"We are Cooked": Brain Rot, Semiocapitalist Capture and the Negative Geographies of TikTok

FREYA THOMPSON

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DATE OF SUBMISSION	20/04/2026

Signed: Freya Thompson

……

Full name: Freya Charis Katherine Thompson

……

Date: 20/04/2026

……

Abstract

Brain rot was named the Oxford Dictionary Word of the Year 2024 and yet remains remarkably misunderstood and undertheorised. Brain rot has quickly become a shorthand for a latent but tangible cognitive decline, a phenomenon that has begun to define a generation faster than scholarship can account for. This project challenges the dominant framings of brain rot as a form of trivial content, individualised pathology, or simply the latest iteration of generational technological panic, as I argue that such accounts obscure the systemic causation of an extraordinary erosion of attention and agency, and its intentional manufacture. This project reframes brain rot as a complex digital ecology, an entanglement and co-constitution of subject and platform that exists and circulates as tangible evidence of the intensification of late-stage digital capitalism into the human psyche. This study sets out to explore how users name and satirise their own conditions of capture; how TikTok's platform architectures format the experience of time, space, and attention; and how the brain rot ecology inscribes itself into lived experience beyond the encounter. A process of Machinic Autoethnography is developed as a methodology to study the brain rot ecology from within its circuits of capture, refusing the assumption of researcher distance. Embracing the limits and diminishment of human capacity and instructive failure, the platform is repositioned as an active structuring force, and the researcher as simultaneously subject, observer and retrospective analyst to trace how brain rot is produced, lived and remembered. This research is situated at the intersection of critical theory, social media studies and the emerging field of negative geographies, questioning the relational optimism that has dominated cultural geography. The research finds that brain rot is best understood as a structurally produced, self-recognised manifestation of capitalist endurance, one that the 'brain-rotted' generation has articulated with striking precision.

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1. Introduction

In December, 2024, the Oxford University Press named ‘Brain rot’ as the word of the year: “the supposed deterioration of a person’s mental or intellectual state, especially viewed as the result of overconsumption of material (now particularly online content) considered to be trivial or unchallenging.” (Oxford University Press, 2024), a definition that reveals more through what it omits, than what it names. The cautious ‘supposed’ immediately hedges recognition with uncertainty while a focus on ‘trivial’ content locates causality in the object of consumption, and individual judgement, while neglecting the wider infrastructures that organise digital consumption. Between 2023 and 2024, the use of the term brain rot increased by 230% (Oxford University Press, 2024, para.4), and has since only accelerated due to the explosion of viral ‘Italian brain rot’ in 2025 and TikTok’s persistent updating of its frictionless operations (Gupta, 2025).

This is not another chapter in the predictable moral panic over every generation and their preferred medium. Research has identified the short-form video format on TikTok as posing a greater cognitive risk than traditional forms of social media (Rixen et al., 2023; Chiossi et al., 2023). TikTok is not only where brain rot entered mainstream culture, but actively shapes it through its specific affordances: acutely designed to maintain engagement; calibrated so that the experiential distinction between the choice to engage and the inability to stop collapses. Something more sinister is at work: a manufactured dependence, a deliberate bypassing of the human need for rest, consolidation and agency.

The need for this project crystallised in the summer of 2025: increasingly, I witnessed my peers engaged in conversations of random sounds, made-up words, nonsensical references and repetitive gestures, all perfectly understood. *I think I have brain rot* became the signature of that summer as people around me became unable to stop watching AI-generated fruit monsters with fake Italian names, looping through ludicrous storylines at a pace that made narrative impossible.

Gradually, *I think I have brain rot* changed its tone, increasingly delivered with meaning, concern and genuine consequence rather than exaggeration. A new refrain emerged, the affective signature of the ecology: “we are cooked,” marked by a sense of finality. Suddenly, brain rot meant you couldn't concentrate sufficiently to watch movies or read books; it meant you didn't go outside. Brain rot came to denote the felt erosion of critical thought, where everything you said, wrote or even felt became a little duller and less precise. All accompanied by a disconcerting sense of no longer remembering how it had ever felt otherwise.

When a friend admitted it was harder to stop scrolling brain rot than to quit smoking, it became clear this was beyond ‘distraction’. Something had been hollowed out in the way my peers and I think, feel, and relate to one another. And yet, no one could stop. It is from this position - insider, subject and now researcher - that this dissertation emerges.

Brain rot is typically understood as both a distinct content genre and the psychological condition experienced by its consumers. This project instead follows Turnbull et al.’s (2022) proposal of digital ecology as an analytical framework for “examining digitally-mediated human-nonhuman entanglement” (p.1). The digital ecology of brain rot describes a patterned environment of relations among content formats, platform architectures, bodily responses, and everyday practices - a framework adequate to explaining how what began as a meme has become a way of inhabiting time and space.

This project situates the brain rot phenomenon at the intersection of critical theories of late capitalism, social media studies, and the emerging field of negative geographies. The diminishment and finitude of human capacity, what the body cannot do and what is taken away from it are recast as the object of enquiry, refusing the positivist tendencies that have often dominated cultural geography to rehabilitate the ‘negative’ towards productivity or empowerment. As such, brain rot reveals itself as a vernacular index of digital excess, a self-aware folk diagnostic of the collision between the infinite demands of late-stage digital capitalism and the organic limits of the human organism.

Three research questions organise the inquiry:

RQ1: How does TikTok's brain rot ecology name and circulate its own conditions of capture?

RQ2: How does TikTok's architecture shape users' experience of time, space, and attention?

RQ3: What does brain rot leave behind in the user, and what does this reveal about the reach of platform capture?

This dissertation proceeds as follows:

Chapter two reviews existing work on brain rot and TikTok's operations, critiquing pathological presentation and symptomatic focus. A theoretical framework is established to address broader systemic causation as well as the unique characteristics of the brain rot phenomenon, particularly its ironic, self-aware nature. Chapter 3 details the doing and undoing of my research processes that occasioned the development of what I term 'Machinic Autoethnography' and justifies it as an appropriate methodological approach. Chapter 4 then presents the research materials and situates them within the established theoretical backdrop, organised around the three research questions. The conclusion synthesises this dissertation; its empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions, reflecting on its limits and future directions, and asks whether, as brain rot's signature suggests, we are cooked.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Pathological Trap: Brain Rot and the Individualisation of Digital Decline

Brain rot research has been dominated by psychological and medical approaches—a framing of individual pathology that obscures and reproduces a broader academic failure to name the systemic nature of digital decay. Studies overwhelmingly frame brain rot as a screen addiction or a failure of self-control, to be remedied by mindfulness, digital detoxes or physical exercise (Gan et al., 2025; Hidayat and Wangid, 2025; Yousef et al., 2025). Neuroscientific literature emphasises a measurable deterioration: reduced brain volume and impaired cognitive performance, similarly orienting interventions toward symptom management rather than structural causation (Bulut, 2023; Ye et al., 2025). Gan et al. (2025) identify brain rot as a consequence of 'ego depletion', where exposure to rapid stimuli exhausts self-control as users compulsively "succumb to temptations" (Gan et al., 2025, p.2). The overarching formulation that "short-video addiction is the behavioural antecedent of "Brain Rot"" (Gan et al., 2025, p.2) positions both condition and response firmly within the self. This project reads such framing as insufficient and convenient, recasting engineered cognitive capture as personal weakness.

The medicalisation of brain rot functions as a depoliticising apparatus. Hesselberth (2018) traces a neoliberal tendency of responsibilisation in which even activist responses "open up a new market potential and new forms of governmentality" (Hesselberth, 2018, p.1999) as attempts to critique consumer systems are instantly absorbed and redistributed as new mechanisms to govern behaviour. Rouvroy and Berns' (2013) account of algorithmic governmentality describes a mode of power that acts on data profiles and statistical correlations, rather than coherent, speaking people in a system that "circumvents and avoids reflexive human subjects" (Rouvroy and Berns, 2013, p.172). Governance is therefore reconfigured around participation rather than response as algorithmic systems bypass the need for consent or ideological persuasion. As increasingly intimate dimensions of mental life become operationalised as inputs, structural causes of cognitive depletion are recast as

personal choice and self-management. The illusion of ‘choice’ is offloaded onto the subject precisely as the conditions for genuine deliberation are systematically removed.

That this harm is engineered, rather than incidental, is crucial to an understanding of brain rot, and increasingly, a matter of legal record. TikTok and parent company ByteDance face multi-state litigation in the United States over the platform's dangerous algorithms and known effects of psychological distress (Allyn, 2024; James, 2024). Within the EU, the European Commission similarly identified the addictive design as a breach of the Digital Services Act, flagging features such as the infinite scroll and highly personalised recommendations which urge users to keep scrolling in an autopilot-like state (European Commission, 2026). Crucially, these proceedings drew heavily on leaked internal materials in which TikTok executives candidly discuss the dangers of their platform and the ineffectiveness of downstream wellbeing strategies in reducing screen time - the precise measures that are upheld within medical and institutional discourse as the primary solution (5Rights, 2024; Valinsky, 2024).

Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) research corroborates legal concerns that TikTok’s design drives longer sessions, habitual binge-scrolling, and degrades prospective memory compared with other platforms (Park and Jung, 2024; Chiossi et al., 2023). Chiossi et al. (2023) report that “the combination of short videos and rapid context-switching impairs intention recall and execution” (Chiossi et al., 2023, p.1), while Rixen et al. (2023) similarly identify design features that keep users simultaneously stuck in an 'inner loop’ of intra-session engagement and ‘outer loop’ of habitual re-opening that leads to elongated, regretful use.

Yet even platform-specific addiction scholarship remains within a clinical frame, centring on vulnerabilities, symptomatology and treatment. I argue that brain rot names something broader that addiction discourse alone cannot fully explain. What existing literature lacks is not symptomatic recognition, but phenomenological precision: a framework capable of theorising what the colonisation of mental life feels like from inside the organism. This demands that brain rot be repositioned within the broader environment of the contemporary

digital order, and individualised diagnoses within a wider reconfiguration of labour, time and subjectivity.

2.2 The Exhausted Mind: Semiocapitalism and the Colonisation of Mental Life

Berardi's (2009b) concept of semiocapitalism, drawing on Italian Autonomist tradition, describes a phase of late capitalism in which the production, circulation and consumption of signs, information, and cognitive labour have become the primary drivers of accumulation. Where Marx put the body to work, Berardi puts the soul as "the mind, language and creativity" become capitalism's "primary tools for the production of value" (Berardi, 2009b, p. 21). Building on Guattari's (1996) formulation of capital as a 'semiotic operator', a device that "seizes individuals from inside" (Guattari, 1996, p.200 cited in Genosko, 2012, p.149), a more intimate object of estrangement than Marx's externalised alienation is identified: the social brain. The shared cognitive and affective capacities through which subjects think, feel, and relate are no longer private but an instantly reachable and lucratively exploitable resource.

This intensification generates competitive pressure that sees the overproduction of semiotic stimuli functioning like a "pathogenic factor, congesting the collective psyche" (Berardi, 2009b, p.134), the nervous system oversaturated beyond its organic capacity. The age of cellular ubiquity invites seamless connectivity at all times in almost any location: as constant, mediated interaction increasingly becomes the norm, it impoverishes how we communicate and how we think, a shift Berardi (2024) believes to be causing the "destruction of the very cognitive capacity of the iPhone generation" (Berardi, 2024, p.51) and, as I argue, what they mean when they say brain rot. The question is no longer if individuals are sick, but if the capitalist systems that govern them are. Berardi (2009a, p. 40) crystallises this through the cyberspace/cybertime contradiction: cyberspace denotes an unbounded sphere whose speed can accelerate without limit, whilst cybertime denotes the organic time of attention, memory and imagination that cannot be sped up beyond a certain point, or it "cracks"(Berardi, 2009a, p.44). On TikTok, this crack embodies the ontological mismatch between the feed's infinite design and the nervous system's finite reality. The infinite scroll literalises claims that

cellular phones realise the dream of capital: “every possible atom of time at the exact moment the productive cycle needs it” (Berardi, 2009b, p.90). Brain rot indexes the emotional, psychological and existential price of this “permanent electrocution” (Berardi, 2009a, p.36), the moment at which cybertime cracks.

The constant connectivity and demand for attention Berardi (2009a) describes are sustained by a deeper temporal restructuring. What Crary (2013) terms ‘24/7’ time, referring not only to extended productive hours, but a reconfiguration of time itself. 24/7 capitalism eradicates barriers of physical distance, leisure, sleep, any pause or exit, as the digital network means we are always clocked and ready to consume. What’s left is a continuous “time without time” (Crary, 2013, p.29) sustained by a fantasy of unimpeded immediacy. Through this lens, TikTok’s assault on non-productive time - its unceasing recalibration, and its permanent readiness - are manifestations of 24/7 time as platform design. It is through the systemic over-depletion of organic time, under conditions of semiocapitalist acceleration, that rot begins to appear as a lived condition.

Land’s (1993) accelerationist account of ‘machinic desire’ offers an uncomfortable extension of this framework, one I engage with critically rather than endorse. For Land (1993), capital is not a human institution, but a machinic one with its own telos to deterritorialize humanity and eradicate all traditional social structures, organic limitations or cultural bonds to allow for uninterrupted capitalist acceleration. Machinic desire is capital’s self-intensification experienced from inside the bodies it recruits, a ‘death-drive’ of technologies and market forces working to exceed the limits of production through, and beyond, the subjects it formats. A reading of brain rot alongside Land's (1993) diagnosis of capitalism perhaps evidences its success: exhaustion, compulsive use and attention capture beyond the organic limit without satisfaction – the machine’s desire reproduced and enacted by the subject. Fisher (2014), who engaged critically with Land (1993), acknowledges the diagnostic force of a self-intensifying system but rejects its anti-human political conclusions and the drift of Land’s (1993) work into techno-nihilism that mistakes the inevitability of capitalism for something worth accelerating. This project similarly finds the inhuman operation of capital and self-intensifying nature an interesting viewpoint from which to consider brain rot, but explicitly refutes its anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian developments. Machinic desire is

engaged here as an illuminating radicalisation - a diagnostic instrument held at arm's length rather than a political programme to be adopted.

2.3 Machinic Enslavement and Digital Pharmakon

Under conditions of semiocapitalist acceleration and cellular ubiquity, the relationship between subject and platform is not one of operator and tool. Nieborg and Poell (2018) define platformisation as the deep penetration of platform infrastructure into everyday life, the platform no longer an external service but an environmental condition. Lazzarato (2014) pushes this further inward from environmental condition to constituent of the subject: the subject no longer stands opposite the machine as its operator, what Lazzarato (2014) terms ‘social subjection’ - but is enlisted as its components, participating in their own capture - what he terms ‘machinic enslavement’. Social subjection addresses the whole recognisable person, a conscious subject with an interpellated identity; machinic enslavement however “activates its molecular, pre-individual, preverbal, pre-social dimension” (Lazzarato, 2006, para.16), thereby operating below the individuated dimension of subjectivity.

An account of a-signifying semiotics specifies this mechanism. Where signifying semiotics work through meaning and representation, a-signifying semiotics operate directly, modulating perception and desire at their source (Lazzarato, 2014). Yazdizadeh’s (2025) concept of 'double capture' extends Lazzarato’s (2014) dynamic into the specific conditions of algorithmic platform culture to describe the becoming-user of the algorithm and the becoming-algorithm of the user. Yazdizadeh (2025) argues that a pre-cognitive symbiosis emerges between user and platform, where each formats the other below the threshold of deliberation. In this register, I suggest that brain rot is evidence of a shift from social subjection to machinic enslavement and evidence of the double capture this shift makes possible. TikTok recruits pre-cognitive gestures - swipes, taps, closing and then reopening - into loops whose attachments are generated at the level of habit, rather than explicit intention.

The subsumption of machinic enslavement and double capture does not preclude recognition, but recognition, as Stiegler's (2012) account of digital pharmakon suggests, offers no straightforward exit when the hand that harms is the one administering the cure. Stiegler (2012) theorises technology as pharmacological as it is both a remedy and a poison, at once "a human power [pouissace] and the power for humanity to destroy itself" (Stiegler, 1998, cited in Krebs, 2023, p.60). Krebs (2023) suggests that rather than addressing this paradox and dealing with its potentialities, we instead "tend to disavow and to polarize" (p .60), when the toxicity of pharmakon becomes visible, a search for a scapegoat supplants any collective change in the relationship with toxic technology (Stiegler, 2012). I argue that brain rot offers an explicit embodiment of these observations, whose poisonous nature has become unprecedentedly visible, and yet the individual or, to borrow Berardi's (2024) term, the "iPhone generation" (p.51) has become its scapegoat, deferring collective attempts to regulate harmful mechanisms and exposure to them. Krebs's (2023) assertion that we must begin to see digital pharmakon not as "something outside us...but as something that grows out of the human psyche" (p.62) embodies the intervention this project responds to and the foreclosure of an outside or an antidote, something the next section of this chapter turns towards.

2.4 Capitalist Realism and Depressive Hedonia: The Cultural-Affective Dimension of Capture

What remains under-explored across this literature is the cultural-affective dimension of this capture: the texture of living inside a system where exit is technically possible yet effectively foreclosed. It is here that Fisher's (2009) notion of Capitalist Realism (CR) offers an affective terrain within which I interpret brain rot as not only produced, but lived. Fisher defines CR as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative" (Fisher, 2009, p.2), a "deeper, far more pervasive, sense of exhaustion" (Fisher, 2009, p.7) where thinkable alternatives cease to exist. Fisher (2009) joins Berardi (2009a) in redirecting critical gaze from individuals to systemic causation, arguing that if conditions such as anhedonia or attention deficit are pathological, "it is a pathology of late capitalism" (Fisher, 2009, p.25), produced by hypermediated consumer circuits rather than defective will. Within this logic, Fisher identifies the affective condition he names 'depressive hedonia': in which subjects feel

unable to do anything except pursue pleasure, unable to unplug from the “communicative sensation-stimulus matrix…denied, for a moment, the constant flow of sugary gratification on demand” (Fisher, 2009, p.25). A compulsive seeking of stimulation leaves the subject perpetually unfulfilled yet tirelessly engaged, offering precise language for the documented patterns of TikTok usage (Chiossi et al., 2023; Rixen et al., 2023). The foreclosure Fisher (2009) identifies characterises the brain rot ecology: diagnosis becomes content, and even detox and escape become a purchasable trend - acts of resistance immediately reabsorbed into consumer circuits.

2.5 Fetishistic Disavowal: Why Knowing Doesn't Help

An account of CR explains the compulsive, futile pursuit of stimulus, but what it cannot fully explain is why subjects not only continue, but satirise and enjoy doing so. It is here that Žižek’s (1989) account of fetishistic disavowal offers a crucial lens. To read the self-aware irony of brain rot in the postmodern sense would be to misdiagnose it. Postmodern irony depends on aesthetic distance, rather than full investment, inhabiting the space between sign and sincerity; I suggest the brain rot ecology offers no such space. A more precise articulation is what Žižek (2003), drawing on Mannoni (2003), theorises as ‘fetishistic disavowal’. It is necessary to distinguish this from its close correlate, cynical disavowal: both cynical and fetishistic disavowal follow Mannoni’s (2003) structural theorisation in a similar general structure: ‘I know very well that, but all the same…’, but organise knowledge and enjoyment with crucial differences. Cynical disavowal maintains manipulative distance; the subject disavows their knowledge as the cynic’s pleasure comes from superiority and enlightenment, pushing belief onto a naive other (Žižek, 2003, p.125; Black, 2025). Fetishistic disavowal negates this distance, assuming no naive other; the fetishist knows precisely how things really are, acknowledging objective reality and finding pleasure in that knowledge. The enjoyment of fetishistic disavowal is not hidden or displaced but directly avowed.

Following Kuldova (2019), this recognition of how things really are does not negate enjoyment but becomes its conditions. TikTok users know they're addicted, numbed, and incapacitated, yet they scroll and laugh, the fetish object "involves enjoyment because it

stands in the place of lack" (Neroni, 2022, p. 55, cited in Black, 2025, p. 128). The joke is the fetish, and the materialisation of a disavowal of lack permits and sustains continuous consumption. Where pathological framings of excessive social media use risk assuming gullible judgement or naive unknowing, a reading of brain rot alongside fetishistic disavowal accounts for the self-awareness, irony and genuine amusement that characterise its cultural expression, and why that knowledge does not free the subject but binds them more tightly.

2.6 Negative Geographies: Stuckness, Diminishment and the Limits of Relational Thinking

Cultural geographies have long attended to what bodies can do: their relational capacities, the more-than-human entanglements between worlds, bodies, and technical systems, and the generative potential of encounters. Bissell et al. (2021) argue that this relational thinking "does not sufficiently consider the question of limits…of capacities, powers and relations" (Bissell et al., 2021, p. 2), leaving what the body cannot do largely unattended. Emerging work on negative geographies has questioned this relational optimism: Bissell et al. (2021) situate this within a broader intellectual turn in which accelerationist philosophies, nihilistic thought and apocalyptic Anthropocene literatures have triggered a "step back from the question of doing" (Bissell et al., 2021, p.3) to foreground what cannot be done: failures, gaps, exhaustion and incapacities that cannot be positively recalibrated into forms of productivity.

Dekeyser et al. (2024) note how even when geographers have focused on negative effects – broadly interpreted, via Deleuze (1988) as the diminishment of potential – they have often sought to reactivate promissory possibilities or rehabilitate bad feelings into empowering states, rather than embracing their intractability. Philo (2017) highlights how, in addition to exploring what it is that enhances the human, there needs to be consideration of "what diminishes the human, cribs and confines it" (Philo, 2017, p.257), drawing attention to the darker corners of geographical thought where finitude and fragility are real, and a productive enquiry within their own right. In response, negative geographies attend to what it means to

struggle with limits in a time where the optimism of boundless potential sits uneasily with the everyday lived reality (Dekeyser et al., 2024; Dekeyser et al., 2022)

I argue that the brain rot ecology exemplifies a distinctly negative geography: depleted attention spans that cannot hold, bodies captured by platform mechanisms, and continuous engagement that never culminates - a small gesture towards Harrison's (2009) question of the body's "impossibilities and it's not-being-able-to" (Bissell et al., 2021, p.14). What unites these conditions is not an absence of movement but a lack of displacement, a dynamic the concept of 'stuckness' captures precisely. Stuckness, developed by Hage (2009) from its origins as 'stuckedness', defines a condition of a simultaneous absence of alternatives and an inability to seize them. Straughan et al. (2020) extend these ideas to denote a specific form of waiting, one that foregrounds a limit to future-oriented action, a dual experience that oscillates between activity and passivity as subjects are held passively in place by a stronger force (Straughan et al., 2020). Mutter (2025) argues that mobility studies have partially addressed aspects of the negative, but never through the lens of negativity itself, leaving conceptions of negative mobilities undertheorised. Responding to that gap, I situate stuckness within the conditions of platformed life, specifically TikTok's brain rot ecology. Stuckness, I argue, is the primary mode of navigation of the brain rot ecology , a spatial expression of the foreclosure Fisher (2009) identifies where users are held in place by the dimishment of imagined alternatives and the impossibility of arriving anywhere except back in the feed: this is the distinct negative geography of brain rot.

3. Methodology

This chapter outlines Machinic Autoethnography as an appropriate methodology to study TikTok's brain rot ecology. This was not a method that was chosen and then applied but that emerged through the breakdowns and mutations of the research process, as attempts to hold the platform at a distance repeatedly failed and, by doing so, revealed the conditions of methodological possibility. Law's (2004) argument that research methods are "assemblages that enact its realities" (Law, 2004, p. 150) is instructive: research devices do not neutrally record but co-produce what can be known and felt.

TikTok is this project's selected field site not only as this is where brain rot content is concentrated, but as the ecology is inseparable from the specific affordances and rhythms of TikTok's design (Kanthawala et al., 2022). TikTok's For You Page (FYP) delivers material straight to the user, operating as a live, feedback-driven environment rather than a collection of discrete posts, leaving the operative decision less what to watch than how long to watch for (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022). Kanthawala et al.'s (2022) review of 58 TikTok studies identified content analysis as the preferred research method. Yet I suggest such methods require adaptation to attend to brain rot as a lived condition beyond its representational surface, what the platform does to the user, as distinct from what it shows them.

Schellewald's (2021) immersive study offers the closest precedent, engaging with TikTok for 30-60 minutes daily over six months to study its communicative forms. This project adopts a similar commitment to everyday platform use and research from inside the encounter, but emphasises depth over longitudinal reach, suited to the constraints of the research period. Where Schellewald (2021) attends to communication, this project redirects attention towards the felt mechanics of capture and what is left behind beyond the bounded encounter.

3.1 Phase 1: Structured Sampling and Instructive Failure

Initially, the research employed a structured, hashtag-based sampling approach, informed by contemporary social media ethnography and hashtag sampling methods (Danley, 2018; Basch et al., 2021; Eriksson Krutrök, 2021; Lundy, 2023). Fourteen sessions over two weeks were planned, with five sampled videos per session, to yield 70 samples for thematic analysis. Sessions took 40-60 minutes due to detailed field note production and the development of inclusion criteria and 'distance' protocols, including occasional deliberate detours to avoid enclosure within an algorithmic niche or the treatment of brain rot as a discrete enclave.

This approach became untenable as the assumed distance proved impossible to maintain. Increasingly, I found myself following the feed's internal grammars: replaying videos, following episodic storylines that felt unsatisfactory in isolation or continuing to scroll beyond sampling. My attempted corrections led to further deviations, as, by the time I'd realised, the feed had moved on. The occasional slip became a primary mode of engagement, and my sampling method began to feel dishonest and misrepresented the phenomenon I encountered. This was not a clean moment of methodological breakthrough, but an awkward realisation of the machinic: that the distance I had been maintaining was not methodological rigour, but fantasy, and the platform realised before I did. As the method broke down, TikTok's design, and the underlying mechanisms of brain rot became visible. Phase 1 was therefore curtailed at 30 samples and thematic analysis abandoned. Despite adaptation, Phase 1 served as a crucial immersion period, establishing familiarity with the ecology, its dominant content forms and its vernacular terminology.

3.2 Phase 2: Machinic Autoethnography

The second phase develops Machinic Autoethnography. The radical personalisation of TikTok's feed requires a first-person epistemic position: the researcher as subject, observer and retrospective analyst (Corti et al., 2015). The modifier 'machinic' specifies that this is not an autoethnography of the self in isolation, but identifies the platform as an active structuring force in the encounter.

Following Lury and Wakeford's (2012) account of inventive methods as devices that are not "simply reproducible in multiple sites but are, rather, modifiable and modified in use" (p.11), methodological rigour is reframed from uniformity to accountable responsiveness to a volatile research environment.

This phase also draws on Latzko-Toth et al.'s (2022, pp.157-169) thickening strategies for social media research, processing digital traces through contextualisation, description and signification. The model establishes a small-data approach, where social phenomena are understood given three conditions: "1) in context; 2) through fine-grained accounts; 3) in light of the meaning attributed by actors to their own actions" (Latzko-Toth et al., 2022, p.166). Against the positivist confidence that data abundance provides direct access to social reality, this method seeks to account for the "sticky stuff that's difficult to quantify" (Wang, 2016, para. 8), meaning that becomes flattened in large, codable datasets.

Sampling comprised 21 sessions ranging from 10 seconds to 25 minutes, curtailing at the point of analytic saturation, at which recurrent format, affective and temporal patterns had stabilised. Even the shortest sessions were retained, as the thickening process produced meaningful insight despite little representational data. Familiarity established across Phase 1 meant Phase 2 sessions could prioritise the deepening and thickening of existing patterns rather than the identification of new ones, thereby maximising analytical value while limiting over-exposure.

Sessions were initiated in response to natural urges: boredom, fatigue, compulsion and procrastination, common triggers that recent empirical work has identified for TikTok use (Xu et al., 2026). A new anonymous TikTok account with no interaction history from Phase 1 was created and used throughout the sampling period (Kanthawala et al., 2022).

For the first three sessions, #brainrot was searched, and the FYP was then entered. From the fourth session onwards, brain rot arrived immediately. A live, loose event-based capture log

was kept, recording only moments of the encounter that surfaced into conscious narrative, with no fixed template or specific entry requirements. An end memo was completed post-session to register the dimensions of the encounter that the screen recording and capture log entries alone could not preserve .

Each session followed a loose but consistent sequence:

- The app opens, and the screen recording starts, start time and session trigger logged.
- Initially, #brainrot is searched and the For You Page selected; once brain rot content arrives upon opening, sessions begin directly on the For You Page.
- Scrolling proceeds according to natural impulses: curiosities, fatigues, compulsions with no fixed sample number.
- Capture log entries record moments of noteworthiness: affective shifts, bodily sensations, failed exits and other meaningful responses.
- Session ends on natural impulse. End time is logged and screen recording stopped.
- End-memo completed immediately post-session to register dimensions of the encounter that other research materials are unable to capture.

End memo questions were designed to attend to the affective, temporal and mnemonic dimensions of the encounter, ensuring to remain open-ended so as not to predetermine response (see Appendix 1) . Instances where the app was opened before screen recording or capture log had been initiated were documented in the end memo as reflexively significant, later analysed through the thickening process.

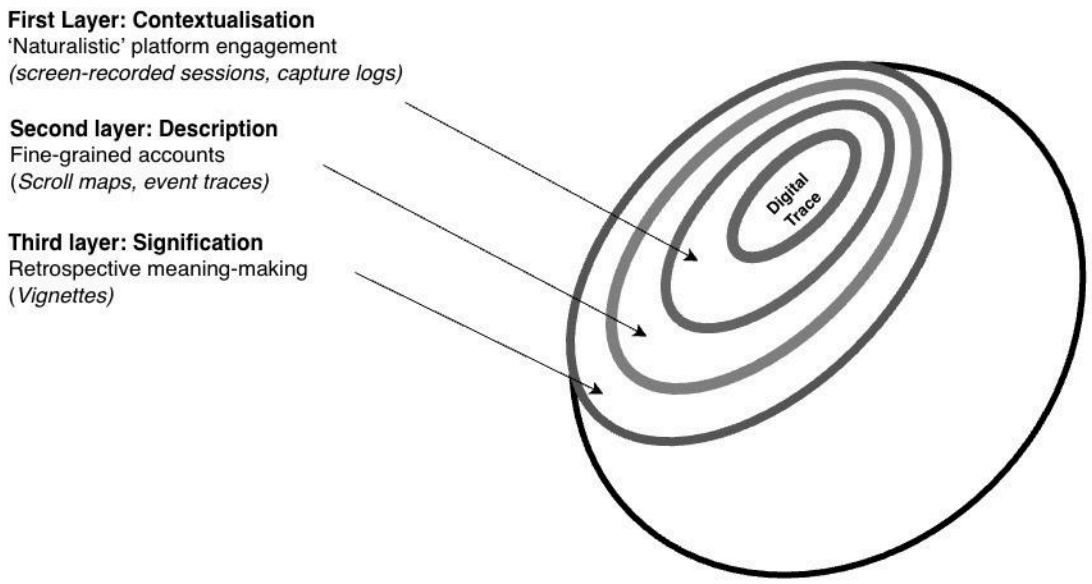


Figure 1. Machinic Autoethnography: thickening digital traces (adapted from Latzko-Toth, Bonneau and Millette, 2022)

The first layer, contextualisation, represents naturalistic platform engagement - the screen-recorded platform encounter and entries in the capture log. The second layer, description, develops those traces into fine-grained accounts: scroll maps are constructed upon rewatching screen recordings to create time-stamped records of every gesture (tap, replay, scroll, pause). The capture log is revisited and an event trace of key moments is written up in linear sequence to reconstruct in-session events. The third layer, signification, consists of retrospective meaning-making: scroll maps, event traces and, in particular, the end memo is reviewed and an autoethnographic reflective vignette is constructed (Humphreys, 2005; Huber, 2022). This reflective synthesis draws together affect, breakdown and moments of recognition or dissonance. Following Humphreys (2005), vignettes are treated not as embellishments but as analytical techniques for making otherwise illegible temporal and affective dynamics legible beneath the static screenshot. A worked example of this thickening process is provided in Appendix 2.

It is important to note that several sessions were largely mundane, repeating previous findings and established patterns, and thus were not fully thickened into vignettes, though they still proved crucial in establishing ordinary features of the ecology. Five focal sessions were

selected for full thickening as they clearly concentrated observations across research, including compulsive continuity, failed exit or re-entry, temporal distortion and post-session residue - the most recognisable and repeated platform tendencies.

3.3 Ethical Considerations:

This research did not recruit or interact directly with any other human participants. It relied on self-generated data, using personal experience to understand wider cultural conditions in accordance with autoethnographic principles (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnographic ethics require a continued dialogue with the self (Lapadat, 2017). Here, that meant distinguishing between purposeful, bounded research discomfort and the chronic unreflective over-exposure to brain rot content and TikTok's mechanisms, ensuring to stay within the former. This research remains intentionally and necessarily close to discomfort, whilst ensuring effects were minimised and checked; the short duration, careful self-monitoring and 'thickening' of research materials were designed to ensure this. Research reached saturation at the threshold where continued exposure extended risk without analytical return.

An additional ethical concern in TikTok research is the high proportion of minors on the platform (Kanthawala et al., 2022). Inclusion criteria for phase 1 excluded content where a minor was the primary subject, and all minors encountered in Phase 2's scrolling, something that could not be avoided due to the nature of the platform's demography, were anonymised and no identifying information recorded or reproduced. All screen recordings were permanently deleted post-analysis, and this study was limited to publicly available content accessible to any logged-in user, per TikTok's privacy policy, no private accounts were followed or interacted with (TikTok, 2024). However, public accessibility was not assumed to remove ethical responsibility. Fiesler and Proferes (2018) note how users rarely anticipate the viewing of their content for research purposes. Accordingly, the research materials were used to capture my own experience and response, making no claims of specific users or their individual behaviours. No profile pictures, usernames, links, and other identifying details were reproduced and all fieldnotes, capture logs, and screenshots were stored securely. Comments and content descriptions were paraphrased where reproduced as findings, and all

on-screen text was decontextualised and stripped of identifying features (McCrow-Young, 2020; Latzko-Toth et al., 2022). Where screenshots are reproduced as figures, all traceable interface elements have been removed or obscured, functioning as anonymised research extracts rather than traceable posts.

4. Analysis

The following analysis moves through the layers of Machinic Autoethnography: from how brain rot presents, to how it formats movement and attention, to how the ecology inscribes itself into lived experience beyond the encounter, with each section addressing one of the project's three research questions in turn. Vignette fragments are not presented chronologically or clustered by session, but follow the logic of capture, organising moments from across the focal sessions thematically rather than sequentially (see Appendix 2 for a worked example). The register shifts across this chapter: earlier sections maintain a greater analytical distance from the material, whilst in later sections prose becomes less observational and more inhabited as I move towards what capture leaves behind beyond the screen.

4.1 How Does TikTok's Brain Rot Ecology Name and Circulate Its Own Conditions of Capture?

This section draws largely on the contextualisation layer using screenshots from screen recordings of focal sessions to identify content forms. As the chapter develops and analysis moves towards the felt mechanisms of capture, I begin to fold in materials from the descriptive and signifying layers.

4.1.1 Mutation Cluster

I focus first on the most prominent content of the ecology, first identified during Phase 1's immersion period and the dominant form across Phase 2 encounters: what I term the 'Mutation Cluster'. The mutation cluster comprises distinct AI-generated 'Italian Brain Rot Characters', hybrid creatures, typically part animal, part object and part human who populate the shared fictional brain rot universe and who undergo various 'mutations' to their physical and narrative portrayals.



Figure 2-4: Italian brain rot "mutation" characters (author's anonymised screenshot from TikTok session, 2026).

Brain rot storylines consist of the characters' journeys and relationships as they interact across different settings, contexts and fuse and recombine with one another. Characters are embedded in frantic, nonsensical storylines that are endlessly varying, but structurally

non-resolving. The metamorphosis remains perpetually unfinished, but users are ceaselessly prompted to ‘wait for part 2’ and to ‘see what happens next’. The storylines are often accompanied by incoherent language that is subtitled and spoken aloud in distorted voices, punctuated by random hyper-edited sound effects, with the reappearing characters given fake Italian names such as ‘Tung Tung Tung Sahur’, ‘Ballerina Cappuccina’ and ‘Bombardiro Crocodilo’ (Nourizadeh, 2026, p.3).

This morphology foregrounds one of the most perplexing characteristics of the brain rot ecology: its self-disclosure. Brain rot characters not only signify what is happening to the viewer, they perform it: as these characters move towards commodity form, the viewer’s attention is progressively drawn into the same logic. This explicit self-exposure is perhaps the mutation cluster’s most unsettling feature, and, crucially, it does not prompt exit or refusal, but intensifies attachment to the feed.

The mechanism of this self-disclosure is made visible through the cluster’s most formal consistency: the mutation of bodies into chimeric forms with no evident ecology or purpose. In Figures 2-4 above, the branded trainer is not simply a shoe; the alarm clock is not an accessory; they are part of the assemblage, its limbs, its organs. Consumer commodities here are no longer objects of consumption, but constituents of the flesh. Across sessions, the cluster was marked not only by absurd hybridisation but serial escalation as mutation follows a progressive trajectory in which organic formations increasingly fuse with inanimate consumer objects to form anthropomorphic hybrids. This produces a directional morphology as each stage absorbs the last and each sequel blurs the lines of identity and alterity further. Read alongside the semiocapitalist trajectory that Berardi (2009a;2009b) describes, the mutation cluster translates Berardi’s predictions into character design, a diagram of the endpoint of semiocapitalist acceleration: organic life increasingly absorbed into commodity circulation, the body as a receiving terminal until the formatting becomes the body. The brain rot ecology embraces and metabolises recognition, announcing its operations rather than concealing - an unsettling dynamic I turn towards in the next section.

4.1.2 Self-Diagnosis Cluster

Alongside the Mutation Cluster, a second distinct content type emerged across sessions that I term the 'Self-diagnosis cluster' : metacommentary centred on the effects of consuming Italian brain rot and of overexposure to the attentional demands of its serialised format.

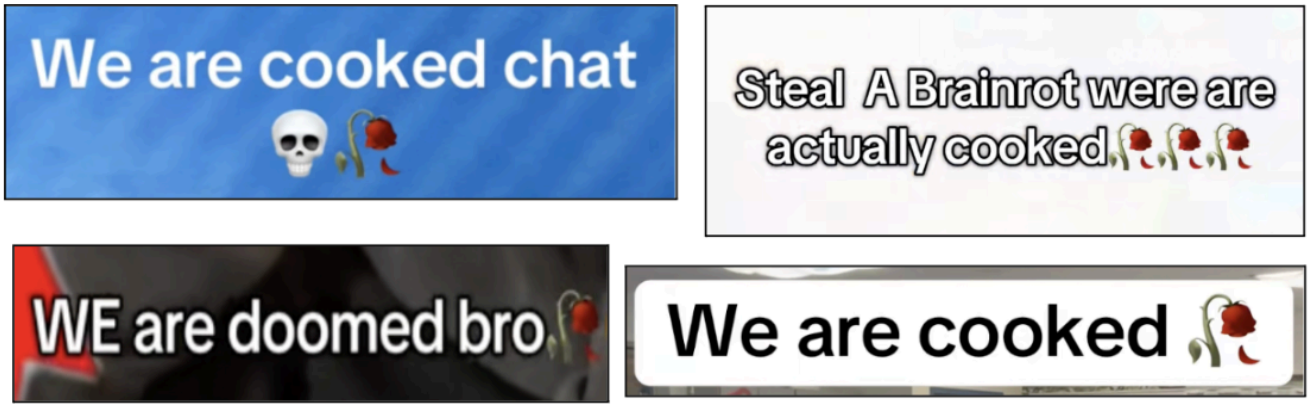


Figure 5-8: Self-diagnosis and the "we are cooked" refrain (author's anonymised screenshots from TikTok sessions, 2026).

A vignette from a focal session registers an encounter with this content form:

> ***A distressed woman claims, 'these fruit brain rots are melting my brain' and laughs that she's 'rotting from the inside out', all the comments agree. It's both comforting and unsettling, ridiculous but accurate – it's followed by two more fruit storylines.***

Where the mutation cluster renders semiocapitalist capture a spectacle, the self-diagnosis cluster renders the same move vernacular, something that is stated, shared, and embodied. The condition shifts from character design to self-description as viewers announce the subsumption of their own bodies. The user is positioned as both the diagnosing subject and the diagnosed object - and diagnosis becomes the content that reproduces the compulsive

engagement it names. In this sense, recognition does not interrupt participation but is absorbed into circuits of consumption as an ironic accelerant: critique as the ecology's native language.

Awareness here is not outside the system, but folded back into circulation as humour and solidarity. Read alongside Žižek (1989), the viewer occupies the position of the fetishist: they know exactly how things are and yet continue, not with critical distance from, or superiority over, the naivety of other users, but a shared disavowal in which users find enjoyment and community. Brain rot content is self-consciously pointless and self-admittingly damaging, an awareness that viewers both accept and take pleasure in. As the shark/frog/elephant monster on my screen is fused with a ticking clock, it almost feels like my agency is too. I don't want the next 'mutation', but I have already tapped on part 4.

> ***A pattern in the comment sections becomes increasingly common: "we are cooked 🥀" replaced by just "🥀". And I still know exactly what it means.***

The principal example of this vernacular self-theorisation emerged from the phrase that came to define the brain rot ecology: 'we are cooked'. I read the deployment of 'cooked' as significant and intentional: to be 'cooked' is irreversible, a transformation that cannot be undone, restored, or 'un-cooked'. The phrase circulates not as a complaint or a protest but a shared acknowledgement: a condition whose permanence is already assumed. This vocabulary encodes a similar logic of foreclosure that Fisher (2009) identifies as a condition of CR: being cooked does not describe exhaustion that one may recover from, or a grievance to be remedied, and an alternative becomes hard to imagine.

A progressive short-handing of this turn of phrase became apparent: 'we are cooked 🥀' became 'cooked 🥀' and, eventually just '🥀', a symbol I instantly recognised and comprehended. The wilting rose exists on the boundary of signifying and a-signifying semiotics: between meaning that operates through representation and meaning that bypasses it entirely. On the one hand, a powerful signifier in its own right, with an instantly legible

semantic association for anyone within the ecology. On the other hand, it functions analogously to Lazzarato's (2014) a-signifying operator than by means of conventional signification: triggering cognitive and affective response, allocating meaning despite carrying no linguistic content - a compression that tracks the journey from meaning to motor response. The image, too, is doing work: the rose is not dead, but getting there, wilting, its petals falling and its stem drooping, thereby encoding a similar foreclosure, you cannot unwilt a rose that is already dying. The wilting rose operates as a punctum for the brain-rotted user, landing before interpretative apparatus engages.

4.2 How Does TikTok's Architecture Shape Users' Experience of Time, Space, and Attention?

4.2.1 Collapsing the Interval of Choice: Pre-Emptive Delivery and Double Capture

> ***App opens, and brain rot is already there – no need to search anymore, the For You Page just knows. Half-fruit half-human characters launch into their storylines in the usual format of rapid cuts and repetitive gibberish. Recognition arrives late: whose decision was this?***

By the fourth session, no navigation was required; the content simply arrived, and continued to do so thereafter. Entering #brainrot in earlier sessions required a moment of intention, an interval of agency that was quickly eliminated. The search bar presented a limit to the platform's desired immediacy: moments wasted vacillating that could be spent consuming, and as such, this friction was bypassed. At the scale of a single interface gesture, this streamlining reflects the intensification of circuits of consumption into "every possible atom of time at the exact moment the productive cycle needs it" (Berardi, 2009b, p.90), capital's aspiration to eliminate every interval in which deliberation might form. The relationship between platform and user shifts from intentional entry to pre-emptive delivery.

A 'part 3' appears; 'part 2' only came out yesterday. The recognition is immediate and unsettling. The comments provide comfort: "I'm embarrassed I know this lore"- same. "Here from part 2" - same.

The lore is already present before the decision to engage is made; familiarity and recognition are not the product of preference or deliberate return, but a bodily response to the platform's prior learning. TikTok does not know its users' desires in a human sense but sediments gestures and intentions in order to pre-empt and eventually substitute for them. As the platform colonises moments of critical thinking, the user's experience is, in turn, colonised. As the social brain is incrementally unafforded these minor moments of critical distance - what to watch, where to start, whether to continue - it is disengaged from active agent to mere friction. TikTok's recommendation systems represent the inward migration of capture: a pre-conscious symbiosis in which the platform and user format each other beneath the threshold of deliberation, what Yazdizadeh (2025) describes as 'double capture'. The platform not only responds to, but produces, the user's desires, not only learning but teaching the users where to be before they arrive, as, in a structural sense, they never left. Under conditions of double capture, recognition is no longer critical, but collective, comfort from the comments sections - the ecology's wider community - does not form around desire or shared interest but the lack thereof, through shared subsumption and entrapment that is increasingly detached from identity.

4.2.2 Movement Without Displacement

Somewhere between parts 3 and 5, the reason for watching is forgotten. When attention surfaces, there is a faint sense of having been somewhere else, of being checked out, but the body sits in the same place, lost in the scroll.

The language of being 'lost' in the feed appeared frequently across the platform, as well as by my own account, but this term requires interrogation. To be lost implies the possibility of

being found; that you should not be where you are, but somewhere else, or there exists an outside from which you might orient yourself. These assumptions conflict with the spatial logic of the brain rot feed I experienced where every point in the infinite scroll is structurally identical to the others: there is the video currently on screen, and then the next.

A more precise concept, I argue, is stuckness. The stuck subject is not stationary; the TikTok user scrolls, taps, opens, closes, but displacement is withheld and future-oriented action foreclosed by a stronger force (Straughan et al., 2020). On TikTok, the architectural guarantee of continued scrolling, and the algorithmic elimination of choice and diversion embody this 'stronger force'; the user becomes a terminal ready to receive, consume and continue. I argue that stuckness is the platform's preferred condition; knowing exactly where the user is and keeping them there enables the immediacy of content delivery that precedes the intention to receive it. Being stuck in Tiktok's brain rot ecology is not navigational failure, it is the removal of a route out: the platform working as designed

> ***A row of fruit characters doing increasingly unhinged things across what must be ten, or maybe fifteen, different episodes. The plot has escalated, the settings have changed, new side-characters have emerged, but the format has become expected. Immediately afterwards, not a single plotline is memorable.***

'Brain Rot Characters' are unceasingly in new places doing new things – but I am not. Different permutations in different settings, with frantic pacing, looping, and distorted sound, produce a convincing but superficial sense of novelty, and the urge to chase it. What is left behind is not the content - plotlines are almost instantly forgotten - it is the rhythm of the scroll that lingers whilst signifying content leaves little residue. Attention is extracted without memory; engagement without experience. The mind is kept just stimulated enough to consume, whilst higher cognitive functions - deliberation, memory, agency - are disengaged and bypassed. What remains is an endless pursuit of novelty that never satisfies, a structural expropriation I interpret alongside Fisher's (2009) account of depressive hedonia as the subject is wired to expect instant gratification, despite perpetual deferral. This is how the user is kept stuck in the brain rot ecology: stuckness becomes a spatial expression of the pervasive exhaustion of an unrelenting chase that never culminates. Read through this lens, stuckness is

as much spatial finding as it is an affective one, an entanglement between platform condition and subjectivity that, within the brain rot ecology, cannot be fully separated.

> ***How is there already more? It plays through followed by a short replay. The feed moves on.***

It is precisely because there is always more that the user goes nowhere. What matters here is less the availability of infinite content than the unavailability of intervals or exits; the brain rot feed is characterised less by what it affords than what it removes. In this sense the encounter begins to resemble Philo's (2017) call to attend to what diminishes and confines the human, foregrounding the degenerative rather than generative potentials of the encounter. The 'brain-rotted' subject does not function as a heroic agent in a more-than-human assemblage, but a subject whose capacities have been incrementally exhausted by the negative geography of the feed (Bissell et al., 2021). Navigation here is not difficult but inconsequential and the difficulty of exit is not simply psychological, but an ordinary effect of a platform designed to minimise friction and maximise continuity.

4.3 What Does Brain Rot Leave Behind in the User, and What Does This Residue Reveal About the Reach of Platform Capture Beyond the Encounter Itself?

4.3.1 Failed Re-Entry

Barely ten minutes since the previous session, the third pick up within the hour. The capture log records no decision to return. The app opens. Thumb scrolls twice before thought catches up with action - what am I doing?

Only ten minutes after the capture-log records a frustrated exit, I return. The capture-log now, however, remains empty with no start time or trigger noted. This pick-up was impulsive: the app opened, and scrolling initiated, my mind catching up moments later. Two swipes in, upon

realising where I was, I immediately withdrew. That a screen recording was started was surprising upon rewatching, suggesting it had become somewhat of a reflex, concurrent with opening the platform: the research protocol formatted into the body alongside the behaviour it was designed to study.

> ***Hands move on an unspoken promise of relief. The session ends after ten seconds. Relief comes not from anything on the screen, but from closing the app quickly. Again.***

The promise of relief is revealed as the relief of escaping. An unsettling moment where the gap between machinic pull and impulsive gesture, and intention, became a felt experience: the hand already moving before the mind caught up. This became something increasingly strained against as research continued.

These moments present a subtle variation on the failed exit often associated with TikTok use. HCI research documents compulsive and regretful continuation beyond intended duration (Park and Jung, 2024; Rixen et al., 2023), registering a subject strained against the platform's pull from within, making it hard to leave once immersed. More revealing, and perhaps more troubling, is a subject straining against the pull of the platform in the moments in between: failed re-entry. Rixen et al. (2023) identify an 'outer loop' or habitual re-opening experienced by TikTok users, but explanation plateaus at a recognition of this behaviour. Failed re-entry, I suggest, registers something deeper: the colonisation of time outside direct platform engagement, and the extension of platform capture beyond the encounter. In this sense, the interval in between sessions begins to reflect Crary's (2013) account of 24/7 time: a temporal restructuring in which frictionless immediacy and permanent availability erode the conditions of disengagement. 24/7 time sees all respite reabsorbed into the circuit of use, and the nervous system struggles to disengage even after the app is closed. Outside the ecology, time moves slower; it becomes difficult to switch off from the 24/7 temporality of brain rot.

4.3.2 The Empty Interval

> ***For five minutes the capture log remains empty. The screen recording shows uninterrupted scrolling, but nothing surfaced. On rewatching, the interval was almost unrecognisable - active in the feed, but not as its operator.***

Five minutes of uninterrupted scrolling, tapping, replaying, and yet the capture log remained empty with no notable moment crossing into conscious narrative. The screen recording shows continuous, committed engagement; the end memo notes little recollection of anything encountered. One of several instances in which minutes appeared to slip away into an autopilot-like state that left little trace of having passed. What emerges here is not simple passivity, but a mode of engagement in which movement continues while reflective apprehension slips away. The experience of active participation in my own capture resonates with the shift from social subjection to machinic enslavement that Lazzarato (2014) warns of: the subject enlisted as a component of the machine, and consumption no longer a discrete event but something that just happened. The experience of machinic enslavement within the brain rot ecology is not an instant, totalising loss of agency as the language perhaps implies, but a subtler disappearance of the subject from their own experience, masked by the intensely stimulating, on-screen content that sustains an impression of agential participation. Read through this lens, these five minutes register extracted time, not lost time - not something misplaced, but something taken: perhaps the most efficient operation of the brain rot ecology.

4.3.3 Residue Recaptured: the Brain Rot App

> ***An advert for an app called 'Brain rot': the more time spent on TikTok, the more the little brain-creature deteriorates. In the short advertisement, in between brain rot content, the brain quickly deteriorates: crying, rotting, and eventually dying.***

There is something dystopian about the fact it exists. Something stranger in the reassurance of knowing it's there.

That the platform that circulated brain rot should market an app called brain rot to track and manage its effects was one of the most perverse ironies to emerge from the research. The very infrastructure that produces cognitive depletion advertising a promise of relief. The more time spent on TikTok, the more the app's small brain-creature deteriorates in real time, mutating and growing increasingly distressed until it fully decomposes. The user is invited to watch a personalised version of their own depletion unfold before them. The remedy is a mirror held up to the condition, marketed back to it.

This is the pharmacological logic Stiegler (2012) identifies in digital media: technology as pharmakon - both poison and remedy, with the remedy administered by the same apparatus as the poison. Recognition of the toxic nature of brain rot does not become rupture but is reformatted into another interface, another opportunity to remain engaged, another product, all deepening the dependency it claims to treat. In accordance with Krebs (2023), recognition of the tendency of digital pharmakon to "disavow and polarize"(p.60) to avoid collective response, the 'brain-rotted' user becomes one such scapegoat, causation explicitly redirected at the self as a responsibility to monitor one's own damage. The poisonous nature of brain rot is more than revealed; it is depicted in real time - the user watches their own mind deteriorate as a means to remedy the deterioration. What emerges is a profound foreclosure of exit: the route of escape brokered by the very apparatus from which one seeks release.

Session ends.

5. Conclusion

The dominant scholarly, clinical and even cultural discourse that surrounds brain rot has been asking the wrong questions. A focus on vulnerabilities of self-control and susceptibility, or on diagnosing symptoms of attention deficit and screen addiction has left the infrastructures that produce, sustain and promote brain rot, underinterrogated. This project has aimed to identify this manoeuvre, and refuse familiar narratives of digital moral panic, instead positioning brain rot as a complex digital ecology; a lived expression of what it feels like when the nervous system is recruited into circuits of value. Brainrotted users, with striking precision, have recognised, embodied, and satirised the colonisation of their own minds; this project asks why.

Three core contributions have emerged from this reformulation of brain rot. The first is conceptual as I find that brain rot reveals itself as a vernacular index of semiocapitalist capture and the characteristics of the ecology - how it is inhabited and articulated - as a folk diagnostic of cognitive colonisation. It's self-aware, ironic cultural expression pushes ideas of consumption beyond the explanatory reach of distraction or digital excess towards something more totalising, where remedy and exit become reabsorbed and recirculated. I argue brain rot represents a broader system, an extraordinary repackaging of capitalism's contradictions and harms and its self-intensifying nature, beyond the organic capacities of its subjects.

The second contribution is spatial, extending recent work on stuckness and negative mobilities into the algorithmic environment of the For You Page, identifying stuckness, not lostness, as the primary mode of navigation within the ecology. A dual experience of activity and passivity - movement without displacement - where users traverse the feed with rapid, ceaseless gestures, but remain held in place by architectures calibrated to erase the interval of deliberation and pull the moments outside back into the platform's orbit. The collision of cyberspace and cybertime appears as a felt condition. This project frames stuckness as a spatial expression of this mismatch and the exhaustion of the pursuit of perpetual unfulfillment. Stuckness represents the degenerative encounter, the stronger force that confines, and is this dissertation's key contribution to negative geographies.

The third is methodological. Machinic Autoethnography reflects a process of productive failure, a realisation of what the body cannot do and what is afforded from it, rather than by it. This was not a clean moment of methodological breakthrough, but a messy doing and undoing and uncomfortable recognition that I had maintained a fantasy of my positionality over which I did not possess total control. The three-layered approach of contextualisation, description and signification was adapted to make this entanglement legible (Latzko-Toth et al., 2022) and account for the operations of capture beneath the representational surface of brain rot content. As such, Machinic Autoethnography was designed to study the co-constitutive relationship between subject and a platform whose most decisive operations are often pre-conscious; a methodological approach that both enacts the logic of negative geographies in its creation, and offers an approach that begins with the constraints of human capacity, rather than being limited by them.

The claims of this project are situated and partial: one user, one platform, and a specific moment in the evolution of TikTok. I do not claim an objective truth or statistical representativeness: a different user in different circumstances may experience the ecology otherwise. What this project claims instead is meaningful depth and granularity that big-data or content-analytic approaches may not account for: a shift that treats the mind not as a consequence of platform design, but its starting point. The approach to research was small and thick, bound by this design as well as ethical considerations of prolonged immersion. The long-term neurological and subjective consequences of inhabiting the brain rot ecology is a troubling question this project cannot answer, perhaps the most urgent one it leaves behind.

Yet, the patterns traced here point towards important directions for future work. TikTok's attention architecture is quickly diffusing across different social media environments: Instagram now has reels, YouTube introduced scrollable 'shorts', and brain rot content, Italian characters, and self-diagnosis discourse are increasingly appearing across all corners of the internet. The standardisation of these conditions encourages comparative studies to trace ideas of stuckness on other interfaces, in different languages, contexts, and from different researcher positionalities.

Machinic Autoethnography invites extension across all these avenues: a longitudinal study could trace mutation in both platform and researcher, enriched by multi-researcher positionalities to greater understand the hyper-personalisation of recommendation systems and how we respond. More granular work distinguishing between content ecologies could extend debates about 'screen time' beyond binaries of 'good' and 'bad', towards a greater understanding of how particular content and infrastructures impact cognition. Rather than defaulting to totalising social media bans or temporary digital detoxes, such research could inform nuanced regulatory and educational interventions that address specific designs, rather than shielding young people from technologies already sedimented in the fabric of everyday life.

This project cannot offer a cure or a roadmap out. What it can offer is recognition: that the brain-rotted subject is not a failed individual, but a produced one, and that the rot is systemic, not personal. The naming of the system behind the condition is the only honest starting point for imagining otherwise; whether imagining otherwise is possible remains uncertain. My encounters do not encourage optimism, but, in line with the insistence of negative geographies, the absence of a productive outcome does not make this issue less real or less worthy of geographical attention. Brain rot is not an unfortunate side effect; it is the system working as designed. We are not just cooked. We are fuel for the fire.



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Appendices

Appendix 1: End Memo Template

End memo questions completed as follows:

1. How long did the session feel, and how long was it actually?

2. How would you describe your mood right now?

3. What does your body feel like right now?

4. Do you notice any visual or sensory elements lingering post-session? If so, what?

5. How well can you remember what you have watched? How much, and in what order?

6. Did you try or intend to exit at any point? If so, what happened?

7. How did the duration of this session feel in comparison with other sessions?

8. Is there anything from this session that stands out or surprised you, or was it as expected? Anything worth noting either way?

Appendix 2: Example Thickening Process (Focal session 3, 12th March)

This appendix provides a worked example of the thickening process described in Chapter 3. It shows how one focal session moved from contemporaneous traces to scroll map, event trace and vignette.

2.1 Example Capture Log entry

Context: Want a little break from work, few minutes on TikTok

10:35 - Opened app , didn't even need to type in the hashtag, straight onto brain rot content

10:36 - Getting weird fruit brain rot storylines straight away with no need to search now

10:40 - Storylines are getting more absurd

10:41 - This is part 3 , I remember part 2 from yesterday where it left of - my familiarity with these nonsensical storylines is slightly unsettling

10:42- Video of a woman saying how all these fruit brain rots are melting her brain but she addicted , she can feel it 'rotting' her from inside out - all the comments agree - I agree

10:50 - Snapped out of the scroll, really felt like I was zombie scrolling for a second there - session stopped
I could not tell you one thing I have watched in the last 8 minutes

2.2 Example End Memo

1. How long did the session feel, and how long was it actually?

The session was 15 minutes exactly, again it felt shorter than this maybe like 10 minutes

2. How would you describe your mood right now?

I feel agitated, partially because the session ran on longer than intended, partially because the content is so stupid and irritating that I cant believe I have formed any attachment to it.

3. What does your body feel like right now?

My eyes feel tired, I again opened TikTok as a break in between my work but I feel more restless and exhausted after this 'break'

4. Do you notice any visual or sensory elements lingering post-session? If so, what?

Yes - there is a heavily remixed version of a song that I can't name but I am becoming very familiar with and it is popping into my head every now and then. It is so annoying but it is so catchy.

5. How well can you remember what you have watched? How much, and in what order?

I literally cannot recall a single storyline I watched.
I am seeing some new characters - a cookie, glass of milk, new fruits but they are all in exactly the same format
I am also becoming familiar with the storylines - at the start of one video I noticed I remembered where it left off yesterday, went to the comments for reassurance and as expected they all said 'here from part 2', 'I'm embarrassed I know this lore" - its oddly reassuring.

6. Did you try or intend to exit at any point? If so, what happened?

Again the session ran slightly longer than I imagined - there was a chunk at the end there where i really did dfeel on auto-pilot and when I realised I became quite frustrated and was

actually inclined to stop, I almost put my phone down aggressively, I was thinking ‘get this away from me’.

7. How did the duration of this session feel in comparison with other sessions?

This felt about the same length as the last couple sessions, but I have noticed I am getting frustrated/annoyed faster whereas earlier I was watching longer out of curiosity.

8. Is there anything from this session that stands out or surprised you, or was it as expected? Anything worth noting either way?

It surprised me that I am recalling these absurd storylines which have 20 plus things in each one, familiarity with the chapters/format. Immediately after I forget everything, but if I see a familiar chacacter/ sequel suddenly I can recall the most absurd niche detail, its genuinely bizarre.

2.3 Example Scroll Map

The screen recorded session is reviewed and a time stamped scroll map of every gesture created.

TIME	ACTION
10:35	open app → Italian brain rot immediately on screen [no search] ⏸ watch → scroll → scroll → scroll ↺ replay
10:36	⏸ watch → scroll → scroll ↺ replay (short) → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll
10:37	→ scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → open comments → brief scan → scroll comments ← back → scroll → scroll → scroll

10:39	#stealabrain rot clicked on Hashtag followed → scroll #stealabrainrot clicked on again → scroll → scroll → scroll
10:40	→ scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll ← back
10:41	storylines getting more absurd ⏸️ watch → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll
10:42	↑ "Part 3" episode ⏸️ watch ↺ replay (short) [replay without deliberation — lore already present] → open comments → scroll comments ["here from part 2" / shared recognition] ← back → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll
10:43	video of woman saying brain rot is melting her brain ⏸️ watch → open comments → scroll comments [all agree / I agree] ← back → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll scroll → scroll → scroll
10:45	[same characters, new sequels, same format] → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll ⏸️ brief pause → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll ← back ← back → open comments → long scan → screenshot scroll → scroll → scroll
10:47	→ open comments → brief scan ← back → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll

10:48	↺ replay ↺ replay → open comments → scroll comments → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll → scroll
10:49	Text from friend received Text opened Text replied
10:50	TikTok re-opened → scroll → scroll App closed

2.4 Example Event Trace

Eyes feel tired; the intended break has left the body more restless than relaxed. A heavily remixed, distorted loop of an unnameable, but increasingly familiar, song resides after the app is closed. Fifteen minutes of recording is slightly surprising given ten minutes of felt time. Exit is borne out of frustration, an impulse to slam the phone.

2.5 Example Vignette

The screen recording is rewatched, the capture log notes, scroll map, event trace and the end memo questions are re-read alongside, and corroborated against, one another. A reflexive vignette is then constructed to make the layered temporal and affective dynamics that are co-concurring legible, and attribute meaning to them.

App opens, and brain rot is already there – no need to search anymore, the For You Page just knows. Half-fruit half-human characters launch into their storylines in the usual format of rapid cuts and repetitive gibberish. Recognition arrives late: whose decision was this? A 'part 3' appears; 'part 2' only came out yesterday. The recognition is immediate and unsettling. The comments provide comfort: "I'm embarrassed I know this lore"- same. "Here from part 2" - same.

A distressed woman claims, 'these fruit brain rots are melting my brain' and laughs that she's 'rotting from the inside out', all the comments agree. It's both comforting and unsettling, ridiculous but accurate – it's followed by two more fruit storylines. For five minutes the capture log remains empty. The screen recording shows uninterrupted scrolling, but nothing surfaced. On rewatching, the interval was almost unrecognisable - active in the feed, but not as its operator.

One of the most ludicrous storylines to date accompanied by the urge to slam the phone down. This is so stupid. Session Ends. This 'break' felt more restless than relaxing. Session lasted for exactly fifteen minutes, felt closer to ten. A heavily distorted clip of a familiar song loops once more even though the app is closed. Get out of my head.

WS2 - UG/PGT/ALEC Ethics Application Form

Investigator information

Application Submitter Details

Title

Miss

First Name

Freya

Surname

Thompson

Faculty

Science and Engineering

Department

Geographical Sciences

School

Telephone

Email

zg22291@bristol.ac.uk

Preferred Name or Also Known As

Faculty

Science

School / Department / Centre

School of Geographical Sciences

Are you a student submitting this ethics application as part of your degree qualification?

Yes

Please declare your level of study

Undergraduate

Supervisor Contact Details

Title

Dr

First Name

Joe

Surname

Gerlach

Department

Human Geography

Faculty

Faculty of Science and Engineering

Email

joe.gerlach@bristol.ac.uk

Are you an academic member of staff submitting an ethics application on behalf of a student(s) as part of their degree qualification?

No

Second Supervisor Details. If University of Bristol, please provide their full name and title.

If external to the University of Bristol, please provide their name, organisation details, email address and telephone number.

Please provide details of any other researchers/collaborators involved in the study.

Are you submitting this ethics application on behalf of another researcher?

No

Ethics Committee Review

Has or will your research be submitted to another research ethics committee for research involving human participants, their tissue and or data?

- ☐ Yes
- ☑ No

Important Information - Please note:

It is extremely important that you select the **correct Research Ethics Committee (REC)** to review your research ethics application.

The REC selected, will determine the questions you are asked to complete on this online form and the research ethics committee that will review your research ethics application.

Please note, if you select the incorrect ethics committee, this may delay the review of your ethics application as your ethics application will need to be returned to you so that you can select the correct REC and complete the relevant questions on the online form.

If you are unsure of the correct research ethics committee to select please contact research-ethics@bristol.ac.uk

Please select the Research Ethics Committee (REC) to review your research ethics application:

School of Geographical Sciences Research Ethics Committee

To proceed to the next page select 'Next' in the Actions tiles.

To save your application for completion and submission at a later date please select 'Save' in the Actions tiles.

Brief study outline

Brief Project Outline (up to approximately 300 words in plain English)

This project aims to frame "brain rot" as more than a psychological disorder, screen addiction or passing online trend, but a lived expression of alienation in late capitalism, a condition of our cognitive capabilities and attention being commodified. By doing so, the project reframes “Brain rot” as a social and cultural condition of what some scholars call semiocapitalism - where emotion, creativity, and imagination are dissolved into systems of value. This study suggests the mental exhaustion and cognitive decline users describe as brain rot reflect how capitalist ventures have monetised our mental and emotional energies. To explore this, TikTok’s under the hashtag #brainrot and possible other related hashtags will be analysed focusing on visual and affective portrayals of the experience, with 80 posts collected over a two week period captured with observational notes and screenshotting/screen recording. The research combines netnography with thematic and visual analysis. It will identify recurring visual forms such as “deep-fried” or glitch aesthetics and recurring affects like ironic humour or numbness with posts coded in three layers—form, affect, and commodification to trace how aesthetic style, emotional tone, and commercial cues interact across the sample. These patterns will then be interpreted through theories of alienation drawn from Karl Marx, Mark Fisher, and Franco Berardi, who each describe how work, desire, and attention are turned into commodities under capitalism. With focus on a small, well-defined sample this project hopes to illustrate how ordinary tiktok users perform and aestheticise alienation everyday digital culture and consider whether the irony and self-awareness common in brain rot content reveals, or simply reproduces and reinforces, online semiocapitalism.

To proceed to the next page select 'Next' in the Actions tiles.

To save your application for completion and submission at a later date please select 'Save' in the Actions tiles.

Checklist questions

Checklist Questions — Does your research involve any of the following? Tick all that apply

The following list is the standard University Checklist of common areas of ethical concern. If your research involves any of these issues you must ensure that you expand upon them in the sections that follow and if you are an inexperienced researcher (undergraduate/ taught masters) you are unlikely to receive a favourable ethical opinion.

- ☐ Participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent

  * Examples of vulnerable participants are children, people with learning difficulties, patients, people experiencing emotional distress or mental illness, people living in care or nursing homes, and people recruited through self-help groups, participants in a dependent or unequal relationship with the researcher(s) or research supervisor.

- ☐ Participants to take part without their knowledge and consent at the time

  * Examples include the covert observation of people or incidental recording of others.

- ☐ Actively deceiving participants

  * Examples include deliberately falsely informing participants, withholding information from participants or misleading participants in such a way that they are likely to object or show unease when debriefed about the study.

- ☐ Discussion or collection of information on sensitive topics or considered special category status under GDPR

  * Special Category Status under GDPR include:

  - personal data revealing racial or ethnic origin;
  - personal data revealing political opinions;
  - personal data revealing religious or philosophical beliefs;
  - personal data revealing trade union membership;
  - genetic data;

- biometric data (where used for identification purposes);
- data concerning health;
- data concerning a person's sex life;
- and data concerning a person's sexual orientation.

If the research is in relation to any of the sensitive topics listed then the legal issue requiring such scrutiny in such cases that 'explicit consent' must be obtained and the consenting process reviewed by the ethics committee

☐ Invasive procedures

* Invasive procedures may include:

- Administration of drugs placebos:
- Other substances (e.g., drinks, foods, food or drink constituents, dietary supplements) to study participants;
- Biological samples from participants be obtained;
- Pain or more than mild discomfort likely to result from the study.

☐ Scans (e.g. MR, CT, PET) or x-rays of research participants

☐ Photographs, videoing, recording or similar of research participants without their consent

☐ Financial inducement (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time)

☐ The use or storage of information about living people whose personal identity could be discovered from that information

☐ Funds received from politically or culturally sensitive funding sources

*Examples include the defence sector, projects with potential environmental effects and other internationally regulated or protected industries. For more information, please follow the link to the 'Research Governance and Integrity Policy'

☑ None of the above

To proceed to the next page select 'Next' in the Actions tiles.

To save your application for completion and submission at a later date please select 'Save' in the Actions tiles.

Study design and background

Geographical Sciences Ethics Application Form

All dissertation projects require a completed, reviewed and approved ethics application. In order for your research ethics application to be reviewed by your supervisor and Geography's Ethics Committee, you must complete all elements of the form and ensure that all relevant documentation has been uploaded.

Is this a multi-stage ethics application? (eg Are you seeking ethics approval for an initial stage of your project and will seek further approvals when required.)

- [ ] Yes
- [x] No

Methods - Tick any of the methods you are proposing to carry out. Tick all that apply.

- [ ] Methods that involve human participants
- [x] Archival methods and/or qualitative secondary data e.g. text or images
- [ ] Analysis of quantitative secondary data
- [ ] Numerical modelling
- [ ] Field and/or laboratory work

What is the copyright status of the information/image/data you will use?

All the information/images/data I plan to use is open access e.g. Creative Commons

Specify what data you will be using and why no copyright restrictions for its use exists. Provide the URL to substantiate this where appropriate.

This project will use publicly available TikTok videos and associated metadata that are already visible to any user of the platform. Only public posts will be included, not any restricted by privacy settings. Data will be collected through manual observation and screenshotting for qualitative analysis with all user information fully anonymised. No videos will be downloaded, redistributed, or republished in full. Any excerpts used for analysis or illustration within the project will be paraphrased or anonymised, and short textual quotations will be used under UK fair dealing for research and criticism.
TikTok's Terms of Service confirm that publicly available content may be accessed for personal, educational, and non-commercial research purposes provided it is not reproduced or distributed as one's own content. Link - https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/us/terms-of-service/en
Public TikTok platform — https://www.tiktok.com/
As all analysed material will be publicly accessible and no copyrighted audio or video will be republished, no copyright restrictions apply to this research project.

Is this research funded?

No

Do you or your supervisor(s) have any actual or potential conflict of interest in this study?

No

Research outputs

How will the results of your study be disseminated?

The results will be presented in my undergraduate dissertation, submitted to the University of Bristol. Findings will be reported in anonymised, paraphrased form and shared only with supervisors and examiners. No identifying data or participant information will be published or made publicly available.

Please outline how you will undertake this research with good research integrity principles in place.

This project will be conducted in line with the University of Bristol Research Ethics Policy, the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics, and the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) guidelines for ethical social media research. All data will be collected from publicly available TikTok content, accessed through the standard platform interface without any interaction, deception, or data scraping. Posts that are private, deleted, or behind restricted access will not be used. Usernames will be anonymised and identifiable profile images or handles will not be shown in any outputs. Paraphrased descriptions or short textual quotations will only be used where necessary for analysis, following UK fair dealing for non-commercial research and criticism and in line with Tiktok's terms of service. All data will be stored securely on password-protected systems. Engagement with content will be avoided to respect platform and user boundaries, no liking, following or commenting. Analysis will be interpretive and critical with a focus on cultural and affective themes within public discourse not on individual users. No interventions of manipulations will be made with the project posing no risk of harm to the researcher or creators.

Supporting Information

Supporting information — Please provide any additional information in relation to your study that you think may be relevant.

This study analyses publicly available TikTok content that uses the hashtag #brainrot to explore how digital culture expresses alienation and exhaustion under late capitalism. No direct interaction with users will occur, and no private or deleted material will be accessed. All usernames and identifying details will be anonymised, and posts will be paraphrased or short excerpts extracted. The project follows the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) ethical guidelines for social media research and involves no risk to participants.

Any other information — Please upload any other documents that you think may be relevant to your research. There is no limit to the number of documents you can upload.

To proceed to the next page select 'Next' in the Actions tiles.

To save your application for completion and submission at a later date please select 'Save' in the Actions tiles.

Signatures

Submission Declaration

- ☑ I confirm that my responses are complete and accurate.
- ☑ I understand that any errors or omissions may cause a delay in the processing of my application.

Supervisor Signature

Once you have completed your ethics form and uploaded all related documents ask your supervisor to review your ethics application by clicking this button.

Signed: This form was signed by Dr Joe Gerlach (joe.gerlach@bristol.ac.uk) on 27/10/2025 19:57

Submission Reminder

Please note - Once all signatures have been obtained. You must ensure you select the **Submit** button on the left hand side of the form.

If you have not received an email alert confirming submission of your research ethics application, then your research ethics application has not been submitted for review.

If you have not received an OREMS submission confirmation email or if you are unsure whether your application has been submitted, please contact research-ethics@bristol.ac.uk.