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Scrolling Into Stagnation: A Qualitative Study on the Perceived Effects of 'Brain Rot' Among Students' Communication Skills

Karen P. Donaldo[1]
[1]Davao del Norte State College, Davao del Norte, Philippines

Corresponding author e-mail: karen.donaldo@dnsc.edu.ph

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Abstract: This qualitative study investigates the perceived effects of the phenomenon colloquially known as "brain rot" on students' communication skills. The term refers to the decline in cognitive and expressive functions resulting from prolonged exposure to passive digital content, particularly on social media platforms. Using semi-structured interviews with purposively selected students, this study sought to understand how excessive screen time influences verbal expression, social interaction, vocabulary development, and overall communication behaviour. Findings revealed recurring themes including reduced attention span, increased reliance on meme-based or short-form expressions, diminished face-to-face interaction confidence, and a perceived deterioration in critical thinking and vocabulary richness. While students acknowledged the benefits of digital connectivity, many reported feelings mentally fatigued and less articulate during offline conversations. These insights suggest that the overconsumption of fast-paced, visually stimulating content may gradually undermine fundamental communication abilities. The study concludes that "brain rot" is not merely a humorous online term but a reflection of a growing concern over digital media's influence on essential life skills. It recommends the implementation of media literacy education, balance in screen time, and the reinforcement of traditional communication practices in educational settings.

Keywords: Brain Rot, Qualitative Study, Social-Media, Students' Communication Skills

A. Introduction

The rise of the digital age has dramatically transformed communication patterns, particularly among students, raising concerns about cognitive and communicative declines, sometimes referred to as 'brain rot.' Recent studies highlight that excessive screen time and reliance on digital devices negatively impact adolescents' cognitive functions and communication abilities. The study found that adolescents engaging in

high screen-time behaviours exhibit significantly greater difficulties with concentration, memory, and decision-making, critical components of effective communication (Onyeaka et al., 2022). Similarly, a study demonstrated that even young children exposed to more than one hour of daily screen time show impaired social skills, language development, and overall communication abilities (Kerai et al., 2022). Understanding these effects is crucial, as communication skills are foundational to human interaction and essential for academic and social success in an increasingly digital world.

While facilitating instant communication, social media may contribute to the brain rot phenomenon by promoting superficial interactions rather than deep, meaningful exchanges. For instance, students frequently mimic viral trends or audios from platforms like TikTok and YouTube Shorts—such as the "skibidi toilet" series, exaggerated meme expressions like "rizz," "gyatt," or nonsensical soundbites like "tralalilo tralala." These trends, though entertaining, often lack substantive meaning and are habitually repeated in real-life conversations, replacing thoughtful dialogue with catchy yet empty phrases. According to 2019 Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Survey (2021), excessive engagement with viral TikTok trends can lead to superficial social interactions and hinder the development of greater communication skills. Additionally, a study found that the rapid context switching inherent in short-form video consumption impairs cognitive functions such as prospective memory, further limiting students' ability to sustain coherent discussions or express complex emotions (Angelique et al., 2025). These behavioural shifts reflect a potential erosion of deeper communication practices fostered by the pervasive influence of social media trends.

At the national level, in contrast with the declining numbers of mainstream media, the Philippines has seen a rise in internet connectivity. In 2013, only 16.2% of the population was exposed to the internet for social media or emails and 13.9% for research work, respectively; these jumped up to 73.9% and 63.6% in 2019, with a combined 67.7% of the population using the internet daily (Chiossi et al., 2023). Noticeably absent are some emerging media platforms in the Philippines with the same affordances and considerable local users: TikTok and WeChat. The latest government data shows 58,806 Filipinos aged 10-64 are exposed to social media, and a study shows 48.8% of Filipino Internet users aged 16-64 using TikTok and 21.3% using WeChat. While technology offers opportunities for innovative learning, the potential for communication skill degradation demands critical examination within the Philippine educational context.

Local studies in the Philippines, particularly in regions like Davao del Norte and nearby areas, highlight the significant impact of digital culture and social media on students' communication skills. Research among Senior High School (SHS) learners in the Davao

region reveals a positive correlation between social media use for academic purposes and the enhancement of critical thinking skills among senior high school learners [7]. Similarly, studies conducted in other parts of the region observe that while social media facilitates easier and faster communication, it also encourages reliance on informal language, catchphrases, and fragmented conversations, which can challenge students' ability to express complex ideas clearly in academic settings (Duterte, 2025). These findings raise important considerations for local educators as they strive to adapt teaching strategies that balance the benefits of digital communication with the need to cultivate robust and transparent communication skills among students in the evolving digital landscape.

This qualitative study explores students' perceptions of 'brain rot' and its impact on their communication abilities, providing insights that can inform educational policies and teaching approaches both locally and beyond. Understanding communication as a fundamental human skill critical for social and professional success highlights the importance of addressing these challenges in a balanced, context-sensitive manner.

Research Questions

This study explores how Junior High School students from the public schools within Carmen District, schools located in the Division of Davao del Norte, Region XI perceived the impact of digital media consumption, commonly referred to as "brain rot" on their communication skills. The following research questions aim to uncover students' definitions, experiences, and proposed strategies regarding the influence of digital trends on both academic and social communication.

1. How do students describe and define 'brain rot' in relation to their communication abilities?
2. What specific digital trends or social media content do students believe contribute most to 'brain rot'?
3. In what ways do students feel their communication skills have changed due to digital media consumption?
4. How do communication challenges attributed to 'brain rot' differ between academic and social interactions?
5. What strategies do students propose to improve communication skills despite the influence of digital media

B. Methods

Research Design

This study will base its conduct and interpretation of meaning on the philosophical paradigm of interpretivism. As a research paradigm, interpretivism manifests reality through understanding the meanings and interpretations of people to their experiences. Jansen (2023) postulates that interpretivism sits more in the position that reality is socially constructed and is constructed by the observer through their experience of it. Furthermore, this explores the subjective experiences of people which makes this paradigm suitable to be used in this study since this aims to navigate the challenges experienced by teachers teaching literature in the modern world. (B. Quinto & M. Cho-oy, 2022).

Since the researchers will be focusing on the narratives, highlighting the experiences of the junior high school students who are primarily consumers of "brain rot" effect, it cannot be measured through numerical interpretation or using numerical data. Thus, a qualitative approach will be utilized to delve into the narratives of the learners. Qualitative approach answers the hows and whys instead of how many or much. Furthermore, it is an approach by which the inquirer makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives (i.e. the multiple meanings of individual experiences, meanings socially and culturally constructed with an intent of developing a theory or pattern) or advocacy/participatory perspectives (i.e. political, issue-oriented, collaborative, or change oriented) or both. It also focuses on the approaches on ethnographies, grounded theory, phenomenology, narratives, and case studies.

Henceforth, the researchers applied qualitative research to present and reveal the impact of 'brain rot' of students' communication skills through interviews (Sarita & MAED, 2025). In this study, the researchers used thematic analysis in analyzing the data. Thematic analysis is a method used to systematically identify, analyze, and interpret patterns or themes within data, providing a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences. This approach involves a structured process, including familiarization with data, coding, theme development, and refinement, ensuring that findings are both rigorous and insightful (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In choosing the respondents, the researcher will utilize the purposive sampling technique by which they are chosen on purpose not just randomly. Purposeful sampling involves selecting participants because in a belief that they might contribute something to your analysis. The participants will be selected by virtue of knowledge and experience as advisers without the need for underlying theories.

Research Locale

The study will be conducted at the public schools within Carmen District, schools located in the Division of Davao del Norte, Region XI – commonly known as Davao Region, located at the Southeastern portion of Mindanao. In this study, the primary focus will be Junior High School students. Pseudonyms will be used to add confidentiality among the respondents. The key thoughts of the respondents will emerge from their experiences as students. In this study, a total of 5 students would be the respondents.

Research Participants

In this study, the participants will be 5 students from Junior High School unit within Carmen District, Division of Davao del Norte. The participants will share their thoughts, feelings, and communication patterns associated with excessive digital media use. Semi-structured interviews offered flexibility, allowing the researchers to explore topics in more depth based on participants' responses while maintaining consistency across all interviews (Morgan, 1997).

To protect the participants' identity and ensure privacy, their names were replaced with codes and pen names. The code and pen names are: P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5.

Data Collection and Analysis

In the conduct of this study, data gathering will be done through interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD). For interviews and FGDs, open-ended questions will be applied based on the research questions stated above. However, interviews will be unstructured by which the researcher would dwell and adapt to the responses of the participants until sufficient information is gathered. On the one hand, focus group discussions will be structured with a specified number of questions and participants only on every FGD.

Data was collected through one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions, depending on participant preference and availability. Each session lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted either in person or via secure online platforms such as Google Meet or Zoom. Before each session, participants were provided with a clear explanation of the research objectives and were asked to sign an informed consent form. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission to ensure accurate transcription and analysis. The process involved several key steps. First, all interview transcripts were transcribed verbatimly and then thoroughly read to familiarize us with the data. Next, initial codes were generated by highlighting significant statements and

segments that pertained to the research questions. These codes were then collated into potential themes, which captured essential aspects of the student's perceptions on the effects of 'brain rot' on their communication skills. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and were then defined and named to clearly convey the essence of each theme. Finally, the themes were synthesized into a cohesive narrative that illuminated essential information coming from the participant's shared thoughts supporting slow readers, providing valuable insights for enhancing literacy instruction and intervention programs.

Data Analysis

The data collected from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The researchers first became familiar with the data by reading the transcripts multiple times, followed by coding significant phrases and expressions that reflected the participants' experiences. These codes were then organized into themes that represented broader meanings across responses.

After initial themes were formed, they were refined and reviewed to ensure they were distinct and clearly supported by the data. The final themes captured key aspects of how participants described brain rot, including symptoms, coping strategies, and effects on communication (Orb et al., 2001). Direct quotes were used to highlight each theme, allowing participants' voices to be represented authentically. This analytical process provided insights into the shared and individual experiences that define the impact of brain rot on communication.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were strictly followed throughout the research process. Participants were informed of their right to refuse or withdraw from the study at any point without consequences. All participants gave informed consent, and their anonymity was protected by assigning pseudonyms in the transcripts and final reports. The nature and scope of the research were clearly explained before the interviews began (Orb et al., 2001).

To ensure the safety and comfort of participants, care was taken to avoid intrusive or distressing questions. All data were stored securely on password-protected devices, and access was restricted to the research team. The researchers prioritized respect, confidentiality, and integrity, ensuring that the study upheld the ethical standards expected in academic research involving human participants.

C. Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the results of the analysis, interpretation of the findings, and the discussion of the analyses yielded in this study.

1. A Description and Definition Of 'Brain Rot' in Relation to Communication Abilities

Participants described "brain rot" as a decline in mental sharpness caused by excessive exposure to fast, low-quality digital content. It is associated with mental fatigue, laziness, and overstimulation of the brain. This condition leads to shallow thinking and difficulty engaging in meaningful conversations. Many mentioned that "brain rot" results in communication dominated by memes, slang, or fragmented thoughts (Yousef et al., 2025). Overall, it reflects a negative impact on the ability to think deeply and communicate clearly.

1.1 Cognitive Overload and Degradation of Meaningful Communication

Brain rot is commonly perceived as a form of cognitive overload resulting from the continuous consumption of trivial and fast-paced digital content. This overload leads to mental fatigue, reducing the brain's capacity to focus on complex or serious topics. Participants in the study reported that such cognitive strain significantly diminishes the quality of conversations and impairs critical thinking skills (Chen, 2024). Consequently, meaningful communication deteriorates and is often replaced by superficial, distracted, or fragmented exchanges. The brain becomes overwhelmed, struggling to effectively process information or respond thoughtfully.

Participant responses further illuminate these experiences:

> *"Uh, brain rot makes me think of, like, mental mush. It's when your brain feels, um, tired or lazy from too much online content."*
>
> ***– Excerpt from P1***
>
> *"So, it means I consume so much fast content that I, uh, can't keep a serious conversation anymore. I end up speaking in memes or slang, you know?"*
>
> ***– Excerpt from P2***
>
> *"I'd describe brain rot as, like, the side effect of a digital overdose, um, from too much screen time."* ***– Excerpt from P3***

> *"For me, 'brain rot' is the inability to think deeply or hold a real conversation because your brain is, you know, overstimulated."*
>
> ***– Excerpt from P4***
>
> *"I think of brain rot as when your mind is constantly fed junk info – so, um, your communication just suffers."*
>
> ***– Excerpt from P5***

Across all participants, "brain rot" is strongly associated with a decline in mental sharpness and communication ability, primarily caused by overexposure to rapid, low-quality, and overwhelming digital content. Common themes include mental exhaustion, overstimulation, shallow thinking, and an impaired ability to engage in meaningful and sustained conversations (Chen, 2024).

1.2 Cognitive Fog and Reduced Verbal Clarity from Prolonged Screen Exposure

Extended screen time contributes to a state of cognitive fog, which participants describe as a mental cloudiness that impairs their ability to think clearly and communicate effectively. Many reported experiencing difficulties forming coherent sentences and frequently losing their train of thought after prolonged periods of scrolling or digital engagement. This cognitive sluggishness manifests as reduced concentration and diminished verbal clarity during real-life conversations. Even when participants are aware of what they intend to say, articulating their thoughts becomes a challenge. Such mental fog hampers smooth, confident, and coherent communication (Bergum Johanson et al., 2023).

Participant descriptions include:

> *"Um, to me, it's like when I've, uh, scrolled for hours and suddenly can't form proper sentences in real life."*
> ***– Excerpt from P1***
>
> *"It's, like, a foggy feeling, you know? Like I lose my train of thought really quickly."*
> ***– Excerpt from P2***
>
> *"It's when I can't, uh, concentrate and my brain just struggles to come up with clear responses."*
> ***– Excerpt from P3***
>
> *"I, uh, define it as mental sluggishness from too much screen time, honestly."*
> ***– Excerpt from P4***

> *"It's like, I know what I want to say but, um, I just can't explain it well anymore."*
> ***– Excerpt from P5***

This theme highlights how sustained digital exposure can create temporary but significant cognitive impairments, leading to frustration and decreased effectiveness in verbal communication. The persistent mental fog not only disrupts participants' ability to express themselves clearly but also undermines their confidence in everyday social interactions. These findings suggest that prolonged screen time may have immediate negative effects on verbal fluency and cognitive responsiveness, which could impact both personal and professional communication (Bergum Johanson et al., 2023).

1.3 Disrupted Real-Time Communication and Self-Expression

Participants report experiencing disrupted communication during in-person interactions or formal settings following prolonged use of digital media. They describe feelings of mental detachment, increased reliance on filler words, and episodes of stuttering. Moreover, articulating complex or emotional thoughts becomes notably more difficult. Participants also express self-doubt regarding their word choices when writing or texting formally. These disruptions collectively contribute to difficulties in real-time and structured communication, reducing its clarity and effectiveness.

Participant accounts illustrate these experiences:

> *"I notice it, uh, when I have to talk to someone in person right after being on TikTok – it's like my brain isn't fully present."*
>
> ***– Excerpt from P1***
>
> *"During group work or class discussions, it's obvious. I, um, stutter or forget what I'm saying mid-sentence."*
> ***– Excerpt from P2***
>
> *"It mostly hits when I'm trying to explain something complex or emotional. Like, words just don't come out right."*
>
> ***– Excerpt from P3***
>
> *"I feel it when I speak during reports and, uh, I catch myself relying too much on filler words."*
> ***– Excerpt from P4***
>
> *"I especially feel it when I'm texting formally or writing essays – I, um, second-guess my wording a lot."*
> ***– Excerpt from P5***

These findings reveal several key patterns: mental detachment or lack of presence during conversations (P1), speech disruptions such as stuttering and filler word usage (P2, P4), difficulties in articulating complex or emotional ideas (P3), and self-doubt in formal writing or speech (P5). Collectively, this theme highlights how "brain rot" impairs students' ability to communicate effectively in structured or high-pressure contexts, often leaving them mentally disoriented, hesitant, and less articulate (Chen, 2024).

2. Cognitive Decay in the Digital Age: Identifying Social Media Trends Contributing to Brain Rot

This study investigates the effects of prolonged exposure to specific social media trends on the cognitive and communicative abilities of users, particularly students. The term "brain rot," commonly employed by youth online, denotes a state of mental fatigue, reduced focus, and superficial thinking attributed to excessive consumption of digital content. Through qualitative data analysis, this research identifies prevalent patterns demonstrating how particular media habits result in diminished attention span, impaired critical thinking, and disrupted verbal clarity in both academic and social contexts (Yousef et al., 2025).

2.1 Addictive and Superficial Digital Content Leading to Passive Consumption

Participants frequently reported that certain social media trends—especially TikTok reels, meme pages, fan edits, livestreams, and controversial content—promote passive and continuous scrolling without providing intellectual stimulation. These content types are designed to deliver instant gratification, maintaining user engagement through brief entertainment bursts while lacking meaningful cognitive engagement (Chen, 2024).

Participant accounts illustrate these experiences:

> *"TikTok and Instagram reels, 100%. They're addicting but, like, so shallow."*
> ***—Excerpt from P1***
> *"I think, honestly, meme pages and reaction content kinda make me passive. I just, you know, absorb and don't really think."*
> ***—Excerpt from P2***
>
> *"Um, POV videos, fan edits, and those super quick 3-second joke reels? Yeah, they affect me the most."*
> ***—Excerpt from P3***
>
> *"Gaming livestreams and commentaries... I mean, I watch for hours and then just feel mentally numb."*
> ***—Excerpt from P4***

> *"I'm, like, totally addicted to scrolling through controversial takes on X (Twitter). It's a problem."* ***– Excerpt from P5***

Participants identified these digital trends—short-form videos, meme content, fan edits, livestreams, and online debates—as major contributors to "brain rot." This content is characterized by its addictive nature and mental superficiality, encouraging passive, mindless scrolling habits that lead users to absorb information without active processing. Moreover, some content, particularly controversial or overstimulating material, can induce emotional and cognitive fatigue (Chen, 2024). This theme underscores how such social media trends inhibit critical thinking and foster overstimulation, culminating in mental numbness and disengagement from more substantive information.

2.2 Superficial Digital Consumption Resulting in Reduced Attention and Shallow Thinking

This theme addresses how the rapid tempo and fleeting quality of most online content cultivate superficial consumption habits that negatively affect cognitive function. Participants described how constant exposure to brief, low-depth media renders them more impatient, easily distracted, and less capable of sustained focus. The habitual intake of simplified, quick information contributes to shallow thinking, undermining their ability to engage with complex concepts or sustain meaningful conversations (Yousef et al., 2025). Ultimately, this pattern reshapes cognitive habits, resulting in reduced attention spans and a preference for immediate gratification over deeper intellectual engagement.

Participant descriptions include:

> *"I binge hours of short clips without realizing how it messes up my focus."*
> ***– Excerpt from P1***

> *"I mean, I like them, but they don't really challenge my brain, you know?"*
> ***– Excerpt from P2***

> *"Honestly, it makes me kinda impatient with real-life conversations.*
> ***– Excerpt from P3***

> *"It's like, um, eating snacks all day instead of a real meal – no substance at all."*
> ***– Excerpt from P4***

> *"Everyone's, like, either fighting or oversimplifying things, so I end up with these really shallow opinions."*
> ***– Excerpt from P5***

Participants noted that consuming quick, low-substance content adversely affects their cognitive and communicative abilities by reducing focus and patience. This content fails to stimulate intellectual challenge, leaving users mentally undernourished. Furthermore, it encourages oversimplified perspectives and superficial opinions, limiting the development of well-rounded viewpoints (Spytska, 2025). This theme captures how routine exposure to transient, low-depth digital material undermines critical thinking and meaningful engagement in dialogue and learning.

2.3 Reduced Concentration and Critical Thinking Abilities Following Consumption of Fast Digital Content

This theme explores how frequent consumption of rapid digital content impairs users' concentration and critical thinking skills. Participants reported difficulties in maintaining focus on longer or more demanding tasks such as reading, writing, or participating in discussions after engaging with short-form videos, memes, or similarly fast-paced media. They also described challenges in organizing their thoughts coherently and sustaining attention during extended conversations or debates. These patterns suggest that habitual exposure to brief, easily digestible content conditions the brain to operate superficially, diminishing deeper intellectual engagement and effective communication in academic and social environments (Yousef et al., 2025).

Participant responses further illuminate these experiences:

> *Afterwards, I struggle to focus on reading or writing longer content."*
> ***– Excerpt from P1***
>
> *"After a binge session, I swear I can't even, like, write captions for school projects properly."*
> ***– Excerpt from P2***
>
> *"When a convo goes long, I just zone out cause my brain's, like, used to quick info."*
> ***– Excerpt from P3***
>
> *"After that, I literally can't even answer basic questions without rewording them in my head, like, five times."*
> ***– Excerpt from P4***
>
> *"It totally affects my critical thinking, especially during, you know, debates or group discussions."*
>
> ***– Excerpt from P5***

Participants commonly experienced impaired concentration and reduced capacity for complex cognitive tasks after exposure to fast-paced digital media. They reported

difficulty focusing on extended reading or writing assignments, zoning out during long conversations, and struggling to articulate thoughts clearly. Many also noted diminished critical thinking during debates and discussions. This theme highlights how habitual consumption of bite-sized information weakens the ability to concentrate, process complex ideas, and communicate effectively in more intellectually demanding contexts (Yousef et al., 2025).

3. The Influence of Digital Media Consumption on Communication Skills

Participants revealed that their communication skills have notably changed because of frequent digital media use. Many reported adopting a more casual and informal style of speaking and writing, often at the expense of clarity and structure. There was a shared sense of diminished confidence in self-expression, especially in formal or academic contexts. Additionally, participants noticed a decline in attentive listening and increased use of filler words during conversations. Overall, these changes suggest that heavy digital media consumption influences not only how people communicate but also their ability to engage meaningfully and confidently with others (Han, 2024).

3.1 Decline in Communication Formality, Confidence, and Listening Skills

Participants consistently reported a noticeable decline in the formality and confidence of their communication due to digital media consumption. Many shared that their speech had become more casual and less structured, even in situations that called for professionalism. Alongside this, a decrease in confidence when expressing ideas was frequently mentioned. Participants also described poorer listening skills, often interrupting conversations or losing focus. These changes collectively highlight a weakening in both verbal and non-verbal communication effectiveness (Han, 2024).

Participant responses further illuminate these experiences:

> *"I've become more, uhh, casual and less structured in how I speak."*
> ***– Excerpt from P1***

> *"I've, umm, lost confidence in how I express myself."*
> ***– Excerpt from P2***

> *"My grammar got worse. I, ahh, notice it in my essays and even emails."*
> ***– Excerpt from P3***

> *"I interrupt more and, uhmm, don't listen as deeply anymore."*
> ***– Excerpt from P4***

> *"I find myself using filler words like 'like' or 'literally' too often."*
> ***– Excerpt from P5***

The findings indicate that digital media consumption has contributed to a shift toward more casual and less structured speech among participants. This change is accompanied by a noticeable decrease in confidence when expressing themselves, both verbally and in writing. Additionally, many participants reported a decline in grammar and overall writing quality. Listening skills have also been affected, with an increase in interruptions during conversations. The frequent use of filler words further highlights a reduction in communication effectiveness. Together, these factors demonstrate a significant decline in the formality and clarity of communication, affecting both spoken and written interactions as well as attentive listening (Han, 2024).

3.2 Impact of Digital Media on Language Skills and Thought Organization

Participants highlighted how digital media consumption has affected their language skills and the way they organize their thoughts. Many noted an increased use of internet slang and informal language, which often disrupted proper grammar and sentence structure. Several expressed growing self-doubt, particularly when writing in academic or formal contexts. Additionally, a decline in reading habits was reported, leading to reduced vocabulary and weaker language foundations. These factors combined to create fragmented thinking and challenges in expressing coherent, well-organized ideas (Abang Yusof, 2021).

Participant accounts illustrate these experiences:

> *"I, umm, use too much internet slang and, uh, forget proper sentence structure."*
> ***– Excerpt from P1***

> *"I, ahh, second-guess everything, especially in academic writing."*
> ***– Excerpt from P2***

> *"Also, I, uhh, lost the habit of reading, which used to help me a lot in building vocabulary."*
> ***– Excerpt from P3***

> *"I think it's because my brain is, umm, always expecting something fast and entertaining."*
> ***– Excerpt from P4***

> *"I also tend to speak in broken thoughts now, especially when, uh, nervous."*
> ***– Excerpt from P5***

Participants emphasized that heavy digital media consumption has led to an overuse of internet slang and a noticeable weakening of grammar skills. Many reported increased self-doubt when writing in academic or formal contexts, which affects their confidence and clarity. A decline in reading habits was also noted, resulting in reduced vocabulary development. The preference for fast-paced, entertaining content has negatively impacted attention spans, making it harder to focus on longer or more complex material. Furthermore, participants described experiencing fragmented and disorganized speech, particularly when under stress (Abang Yusof, 2021). Overall, this theme illustrates how constant exposure to rapid, informal digital content disrupts traditional language abilities and hampers the organization and clear expression of thoughts

3.3 Reduced Ability to Sustain Detailed Communication Due to Digital Media Habits

Participants expressed difficulty in maintaining detailed and focused communication because of their digital media habits. Many reported that their conversations had become overly brief, favouring short, fragmented statements over thorough explanations. They also described struggling to stay attentive during longer discussions or formal settings. The constant switching between digital platforms was identified as a key factor causing mental distraction and reduced concentration (Poles, 2025). Overall, these habits have led to challenges in sustaining meaningful and coherent communication in both personal and professional contexts.

Participant accounts illustrate these experiences:

> *"Even in formal settings, my words come out, uhh, too relaxed."*
> ***– Excerpt from P1***

> *"Social media trained me to be brief, but, umm, now I struggle when I need to be detailed."*
> ***– Excerpt from P2***

> *"I now prefer one-liners and, ahh, can't explain ideas well."*
> ***– Excerpt from P3***

> *"When someone talks for more than a minute, I, uhmm, tune out."*
> ***– Excerpt from P4***

> *"I blame it on the constant switch between platforms that makes me, uhh, scattered."*
> ***– Excerpt from P5***

Participants revealed that their communication style has become overly casual and relaxed, even in formal situations where more structure is expected. Many now prefer

brevity over-elaboration, which makes it challenging to fully explain their ideas. Shortened attention spans were commonly reported, with participants often tuning out during longer conversations. They also described experiencing mental fragmentation, a result of constant multitasking across multiple digital platforms (Poles, 2025). This theme underscores how habitual exposure to fast-paced, bite-sized digital content diminishes the ability to sustain detailed, focused, and coherent communication.

4. Differential Impact of 'Brain Rot' on Academic vs. Social Communication

Participants highlighted clear distinctions in how communication difficulties related to 'brain rot' manifest differently across academic and social settings. Their experiences reveal that while brain rot affects communication in both areas, its impact is more pronounced and challenging in academic contexts, such as during presentations or formal discussions, than in casual interactions with friends (Han, 2024).

4.1 Greater Communication Challenges in Academic Contexts Compared to Social Interactions

Across responses, participants consistently described facing more obstacles expressing their ideas clearly and confidently in academic or formal settings. Unlike social conversations, where slang, emojis, and informal expressions are acceptable, academic environments require precise and structured communication, making brain rot's effects more obvious and difficult to manage (Yousef et al., 2025). Conversely, participants found social interactions more forgiving and natural, allowing for a casual tone even if some awkwardness persisted due to brain rot. Although communication difficulties were present in both settings, they were amplified by the formality and expectations of academic tasks, causing greater stress and hesitation.

Participant accounts illustrate these experiences:

> *"In academics, I struggle more. I can't just use slang or emojis to get my point across."*
> ***– Excerpt from P1***

> *"I feel more pressure academically, so the effects show more."*
> ***– Excerpt from P2***

> *"I think brain rot hurts my academic voice more."*
> ***– Excerpt from P3***

> *"I can carry a convo with friends, even if it's silly."*
> ***– Excerpt from P4***

> *"Brain rot makes me awkward in both areas, but I recover faster in social ones."*
> ***– Excerpt from P5***

The impact of brain rot is felt more intensely in academic settings, where clear structure and formal tone are required. While students can express themselves freely in casual conversations, academic tasks demand mental effort that highlights the effects of brain fog, such as difficulty finding the right words or organizing thoughts. This contrast shows how formal settings increase communication pressure, making the effects of brain rot harder to hide (Yousef et al., 2025). Ultimately, academic contexts expose the cognitive strain caused by frequent informal digital communication more than social situations do.

4.2 Differing Tolerance and Pressure Between Social and Academic Communication

Participants further elaborated on the contrasting demands and emotional experiences between social and academic communication. Social conversations were described as relaxed, tolerant of errors, and conducive to informal language use. This environment permits vagueness, humour, and a lighter approach to communication, which helps participants cope with brain rot's effects more easily. In stark contrast, academic communication requires formality, accuracy, and sustained mental effort to 'switch modes' from informal to formal expression, which many found taxing and anxiety-inducing. The heightened pressure to avoid mistakes and fear of judgment in academic settings intensified the negative impact of brain rot on their communication abilities (Han, 2024).

Participant responses further illuminate these experiences:

> *"Socially, it's more forgiving – you can laugh off a mistake."*
> ***– Excerpt from P1***

> *"In casual chats, I can just be vague or funny and no one cares."*
> ***– Excerpt from P2***

> *"When I'm writing essays or emails, I realize how much I've lost my formal tone."*
> ***– Excerpt from P3***

> *"But in academic settings, I freeze. It's like I need to switch mental modes, and it takes effort."*
> ***– Excerpt from P4***

> *"In school, there's more judgment and that adds to the stress."*
> ***– Excerpt from P5***

Participants feel more relaxed communicating socially, where casual speech and mistakes are easily forgiven. In contrast, academic tasks carry pressure and the fear of being judged, which makes communication more stressful. This difference in expectations shows that the emotional environment influences how severely brain rot impacts students' ability to express themselves (Audrin & Audrin, 2024). As a result, academic communication not only demands more effort but also magnifies insecurities tied to digital media habits.

4.3 Struggle to Transition Between Informal Online Communication and Formal Academic Expression

A prominent theme among participants was the struggle to shift their communication style between informal digital media-influenced habits and the more structured requirements of academic work. Many described difficulties finding the appropriate words or tone during presentations and school assignments, often feeling that their speech or writing lacked clarity or depth. Meanwhile, in social interactions, participants admitted to unconsciously mimicking online slang and informal language patterns, which further complicated their academic communication. The pressure to communicate effectively with authority figures, such as teachers, led to overthinking and increased anxiety. Participants expressed a conscious awareness of the need to 'unlearn' casual digital communication habits to regain academic proficiency, highlighting the cognitive effort required to transition between these contrasting communication modes (Han, 2024).

Participant descriptions include:

> *"But in presentations, even simple words escape me."*
> ***– Excerpt from P1***

> *"But in schoolwork, being vague is a problem."*
> ***– Excerpt from P2***

> *"Socially, I just mimic how people talk online."*
> ***– Excerpt from P3***

> *"I overthink every sentence when talking to teachers."*
> ***– Excerpt from P4***

> *"It feels like I need to 'unlearn' my online habits when doing academic work. "*
> ***– Excerpt from P5***

Students often rely on casual online language in daily life, but academic settings require a more formal voice. Brain rot makes switching between these styles harder, leading to awkwardness or overthinking. This highlights a growing disconnect between how students communicate online and the demands of academic expression (Yousef et al., 2025). This struggle suggests that digital habits are reshaping the way young people mentally organize and deliver their thoughts.

5. Strategies to Improve Communication Skills Despite Digital Media's Influence

Participants shared various methods they personally use to maintain or improve their communication skills despite heavy online engagement. These strategies aim to regain clarity, structure, and fluency in both spoken and written communication. Across responses, participants emphasized proactive habits such as journaling, reducing screen time, engaging in offline hobbies, and mimicking formal speakers as ways to sharpen their communication (Wu et al., 2023).

5.1 Active Strategies to Counteract Brain Rot and Improve Communication Skills

Participants reported taking conscious steps to reduce the effects of brain rot by implementing habits that support cognitive recovery and verbal clarity. These included reducing passive screen exposure, engaging in hobbies that require attention, and consuming more meaningful content (Yousef et al., 2025).

Participant descriptions include:

> *"I try journaling every night. It helps me form full sentences again."*
> ***– Excerpt from P1***
>
> *"I started limiting screen time and using more 'offline' hobbies like painting."*
> ***– Excerpt from P2***
>
> *"I joined a reading challenge to get back into books."*
> ***– Excerpt from P3***
>
> *"I use digital detox hours – like 8pm to 10pm, no screens."*
> ***– Excerpt from P4***
>
> *"I now watch TED talks and mimic the speakers to build back my speech skills."*
> ***– Excerpt from P5***

These responses show a shift from passive digital media consumption toward more mindful and constructive activities. Journaling and reading challenges allow participants to restructure their thought patterns and vocabulary use, while digital detox periods

create mental space for reflection and linguistic recalibration. Mimicking formal speakers and engaging in creative offline hobbies also emerged as effective ways to rebuild fluency and confidence in communication (Wu et al., 2023).

5.2 Deliberate Practice and Cognitive Rebuilding through Offline Engagement

Participants also described specific efforts to challenge their digital habits by embracing deeper cognitive engagement. They mentioned the importance of reading long-form content, talking aloud, and initiating meaningful offline interactions as tools for retraining focus and regaining comfort in both formal and informal communication contexts (Han, 2024).

Participant responses further illuminate these experiences:

> *"Also, I read long articles to retrain my brain to focus."*
> ***– Excerpt from P1***

> *"It clears my head and gives me something to talk about beyond social media trends."*
> ***– Excerpt from P2***

> *"I also practice talking out loud in front of a mirror to rebuild fluency."*
> ***– Excerpt from P3***

> *"Instead, I have real convos with family or even just read."*
> ***– Excerpt from P4***

> *"Also, I volunteer for hosting or reporting tasks just to force myself to communicate better."*
> ***– Excerpt from P5***

These intentional strategies show how participants actively resist digital media's influence by reintroducing slower, more focused communication practices. From mirror rehearsals to volunteering for speaking roles, these responses reflect a dedication to self-improvement and a recognition that communication skills can be rebuilt through sustained, real-world application (Alanzi et al., 2024).

5.3 Utilizing Alternative Communication Practices to Rebuild Focus and Confidence

Participants also offered advice to others experiencing similar struggles with digital media's impact on communication. Their suggestions involved simple but effective alternatives like listening to podcasts, writing letters, and rehearsing speech to gradually restore focus and self-assurance.

Participant accounts illustrate these experiences:

"Even podcast listening helps."
– Excerpt from P1

"I also write letters to friends instead of chatting."
– Excerpt from P2

"I feel more confident when I rehearse expressing myself."
– Excerpt from P3

"It helps rewire my focus."
– Excerpt from P4

"It's scary but effective."
– Excerpt from P5

These insights point to a shared understanding that while recovery may be uncomfortable or challenging, it is possible through diversified approaches. Participants noted the emotional and cognitive benefits of analog communication styles, such as letter-writing and in-person conversations, which contrast sharply with the brevity and informality of digital interactions. These methods contribute to a slow but steady re-centering of attention, confidence, and verbal clarity in both academic and social contexts (Alanzi et al., 2024).

D. Conclusions

This study explored the perceived effects of "brain rot"—a term colloquially used to describe the mental stagnation from excessive social media and screen exposure—on students' communication skills. Through qualitative analysis, it became evident that students are increasingly aware of the negative impacts of prolonged digital consumption, including reduced vocabulary, fragmented attention, weakened interpersonal interactions, and over-reliance on visual or meme-based expressions. While digital spaces offer vast opportunities for creativity and connection, the unregulated consumption of bite-sized, passive content may hinder students' ability to communicate clearly, confidently, and critically in both academic and social contexts. The findings highlight a growing tension between technological engagement and communicative competence in today's digital-native generation. Considering these insights, it is recommended that: 1) Educational institutions integrate digital literacy programs that emphasize mindful media consumption, critical thinking, and healthy screen habits; 2) Teachers and communication *instructors* adopt blended learning techniques that incorporate interactive, face-to-face communication exercises alongside digital tools; 3)

Parents and guardians encourage open dialogue at home and model active communication behaviors, promoting balance between screen time and real-world interaction; 4) Future research explores the long-term cognitive and social implications of "brain rot" in different age groups and assess intervention strategies to reverse its effects. Ultimately, addressing the subtle yet pervasive influence of "brain rot" is crucial to preserving and enhancing the communication skills that are foundational to personal, academic, and professional success.

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