monthly Organic Traffic
1	Facebook	3.06 billion	13,1 billion	11	Kuaishou	370 million	12.7 million
2	YouTube	2.70 billion	73 billion	12	Bilibili	336 million	1.0 billion
3	WhatsApp	2.40 billion	3.9 billion	13	Microsoft Teams	320 million	1.7 billion
4	Instagram	2.35 billion	6.7 billion	14	Linkedin	310 million	1.9 billion
5	TikTok	1.67 billion	2.7 billion	15	Quora	305 million	1.1 billion
6	Messenger	1.10 billion	253.7 million	16	Line	230 million	286.5 million
7	Telegram	900 million	615.1 million	17	Xiaoshongshu	200 million	76.3 million
8	Viber	820 million	17.3 million	18	Discord	200 million	1.0 billion
9	X	600 million	4.4 billion	19	Medium	100 million	215.6 million
10	Sina Weibo	588 million	136.6 million	20	Vkontakte	80 million	1.1 billion

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Source: <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/top-social-media-platforms>.

Analyzing Table 1: reveals a selection of the five most frequently utilized social media platforms. The observed daily growth in user numbers underscores their pervasive influence on contemporary existence. Indeed, Howarth reports that Facebook, with a user base of 3.06 billion, represents usage by 37% of the global populace on a monthly basis. This statistic elicits a reaction of surprise, alongside a degree of parental apprehension. Considering this reality, as defined within the context of brain rot, the presence of content lacking quality and value warrants the implementation of transnational regulatory measures. This condition of "brain rot," which stems from the unchecked consumption of social media, demands urgent intervention, mirroring the dynamics of "the tragedy of the commons" in relation to commonly held resources.

The phenomenon of "brain rot", viewed as a manifestation of the tragedy of the commons, necessitates involvement on a global scale. Addressing this worldwide societal challenge necessitates a classification of brain rot as a worldwide public good, triggering international regulatory measures. The benefits it generates should be thoroughly investigated in order to qualify it as a global public good. Whether dealing with private or public goods, fulfilling consumer demands is paramount. In light of globalization, reevaluating market inefficiencies and their adverse spillover effects is crucial from a global vantage point. (Caplan, 2010, p335) Methods like internalizing externalities via market creation and empowerment, alongside leveraging taxes and levies, offer possible pathways. (Kiran, 2021, p43)

The excessive use of social media generates adverse side effects, contributing to societal problems like cognitive decline. To combat this, the possibility of paid social media platforms might be considered. In principle, applying a price to a product that produces negative externalities can eradicate the unfavorable consequences. Consequently, the monetization of

these platforms, which contribute to mental deterioration, should not be viewed as the sole answer. Hence, there's a requirement for government-led interventions. There are dissenting voices against the regulation of social media. also rebuts arguments concerning limitations on free speech in the framework of social media oversight. According to his perspective, speech is perpetually subject to regulation. As a demonstration, individuals are not permitted to use offensive language during an opera performance or circulate child pornography. (Martin, 2024, p543)

Most social media sites operate without direct charges to their audience, deriving income instead from advertising clients. Functioning as platforms designed to capture attention, they present content to users, concurrently gathering data for tailored advertisements that businesses purchase. Their sustained success hinges on attracting and maintaining a large base of desirable users, thereby sustaining the appeal of ad space. Thus, these platforms must supply enticing content, keeping users engaged for extended periods. Considering these aspects, a crucial inquiry concerns whether responsibility primarily belongs to the social media entities or to their respective users when evaluating who could avert potential harm at the lowest expense. A flawed apportionment of this accountability might inadvertently impair public well-being, either by diminishing the benefits afforded by social media or by intensifying the impact of unmitigated negative side effects. (Kersbergen, 2022, p118)

4. CONCLUSION

The "brain rot" phenomenon represents one of the greatest contemporary challenges for mental health, especially in the face of the increasing digitization of human relationships and the consumption of information. This study highlighted the main clinical manifestations associated with the phenomenon, such as anxiety disorders, depression, insomnia and social isolation, in addition to pointing out the challenges that psychiatry faces

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in addressing these issues. The solutions proposed in the literature include awareness campaigns, psychosocial interventions, emotional regulation and the use of monitoring technologies. However, implementing these strategies requires collaboration among mental health professionals, educators, public policy makers, and society at large.

As a practical contribution, the promotion of a more conscious use of digital technologies is suggested, through educational programs and preventive practices aimed at the most vulnerable population, such as adolescents and young adults. In addition, the development of public policies that encourage the balance between the use of technology and activities that promote mental well-being is essential to mitigate the impacts of "brain rot".

New studies on the "brain rot" should be developed with broad and integrative methodologies, capable of providing a detailed and in-depth view on the impacts of excessive use of technology on mental health. It is crucial that these surveys include different population groups, with particular attention to children, adolescents and young adults, whose brains are at important stages of development and are most vulnerable to external influences.

In this age group, brain plasticity makes the impact of technologies more significant, and can affect cognitive, emotional and social skills in a lasting way. In addition, it is indispensable to broaden the scope to include populations from different cultural, social and economic contexts. For example, individuals in low-income countries may experience different impacts due to lower access to technology or differences in forms of digital interaction, compared to populations in more developed countries.

The ideal methodologies for these investigations include longitudinal studies, which allow to follow the effects of "brain rot" over time, revealing patterns and changes associated with factors such as age, gender, type of technology used and frequency of use. In addition,

comparative studies between different cultures are essential to identify variations in the impact of the phenomenon and cultural factors that may act as barriers or amplifiers of its effects.

use of advanced technologies in research should also be prioritized, such as functional neuroimaging to map changes in brain structures and functions related to heavy use of digital devices. In parallel, big data analytics could be applied to identify patterns of online behavior that are associated with early signs of cognitive or emotional impairment, allowing the creation of predictive risk models.

Another central aspect of future research is the development of validated and standardized psychometric instruments to measure the effects of brain rot. These instruments should be able to accurately assess symptoms such as difficulty concentrating, changes in mood, sleep disorders and technological dependence. In addition, it is essential that diagnostic criteria are widely discussed and validated internationally, ensuring that the concept of "brain rot" is understood and applied uniformly in different clinical and academic contexts. A participatory approach, involving young people and other users in the process of creating tools, can increase the relevance and applicability of results, ensuring that interventions are effective and culturally sensitive.

Psychiatrists play a key role in both advancing scientific understanding and creating clinical strategies for dealing with brain rot. In the clinical setting, it is important that professionals are trained to identify the signs of the phenomenon early, which requires specific training and the inclusion of discussions about digital health in medical and psychological training. In addition, it is necessary for psychiatrists to lead initiatives to integrate the issues related to "brain rot" with other psychiatric conditions such as anxiety, depression and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. This integrative approach can help to better understand comorbidities and provide the basis for more effective and personalized treatments.

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From the point of view of product development and interventions, there are numerous opportunities to create technological tools that help mitigate the impacts of "brain rot". Self-regulating apps could help users monitor and limit screen time by encouraging breaks and promoting offline activities. Digital games with therapeutic purposes could be developed to improve skills such as emotional regulation, working memory and empathy. In addition, educational programs that teach about the risks of excessive technology use and promote healthy habits should be implemented in schools, communities, and work environments. These programs could be combined with public policies that encourage the ethical design of digital platforms by limiting features that promote dependency, such as excessive notifications or manipulative engagement algorithms.

Finally, the advancement in the study of "brain rot" requires an interdisciplinary approach that brings together professionals from psychiatry, neuroscience, technology, education and Social Sciences. The rapid pace of technological evolution makes it urgent for these disciplines to collaborate to keep up with changes and their impacts. Only through collaborative efforts will it be possible to fully understand the "brain rot" and develop effective interventions that promote mental health in an increasingly digitized world. Building solid evidence will allow not only to mitigate negative impacts, but also to transform society's relationship with technology into a more balanced, conscious and healthy interaction.

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