



THE VOID+



We



Have



Always



Been



Brainrotted

Names Are All There Is to Know



As I take a short break from work, I wonder if I should start a conversation with my colleague who seems busy. Instead of bothering them, I open TikTok, and what is left from my break is a dense fog of half-consumed content, some of it saved for later but never reopened, and a few instantly forgotten thoughts. I return to my work.

The word brainrot first surfaced online in late 2023 as a jokingly derogatory term for our mostly short-form-content-dictated online consumption habits: a judgemental description of how endless scrolling through mindless, user-generated, low-effort content of little quality or value affects our cognitive abilities. The choice of the word is no coincidence; from its inception, the concept takes up a clearly defined position on both the content itself and the consequences of its consumption. Our position as spectators thus seems to be already ascribed in very clear and rigid terms – brainrot sits atop the social media empire as an unstoppable imperative and rules through its subjects by forcing them into complicity and stupidity.

In 2024, the term was selected as the word of the year by Oxford University Press, promoting these implications of the word

into another iteration of an evergreen moral panic of the youth's media consumption. But as we can observe, the meaning of the word is not solely tied to its ramifications; instead, it increasingly delineates the content producing the effect itself, a loose label for short-form content that consumers view as something with little to no meaning and, at its core, unproductive.¹

Brainrot should be studied with care, as we cannot reduce it to merely a genre of content. Rather, it operates as a perceptual texture of a new cultural regime that has been slowly and emergently forming for the last three decades, sprouting from and in turn shaping the infrastructures of algorithmic recommendation, content streaming and automated content reproduction. What appears today as an outbreak of AI-generated slop is only the visible froth of a much older process. In giving a name to the

1 Owens, E. (2025). "It Speaks to Me in Brain Rot": Theorising "Brain Rot" as a Genre of Participation Among Teenagers. *New Media & Society*, 0(0).



experience of overstimulation and ironic self-awareness characteristic of digital life, it ends up denoting the entire algorithmic ecology that produces such experience.

When I want to quickly check a recipe suggested to me by Instagram, I suddenly realise that I forgot what I was doing, haven't answered any of my DMs, my meal not any closer to being finished. I retrieved a few items from the pantry and sat in a liminal state between the cutting board and the ingredients. My stomach growls.

When trying to delineate a new cultural phenomenon, especially one brought about by rapid technological development, there is a strong urge to theorise this particular piece of culture and the technology that produced it in one of two ways: either as a qualitative break in our understanding of humanity, as in the cases of the printing press, photog-

raphy and the internet, or as something that ultimately leaves existing capital and power structures intact, as argued of virtual reality, cryptocurrency and the metaverse. We are indeed not trying to understand brainrot from either of these perspectives, as we feel the truth lies somewhere in between. Although the title of this essay definitely positions it closer to the second understanding, as nothing in fact ever happens, we should think of brainrot as a long-standing cultural process that has only now been able to express itself in a widely visible form, concretely through the centring of peripheral media by algorithmic propagation.

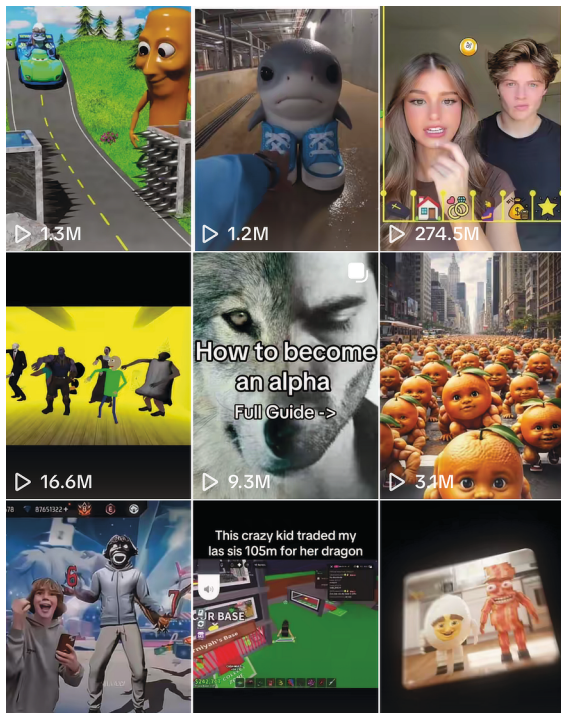
The answer is thus twofold: the deployment of relatively marginal, long-lived cultural practices that are quickly disregarded and the propagation of these peripheral media practices on a never-before-seen scale with utmost efficiency. As Mark Fisher argued,

recent technologies only changed the way culture is being consumed and distributed, with production remaining more or less untouched: *“Needless to say, it is not that technology has ceased developing. What has happened, however, is that technology has been decalibrated from cultural form. The present moment might in fact be best characterised by a discrepancy between the onward march of technology and the stalling, stagnation and retardation of culture.”*²

2 Fisher, M. (2009, April 30). *Running on Empty: The Lack of Innovation in Pop Music Suggests That We Are Experiencing an Energy Crisis in Culture*. New Statesman. Retrieved June 17, 2026.



WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN BRAINROTTED



Screenshot of the TikTok playlist created by THE VOID+ for the live video essay *We Have Always Been Brainrotted*.³

3 THE VOID+ [@nejot.pikot]. (n.d.). *Void+* [Video playlist]. TikTok. Screenshot retrieved by Lea Sande, February 2026.



[...]

The Bottom of the Hole



Sometimes, if I have to work at home and am really unmotivated, the only way to do it is to request the help of an app that locks me out of my feeds. The pull of the digital hole is so great that I often catch myself checking if the timer ran out. When I finally earn my five minute break, it doesn't feel as good as I was convinced it would. It's over in a blink, and I wonder why I was even looking forward to it. After I finish my work, I go to bed. I can't sleep and scroll for two hours regardless.

Following the path to its end, brainrot settles into view as a cultural condition that comprises many historical, infrastructural and aesthetic moving parts, rapidly mutating in various directions. It emerges as an infinitely reproducing digital hole that assembles meaning by consuming referentiality and infrastructural elements, inventing its own black hole information paradox – how can meaning ever be truly reduced to nothing?

Brainrot represents algorithmic culture at its purest, filling in the aesthetic gaps of a highly abstracted and immaterial economy. The historical persistence of peripheral media helps situate this condition, as forms once confined to margins, ornaments, pauses or breaks have expanded until they structure the whole. What once offered relief from sustained attention now defines the baseline.

We have always been brainrotted in the sense that these media practices are already deeply familiar and ingrained in our perception – they have just been enforced and accelerated beyond their recognition. Whether aestheticising the operational or operationalising the aesthetic, images created by computers, reclaimed by humans, are again being deconstructed and reconstructed for algorithmic propagation; culture operates on completely different scales than ever before.

If we stare at the hole for too long, it may look like there is nothing to see, but if we change our viewing point just a bit, we can catch a glimpse into the structure of algorithmic culture's space-time.

We Have Always Been Brainrotted^{THE VOID+}



This text is an expanded version of the live video essay performed by THE VOID+ Band in February 2026 at the Aksioma Project Space and Kino Šiška in Ljubljana.

Watch the full video here.

THE VOID+ is an initiative of Aksioma – Institute of Contemporary Art & the Institute of Network Cultures that brings together researchers Lea Sande, Tommaso Campagna, Jordi Viader Guerrero and Giulia Timis; producer and DJ Tisa Troha; artist and VJ Neža Knez; and visual artist Oskar Kandare.



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The consumption of marginal media practices has a long history, which has only now, thanks to the power of algorithmic curation, found full expression in the phenomenon of brainrot. Through an analysis of peripheral media, the structuring of content as a digital hole, and the operationalisation of short-form content within the computational economy, this essay illustrates how brainrot can be read as an untethered expression of algorithmic culture.



THE VOID+ is an international group of researchers and artists who write, perform and livestream theoretical video essays as a form of expanded publishing.

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