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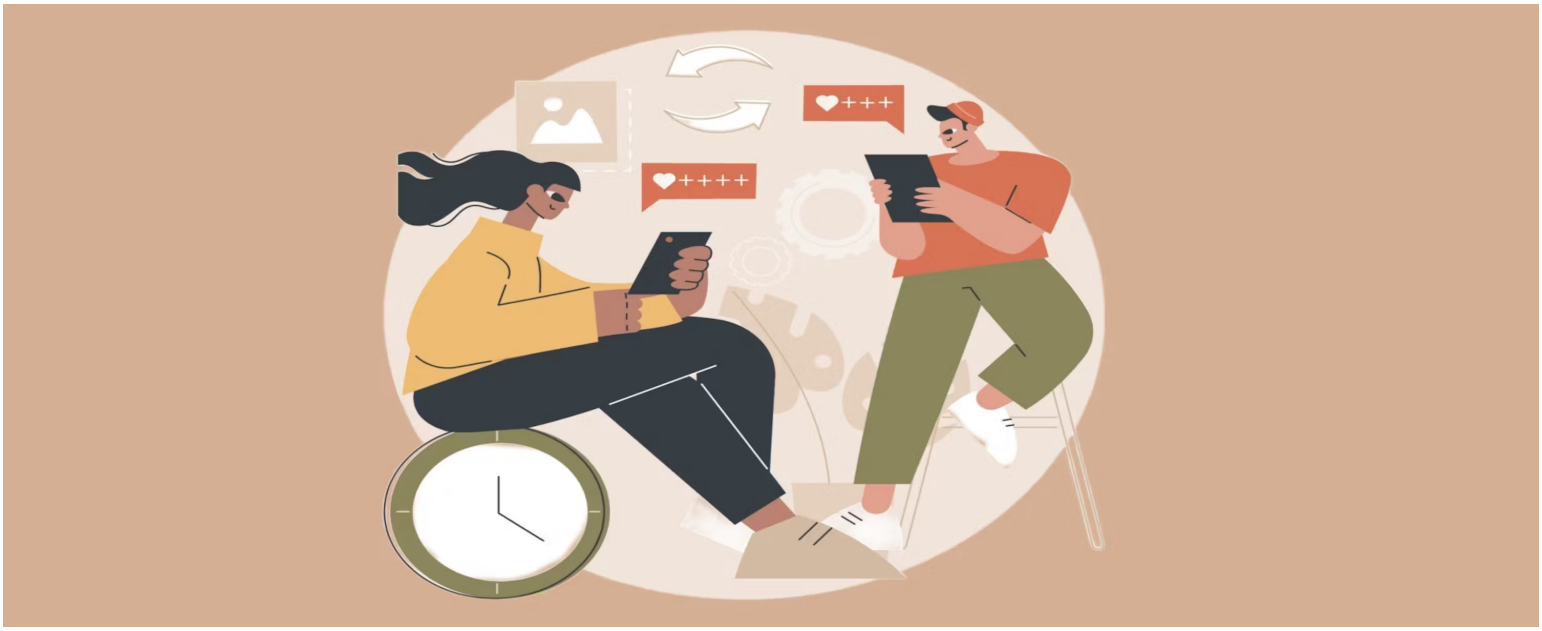
Why ‘Brain Rot’ Can Hurt Learning — and How One District Is Kicking It Out of School

By **Nadia Tamez-Robledo** Jan 16, 2025



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I was recently sitting with my friend’s 9-year-old son, Guillermo, as he teed up a YouTube video on the TV.

I’d wanted to get a kid’s perspective on “brain rot,” Oxford University Press’ 2024 word of the year that describes both low-quality video content and what seemingly happens to the mind after watching too much of it. Naturally, I sought out someone with on-the-ground experience. The playground, to be specific.

Guillermo softly spoke into the remote control, “Skibidi rizz” — a sort of modern-day “open sesame” that summoned a veritable buffet of short, bizarre videos.

A disembodied head spewed nonsensical words from a toilet (Why is he in the toilet? Does he live there?). Teens drenched themselves in nacho cheese and an energy drink while lip-syncing to audio of popular YouTubers talking about their Lunchable knockoff. A chicken nugget with the face of a man — I couldn’t tell you what it was doing or why.

This flavor of internet short-form content — absurd, easily produced, no plot — appears to be having an effect on its viewers that is being felt by schools and youth mental health experts.

Educators have talked for years about students’ shortening attention spans and how kids struggle to follow the most basic of instructions.

Guillermo stresses to me that he is not a fan of brain rot videos. For one, he doesn’t want to be like the kids at school who do like brain rot.

They’re iPad kids, Guillermo says derisively, the kind who screech in dismay when separated from their tablets. One boy in his class is prone to shouting unprompted, “Skibidi toilet!” — behavior reminiscent of the “random” humor era of the 00s.

“Is it supposed to be funny?” I ask.

Guillermo responds with a big shrug of his shoulders.

“I don’t want to watch brain rot even if it’s animated,” he says firmly.

That's an important detail because Guillermo is an aspiring video animator. Brain rot, Guillermo says, is weird and lacks a story. Its creators, he tells me, want to grab attention and rack up views quickly so they get free stuff. (It's common for popular social media creators to get brand deals with companies that use influencer marketing).

Brain rot's biggest crime, at least to him as an artist, is that it's devoid of creativity.

The Newport Institute wrote about the phenomenon and negative outcomes of brain rot, categorized by scrolling on social media for long periods of time.

"Scrolling through social media platforms spikes the neurochemical dopamine, which produces feelings of satisfaction and pleasure," according to the youth mental health and substance abuse treatment center. "The more you do it, the more you want to do it. Your brain associates scrolling with a feeling of gratification, even when you're aware of its negative consequences. In this way, scrolling can become a behavioral addiction."

Educators are testing ways to manage some of the problems that this type of social media content is associated with: students having trouble paying attention, absorbing information and feeling connected at school.

Hardwired to Like 'Likes'

One of the reasons young people have a tough time unplugging from social media is that their brains are driven by dopamine, says researcher Laura Marciano. Marciano is a research associate at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, and she was the lead author of the chapter on digital media and brain development in adolescence for the forthcoming "Handbook of Children and Screens."

As Marciano explains, the brain's reward-driven limbic system is highly active during adolescence while the prefrontal cortex that controls behavior and impulses doesn't fully develop in the brain until around age 25.

"Through that system, we can anticipate a reward at the biological level," she says. "Our brain is already releasing dopamine before receiving [likes] on social media, especially at that age."

That reward-seeking brain system makes adolescents vulnerable to what researchers call problematic digital media use, Marciano says, which is characterized by behaviors like constantly thinking about their phone, feeling negative emotions when they're unable to use their phones, and withdrawal symptoms. About one in four adolescents report symptoms of problematic digital media use, according to the book.

"We normally tend to prioritize with our attention what is more rewarding than what requires a higher cognitive load — that is something that is natural for us," Marciano says. "If we think about students studying, obviously their brain will prioritize scrolling social media because it's more rewarding and it requires less effort than studying."

Students don't have to be passively scrolling through brain rot videos on social media to be distracted from their schoolwork. Marciano says that researchers have found even having a phone out of sight in their backpack diminishes students' attention. During one study where participants were asked to complete a puzzle, Marciano says only those who left their phones in a different room were able to focus on the task at hand.

The fast-paced content ecosystem on social media can likewise affect how students learn and retain information. The brain first needs to give something undivided and sustained attention before it's committed to long-term memory, Marciano explains,

along with sleep to reinforce it.

“If we think about studying a lot and then using the smartphone or watching a stream of TikTok videos, that can be very detrimental for the memory trace to go from a short-term memory to the long-term memory,” she says.

Parents can help their children learn to manage their social media use by creating time limits at home, Marciano says, but it will only be effective if parents model those changes and apply the rule to everyone in the family. She has found in her own research the amount of time parents spend on social media is directly linked to how much time their kids spend scrolling, as well.

“We know that there are also some benefits if social media are used for a limited amount of time because it allows us to stay connected with other people, to learn new content, to be inspired, find community,” Marciano says. “It’s important to create a balanced view of good use of social media.”

Analog Solutions for Digital Problems

Shari Camhi, superintendent of Baldwin Union Free School District in New York, says that cell phones have never been seen as anything but a distraction in the district of about 4,500 students. They’re not allowed in any K-12 classrooms. They’re not allowed at all on elementary and middle school campuses. High schoolers can use their phones during lunch, but the devices otherwise stay in their lockers.

“That doesn't mean it's not without some difficulties. It's a constant reminder to put your cell phones away,” Camhi says. “We put up this big barrier that says, ‘No.’”

The effects of social media overconsumption trickled in despite the district’s efforts

to raise a firewall and to keep students focused on their classwork. Particularly after students came back from the COVID-19 lockdown, they had lost some of their social skills and were quicker to anger.

“When you go online, whatever you're reading is probably a sentence or two or three, or maybe a paragraph long,” Camhi says. “So there's this TikTok, right? It's like 15-second videos. Everything is in these short, quick bursts. And the work that we do in school is not short, and it's not quick.”

Camhi is not a fan of the term “brain rot.” She thinks the phrase lacks the empathy that students need to strengthen the skills social media has diminished.

“That doesn't mean we're not tough on it. Anyone here will tell you I am tough. I'm a kid that grew up in the streets of Brooklyn before Brooklyn was too expensive to live in,” Camhi says. “I am not a pushover by any stretch of the imagination, but I just would not use that term because whatever our kids are going through, they need more support. They need more guidance, they need guardrails, they need direction. They don't need negativity.”

Camhi wanted to get students — and their parents — away from their phones. Last year, the district organized a family field day where kids and adults played the games that Camhi did growing up in Brooklyn, when the only way to get your friends together at the playground was to talk to them in person. The Baldwin Street Games had jump rope, hit the penny and scully shuffle.

“In the middle of it, it started to rain. No one left,” Camhi says. “The feedback was so incredibly positive because it was genuine, pure, unencumbered. The kids' reaction was, ‘Can we do this every day?’ So sometimes going back in time is not such a bad thing.”

It’s not realistic to expect that parents are going to separate children from their

phones forever, Camhi says. To do that would be cutting students off from half of their social life. But the superintendent advises parents about limiting kids' time on electronics at home.

The Baldwin school district is also teaching students not to take everything they see on social media at face value. Media literacy classes begin at sixth grade and continue through high school. Camhi says the goal is to ensure that students learn how to decipher what is real online and what is not.

"We find that success really lies in our students asking questions," Camhi says. "Where is this coming from? Who's the author? Can I verify this? Those questions that kids ask, and their ability to think through those questions, their ability to think about whether something seems feasible, seems likely — that's all critical thinking."

In March 2024, the district opened a wellness center in Baldwin Middle School to offer counseling and behavioral therapy for students in all grades. That includes what Camhi calls "academic wellness," support for students who have been avoiding attending school. Another center is under construction at the district's high school.

"We're really, really focused on that because we believe that if you are not emotionally ready, you're not going to learn," she says, "so there's been a big push to make sure our kids are healthy."

As Camhi describes the district's work in supporting students, she refers often to her own childhood — one that is characterized by connection. When it comes to the activities the district aims for in its classes, educators want students to be so engrossed that they don't even hear the bell ring, Camhi says.

When she sees students plugging their ears with AirPods and staring at their phones, she doesn't see them connecting to the wider world — Camhi sees them

filtering out the world in front of them.

“Social media is this ever-present, ever-responding, ever-posting — It doesn't go away. The ability to escape from that is really almost non-existent, and so I think in large part, one of the reasons why we're seeing this breach of social norms is because you could just never get away from that constant picking at the scab.”

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