

Dark Humor and 'Brainrot': The Hidden Power of Gen Z Laughter and Collective Identity Making

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ABSTRACT

'Brainrot' is a relatively new concept within fields such as anthropology, cognitive science, and psychology. It is generally defined as low-effort social media content associated with a range of negative consequences, including shortened attention spans and increased anxiety. However, this article proposes an alternative understanding of brainrot rooted in its capacity to help Generation Z navigate and resist societal expectations, producing more generative and positive outcomes. Drawing on ethnographic interviews with seven Generation Z (Gen Z) participants—undergraduate students at UC San Diego—this paper demonstrates how brainrot operates as a genre of dark humor through which Gen Z expresses a shared, collective political identity. Although brainrot is often framed as detrimental to young people's cognitive and social development, I argue that brainrot humor shares key qualities with surrealism, linking it historically and aesthetically to traditions of dark humor. In doing so, it reveals an emancipatory political potential. Through this lens, more broadly, this article proposes brainrot as a communicative practice that offers insight into how Gen Z constructs identity, builds community, and develops coping mechanisms in response to contemporary social pressures.

Keywords: Brainrot, dark humor, Gen Z, collective identity, political expression, California, USA

This article explores how Gen Z's consumption and production of brainrot humor functions as a response to the sociopolitical pressures placed on them as the generation expected to "fix" society's many challenges. Drawing on ethnographic interviews with undergraduate college students, in which participants react to dark humor brainrot Instagram reels, I examine the defining qualities and characteristics of this form of humor. For example, brainrot media employs "deliberate absurdity and surreal AI-generated aesthetics" (Götzfried and Heitmayer 2026, 1) which I expand on below.

I argue that brainrot is a distinct comedic mode within Gen Z culture, which can be divided into two primary forms: "classic" brainrot and dark humor brainrot, both of which are explored in this study. Furthermore, dark humor and brainrot play a vital role in how Gen Z cultivates social cohesion, helping to "form a sense of community by making light of shared experiences through the expression of a generational identity" (Aronson and Jaffal 2020, 527). Brainrot is often understood as "the supposed deterioration of a person's mental or intellectual state, especially viewed as the result of overconsumption of material (now particularly online content) considered to be trivial or unchallenging" (Yousef et al. 2025, 1). However, this article contends that it serves a more meaningful function: for Gen Z, brainrot operates not only as a creative coping mechanism, but also a communicative practice that forms solidarity and acts as a tool for political expression. First, I define what makes a generation and trace the generational differences in dark humor throughout recent decades, revealing a Gen Z specific humor.

Dark Humor through Generations

Generation Z (also known as Gen Z or Zoomers) is generally defined as the age group born between 1997 and 2012. However, the category of "generation" is made up of more complex relationships, feelings of belonging, and identity than simply being born within a certain period. Specifically, as anthropologist Corrine Laporte at the University of Ottawa claims, being a part of a generation is subjective and involves self-identifying with trends associated with the group (Laporte 2021, 7). Laporte cites the collective symbolization of rock music and counterculture for example, to generally represent those who came of age in the 1960s despite only a portion of this generation participating in these trends (Laporte 2021, 100). Similarly, while most of my interlocutors resonated with brainrot trends, they found the reels they watched funny or at least understood them. One interlocutor found himself confused by many of the Instagram reels and did not resonate with the humor. I want to note my interlocutor's reaction to illustrate that like in any generation, there are differences in interpretations of humor and perceptions of cultural events.

Therefore, while any generation cannot be generalized completely, the height of millennial trends, for example, was massively shaped by the rise of the internet and a specific humor and meme culture marked by excessive self-deprecation and irony recognized today by many Gen Z as outdated and "cringe" (Cheong 2023). Gen Z trends, on the other hand, were created during the peak of short-form media creation through platforms like Vine, Musical.ly which became TikTok, and eventually Instagram and YouTube which now also feature short-form videos. This form of media consumption has arguably led to the rise of brainrot. In her research on millennials, Laporte (2021) notes how generational conflict may also be necessary to form generational belonging. For example, she finds that part of the identity of millennials is to contest the 'Boomer imposed narrative' of millennials as entitled and lazy Laporte (2021, 8). This conflict, as I expand on later, is also reflected in Gen Z's identity and approach to humor and online practices.

Researchers of 'dark humor' across different generations have shown how brainrot responds to collective existential threats and social and political crises (Powell 2022, 195)--from U.S. Prisoners of War during the Vietnam War to Millennials during the Covid-19 pandemic. Researcher Linda Henman studied the behavior of American POWs in the Vietnam War who survived years of imprisonment. Soldiers' ability to find humor, especially in the darkest depths of captivity, was crucial to their survival, as it offered a way to take back control and gave them hope to live another day (Henman 2008). These soldiers displayed what Sigmund Freud famously wrote about as 'gallows humor,' which protects the self from the expenditure of painful feelings and offers comfort or pleasure (Freud 1905). Yet in these cases, dark or gallows humor has more effects than just the individual. The ability to laugh together exemplifies and strengthens social bonds which were crucial to the survival of the POWs.

Shifting contexts, millennial digital humor has been described by scholars as dark, absurd, and weird. Millennial meme culture openly and critically joked about existential threats stemming from structural policies such as wage stagnation and job market instability (Powell 2022, 202). Millennials have faced deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, creating an entire generation with increased job instability, costs of living, and financial insecurity, earning them the name "the unluckiest generation" (Van Dam, 2020). Yet millennials were quick to turn to the internet as a site to produce humorous content on their collective challenges. Scholars noticed this especially during the COVID-19 Pandemic, which produced a distinct style of dark humor online, including "witty posts that took reflective aim at emotional eating, isolation and alcohol consumption, temporal disorientation, and existential crisis" (Powell 2022, 203). In a similar gesture of self-preservation as US POWs, millennials used dark humor to not only take back control, but this humor also became part of forging a collective identity online.

Like those previous generations, Gen Z has also faced a multitude of social and existential crises—including feeling responsible for saving the planet from climate change ('climate anxiety'), exposure to gun violence, soaring

economic inequality, and social isolation. One of my interviewees, 21-year-old Noémie from Paris, France, told me, "From a young age we've all been told this discourse 'Oh we're gonna be the ones to save planet earth' and there's a big weight that's put on our generation." Like previous generations, Gen Z extensively utilizes dark humor to respond to these compounding social, political, and environmental crises. And like previous generations, it forges a collective identity through this humor that is partly developed in opposition to previous generations.

But the quality and makeup of Gen Z dark humor, particularly online, is different from both Millennial meme culture and other genres of dark humor. A study of a Facebook group of emerging adults during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed "the existence of generational humor that is unique to this age group," in both its style and deployment (Aronson and Jaffal 2021, 527). The authors found that Gen Z dark humor draws on sarcasm, popular culture references, and specific childhood imagery that "both reproduce[s] and create[s] shared generational experiences and social space in opposition to older generations" (Aronson and Jaffal 2021, 526). While other generations have also used sarcasm, what makes Gen Z dark humor distinctive is how it combines sarcasm with references to pop culture, making "many of the memes incomprehensible to older generations" (Aronson and Jaffal 2021, 527). For example, one interlocutor tells me that when she thinks of the humor of older people, they tend to have a drier sense of humor that often contains a witty critique. And while Gen Z does the same critiquing, it is through "random craziness" that "other generations wouldn't have appreciated because its not clever."

As I argue below, within Gen Z, brainrot is a unique genre of dark humor that is a departure from past generation's uses of the comedic style. Having been defined as "a genre of deliberately low-effort, absurd short-form videos," brainrot has been established as a cultural phenomenon with unique user practices (Götzfried and Heitmayer 2026). For example, in addition to specific nostalgic imagery and sarcasm, brainrot often employs low-quality AI-generated content. And while not

all low-quality content/brainrot is AI-generated and vice versa (Götzfried and Heitmayer 2026, 1), there is certainly overlap between the two that can speak to the more negative nature of brainrot media creation and consumption. Although not all brainrot is produced by AI, AI-generated imagery, aesthetics, and language is often used in brainrot media further compounding an already perplexing form of humor for older generations.

I argue that the illegibility of Gen Z humor is intentional and a symptom of “intergenerational group consciousness” which I expand on in a later section on brainrot and Gen Z identity. This term has been used by scholars Morgan Anderson and Gabriel Keehn to describe the “consciousness building movement” of memes like the ‘OK Boomer’ meme which can help younger generations “build solidarity in the face of their collective marginalization” (Anderson and Keehn 2020, 57).

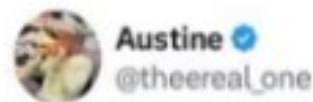
Anderson and Keehn analyze the ‘OK Boomer meme’ as a “nascent expression of sociopolitical critique,” particularly against “the deepening structural inequalities that present unprecedented challenges for our nation’s youth” (Anderson and Keehn 2020, 57). The idea of keeping out older generations is key to Gen Z humor and by extension, Gen Z collective identity (see Figures 1 and 2).

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and formula for ‘practice’ can help explain this complex phenomenon. Bourdieu’s habitus aims to explain why certain individuals and groups of people act in predictable patterns despite being “free agents” (Maton 2008). Habitus “captures how we carry within us our history, how we bring this history into our present circumstances, and how we then make choices to act in certain ways and not



Figure 1 - Digital image screenshot from Instagram reel of an ‘Ok Boomer’ meme. The image itself illustrates the collective feelings of younger generations about the future. The caption posted along with this image (not shown) simply says “ok boomer.” The meme subverts the imposed expectations surrounding cost of living that the Boomer generation (1946–1964) may impose on younger generations. The joke displays how Gen Z will inherit the degraded socioeconomic/social conditions that Millennials have inherited from Boomers (@littleshitjoe 2025).

ONE DAY



i love that being able to afford rent n groceries is being romanticized by gen z like we've literally reached an economic point of no return

Figure 2 - Digital image screenshot from Instagram reel of a meme conveying a similar sentiment about the collective dread the younger generation has about traditionally expected life achievements like moving out and living alone. It exhibits contemporary socioeconomic issues and the reality of affordable housing, something that used to be an expected but is now something many youths see as out of reach or a romanticized “dream.” (@itsallaboutmemesss 2025)

others” (Maton 2008, 52). In addition to habitus, social capital describes one’s position in a social field. These three dynamic relational components (habitus, capital, field) work together to underpin complex human decisions and practices.

However, the structures of habitus also evolve over time. For example, when analyzing Gen Z, the disposition of this group is of course incredibly varied, but the common denominator is their collective experiences within a social field (as Gen Z). For example, Noémie’s story illustrates an existing tension many Gen Z experience while entering adulthood in which they feel responsible for fixing the existential issues plaguing our society.

As Noémie expressed, the popular notion that Gen Z will “save the world” creates an immense burden on Gen Z. Personally, I have heard this exact phrase or versions of it many times whether from professors, well-meaning older individuals, or even content creators on social media platforms. While this rhetoric seems positive and “feel good,” it places significant pressure on members of Gen Z, creating more feelings of anxiety. This overly optimistic outlook of how Gen Z will change the world is not shared by my interlocutors, myself, or other Gen Z youth highlighted by staff writer for Utblick Magazine in an article titled “Why Gen Z Is Not Going to Save the World.” As Gen Z author Lena-Sophia Steinert claims, Gen Z has been labeled as “digital natives” having been the first generation to grow up alongside the internet supposedly creating ultra-aware, politically conscious activists (Steinert 2024). On the other end of the spectrum, Gen Z also commonly face accusations from older generations of being selfish, too attached to technology, and overall unaware or out of touch from reality. An article from The Atlantic “Getting Gen Z Primed to Save the World” showcases this exact polarizing dichotomy as it contends with the popular myth that the next generation is “entitled, distracted, and apathetic” as it claims: “today’s much-doubted young will be as engaged with the issues of the day as any generation before them—and may be even better at making positive change” (The Atlantic 2015).

The result of this misguided labeling is multi fold as “Gen Z has been burdened with the failures of its predecessors and is expected to live up to all of these expectations without crumbling under the crushing weight of a dying world” (Steinert 2024). In addition, these stereotypical conceptions of Gen Z distract from structural issues by displacing responsibility onto this group, maintaining and justifying other generation’s lack of accountability, and are overall reductionist and destructive (despite one having a more “positive” view of Gen Z).

Gen Z has developed in a technologically advanced era in which much of their social expression occurs on and through the internet. The internet can be a space where a different kind of social capital circulates, an online ‘clout’ which may take precedence over traditional understandings of social capital. The combination of a specific generational lived experience as well as seemingly deteriorating social conditions and somewhat equal access to the internet makes it so that brainrot is especially potent in manifesting in the day-to-day behavior and practices of Gen Z. This is what many of my interlocutors refer to as an “unserious” attitude, a phrase many Gen Z use in a distinct conceptualization of casual day-to-day brainrot which I examine more below.

Researcher of new media Wendy Chun examines the intimate relationship between technology, communication, and habit in her book *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. She writes, “New media... are endlessly fascinating yet boring, addictive yet revolting, banal yet revolutionary” (Chun 2016, ix). Chun describes new media as being defined by continuous updates yet inevitable obsolescence, the blurring of boundaries like publicity and privacy or hype and reality, and its habitual mechanism which intertwines and naturalizes new media in our lives (Chun 2016). When the “new” has become the “habitual,” media has the most power to influence and structure our lives without us knowing and ultimately, “through habits users become their machines” (Chun 2016, 1). Brainrot humor can demonstrate how many of these boundaries, between offline and online worlds, can blur and how brainrot humor has become habitual as part of Gen Z media consumption.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative, ethnographic interview approach to examine how members of Generation Z interpret and engage with brainrot on social media. The participants in this study consisted of seven undergraduate students at the University of California, San Diego. Participants were selected to reflect a range of academic disciplines and social identities in order to capture diverse viewpoints. Data collection took place between March and May 2025. Each participant took part in a semi-structured interview around 45 minutes to an hour in which they were shown five Instagram Reels that I had preselected and categorized as examples of dark humor. These reels included content addressing topics such as social justice, economic inequality, and cultural grievances — subjects that are often politically charged and potentially uncomfortable. I want to note that not all instances of dark humor are perceived as equally “dark,” among my interlocutors. Perceptions of what constitutes “darkness” in humor are culturally based, shaped by varying social norms and histories.

During the interviews, I used an open-ended questioning format, asking participants about their reactions to the reels and what thoughts or feelings were provoked. This was to get a better idea of what aspects of dark humor and brainrot stood out to my interlocutors and how it relates to the pervasiveness of this phenomenon. Follow-up questions further examined their interpretations of the humor, their familiarity with similar content, and their broader relationship with “brainrot” media and dark humor online. In addition to reactions to specific reels, participants were asked to reflect more broadly on the relationship between humor and politics, including whether humor can meaningfully engage with serious or sensitive topics. This line of questioning was informed by Rebecca Krefting’s concept of “charged humor,” (Krefting, 2014) defined as humor that engages with politically and emotionally loaded subject matter. Drawing on this framework, I define dark humor as humor that makes light of highly politicized and emotionally potent issues. This project was deemed exempt from Institutional Review

Board (IRB) approval because it was conducted as part of a course requirement.

Results

‘Brainrot’

‘Brainrot’ has various meanings but has mostly been described — and dismissed — by most academics and internet observers as mind-numbing. Another popular use of the term, for example, is a derogatory one as a critique of others’ excessive online usage. Some Gen Z share this negative view as well. One undergraduate student at Tufts University wrote an op-ed about how extensive usage of brainrot terms leads to an erosion of “our ability to maintain intelligent conversations and formality when necessary” (Huang 2024).

Current scholarly literature on “brainrot” is similarly focused on its harmful effects, including on youth cognitive abilities, increased anxiety and depression, and overall health decline. In fact, the term has become pathologized. Research by pediatric physicians on the physical, emotional, and cognitive symptoms and treatment plans for the effects of brainrot shows how short-form media consumption can lead to cognitive overload, diminished academic performance, decreased memory and attention, as well as an increase in superficial information processing (Aysi et al. 2025). Beyond the cognitive effects of brainrot, philosopher Jakub Marek argues that ‘doomscrolling’ (the main mechanism through which brainrot is produced or achieved) also affects the psyche. For more context, from 2020 and onwards the term “doomscrolling” has adopted a slightly different meaning as opposed to its meaning as used most around 2020/the Covid-19 Pandemic era to mean obsessively scrolling through social media looking for the most recent catastrophe/disaster (PenelopePenguin 2020). The most recent definition has shifted to describe the feeling of being unable to stop scrolling on social media (X-Pseudonym 2023). Using Kierkegaard’s existential analysis of distraction and impatience, Marek argues that doomscrolling produces a “specific temporality and corporality,” in which one is disoriented

and dispersed with no possibility of turning towards, or finding, oneself (Marek 2023, 131).

While I do not deny the validity of these views of brainrot, in this paper, I shift the focus to consider brainrot as a complex and unique form of dark humor and specific phenomenological response to the challenges and threats faced by Gen Z. I argue that in addition to what has been said about it, brainrot is also a creative and expressive byproduct of generational conflict. Brainrot offers Gen Z a unified generational experience in which to express and channel feelings of absurdity, build solidarity, and find social support. Further, previous scholarly analyses have not closely examined brainrot's aesthetic sensibilities and qualities, which I show tie back to a longer history of surrealist techniques in dark humor.

My Gen Z interlocutors alerted me to the importance of brainrot as a subgenre of humor when they used the terms 'brainrot' and 'brainrot humor' to refer to both a style of humor and a phenomenological orientation they experience while consuming it. One interlocutor makes the distinction that, unlike other genres of dark humor, brainrot does not seem to require wit or cleverness. Instead, brainrot primarily works through "shock, absurdity, randomness, and non-sense." Generally, the more removed from real life and surreal the content, the more "brainrot" it is. This humor is self-aware in its apparent lack of meaning. Rather, it finds its power in how easily it can be consumed and the feelings it tends to produce. Not all 'brainrot' has 'dark humor' elements--that has a social or political edge to it. One interlocutor said, "You can brainrot to anything, to be honest." His words imply that the content one engages with is not nearly as important as the act of "brainrotting" itself. However, I argue that even 'classic' brainrot shares something in common with classic forms of dark humor, namely the reliance on surrealism. In the following section, I identify two kinds of brainrot: "classic" brainrot and dark humor brainrot and reflect on their expressive qualities for Gen Z. While "brainrot" humor originates online, particularly in meme culture, it also exceeds the social media landscape and filters into Gen Z' everyday life,

even while it maintains connections with technology. While it's no secret that social media influences Gen Z, this phenomenon doesn't seem to be as simple as jumping on the bandwagon or social influencing. Brainrot shows potential to be more than just another silly trend on the internet. It is also a powerful political tool that is intertwined with the sociopolitical concerns and aspirations of the Gen Z social world.

In non-digital environments, brainrot commonly manifests in using brainrot terms such as "cooked" or "aura" in daily conversations or in settings outside of where social media discourse exists, amplifying the humorous and boundary blurring power of brainrot. Merriam-Webster defines "cooked" as a term describing "someone or something in a state of possibly irreversible misfortune and hardship" and "aura" as the vibe given off by someone especially "in reference to exhibiting prowess" (Merriam-Webster 2025). One interlocutor, Andrew, told me he enjoys saying brainrot terms specifically when it is out of context: "I'll be like, what the sigma? And, like I have a Greek alphabet on my phone, so I'll put the actual sigma." He demonstrates how brainrot content is not only something he enjoys interacting with in the sphere of online social media, but how it is entangled and naturalized in his private life off social media as well. Andrew also tells me how the intentional inappropriateness of invoking brainrot terms comes naturally to him. His words illustrate how brainrot blurs reality and surreality as Gen Z further intertwines its language and aesthetics into their offline world, a central aspect of brainrot which I expand on in the section below. Moreover, beyond just saying brainrot terms or references to brainrot humor, brainrot may also manifest as something greater—an ongoing state of mind for Gen Z.

My first indication that there is something specific about Gen Z "brainrot" humor when compared to other kinds of dark humor that utilize shock and absurdity emerged during my interview with my interlocutor Brian, a Hispanic first-generation neurobiology student. He shared a personal anecdote with me about his friends:

This is a bit of an anecdote--sorry for the tangent—but, the other weekend my friends went to New York, and they got into a really bad car accident. One of them had a mild concussion and thankfully they were all safe, but the first thing they did outside of that was film a [funny] TikTok. This generation is so unserious and quick to turn these moments [into something else]. I don't know if it's a coping mechanism, or something our generation, our community, has... been trained to do. But I think [Gen Z humor] is different in being able to so quickly turn such a scary or serious moment into humor.

Brian's story about his friends immediately filming a TikTok after getting into a car accident exhibits how brainrot is not only a type of humor, but a state of mind. His claim that Gen Z is "so unserious" suggests brainrot as not simply a form of humor used to cope with stressors, but a larger philosophy or way of life that transforms serious or stressful situations into something ridiculous. While the word "unserious" can imply not fully grasping the full severity of certain situations and being ignorant of when to be "serious," I believe this "unserious" philosophy to be a practice that Gen Z has evolved to adapt to their social landscape. According to Brian, brainrot is useful in uncertain times as people "are quick to laugh at how ridiculous it might be."

"Classic" brainrot

One of my interlocutors described "classic" brainrot as "endless scrolling" done alone, during which you are bombarded by "flashing bright colors, things that don't make sense, and funny audios." Her description illustrates some essential characteristics of brainrot humor, including overstimulating visual components. By "funny audios," she was referring to short audio clips often borrowed from pop culture and transformed into their own trend through being integrated with memes. Qualities of classic brainrot include utilizing distorted voices or images and illogical sentences or made-up terms designed to be both ironic and utterly overstimulate the user who sees it. "Classic"

brainrot content also includes specific terms/phrases (Skibidi, rizz, aura farming, what the sigma), using certain emojis (laughing crying emoji, skull emoji, fire emoji), and specific songs that already exist or new ones made especially for the brainrot genre (you can find playlists of brainrot music on music streaming platforms like Spotify). Nearly anything can be turned into brainrot as long as it's used meta-ironically, a term also used to describe brainrot and produces a feeling of mental degradation and detachment from real life. The term meta-irony has been used casually across the internet to describe Gen Z humor more broadly and specifically when examining how Gen Z interacts with brainrot content. Essentially, meta-irony is all about blurring the line between joke and sincerity. The punchline is the ambiguity created by, for example, saying "That was so skibidi rizz" and the confusion about whether it was said ironically or with sincerity. Saying brainrot terms in real life is not supposed to be sincere, but because Gen Z adopted these terms into day-to-day conversation, they soon became part of many Gen Z's colloquial language and used both ironically and sincerely. Again, we see how ambiguity and crossing boundaries is a central component to brainrot and Gen Z humor.

After reacting to the pre-selected dark humor reels, third-year neurobiology student



Figure 3 - Digital image of the character "Ballerina Cappuccina" (@aironic.fun 2025).

Paige describes some of them as brainrot or having brainrot qualities. She says brainrot is “laughing at something that isn’t really anything, it’s just stimulus on a screen.” She continues, “It’s random, absurd, and so shocking that you just laugh. Like, it’s so stupid, and you know it’s stupid.” She then bursts out “Ballerina Cappuccino!” To which we both laughed aloud, illustrating her point about how brainrot operates. Ballerina Cappuccino is a reference to the AI generated Italian brainrot memes currently trending on social media (see Figure 3). These AI generated memes combine humans or animals with random objects which are then given Italian or Italian-sounding names and are often accompanied by an AI voice over of an Italian man saying the ridiculous names of the creatures. Some of these characters include Ballerina Cappuccino who is a ballerina with the head of a cappuccino and Tralalero Tralala who is a shark with three legs wearing sneakers (see Figure 4).



Figure 4 - Digital image of the character “Tralalero Tralala” (@eZburger401 2025).

When Paige and I let out an uncontrollable flurry of laughs at “Ballerina Cappuccino,” we illustrated an important aspect of classic brainrot: that it is designed to make you feel distant and detached from real life. Paige’s reference to Ballerina Cappuccino in our conversation temporarily blurred the lines between the online world and the “real world.” The idea of bringing something so silly into

something more serious like an interview caused automatic laughter. In fact, the very idea of conducting academic research about brainrot caused most of my interlocutors to laugh.

Interestingly, my interlocutors had differing views of the effects of the mental and emotional detachment enabled by brainrot humor. Some reinforced what the public health research says about brainrot, while others highlighted brainrot’s other potentials. Paige, for example, described the feeling of mental degradation from viewing this kind of content: “There comes a limit where if everything I’m watching is brainrot, then it’s not surprising anymore and I’m just desensitized to it.” She acknowledged that brainrot is not boundless in its effects on users. However, another interlocutor revealed how this “desensitization” of brainrot can be a coping mechanism to relieve stress. Andrew, a first-year mechanical engineering student said brainrot is “the best humor when I’ve been studying for ten hours straight...I think it’s really stupid humor, but it’s also the stupidity of it that makes it funny.” “Classic” brainrot is nonsensical and absurd. These memes are meant to be “cringe” (A.K.A. embarrassing to watch/hear). In fact, the purpose of “classic” brainrot memes is to be so bad and shocking that they subvert all expectations of what makes a meme funny, which in turn, often draws out a laugh or two out of the user.

Brainrot and Surrealism

On the surface, brainrot may seem useless and just plain “stupid.” However, several conversations with my interlocutors contained mentions of detachment from reality and a feeling of “life is unreal” when watching both “classic” brainrot and dark humor brainrot. Along with my discussion with Paige about brainrot’s ability to cross boundaries, I began to see connections between brainrot and surrealism. Furthermore, some of the aesthetic features of brainrot, particularly its use of surrealist techniques demonstrates how brainrot is connected to a longer history of dark humor.

The French writer and founder of Surrealism in the 20th century, André Breton, defined surrealism as pure psychic automatism or expression with “the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern” (Breton 1924, 87). For Breton, surrealism was a necessary antidote to the “reign of logic” inaugurated by industrial modernity. This system requires absolute rationalism and “under the pretense of civilization and progress,” dismisses “any kind of search for truth” that does not align with widely accepted practice (Breton 1924, 88). The history of Surrealism, beginning in the interwar era in France, reveals the movement’s potential for political agitation which was rooted in the idea of the revolution for a society that would be built for the “psychological needs and desires of mankind rather than imposed by the dictates of utility, logic, and mindless economic determination” (Short 1966, 25). Along with other major artists, writers and thinkers in the surrealist movement—such as Man Ray, Salvador Dali, and René Magritte—Breton believed the key to unlocking the answers to human experience was through the unconscious, particularly the coexistence of dream and reality. For him, returning to childhood was a major pillar of surrealism, as childhood is usually the last time one could be immersed in a dream-like state, free from the rationalizations and restrictions upholding society.

The Surrealists believed that their approach could help liberate our imaginations, freely express the unconscious minds, and eventually bring a new society into being (Short 1966, 5). For some time, the movement aligned itself with the French Communist Party, but tensions between the artistic and political forces within the movement led to their separation after 1935. With writings that utilized “satire and insult,” Surrealists sought to “arouse the feeling of revolt” and spark a spiritual revolution based on the inner most desires of humanity (Short 1966, 14). As a form of humor, “classic” brainrot exemplifies many of the surreal, dreamy, and childlike qualities described by Breton (see Figure 5).

However, I argue that it is dark humor brainrot and not classic brainrot that



Figure 5 - Digital image screen shot from an Instagram reel exemplifying a “classic” brainrot example. A minion from the popular children’s movie *Despicable Me* is photoshopped with rap artist Kanye West’s face. The minion is traveling toward the audience on a boat while audios reminiscent of pre-school music play in the background. Additionally, the background is made up of a dreamy lake scene with a large moon reflecting in the water and white birds flying in the sky. Altogether, this reel contains elements of childhood imagery and absurd, dreamlike qualities. This post at the time of me capturing this image had 1.3 million likes (@brainrotcentralized 2024)

exemplifies the closest connection to Surrealism because of its political potential. “Dark humor brainrot” uses the style of “classic” brainrot characteristics, but it does so to engage in a critique of the hard, cold political reality that currently imbues contemporary US society, from Gen Z’s perspective. The meme as a mode of communication deserves attention as well as it is suitable for the “task of emotional mobilization, both activating the individual experiences of those who experience injustice and also tying them to larger-scale political goals and ideals” (Anderson and Keehn 2020, 60).

Taken together, Surrealism's emphasis on psychic automatism and its use of humor to provoke revolt underscore its orientation toward both imaginative and political liberation. Although "classic" brainrot displays a manifestation of the movement's aesthetic qualities, dark humor brainrot more closely aligns with its revolutionary aims, using absurdity not only to disrupt existing structures but to engage critically with contemporary issues.

Dark humor brainrot

Dark humor brainrot offers the most direct aesthetic, historical, and political link to the surrealist dark humor of the past. An example of dark humor brainrot is a meme that shows a young man swirling a glass of blue Powerade with the overlaying caption "how to deliver bad news" as the camera zooms in on the swirling drink (see Figure 6). It then transitions to a clip of a dolphin jumping out of the water along with the young man who is posed like a dolphin. The caption now says "im getting deported." The 2017 song "Symphony" by Clean Bandit plays in the background producing conflicting emotions of amusement and nostalgia as well as discomfort and shock. Suddenly, instead of being "just" another brainrot meme evoking wonder and play, the viewer is forced to confront the reality of deportation and the underlying idea the imagery suggests: deportation goes beyond simply physically removing someone from where they are living. It also removes that person from the reality they know and understand. Like the young man in the reel, someone may feel they are thrust into an absurd world of nonsense outside the "real world."

This example highlights multiple surrealist qualities of brainrot, such as the use of symbols harkening back to childhood, such as the innocent and dreamy image of a dolphin leaping over a bright blue ocean as the sun sets in the background and a big rainbow fills the sky. The young man is photoshopped into the clip and is a bit distorted as a jarringly happy pop song from 2017 (around when Gen Z would be in middle school) plays in the background, juxtaposing the darkness of the video's



Figure 6 - Digital image screen shot from an Instagram Reel. Source: (@oleki_vfx 2025)

message with the rainbow, candy colored image.

This reel shows how brainrot dark humor can confront a difficult subject and package it into something digestible. Like Breton and the Surrealists' call to use the fullness of our imaginations, the meme transforms our idea of deportation itself, shifting away from a victim narrative to the idea of deportation as a portal to another dimension. In this way, brainrot dark humor asks us to consider "the disparity between appearance and reality in the civic sphere until we realize, finally, that things aren't quite as they seem" (Butler 2023, 61).

The juxtaposition of the utter silliness and absurdity of the visuals/song against the terrifying caption works to short-circuit any rationalizations or logic. This hyper-real representation undermines established social and political structures by drawing attention to the absurdity of policies like mass deportation

or expedited removal which have been brought to the forefront of American politics by the second Trump administration. Furthermore, the silliness and imagery of this video also question the demonized image of immigrants as dangerous criminals. As Nick Butler, the author of *The Trouble with Jokes: Humour and Offensiveness in Contemporary Culture and Politics* writes, "Jokes invite us to play with language and meaning, and they remind us that the way we make sense of the world around us is just one of a number of possibilities" (Butler 2023, 53). Dark humor brainrot creates the space for reimagining a different way of thinking and understanding the violence being imposed on immigrants. This example thus changes the narrative while dispelling harmful stereotypes that have been given fuel in the public domain. This kind of humor "...challenge the myths we sustain about how fair and democratic our society is and the behaviors and practices we enact every day to maintain that fiction" (Krefting 2014, 2).



Figure 7 - Digital image of a screenshot from an Instagram reel showing a young well-dressed man standing in the foreground while what appear to be missiles fall in the background. The caption claims the man is 'aura farming' which suggests that the man is collecting social capital by standing nonchalantly for a picture while a war scene is ongoing behind him (@fruitsnacks 2025).

Most of my interlocutors also recognized that brainrot dark humor could work in the

opposite way, such as when the joke excessively trivializes a highly sensitive matter or 'punches down.' This is an important reminder that not all dark humor is necessarily politically progressive or liberatory. As Rebecca Krefting puts it, "all humor locates itself in social and political contexts, but not all humor does so self-consciously or with specific intentions to promote unity and equality" (Krefting 2014, 2). My interlocutors also described some dark humor brainrot as fatiguing, desensitizing, and as potentially harmful to understanding important social or political topics (See Figure 5).

For example, Tim, a fourth-year human biology student, highlighted the potentially negative effects of dark humor brainrot, such as quick and repeated exposure to dark material (see Figures 7, 8, and 9), ultimately causing people to adopt an attitude of "all this is a joke, and I can say whatever I want." Tim's apprehension reflects Butler's argument about the sinister side of dark humor: "In the not-serious world of jokes, anything is permitted and everything is fair game, and this is what makes humor so seductive and insidious" (Butler 2023, 1). Basically, no matter how bad or offensive, the nature of humor allows one to get away with it by invoking the words: "it's just a joke."

While this more disturbing side of brainrot dark humor certainly exists, it still has significant implications beyond individual effects. For example, brainrot dark humor can act as an instrument to measure and gauge the health of the "individual sovereignty that lies at the heart of Western democracies" (Butler 2023, 53). While Butler argues for a greater awareness of how humor can be weaponized, he also recognizes that it can be used for good. Historically, nation states that have deprived their citizens of the ability to protest by criminalizing humor or criticizing the government have not had the healthiest democracies. Nick Butler reminds us that: "as long as we keep smiling, as long as we don't take ourselves too seriously, we can avoid the worst excesses of fascism" (Butler 2023, 58). Freedom of expression, and in this case political humor, goes hand in hand with political freedom, and dark humor brainrot is no exception. In this way, I believe dark humor



Figure 8 - Digital image of a screenshot from an Instagram reel depicting George Floyd's face photoshopped onto a Labubu. Labubu is the most recent internet trend causing widespread frenzy and mass purchases. Like the image, the caption combines George Floyd and the Labubu together in an absurd and horrifying comment on what many across the internet have expressed as disgust and irritation at social media users' compulsive consumption of whatever the internet deems trendy. Using George Floyd's likeness also seems to be drawing a connection between the mass movements online and in real life that occurred after his death and the most recent Labubu craze. The words "Coming soon" with the fire emoji also seems to be signaling to the idea that this is the future: nothing, even a figure like George Floyd, is safe from the hyper commodification and obsession with consumerism that plagues our society. While no one can be sure of the creator's true intentions, this meme ultimately seems to be expressing disdain and aversion to the idea that some sectors of the public jump onto trends (even social movements like Back Lives Matter) simply for the sake of appearing trendy (@humanity.gone73 2025)

brainrot is also part of Gen Z's contribution to upholding civic accountability and protecting the health of the United States' democracy as the country's youth ensure we continue to comment on, laugh, and destabilize the political status quo.

Brainrot is used "not only to keep informed and to contact others, but also to feel in certain ways" (Lupinacci 2021, 285) which my interlocutors illustrated as they highlighted the feeling of intimate connection with friends and a Gen Z community through brainrotting. Historian Kirsten Leng recognizes how comedy produces affective and psychological effects: "it

can relieve tension, provide comfort, offer catharsis, articulate anger, connect us viscerally (and virtually)" (Leng 2022, 20). Leng notes that these affective responses are "arguably heightened in moments of crisis" (Leng 2022, 20). Leng cautions against labeling all comedy during crisis as a form of escapism as late-night shows for example, "in the early months of the pandemic...did not aim to distract us from the virus; rather, they reflected our sur-reality back to us, or shared our rage and helplessness, or highlighted the new insights and cultural developments brought in the virus's wake" (Leng 2022, 26). I believe dark humor brainrot functions similarly. Its purpose is not to distract from intense political violence and suffering but rather meets the absurdity of



Figure 9 - Digital image of a screenshot from an Instagram reel showing a person cosplaying as Mario in Mario Kart with the caption "hell nah even Mario pulling up to the LA riots." The original reel also included a sideshow of other people cosplaying as fictional characters like Goku and Batman with similar captions for each character. This meme suggests that the riots have reached the point to where even fictional characters are showing up in support (rapup 2025).

these very real and upsetting issues with even more absurdity. With this imaginative remaking of people's everyday political realities, it may create more openings for understanding and change.

Brainrot and Gen Z identity

As other theorists of humor have also argued about different genres of humor, brainrot too produces a sense of communion, collectivity, and belonging for those who participate in it. Humor is just as much about the joke as it is who you're laughing with: "A joke isn't meant to be processed inwardly, in our heads; its meant to be expressed outwardly, directed towards others in search of laughter" (Butler 2023, 2). Brainrot establishes collective identity and creates belonging for "insiders" while simultaneously othering and producing conflict with "outsiders" as "...social identities are fundamental to social interaction in that they provide points of orientation to 'alter' or categorize 'other' as a social object" (Snow and Corrigan-Brown, 2015, 174). Brainrot and its manifestations in real life can be understood as a symbol, and in particular, as a direct index (Hill 1998) of Gen Z identity which signals to others membership within this group as well as traits associated with this group such as open mindedness and nonconformity. Conversely, it can also be an indirect index of a non-Gen Z identity and traits such as conservatism and intolerance. One interlocutor tells me, "[Brainrot] makes me more connected to my friends...we can all collectively laugh at it."

Brainrot in all its variations is an important way Gen Z communicate with one another, signal belonging, and build community, in the sense of a 'we' that is "derived from members' common interests, experiences, and solidarity" (Stekelenburg 2013, 1). Traditionally, the concept of collective identity has been formed within the study of social movements and refers to a 'we' "emerging from shared concepts, convictions and emotions of people actively engaged in implementing social and political changes" (Chodak 2016, 278). While brainrot is not necessarily a social movement, there are components of brainrot, namely its affective and aesthetic qualities, that tell us

about the possible shape of social movements that might derive from or use it.

According to Melucci (1989), cited by Stekelenburg (2013), collective identity "must be conceived as a process because it is constructed and negotiated by repeated activation of the relationships that link individuals to groups" (Stekelenburg 2013, 2). Through memes online and references in real life, brainrot acts as a mode of activation that repeatedly connects individual users to participation in public, collective actions (Shifman 2014). Additionally, according to Castells (1997), the emergence of collective identities "appear to be associated with conditions of sociocultural change or challenge, socioeconomic and political exclusion, and political breakdown and renewal" (Snow and Corrigan-Brown 2015, 176) which reflect the conditions to which dark humor brainrot is bringing attention to.

Social analysts of humor have long noted how humor both produces collectivities and draws boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Brainrot and other forms of dark humor are no exception. A common theme among interviewees was recognizing how Gen Z humor is simultaneously less legible to those who are not part of this generation. In other words, there are those who are "in" on the joke, and those who are not. This concept is illustrated by Brian who describes brainrot as requiring "a group of people to agree that this thing that shouldn't be funny is funny."

During my interview with Brian, he revealed his excitement for this interview as he "thought it would be fun" to discuss dark humor memes. One of the reels I had selected to show was of a white-passing restaurant owner claiming he would defend his employees from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers while performing various silly fight poses in front of a line of his employees. The text in the video reads: "me 12 margaritas deep protecting my small-town Mexican restaurant employees when ICE shows up," as the 1999 song "Livin la Vida Loca" plays in the background. I had expected Brian to react negatively to this reel, because the main subject of the video was the white restaurant owner, not the restaurant workers who I thought Brian might identify

with. But contrary to my expectations, Brian found this reel the funniest out of the five he watched. He explained how conversations about deportations had become “a very real and present threat” in his family. Some of his immediate family members were dealing with their own precarious immigration status. With “how scary” the current political climate can be, Brian felt it was precisely his personal connection with the reel’s themes—the fact that it was making light of a topic that is spoken about within his family—that allowed him to laugh. According to Brian, his “connection to that heritage, that culture,” made this video funnier to him.

While for me deportation was not something I was comfortable joking about, as I do not have the lived experience, Brian, as an insider, could see the humor in the video because jokes and conversations about deportation and ICE already exist in his social world. Brian’s ability to laugh did not mean he did not take the fear of deportation seriously. Rather, Brian revealed a common aspect of dark humor consistent throughout my interviews, which is an insider vs. outsider dynamic, in which one’s location relative to a certain marginalized group dictates that person’s degree of moral authority as well as how that person receives humor. The more ‘inside,’ the more moral authority one has over whether a joke is funny. Relatedly, those on the ‘outside’ feel less authority in deeming the joke funny. That is to say, the lived experience of those in marginalized groups grants them a certain jurisdiction to which “outsiders” do not have access.

Scholars have long noted how humor creates connections between people (insiders) while also drawing boundaries, excluding those who don’t get the joke or cannot laugh (outsiders). In fact, drawing on social psychologist Michael Billig’s theories on humor, far-right politics researcher Eva Svatoňová notes how “the production and reception of humor are essentially dependent on not only the producer of the joke and the audience, but also on the specific culture and social group to which they belong” (Svatoňová 2023, 241). Humor therefore has the power to create emotionally potent feelings of belonging and familiarity, which conversely also means humor has the

power to “other” and further alienate those who do not belong. As Svatoňová puts, “Those who laugh together, belong together” (Svatoňová 2023, 247).

Brian also described brainrot humor as a “large inside joke” that is funny on the condition that there is a collective agreement that it is funny. He stated that brainrot is “more accessible and easier to spread” with friends and other Gen Z because the humor itself is so “low effort” and easy to understand. On the other hand, another interlocutor, Lauren, described brainrot as being less accessible, as there is a “specific type of culture around it” that requires a certain understanding specific to Gen Z. Harkening back to Anderson and Keehn’s use of “intergenerational group consciousness,” their comments on the legibility and accessibility of brainrot reveals how humor, and particularly brainrot humor, can define Gen Z identity itself as being “in” on the joke is a characteristic of being an insider of the group. Like all generational identities, Gen Z identity is shifting and mutable. However, Gen Z have also been described as seeking “authenticity, edginess, and nonconformity in their self-presentation” which makes dark humor especially appealing to this group. ‘Brainrot’ humor can help “establish a distinct self-image that sets them apart from traditional norms and expectations” (Jacob 2023, 219).

As I previously discussed, generational conflict is a defining feature of Gen Z humor as well as Gen Z identity. Brainrot becomes a space in which “clashes between Gen Z dark humor and the sensibilities of older generations” are played out, reinforcing “Gen Z’s self-image as boundary-pushers and rebels...confronting generational differences through their humor expressions” (Jacob 2023, 220). These clashes have as much to do with the medium of expression as they do with the fact that dark humor brainrot “critique[s] and satirize[s]” social structures of power resulting in further alienating older generations who “may perceive it as disrespectful or undermining societal values” (Jacob 2023, 221). At the same time, this consciousness building is a “necessary precondition to political action” (Anderson and Keehn 2020, 57) and

further illustrates how brainrot could be understood in a social movement context.

Conclusion

In his 1905 book *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud examines how jokes are used as a tool to “temporarily pause social prohibitions” and transgress the restrictions society imposes on the id (Butler 2023, 19). Freud defined the part of the human psyche known as the “id” as unconscious instinctual desires which find relief through humor which acts as a socially acceptable outlet. I have argued that for many Gen Z consumers, brainrot humor becomes a way people can truly unleash their innermost desires—in short, the “id.” When concerning these base human desires, things can quickly get dark. But oftentimes, darkness is necessary to see the light. Sometimes, dark humor can be just what an audience needs. Of course, dark humor is not always liberatory and can be oppressive and undermine social justice. But depending on what the joker’s message is, humor can subtly shift how we view the world one joke at a time.

In my time working on this project, which started in the spring of 2025, there have been numerous sociopolitical upheavals which have been reflected in memes across social media. From Donald Trump retaking the White House to mass deportations across the country, to U.S and Israeli air strikes on Iran, Gen Z’s precarity has been on full display. I, alongside my fellow Gen Z-ers, am witnessing in real time how our generation has responded to the possibility of the United States entering a war with Iran and the overwhelming sentiment is reflected in reels I began seeing as soon as news lines came out. This reel (see Figure 10) which is time stamped on June 17th shows a fake clip of hundreds of missiles shooting off into space and coming back down to earth. Then a clip from the 2013 movie *G.I. Joe: Retaliation* plays in which the entire city of London, identified by the iconic Big Ben, is bombarded and destroyed in flames. The caption ‘Trump when it’s my turn to be an adult’ overlays the video as the 1980 parody song “Bomb Iran” by Vince Vance & the Valiants plays which Trump ironically used in his



Figure 10 - Digital image of a screenshot from an Instagram reel showing the city of London being bombed with the caption “Trump when it’s my turn to be an adult” (@hypocrisyhammer 2025).

own post on Truth Social amid the ceasefire which took place June 24th.

Jokes ultimately help us be able to say what we normally wouldn’t be able to, which is incredibly useful when it comes to talking about the worst things happening to the people we love and cherish, our communities and country, and humanity as a whole. While brainrot can look like pure id and just more nonsense on the internet, this view denies the insight brainrot is offering into how many youth understand, process, and communicate about what is happening around them. This shapes their collective identity not only through online networks, but also through human-to-human interactions.

Brainrot could also be considered another tool in what the Surrealists deemed a spiritual and political revolution: “humour is a currency of revolt, exchanged freely between those over whom power is unjustly exercised and spent lavishly at moments of political crisis” (Butler, 60). Indeed, moments of political crisis often produce surges of critique and satirical commentary. It is in this current stage of American politics and seemingly disastrous conditions for our future generations that it is more vital than ever to highlight how brainrot is being utilized by Gen Z as a form of sociopolitical expression, and how it creates new understandings of our world and how we can thrive in it together.

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