Photo of the Day



Students enjoy the sunny day in Storrs, Conn. on April 16, 2026. Campus was lively throughout the day as students basked in the sun.
PHOTO BY SYDNEY CHANDLER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER.

On Brainrot and the Gen Z Will to Reclaim

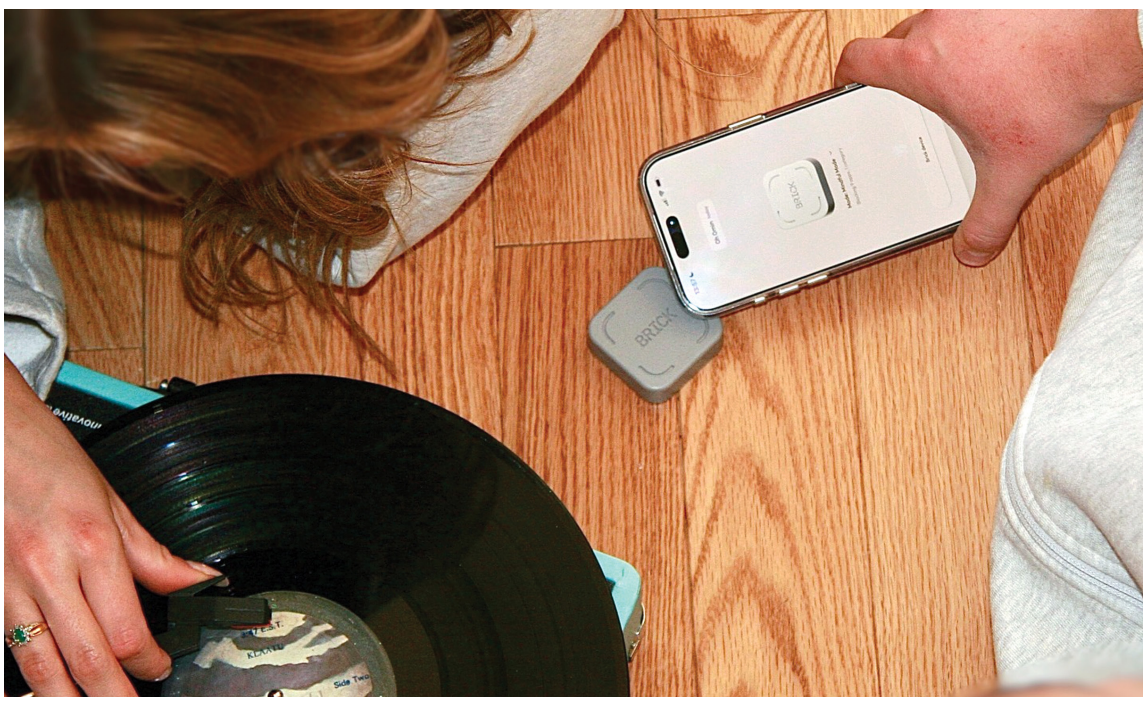
by Tomas Hinckley
OPINION EDITOR
HE/HIM/HIS
tomas.hinckley@uconn.edu

"In all honesty, my biggest concern and secret in the last two years that I've been out of school is that my brain has slowly been melting away," writes Substack author Postcards By Elle in an essay entitled "how to get smart again." As part of a series of how Gen Z postgrads can put their lives back together, this article explores how technology, short-form content and a lack of intellectual stimulation create a formula for brainrot. Similarly, Yana Yuhai (another popular Substack author) poses the question of "how to pay attention again," and offers practices which affect neuroplasticity and dopamine production to support an increased attention span. These essays are representative of how, in recent months, the online world has increasingly been engaged in discourse about how to reclaim a state of mental acuity and intellectual engagement that seems to have been lost in the post-COVID era.

It's not just individual bloggers who are following this discourse though. The Washington Post recently published an article about new research showing the cognitive benefits of social media detoxes. As well, new companies are starting to place their bets on this burgeoning trend: Founded by two Gen Z college graduates, the company "Brick" sells small devices which block apps that the user lists as "distracting" and doesn't allow for easy skips or bypasses. Another new app, "Freedom" limits a device's internet access and only allows calls and texts through.

Today, the average Gen Z American spends approximately over six hours a day scrolling on social media platforms like TikTok, YouTube and Instagram. Plus, they're the most likely age group to be using AI tools, according to one Deloitte survey. Gallup polls find that they're using AI often on a daily or weekly basis. And, of course, this is the same generation which had their educational and social development sharply interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. All of these compounding factors, all disproportionately influencing this specific age group in different ways, are creating a cognitive health crisis.

What this newfound discourse shows is the realization of the pervasive and growing anxiety around the subject of technology induced brainrot. While the idea of "brainrot" has been in the collective vernacular for almost 2 years at this point, now for the first time are people actually responding to it. For example, groups like "Appstinence," founded by Harvard masters student Gabriela Nyugen, are creating programs to get young people off social media permanently. On an international level, The Offline Club is a social organization dedicated to creating social spaces completely absent of all technology. The cultural advent of Substack as a popular media platform, which I reference heavily as inspiration for this essay, falls into this trend as well. As a space that is, at least nominally, based in writing and culture discourse, the fact that it has seen so much more interest in recent times, especially from people leaving Instagram or TikTok, is a sign of changing interests and values in media consumption (although it is not without shortcomings, but more on that later).



People using a "Brick," a device for reducing distraction, with their phones. The product was created by two Gen Z college graduates.
PHOTO COURTESY OF @GETBRICK ON INSTAGRAM.

This intervention fits into broader cultural trends associated with Gen Z, a group that is known for its nostalgia for the past. While typically this exists in the realm of aesthetics (e.g., the revival of the 2000s-era style), this current instance is more revealing of the psychological aspect to this nostalgia. It is really reflective of a deeper desire for stability and connection that has been torn away from them. It is hopeful for a return to the time of brain fog, dopamine burnout and decision fatigue, as well as the identity that came with that. In attempting to reclaim attention spans and intellectual curiosity, people are really searching for a sense of trust in themselves and security in their own minds.

By understanding the current moment as a generation-wide identity struggle, we can better understand why people are becoming so uncomfortable with pervasive technologies and how we can better relate to them. Specifically, the literature on identity continuity through addiction can help us understand these processes on a macro scale.

Dependency on anything, whether it be substances or brain rotting technology, creates distinct shifts in the self-perception of individuals. Researchers note specifically that there are a few distinct opportunities for "identity crises" in the process of addiction. First, is the crisis upon entrance: "when one cannot maintain a pre-addiction concept of self, that is, the addicted individual might realize that they are not who they used to be." Through this framing, quotes like the one that introduced this essay become recontextualized. People can tangibly feel the consequences of long-term technological overstimulation, and it is beginning to create a widespread feeling of crisis. The second point of crisis is when trying to overcome an addiction. The maintenance of self is always based in trying to re-establish the most recent form of identity, but when "[establishing] a post-addiction concept of self, one might experience an identity crisis because of the discontinuity between the addicted self [recent] and the non-addicted self." In combating this, a crucial part of addiction treatment focuses on constructing a new "self" that is not based on addiction. For this case, that means an aspirational identity that rejects the thought terminating excesses of AI-based technologies and social media, while centering intentionality, curiosity and genuine intellectualism.

Although this change will be necessary, it will not be without its difficulties as well. Identity formation in our increasingly disconnected capitalist society often resorts to new forms of consumption or shallow aesthetic self-expression. Any critique of tech systems which have made people so dependent and debilitated has the potential to fall back into reinforcing them. In attempting to "get smart again," people must be critical about where they find this new form of fulfillment.

In her essay titled "Substack isn't solving anti-intellectualism," Freya Dunlap writes, "I see a lot of notes on this app about how incredible Substack is, how people have quit social media and come here to be with all of the 'thought daughters'... Regardless, the coding is the same. Substack is a social media." While Substack may be nominally in support of critical thinking, writers and anybody who is anti-brainrot, ultimately it is still the product of venture capital funding and tech company development patterns (read: enshittification) that are profit oriented. When these "alternatives" are still focused on the bottom-line, they eventually lead people back into the same systems of attention capture that they were trying to escape.

As a generation of young adults begin to enter the workforce and fully leave behind educational environments for the first time in their lives, many more will be forced to reckon with the identity loss and reclamation of a brainrot induced world. Only through a mass movement toward intentional and critical uses of technology will they fully be able to find real security and identity within this period. Reclaiming one's attention, presence and thought is key to a fulfilling life. In a world that constantly looks to capture and monetize that presence, that process of reclamation becomes a radical, but necessary act.



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