

From Brain Rot to Learning Disruption: Social Media Content and Students' Focus in English Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become an essential part of students' daily lives, yet the rising consumption of short form digital content has raised concerns regarding its cognitive impact, which is a phenomenon broadly known as "brain rot". This study aims to examine how exposure to brain rot content on social media influences students' focus and affects their English language learning process. Using a systematic literature review based on the PRISMA framework, relevant articles published between two thousand and nineteen and two thousand and twenty six were collected from Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. From thirty eight records initially identified, twenty two studies were selected and analyzed following screening and eligibility assessments. Regarding the first research question, the findings show a generally negative relationship between excessive exposure to highly stimulating short form content, social media multitasking, and students' attention control, leading to reduced concentration and academic distraction. Regarding the second research question, the results reveal a dual effect on English language learning while platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube provide accessible, authentic language input that supports vocabulary, pronunciation, listening, and speaking skills, excessive exposure can fragment students' attention and reduce deep learning capacity. In conclusion, the impact of brain rot content depends heavily on the nature of the content consumed and individual usage patterns. Educators and students are encouraged to use social media purposefully as a supplementary learning tool while managing potential digital distractions.

Keywords: Brain Rot; Social Media; Students' Attention; English Language Learning; Digital Distraction

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an important part of students' daily lives. Students use social media for entertainment, communication, and learning. In education, social media provides opportunities for students to access information, interact with others, and learn new skills, including English. However, the increasing use of short-form digital content has also raised concerns about its possible effects on students' attention and learning habits. One phenomenon associated with these concerns is known as "brain rot."

Brain rot is a term used to describe a digital phenomenon associated with attention difficulties and cognitive problems resulting from prolonged exposure to low-quality digital content (Özbay, 2026). Brain rot content refers to digital content that is short, fast, and repetitive, mainly prioritizing entertainment over meaningful cognitive engagement (Dewi, 2025). This type of content can be found on platforms such as TikTok, YouTube Shorts, Instagram Reels, and Facebook. Research on TikTok also describes brain rot content as cognitively shallow and highly stimulating content designed to encourage passive engagement (Tunca et

al., 2026). Although these platforms provide entertainment and opportunities to access information, excessive exposure to highly stimulating content may make it difficult for students to maintain attention during longer learning activities. For instance, Dewi (2025) reported a significant relationship between brain rot content consumption and students' learning concentration.

Previous studies have shown that excessive social media use can be related to students' distraction and academic performance. Feng et al. (2019) found that students who frequently used Facebook and the Internet for entertainment tended to experience more academic distraction and lower academic achievement. Similarly, Whelan et al. (2020) found that social media overload was related to poor self-regulation and reduced student performance. Research has also examined the use of social media for English learning. Al-Jarf (2022) found that social media and mobile learning tools can support students' engagement and English learning outcomes. However, previous studies often focus either on the negative effects of social media on academic performance or on the benefits of social media for language learning. There is still limited research specifically examining how brain rot content and social media distraction may affect students' focus during English learning.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how exposure to brain rot content on social media may affect students' focus and English language learning. It also aims to identify how social media distractions influence the English learning process. The article addresses the following research questions:

1. How does exposure to brain rot content on social media influence students' focus?
2. In what ways does brain rot content affect the process of English language learning?

METHODS

2.1 Literature Review

This literature review searched for relevant journal articles using Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. The keywords used in the search included "brain rot," "brain rot content," "social media," "short-form content," "students' attention," "focus," "English language learning," "TikTok," and "social media distraction." Combinations of these keywords were used to identify studies related to students' focus and English language learning in the context of social media and short-form content.

The search focused on articles published between 2019 and 2026. The review included English-language journal articles that were relevant to the research questions. The initial search identified 38 records from the four databases: 12 from Scopus, 10 from Web of Science, 8 from ScienceDirect, and 8 from Google Scholar.

2.2 Selection Criteria

The articles were selected using a PRISMA-based process, consisting of identification, screening, and inclusion. First, duplicate records were removed. From the 38 identified records, 3 duplicate records were removed, leaving 35 records for screening. Next, the titles and abstracts of the 35 records were screened based on their relevance to the research topic and research questions. Eight articles were excluded

because they were not sufficiently related to the topic or did not address the research questions. The remaining 27 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility.

The inclusion criteria for the selected articles required that each study was related to the research topic or research questions, written in English, published as a journal article with an accessible full text, and released within the selected publication period. Consequently, at the full-text stage, 5 articles were excluded because their full texts could not be accessed openly, leaving a final total of 22 studies included in the literature review.

The selection process is presented in Figure 1.

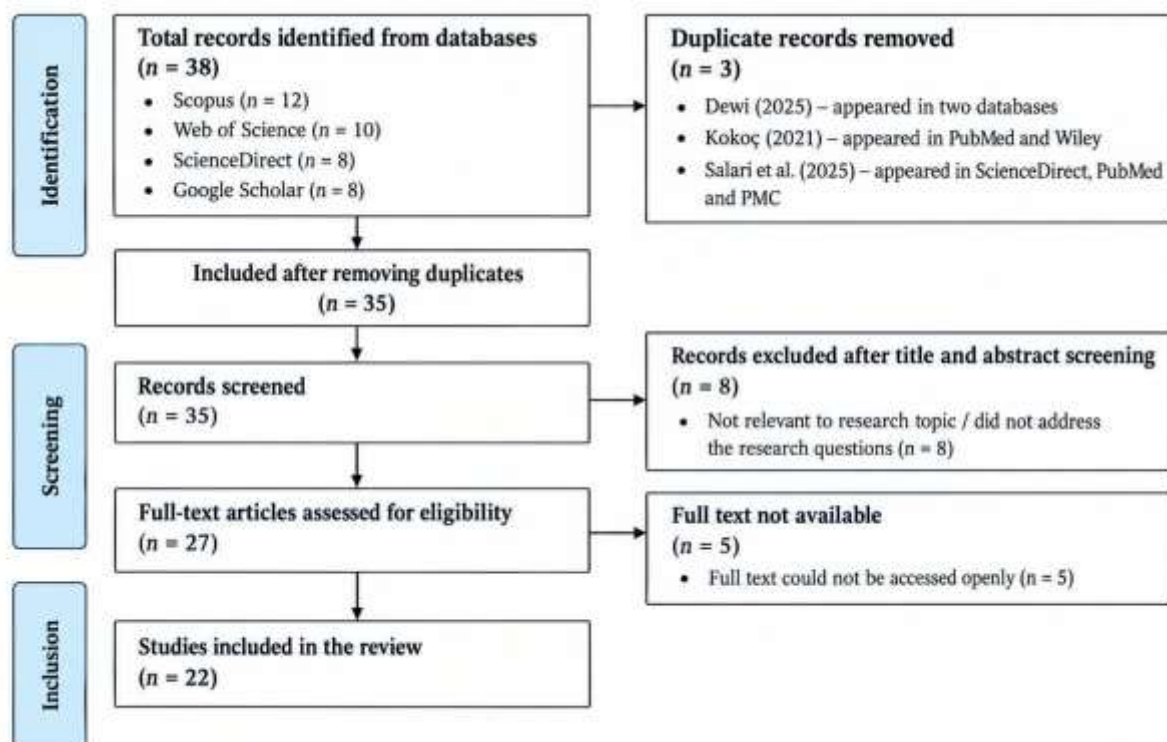


Figure 1. PRISMA-based literature selection process

2.3 Data Analysis

After the 22 articles were selected, the researchers read and reviewed each article to identify information relevant to the two research questions. The relevant findings were recorded and organized based on the author and year, research focus, context, main findings, and related research question.

The findings from different studies were then compared to identify similarities and differences. Similar findings were grouped into relevant themes. For RQ1, the analysis focused mainly on the relationship between brain rot or excessive social media exposure and students' focus, attention, concentration, and attention control. For RQ2, the analysis focused on how social media and short-form content may influence

English language learning, including vocabulary, pronunciation, listening, speaking, and exposure to English, as well as possible challenges such as fragmented attention and reduced deep learning.

Finally, the findings were synthesized and summarized to answer the two research questions and identify the overall patterns across the selected studies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result: Literature Analysis

The literature analysis included 22 selected studies that were reviewed based on their research focus, context, main findings, and relevance to the research questions. The studies were grouped according to their relevance to RQ1 and RQ2. Studies related to students' focus, attention, and concentration were mainly used to answer RQ1, while studies related to English language learning through social media and short-form content were used to answer RQ2.

Table 1. Literature Analysis

No.	Author & Year	Research Focus	Context	Main Finding	Related RQ
1.	Dewi (2025)	Brain rot content and learning concentration	Students	Brain rot content consumption was related to students' learning concentration.	RQ1
2.	Zoromba et al. (2026)	Brain rot-related digital habits and attention	Students	Brain rot-related digital habits and attention dysregulation were examined in relation to academic performance.	RQ1
3.	Lakilaki et al. (2025)	Digital overstimulation and attention control	Students	Digital overstimulation associated with brain rot was related to students' attention control during learning.	RQ1
4.	Sari et al. (2026)	Brain rot exposure and attention	Students	The study examined the influence of brain rot exposure on students' attention.	RQ1
5.	Kokoç (2021)	Social media multitasking and attention control	Students	More frequent social media multitasking was associated with lower attention control and poorer academic performance.	RQ1



6.	Gani (2022)	Social media use and attention	Students	Checking social media notifications during online learning was associated with perceived attention discontinuity.	RQ1
7.	Sun & Chao (2024)	Media multitasking and attention problems	Students	Media multitasking and attention problems were examined as factors connecting excessive social media use with academic performance.	RQ1
8.	Zhao (2023)	Social media multitasking and cognitive distraction	Students	Social media multitasking was associated with cognitive distraction and academic performance.	RQ1
9.	Kolompoy et al. (2026)	Instagram use and concentration	Students	The study examined the relationship between Instagram-use intensity and students' concentration.	RQ1
10.	Agriffina et al. (2026)	TikTok use and learning concentration	Students	The relationship between TikTok-use intensity and learning concentration was examined.	RQ1
11.	Salari et al. (2025)	Social-network addiction and academic achievement	Students	Excessive social media use was associated with lower academic performance, with attention and self-regulation identified as relevant factors.	RQ1
12.	Erduran Tekin (2024)	Social media addiction, attention, and academic achievement	University students	Social media can distract students' attention and reduce the time allocated to academic activities.	RQ1
13.	Al Arif (2019)	Social media use for English learning	EFL university students	Students perceived social media as useful for improving English skills, although they used it more for general purposes than English learning.	RQ2





14.	Al Arif, Sulistiyo & Handayani (2020)	Social media and English learning	EFL university students	Students perceived social media as useful for improving their English skills.	RQ2
15.	Safitri et al. (2022)	Social media as an English-learning resource	EFL learners	Social media was reported as a resource for English language learning.	RQ2
16.	Tambunan, Sari & Rasmitadila (2022)	Social networking sites and English learning	Higher-education students	Instagram was perceived as a useful and enjoyable tool for English learning and motivation.	RQ2
17.	Suciani et al. (2023)	TikTok and English proficiency	EFL students	TikTok was perceived as potentially useful for English proficiency because it provides authentic input and easily understood information.	RQ2
18.	Sihombing & Damanik (2025)	TikTok exposure and English acquisition	Students	TikTok exposure was related to vocabulary, listening, speaking, and cultural awareness.	RQ2
19.	Hikmah & Daflizar(2026)	TikTok and English learning	EFL students	The study examined student's perceptions of TikTok's usefulness, ease of use, and role in English learning.	RQ2
20.	Cahyani & Maghfiroh (2026)	Instagram and English skills	English Education students	Instagram supported vocabulary, grammar, listening, and speaking, while Reels were particularly relevant to listening and pronunciation.	RQ2
21.	Amori, Susanto & Haryanto (2026)	Incidental English exposure through social media	EFL students	YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram provided incidental exposure to vocabulary, slang, expressions, pronunciation, and language patterns, although fast and non-standard English could be challenging.	RQ2





22.	Aulia et al. (2025)	Brain rot culture, short-form media, and English learning	English Education students	Brain rot content and short-form media were perceived to support vocabulary and pronunciation but also contribute to fragmented attention and reduced deep learning.	RQ1 & RQ2



Discussion

3.1 Findings for Research Question 1

RQ1: How does exposure to brain rot content on social media influence students' focus?

The findings show a generally negative relationship between excessive exposure to brain rot content on social media and students' focus. Dewi (2025), Zoromba et al. (2026), Lakilaki et al. (2025), and Sari et al. (2026) indicate that frequent exposure to highly stimulating digital or short-form content may be associated with reduced concentration and difficulties in maintaining attention during learning. These findings suggest that continuous exposure to rapidly changing digital content may make it more difficult for students to maintain sustained attention on academic tasks.

Similar findings are reported by studies focusing on social media multitasking and digital distraction. Kokoç (2021) found a relationship between social media multitasking and students' attention control, while Gani (2022) reported that media multitasking could interfere with students' ability to maintain attention during learning. Sun and Chao (2024) also associated excessive social media use with attention problems and academic performance. In addition, Zhao (2023) found that social media multitasking could contribute to cognitive distraction among college students. These studies support the idea that frequent switching between social media content and academic activities may make it more difficult for students to maintain their focus.

Salari et al. (2025) also reported a relationship between social-network addiction and academic achievement, highlighting the potential negative effects of excessive social media use on students' academic functioning. Kolompoy et al. (2026) and Agriffina et al. (2026) further examined Instagram and TikTok use in relation to students' learning or academic concentration. Their findings suggest that the use of social media platforms can influence students' concentration, particularly when social media becomes a frequent part of their daily activities.

Erduran Tekin (2024) provides further support for this finding by explaining that social media can distract students' attention, contribute to procrastination, and reduce the time allocated to academic activities. The study also emphasizes the importance of self-discipline in maintaining attention and moving away from distracting online activities. This finding is relevant to RQ1 because it helps explain how excessive social media use may interfere with students' ability to focus on learning tasks.

Overall, the studies show a relatively consistent pattern: excessive exposure to highly stimulating digital content and social media may negatively influence students' focus, attention, and concentration. However, not all of the reviewed studies directly examine "brain rot" content. Some studies focus more broadly on social media use, multitasking, or digital distraction. Therefore, these studies should be understood as supporting evidence for the possible relationship between brain rot-related digital consumption and reduced focus, rather than as direct evidence that all social media use causes brain rot.

3.2 Findings for Research Question 2

RQ2: In what ways does brain rot content affect the process of English language learning?

The findings for RQ2 show that social media and short-form content can have both positive and negative effects on English language learning. Al Arif (2019) found that EFL university students had positive attitudes toward using social media for English learning and perceived it as useful for improving their language skills, particularly vocabulary, listening, and speaking. Similarly, Al Arif et al. (2020) reported that students considered social media important for supporting the development of their English skills. Safitri et al. (2022) also showed that social media could provide accessible resources that support English learning.

Other studies highlight the benefits of specific social media platforms. Tambunan et al. (2022) found that Instagram was perceived as a useful and enjoyable tool for English language learning. Suciani et al. (2023) reported that TikTok could support English learning by providing authentic language input and easily accessible information. Sihombing and Damanik (2025) also associated TikTok exposure with aspects of English language acquisition, including vocabulary, listening, speaking, and cultural awareness. Hikmah and Daflizar (2026) similarly found that students perceived TikTok as useful and easy to use for supporting English language learning. These findings indicate that social media can provide students with opportunities to encounter English in an accessible and engaging way.

Cahyani and Maghfiroh (2026) further reported that Instagram can support different aspects of English learning, including vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking, and pronunciation. Amori et al. (2026) also found that students could gain incidental exposure to English vocabulary, slang, expressions, pronunciation, and language patterns through platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. However, the study also identified challenges, such as fast speech and non-standard English, which may make some online English content difficult for learners to understand.

More directly related to the concept of brain rot, Aulia et al. (2025) found that students recognized both benefits and disadvantages of learning English through short-form media. The advantages included opportunities to develop vocabulary and pronunciation, while the disadvantages included fragmented attention, reduced deep-learning ability, and difficulties with time management. This finding is particularly important because it demonstrates that the same short-form media environment can provide useful English exposure while also creating distractions that may interfere with deeper learning.

Overall, the findings suggest that the effect of brain rot content on English language learning is mixed rather than entirely positive or negative. Social media and short-form content can support English learning by providing accessible English input and opportunities to develop vocabulary, pronunciation, listening, and speaking skills. However, when consumption becomes excessive or focuses heavily on highly stimulating and distracting content, it may fragment students' attention and reduce their ability to engage in deeper learning. Therefore, the effect depends not only on the platform itself but also on the type of content students consume and how frequently they engage with it.

3.3 Implications and Limitations

The findings have several implications for English language learning. Social media can provide students with additional opportunities to encounter English outside the classroom through short videos, captions, conversations, pronunciation examples, and other forms of digital content. This can complement formal English instruction by giving students more frequent and accessible exposure to the language. However, the findings also suggest that the educational value of social media depends on the type and amount of content consumed. Content that provides meaningful English input may support language development, while excessive consumption of highly stimulating or unrelated content may contribute to distraction and fragmented attention.

This study also has several limitations. First, not all of the reviewed studies directly examined brain rot content. Several studies focused more broadly on social media use, multitasking, TikTok, Instagram, or digital distraction. Therefore, these studies provide supporting evidence rather than direct evidence of the effects of brain rot. Second, the reviewed studies involved different populations and educational contexts, making direct comparison between findings difficult. Finally, the review was limited by the selected publication period, databases, and availability of full-text articles. Future research could examine the relationship between brain rot content and English language learning more directly, particularly through studies that measure students' actual exposure to short-form content and its effects on sustained attention and language-learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This literature review shows that brain rot content and excessive exposure to social media may be associated with difficulties in maintaining students' focus and concentration. Regarding the first research question, the reviewed studies indicate that frequent exposure to highly stimulating digital content and social media multitasking may distract students and make it more difficult for them to sustain attention during learning. Regarding the second research question, social media and short-form content can support English language learning by providing opportunities to develop vocabulary, pronunciation, listening, and speaking skills. However, excessive consumption may also fragment students' attention and reduce their engagement in deeper learning. Overall, the effects of brain rot content on students' focus and English language learning can be both beneficial and harmful, depending on the type of content consumed and students' patterns of use.

These findings may contribute to English language education by encouraging students and educators to use social media more purposefully as a supplementary learning resource while remaining aware of its potential distractions. Future studies may examine the direct effects of brain rot content on students' sustained attention and English language learning outcomes through empirical research involving different educational contexts.

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