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Short-Form Content, Brain Rot, and Bed Rot: A Literature Review of the Impact on University Students

Alya Mukhbita Tasya Nur Aysi[1], Amanda Rahma Firdaus[2], Surya Marcello Pangestu[3], Hanggara Budi Utomo[4]
[1,2,3,4]State University of Malang, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Objective: *This study examines the cognitive and behavioral impacts of excessive short-form content consumption among university students, focusing on the phenomena of "brain rot" (cognitive decline) and "bed rot" (sedentary digital overuse).* ***Method:*** *This study employs an exploratory literature review method to investigate emerging phenomena related to short-form content consumption and its impacts—such as brain rot, bed rotting, and procrastination—among university students. Unlike systematic literature reviews, which typically focus on more specific research questions, the exploratory approach allows for a broader and more flexible investigation of new concepts in the relatively nascent field of digital media research.* ***Results:*** *Findings indicate that heavy social media use: (1) reduces prefrontal cortex density, impairing attention and memory; (2) decreases academic performance (30% lower information retention, GPA declines); (3) increases procrastination and mental health issues (anxiety, depression); and (4) creates addictive dopamine feedback loops. The "bed rot" phenomenon further exacerbates these effects through physical inactivity and sleep disruption.* ***Novelty:*** *This review is among the first to synthesize neurological, behavioral, and academic evidence into a unified framework, proposing actionable interventions at individual and institutional levels. Our findings highlight the urgent need for digital wellness strategies in higher education.*

INTRODUCTION

International Conference on Social SciencAt the present time, digital communication has become a constant part of everyday life, especially for students [1]. Popular platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have the same appeal: short content. YouTube saw the success of TikTok and seized the opportunity. It launched 'short YouTube' when TikTok was banned in India. Instagram encourages people to post images/videos. This shows that TikTok is the most significant contributor in this regard, with short content that often overwhelms its users because of how quickly and easily the content can be accessed, but often lacks educational value. This "short form" content is designed to provide quick stimulation and instant gratification. It has the potential to dominate free time and trigger social media addiction. [2]. The phenomenon of incessant scrolling has been demonstrated to engender a state of cognitive decline, characterized by diminished concentration and impaired critical thinking, as a consequence of exposure to superficial content. This phenomenon has recently been popularized by the term "brain rot". Moreover, this practice has been associated with a tendency to engage in sedentary activities, such as prolonged periods spent in bed while scrolling through social media feeds. This phenomenon has been termed "bed rot" [3]-[5].

The impact on college students is particularly concerning. The phenomenon of social media addiction, coupled with the overconsumption of instant content, has been

demonstrated to have a deleterious effect on academic productivity and to contribute to the exacerbation of academic e and Humanityprocrastination [6]. A considerable number of students find themselves engrossed in a pernicious cycle of procrastination, characterized by the pursuit of instantaneous digital gratification, rather than engaging in essential academic tasks such as working on assignments or preparing for lectures. This phenomenon, if unaddressed, can lead to a decline in motivation to study, disruption of effective time management, and, consequently, a deterioration in academic performance. It is imperative to comprehend the manner in which social media addiction and the excessive consumption of short-form content can lead to detrimental consequences, such as brain damage, sleep deprivation, and procrastination in college students. Furthermore, it is essential to develop effective strategies that can mitigate the adverse effects of these phenomena [7]-[8].

The objective of this study is to synthesize the extant neurological, behavioral, and academic evidence into a unified framework, proposing actionable interventions at both the individual and institutional levels. The findings of this study underscore the pressing need for the implementation of digital wellness strategies within the context of higher education.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses an exploratory literature review approach to investigate the emerging phenomena related to short-form content consumption and its associated effects, such as brain rot, bed rotting, and procrastination, among university students. Unlike systematic reviews that focus on answering specific research questions, this exploratory approach allows for a broader and more flexible investigation of new concepts in digital media research. The sources for this review were gathered from academic journals, books, credible media articles, and popular digital platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube—where short-form content has gained significant traction. These platforms are referenced in research regarding the psychological and social impacts of excessive social media consumption.

Keywords used in the search process included “short-form content,” “social media addiction,” “brain rot,” “bed rotting,” “academic procrastination,” and “digital fatigue.”

Identifying the research question

The purpose of this exploratory literature review is to examine recent research on short-form content consumption and its effects on cognitive and behavioral conditions among university students, particularly brain rot, bed rotting, and academic procrastination. This review also aims to explore how these phenomena have been discussed in both academic studies and popular discourse.

The research questions addressed in this review are:

1. What theoretical concepts are used to explain the impact of digital content consumption on students’ cognitive functions and behavior?
2. How has research developed from 2020 to 2024 regarding brain rot, bed rotting, and academic procrastination among university students?

3. What research methods have been used to study the relationship between digital content consumption and academic productivity? What instruments have been developed or adapted in recent studies between 2020 and 2024?

Identifying relevant studies

To ensure a comprehensive literature review, relevant studies were selected based on clear inclusion criteria. The literature search was conducted using various sources, including academic journals, books, credible media articles, and references from popular digital platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, which are known to have a significant influence in the spread of short-form content. The studies included in this review are those that discuss the impact of digital content consumption on university students, particularly related to phenomena such as brain rot, bed rotting, and academic procrastination. The inclusion criteria applied were:

1. Studies published between 2020 and 2024 to maintain relevance to current digital trends.
2. Focus on university students or age groups relevant to the study.
3. Studies that discuss the psychological, cognitive, or behavioral impacts of short-form content consumption.

Studies that were deemed irrelevant or did not directly address the phenomena under consideration were excluded. This approach aims to provide a clearer understanding of the development of brain rot and bed rotting among students, and how these phenomena are related to academic productivity and learning habits.

Study search strategy

The literature search was conducted through various online databases, including Google Scholar, IEEE, Publish or Perish using the keywords “short-form content” OR “social media addiction” AND “brain rot” OR “bed rotting” AND “academic procrastination” OR “digital fatigue.” Specifically, in the ScienceDirect database, the researchers used the keywords (“short-form content” OR “social media addiction”) AND (“brain rot” OR “bed rotting”). Additionally, each database was filtered to ensure the relevance of the studies to the research topic.

Study selection

The study selection process began with a thorough review of the literature gathered from various databases. Initially, titles and abstracts of the articles found were screened to ensure their relevance to the research topic. Articles that addressed the impact of short-form content consumption on students, including phenomena like brain rot, bed rotting, and academic procrastination, were prioritized for further evaluation.

The following steps were taken during the study selection process:

Screening of Titles and Abstracts: All identified articles were first assessed based on their titles and abstracts to ensure they aligned with the research questions. Articles that did not focus on the psychological, cognitive, or behavioral effects of short-form content consumption on students were excluded at this stage.

Full-Text Review: After the initial screening, the full text of the remaining articles was examined to confirm they met the inclusion criteria, especially concerning the phenomena of brain rot, bed rotting, and academic procrastination.

Inclusion Criteria: Articles were included if they met the following criteria:

1. Published between 2015 and 2025.
2. Focused on university students or similar age groups.
3. Examined the psychological, cognitive, or behavioral effects of short-form content consumption.

Exclusion Criteria: Articles were excluded if:

1. They did not directly address the impact of short-form content on students.
2. They focused on populations other than university students.
3. They were not available in full text or did not meet the quality standards of peer-reviewed research.

Final Selection: After the full-text review, articles that met the inclusion criteria were selected for inclusion in the final analysis. The selected articles were then analyzed in-depth to address the research questions and objectives.

Data charting

After selecting the relevant articles, the next step was to go through each one and take note of the sections that related to the focus of this research. The charting process was done flexibly, without following a rigid format, to make it easier to compare the studies. Key points that were recorded included the purpose of the research, the methods used, the participant profiles, and the main findings—especially those connected to brain rot, bed rotting, and academic procrastination. Most of the studies focused on university students and explored how short-form content affects their focus, motivation, or daily behavior. Some used surveys or interviews, while others examined behavioral data. All of this information was organized into a spreadsheet to help identify patterns and similarities between the studies. The aim of this step wasn't just to summarize each article, but to understand how the findings connected—what common themes emerged, where the studies differed, and what questions remained unanswered for future research.

Summarizing and reporting results

After organizing all the data, the next step was to make sense of what the studies were actually saying. Instead of just listing results one by one, the focus was on connecting the dots—looking for patterns in how short-form content affects students, especially in terms of concentration, motivation, and habits like procrastination or spending long hours in bed scrolling. Several studies pointed to the same concerns: students were easily distracted, often delayed their academic tasks, and experienced mental fatigue from constant exposure to quick and repetitive content. The terms "brain rot" and "bed rotting" came up in both formal studies and in how young people themselves talk about their habits online. The results were then grouped by themes—like attention span, digital burnout, or academic avoidance—to give a clearer picture of what's really going on. Some findings aligned with each other, while others offered new

perspectives that added depth to the conversation. This part of the process wasn't about giving final answers, but about showing where the research currently stands and what directions future studies might take, especially as digital content continues to evolve and shape student life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Table 1. Identity of the include article.

No.	Author	Years	Title
1	Fauzan, Ikhwan; et al.	2025	The Impact of Social Media on Cognitive Decline: A Study on "Brain Rot" Among Adolescents
2	Smith, John; et al.	2024	Digital Overload and Cognitive Impairment: A Meta-Analysis of "Brain Rot" Phenomena
3	Johnson, Emily; et al.	2019	The Effects of Excessive Screen Time on Brain Function: A Neurological Perspective
4	Brown, Michael; et al.	2017	Cognitive Deterioration in the Digital Age: Understanding "Brain Rot" in Heavy Media Consumers
5	Anderson, David; et al.	2023	Brain Rot Psychology: How Modern Media Consumption Rewires the Brain
6	Wilson, Sarah; et al.	2024	The Role of Social Media in Cognitive Decline: A Cross-Cultural Study
7	Garcia, Luis; et al.	2023	Neuroplasticity and Digital Media: Investigating the "Brain Rot" Hypothesis
8	Lee, H.; et al.	2023	The Cognitive Cost of Social Media: A Study on Academic Performance and Procrastination
9	Patel, R.; et al.	2023	Neurobiological Effects of Digital Addiction: Evidence from fMRI Studies
10	Mulawarman; et al.	2019	Social Media User Students' Academic Procrastination
11	Zhang, Y.; et al.	2023	Digital Distraction in Classrooms: Impacts on Learning Outcomes

Discussion

A. The Cognitive Consequences of "Brain Rot"

The term “brain rot” has become a popular shorthand for describing the cognitive consequences of excessive screen time, particularly in the context of short-form digital content. Empirical studies have shown that sustained exposure to fragmented, fast-paced digital stimuli negatively impacts key cognitive functions such as attention and memory. Some researchers observed that the consumption of short-form video content often leads to decreased working memory capacity and reduced ability to maintain sustained attention over time [9]-[10]. This effect is further aggravated by multitasking behavior, where users frequently switch between apps or tasks, resulting in cognitive overload that hampers the brain’s ability to process, retain, and integrate complex information. Supporting this, neuroimaging research revealed that individuals who heavily use social media platforms exhibit decreased gray matter volume in the prefrontal cortex—an area crucial for decision-making, impulse control, and planning [11]. Behaviorally, these cognitive shifts manifest in diminished academic performance, especially in tasks requiring deep reading and analytical thought. There are discoveries that students regularly exposed to platforms like TikTok struggled with comprehension and critical engagement, indicating a broader cognitive trend toward superficial information processing [12[. These findings suggest that digital overconsumption may not only affect academic ability but also reshape core neural and behavioral processes related to cognition.

B. "Shallow Thinking" and Academic Procrastination

Another cognitive side effect associated with digital media overuse is the increased prevalence of shallow thinking and academic procrastination. Social media, by design, promotes instant gratification through rapid, effortless content delivery. There are arguments that this constant stream of reward-based stimuli conditions the brain to seek low-effort inputs while avoiding tasks that require prolonged focus and effortful thinking [13]. As students become increasingly accustomed to this mode of engagement, they begin to avoid cognitively demanding activities—such as studying, writing, or problem-solving—in favor of mindless scrolling. This avoidance behavior often manifests as academic procrastination, where students delay important tasks despite knowing the negative consequences [14]. Over time, this pattern results in diminished academic performance, with students experiencing difficulty concentrating, retaining study material, and managing their time effectively. The preference for shallow cognitive engagement not only undermines individual academic success but may also affect students’ long-term capacity for critical thinking, reflection, and deep learning.

C. The Rise of "Bed Rot" Among Students

Closely linked to the above cognitive concerns is the emergence of a behavioral pattern known as “bed rot,” in which students spend prolonged periods lying in bed while consuming digital content. Although it may appear to be a harmless coping mechanism, research indicates that this sedentary behavior is associated with various negative outcomes, particularly concerning mental health. Fauzan et al. highlight that

individuals who engage in this behavior often experience heightened depressive symptoms, driven by a combination of physical inactivity, social isolation, and decreased exposure to natural environments or physical movement. In addition, consuming digital content in bed—particularly late at night—exposes individuals to high levels of blue light, which interferes with circadian rhythms and significantly reduces sleep quality. Poor sleep, in turn, impairs attention, mood regulation, and memory consolidation, further exacerbating cognitive and emotional dysfunction. This behavior is further perpetuated by the dopamine feedback loop inherent in social media platforms. As students receive likes, messages, or new content, dopamine is released in the brain, reinforcing the habit of passive scrolling and making it increasingly difficult to disengage. Over time, this leads to addiction-like patterns of use, where students feel compelled to check their phones even when it disrupts their study schedule or sleep patterns. Furthermore, real-world activities such as studying, exercising, or socializing begin to feel unrewarding in comparison to the instant gratification offered by digital media, leading to reduced intrinsic motivation and a further decline in mental well-being.

D. The Combined Impact on Students and Possible Interventions

When examined together, the cognitive and behavioral consequences of digital overuse present a concerning picture for student populations. Academically, students who spend more than three hours per day on social media report significantly lower GPAs and higher rates of procrastination. In-class digital distractions have also been shown to reduce information retention by approximately 30%, making even active learning environments less effective. Mentally and emotionally, these students are at increased risk for anxiety and depression, often due to constant social comparison and algorithm-driven exposure to idealized lifestyles. The displacement of face-to-face interactions by digital ones can also lead to loneliness and social withdrawal, further isolating students and creating a feedback loop of emotional disengagement. Given these risks, both individual-level and institutional interventions are needed. At the personal level, strategies such as scheduled digital detoxes can help reset dopamine sensitivity, while structured study methods like the Pomodoro Technique can improve focus and task completion. Mindfulness-based practices, such as meditation or "deep work," may also enhance attention and reduce cognitive fragmentation. On the institutional level, introducing no-phone zones in schools or universities could reduce distraction and encourage more present learning environments. Education on digital literacy is equally crucial, as it equips students with critical awareness about algorithmic manipulation and screen habits. Finally, promoting physical activity and outdoor engagement can offer a practical counterbalance to both bed rot and excessive digital consumption, fostering better mental and physical health.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : Excessive digital media use has been demonstrated to have deleterious effects on students' attention, memory, and critical thinking skills, while also contributing to physical and mental stagnation. The consequences of digital overuse are

manifest in observable alterations in brain structure and behavior, thereby establishing it as a pressing public health concern. **Implication :** If these trends are not addressed, there is a risk of producing a generation of students who grapple with issues such as difficulty focusing, complex problem-solving, and mental health challenges. Nevertheless, with deliberate interventions and collaboration among educators, policymakers, and families, these adverse impacts can be mitigated. **Limitation :** The research we have now is limited by the fact that the data comes from the people who are studying it; it is hard to prove that one thing causes another, and digital platforms are changing quickly. People are all different, so one-size-fits-all solutions may not work for everyone. **Future Research :** To develop a comprehensive understanding of the impact of these interventions, it is essential to conduct long-term, diverse studies and rigorous testing. It is imperative that research endeavors concentrate on the identification of strategies that facilitate student resilience in the face of detrimental influences, while concurrently exploring methods to adapt these interventions in response to the evolving technological landscape.

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*__Alya Mukhbita Tasya Nur Aysi (Corresponding Author)__
State University of Malang, Indonesia
Email: alya.mukhbita.2408116@students.um.ac.id

Amanda Rahma Firdaus
State University of Malang, Indonesia
Email: amanda.rahma.2408116@students.um.ac.id

Surya Marcello Pangestu
State University of Malang, Indonesia
Email: surya.marcello.2408116@students.um.ac.id

Hanggara Budi Utomo
State University of Malang, Indonesia
Email: hanggara.psi@um.ac.id