


Brain Rot—The 2024 Oxford English Dictionary Word of the Year: Why Should Technology Leaders Care?

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Abstract—This article discusses the 2024 Word of the Year—brain rot—whose sudden popularity reflects deeper issues underlying contemporary social media. *Brain rot* is a colloquial term that refers to the negative cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects resulting from the purposeless, repetitive, and excessive consumption of trivial, unchallenging, and low-quality digital media content, primarily for short-form entertainment. This article defines the controversial term, explains its popularity, and explores its implications for technology leaders.

Key words: Brain rot, memes, short-form entertainment, social media, social networking sites, technology impacts, word of the year.

INTRODUCTION

TECHNOLOGY leaders sometimes struggle to keep up with the terminology circulating within the online culture of contemporary youth. Indeed, catching up with the latest social media trends, following the never-ending memes—digital pieces of information (text, images, and videos) that replicate among social media users [1], [2]—and deciphering the constantly evolving Internet slang demand a tremendous investment of precious time and cognitive resources. In certain cases, however, keeping abreast of the contemporary digital landscape is necessary because new terms may reflect critical issues shaping our information-dependent society, with implications of Brobdingnagian proportions.

This article focuses on one such recent term—*brain rot* (also spelled as *brainrot*)—which was selected as the 2024 Word of the Year by Oxford University Press, publisher of the Oxford English Dictionary [3]. To inform busy managers about

this issue, this article defines the term brain rot, explains its rise, explores why technology leaders should take note, and offers practical recommendations.

WHAT IS BRAIN ROT?

Brain rot is a colloquial term that refers to the negative cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects resulting from the purposeless, repetitive, and excessive consumption of trivial, unchallenging, and low-quality digital media content, primarily for short-form entertainment. The first recorded use of this term appeared in Henry David Thoreau's 1854 book *Walden* in reference to people's mental stagnation when they consume dull, trivial content in huge volumes with "saucer eyes," "primitive curiosity," and an "unwearied gizzard" without any intellectual improvement [4, p. 103]. Fast-forward 150 years, and the term brain rot resurfaced in online discussions around 2004 [5] but the instances of its use were still rare. For example, in 2007, it appeared only 14 times on X (formerly Twitter) in reference to mundane, intellectually unchallenging online content or

activities [6]. Since March 2024, however, its prevalence has surged exponentially [7], earning it the title of the Word of the Year [3].

At first glance, it appears that the popularity of this term reflects a mere passing trend, stemming from youth's obsession with an eye-catching word. Unfortunately, the underlying reality is far more concerning.

WHY HAS THE TERM BRAIN ROT BECOME POPULAR?

Social media users are constantly bombarded with an endless stream of terms, stories, facts, and opinions as millions of content creators compete for their attention [8]. In this saturated and chaotic digital landscape, it seems virtually impossible for a new term to gain traction. However, the rapid rise of the term “brain rot” is not a mere coincidence. Instead, its unexpected fame results from the synergistic interplay of several factors.

Brain rot-facilitating content spreads quickly through virtual memes. However, the quantity and quality of social media memes have been moving in opposite directions, and users have to deal with an avalanche of clickbait [9], recycled content, low-effort viral challenges, conspiracy theories, trivial facts, and fake news [10]. By 2024, social media was inundated with AI slop: substance-deprived, poor-quality media, including text, music, images, and video created using Generative AI tools [11]. This surge was sparked by the advent of various AI content generators, such as Gemini (text), Sudowrite (dynamic fiction storytelling), DALL-E (text-to-image), Jukebox (music), and Sora (text-to-video). In essence, technology, which, in the wrong hands, may efficiently produce tremendous volumes of low-quality digital memes, is now widely accessible and quickly adopted.

It would be misguided to accept the notion of technological determinism [12] by claiming that IT is solely responsible for all societal problems because it is the human users who design, spread, and consume such content. The propagation of low-quality, attention-grabbing memes is driven by the monetization practices of major social media platforms, which financially incentivize website and channel owners for attracting traffic and social endorsements in the form of clicks, likes, comments, subscriptions, and shares (e.g., see [13]), and who, in turn, abuse the system by mass-producing and propagating any content that draws user attention and may be quickly shared [8]. The overall degradation of meme quality is the unfortunate externality unrelated to the initial objective of social media platforms: to build a profitable advertising business model [14]. Platforms' algorithms are also designed to quickly identify and deliver the exact content users are interested in, which is mostly determined by their previous consumption patterns. In short, a combination of Generative AI-boostered technological capabilities, social media giants' advertising monetization practices, and the willingness of certain content creators to engage in exploitative practices dramatically undermines the overall quality of memes circulating on social media.

However, supply cannot exist without demand, which prompts the reasonable question: why do social media users, particularly younger ones, massively consume such trivial, repetitive, and substance-deprived content? This may be explained by analyzing the psychological drivers behind user behavior, the innate characteristics of brain rot memes, and the role of social contagion.

Psychologically, people are cognitive misers [15] who prefer to conserve their mental resources and favor

automatic behavior over deliberate action, especially when interacting with familiar IT systems in routine settings [16], [17], including social media [18]. Thus, the consumption of mentally undemanding, trivial memes is driven by users' automatic, unconscious behavior. Each interaction with such content triggers the release of dopamine—a neurotransmitter (a chemical messenger) that carries signals between neurons in a user's brain, and each episode of dopamine release produces enjoyment [19]. The minimal or even absent substance in the viewed memes creates a sense of curiosity and makes users want to repeat their experience and view another similar piece of content—the process that takes place beyond users' conscious awareness and control. This loop may continue for hours until individuals are interrupted or exhausted. Users may engage in this behavior for pure enjoyment (e.g., to unwind) or as an escape mechanism (e.g., to avoid physically or cognitively demanding tasks). Regardless of their motivations, people's brains are wired in a way that rewards and promotes massively accessing and consuming memes labeled as brain rot.

The characteristics of brain rot memes—strong emotional appeal (both positive and negative), brevity, the inclusion of recognizable characters and facial expressions, tapping into societal and cultural issues, and the ease of digestion [20], [21], [22], [23]—create a perpetual tsunami of social contagion and facilitate their spread and consumption within particular user populations. Social contagion is the spread of emotions and/or behaviors within a group of people when one individual serves as a catalyst for the imitative emotional state and/or actions of another [24]. By contrast, reflecting on critical and pressing issues does not facilitate meme propagation on contemporary

social media [2]. Social contagion factors add fuel to the fire and further contribute to the propagation of brain rot memes. Most of the brain rot-labeled memes pertain to the latest social media trends [5], which are particularly popular among younger audiences. For example, younger users may fear missing out on the notoriously popular *Skibidi Toilet* web series (an inane machinima production depicting warfare between singing human-headed toilets and humanoids) or *Grimace Shake* videos (short homemade clips in which people consume McDonald's Grimace Shake drinks and then find themselves in gruesome situations), which are shared and discussed by their peers. Keeping up with such content gives younger users a sense of social validation and creates the bandwagon effect—where people consume certain content only because others are doing so, regardless of their personal opinion about it [25].

IMPLICATIONS FOR TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING, AND MARKETING LEADERS

While the information presented above is compelling, leaders at various levels may question why they should devote their valuable time to understanding the public's fascination with the term brain rot. This article argues that they may want to keep up with the zeitgeist of our volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous digital world to maintain their industry relevance and ensure the long-term sustainability of their organization.

Top-level technology managers (e.g., Chief Information Officers, Chief Technology Officers, and Chief Innovation Officers) are well-positioned to assess whether their existing business models rely on brain rot-related themes and principles. This includes redefining organizational success metrics by

shifting away from key performance indicators (KPIs) that prioritize engagement-at-all-costs (clicks, reactions, likes, shares, subscriptions, and time spent) in favor of value-creation methods, including user satisfaction, long-term retention, relationship building, constructive discourse, and brand performance [26]. Cultivating an organization-wide culture of “tech with a conscience,” which prioritizes corporate social responsibility over short-term profitability, may further support these efforts [27]. On the one hand, achieving and sustaining high user engagement has traditionally been viewed as a primary indicator of success in contemporary social media design and implementation. On the other hand, this approach is a double-edged sword and may undermine organizational reputation and performance in the long term. Thus, top-level technology managers may develop ethical guidelines and initiate corporate cultural changes by focusing on user well-being.

Engineering managers who supervise the development of social media technologies are encouraged to guide their software engineers away from principles of users' psychological manipulation by excluding or minimizing dopamine-driven product designs [19] that facilitate brain rot content consumption. To achieve this, software engineers can take steps to remove unpredictable reward loops, eliminate infinite scrolling, avoid negativity bias, drop excessive notifications, and disable default autoplay [8], [28]. Instead, they are advised to promote intentional use, personalization, deep interactions (e.g., discussion boards and collaborative platforms), and active user engagement while minimizing passive content consumption. They may also explore introducing periodic stopping points, content consumption limits (e.g., maximum usage time or view counts), and opt-out options

[29]. The widespread presence of brain rot shows that, on their own, software engineers may not always initiate and implement these changes, so engineering managers can support, guide, and supervise software engineers in this challenging initiative. In their interactions with software engineers, engineering managers can emphasize the principles of ethical algorithm design [30] by discouraging the promotion of purely sensational, low-effort viral trends within the algorithm. Engineering managers are also advised to integrate an “anti-brain rot assessment” as a standard component of user experience/user interface (UX/UI) design and ensure that it becomes a routine part of product development and testing.

Marketing managers who oversee the design and execution of social media campaigns at large organizations may take into consideration that the excessive consumption of brain rot content shapes how people perceive trends and marketing messages. Their target audience can inadvertently misinterpret marketing messages that incorporate ideas, terminology, and characters similar to those commonly associated with brain rot. In extreme cases, social media users may repurpose marketing messages into brain rot memes, which may be detrimental to the brand [31]. For example, using amplified drama in promotional reaction videos depicting exaggerated emotional responses to trivial events may backfire if the target audience perceives them as low-quality theatrics and dismisses them as brain rot content. In addition, marketers can minimize the reliance on sensational headlines—for example, “Doctors Are Stunned by This New Discovery,” “Don't Miss This Once-in-a-Lifetime Opportunity,” “The Last Fact Will Shock You,” or “You Won't Believe What Happened Next!”—that may be misinterpreted

as clickbait, leading to cynicism and disengagement [32].

Marketing managers who direct the design and execution of social media campaigns at small- and medium-sized enterprises lacking the resources to hire professional content developers may turn to Generative AI tools for assistance in content creation [33]. The problem, however, is that Generative AI relies heavily on existing content, trends, ideas, phrases, and stylistic patterns [34] and, as a result, may replicate elements of content labeled as brain rot, which users may eventually recognize. As a result, the limitations of Generative AI in content creation may lead to negative audience reactions and potential dismissal of such marketing campaigns as

low-effort attempts to create more brain rot.

When engaging with younger social media users, marketing managers are advised to demonstrate familiarity with current Internet slang and ensure that their products and services resonate with contemporary cultural narratives. One option is to emphasize antibrain rot themes in their offerings to foster trust among younger consumers. Another avenue to explore is the use of humor to highlight the effects of brain rot and its consequences to connect with younger audiences and gain their trust. It is also important to exclude features that facilitate the distribution of brain rot content in all types of public communication—namely, extreme concision, excessive simplicity, inauthentic emotions,

overused character archetypes, and inappropriate cultural references.

Brain rot is unlikely to be the last term used to describe the negative unanticipated impacts of IT on individual users, organizations, and society as a whole. Past examples include *doomscrolling* (the excessive consumption of negative online news, Macquarie Dictionary's Word of the Year 2020 [35]) and *CrackBerry* (a term used to describe a person addicted to mobile email on a BlackBerry device, Webster's New World College Dictionary 2006 [36]), and the list will inevitably grow in the future. Thus, technology leaders at all levels are advised to keep abreast of emerging social trends to recognize evolving user behavior and proactively adapt their products,

Table 1. Key Takeaways.

| What is Brain Rot? |
|--|
| A colloquial term that refers to the negative cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects resulting from the purposeless, repetitive, and excessive consumption of trivial, unchallenging, and low-quality digital media content, primarily for short-form entertainment. |
| Why is This Term Popular? |
| The availability of Generative AI, social media platforms' advertising monetization practices, and the willingness of content providers to engage in low-quality production for profit (supply-side factors). Users' psychological tendencies toward low-effort, repetitive, and rewarding behaviors; the innate characteristics of brain rot memes—strong emotional appeal, brevity, the inclusion of recognizable characters and facial expressions, tapping into societal and cultural issues, and the ease of digestion; and social contagion driven by the fear of missing out (demand-side factors). |
| Implications for Top-level Technology Managers |
| Review existing business models to ensure that they do not rely on brain rot-related themes and principles. Redefine organizational success metrics by shifting away from KPIs that prioritize engagement-at-all-costs. Promote an organization-wide culture of "tech with a conscience." Develop ethical guidelines and initiate corporate cultural changes by focusing on user well-being. |
| Implications for Engineering Managers |
| Encourage software engineers to abandon the principles of users' psychological manipulation and minimize dopamine-driven product designs. Ensure that software engineers promote intentional use, personalization, deep interactions, and active user engagement while also introducing periodic stopping points, content consumption limits, and opt-out options. Emphasize the principles of ethical algorithm design and integrate an "anti-brain rot assessment" as a standard component of UX/UI (User Experience/User Interface) design. |
| Implications for Marketing Managers |
| Ensure that marketing content does not unintentionally incorporate elements associated with brain rot, as this may lead to misinterpretation, abuse, and potential brand damage. Be mindful that the limitations of Generative AI in content creation may lead to negative audience reactions and potential dismissal of such marketing campaigns as low-effort attempts to create more brain rot. Exclude features that facilitate the distribution of brain rot in all types of public communication—namely, extreme concision, excessive simplicity, inauthentic emotions, overused character archetypes, and inappropriate cultural references. Stay ahead of emerging social trends to recognize evolving user behavior and proactively adjust products, services, and promotional campaigns. Demonstrate familiarity with current Internet slang and ensure that products and services resonate with contemporary cultural narratives. |
| Implications for Managers at All Levels |
| Recognize that the popularity of the term brain rot reflects a deeper issue with social media in general and highlights users' dissatisfaction with their digital experiences. Find ways to overcome the associated threats and turn them into opportunities. |

services, promotional campaigns, business models, and strategies.

In conclusion, the sudden rise in popularity of the term brain rot reveals a potential problem with social media in general and reflects users' dissatisfaction with their

digital experiences [37], [38], as these experiences contribute to people's intellectual stagnation rather than personal growth. While this presents challenges, forward-thinking leaders can transform these threats into opportunities, better connect with the new generation of

IT users, and help them overcome the unanticipated consequences of the use of contemporary IT. The first step, however, is to acknowledge and define the issue, which was the purpose of this article. Table 1 summarizes this article's key takeaways.

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