



INTERNATIONAL MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE *ITALIAN BRAINROT* PHENOMENON

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Italian Brainrot Generation Alpha Generation Z Generative Artificial Intelligence Viral meme AI Slop	<i>This study examines international media coverage of the 'Italian Brainrot' phenomenon throughout 2025, analysing the intersection between digital virality and traditional news agendas. Through a mixed-methods content analysis (both quantitative and qualitative) of 107 verified news items from 23 countries, the findings reveal a peak in coverage during April, predominantly in the Technology and Society sections. The discourse evolved from defining 'AI slop' to engaging in debates on parenting, mental health, and legal complexities. The study concludes that traditional media legitimise generative AI artefacts through conventional news framing, thereby transforming ephemeral memes into multidimensional global cultural and economic phenomena.</i>

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1. Introduction

In mid-January 2025, the viral phenomenon known as Italian Brainrot (IB, hereafter) emerged on social media. It is characterised by absurd and surreal characters, typically hybrids of animals, fruits or everyday objects with anthropomorphic features (Figure 1). These characters are generated and animated by countless users through applications and programs based on Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI, hereafter) and are amplified by recommendation algorithms (Seaver, 2017) on short-video social media platforms such as TikTok (with Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts playing a lesser role). Within weeks, characters such as Tralalero Tralala (a shark with three Nike trainers on its fins) or Ballerina Cappuccina (a classical ballet dancer with the head of a cappuccino coffee cup) amassed millions of views on these platforms. Their names and associated songs quickly became part of the everyday vocabulary and slang of users, predominantly from Generation Z (Gen Z, hereafter) and Generation Alpha (Gen Alpha, hereafter).

The level of engagement and exposure among young people to IB—with tens of millions of plays on TikTok since its emergence in mid-January 2025—suggests that this is not merely another viral trend, but rather the first fully GenAI-generated global cultural and digital entertainment phenomenon to reach both Gen Z and Gen Alpha on such a scale (Olivares y Delgado, 2026).

Figure 1. Italian Brainrot Moodboard



Source: screenshot from Drawing with Arfan, bit.ly/453nxYH.

1.1. International Coverage of the Italian Brainrot Phenomenon

The emergence of IB extends beyond social media and captures the attention of major global news outlets. Since its appearance and rapid spread on social platforms, both generalist and specialised publications—in print and digital editions—have been publishing articles on IB. One of the earliest identified mentions dates from 18 March 2025 in *Wired* magazine, which states: “Tralalero Tralalá and Bombardiro Crocodilo, da dove arriva il successo dei brain rot italiani” [Tralalero Tralalá and Bombardiro Crocodilo: where does the success of Italian Brainrot come from] (Polidoro, 2025). On 30 April 2025, *The New York Times* published: “Brain Rot Comes for Italy. Meet Ballerina Cappuccina and the Italian brain rot crew, an absurd group of A.I.-generated characters that are flooding TikTok” [The brainrot coming from Italy: meet Ballerina Cappuccina and the absurd group of AI-generated characters flooding TikTok] (Haridasani, 2025). On 29 May 2025, the American cultural magazine *Vulture* explained the origins of IB and situated its rise within internet culture, even noting how the phenomenon reached prime-time television when actress Ana de Armas hummed “Ballerina Cappuccina mi mi mi” on *The Tonight Show* with Jimmy Fallon (Zhan, 2025). On 13 June 2025, Novoa wrote in *El País* about young people’s fascination with this “absurd humour as a generational escape route”, pointing out that these videos are “gaining increasing presence on social media” and warning of their potential “anaesthetising” effect on the loop consumption encouraged by algorithms, primarily those of TikTok (Novoa, 2025).

In France, on 19 June 2025, Quentin Le Van published a report in *Le Monde's Pixels* section exploring “*le business du ‘brainrot’*”, that is, the business model behind the flood of absurd short videos, explaining that the phenomenon, “*généré au kilomètre par IA, taillé pour séduire les algorithmes*” [generated in bulk by AI, designed to seduce algorithms], enables revenue generation through the sale of tools, products or advertising (Le Van, 2025). Helle Hunt, writing in *The Guardian*, approached IB from a social and cultural perspective: an article dated 25 June 2025 in the Society section described how Generation Alpha “has become obsessed” with these characters, to the point that understanding this viral meme helps anticipate “the direction in which online culture is heading” (Hunt, 2025). In the second half of 2025, the Economy and Legal sections of various outlets began examining the commercial and legal implications of this new form of decentralised intellectual property represented by IB. For example, *Forbes* published an analysis on 19 September 2025 titled “*Roblox’s ‘Italian Brainrot’ Trend, Explained*” [The ‘Italian Brainrot’ trend on Roblox, explained], addressing the surge of video games inspired by IB, such as *Steal a Brainrot*, and raising “the question of legal ownership over AI-generated content”, given that the characters are monetised without a single recognised creator (Di Placido, 2025). Similarly, on 24 September 2025, in the economic newspaper *CincoDías*, Patricia Esteban discussed disputes over the trademark registration of the most popular characters amid a “flood of applications” filed with trademark offices in Europe and the United States for terms such as “Tung Tung Tung Sahur” or “Italian Brainrot” (Esteban, 2025).

1.2. Conventional Media and Virality: Between Media Virality and Virality in the Media

News treatment refers to the set of editorial decisions through which a media outlet selects, prioritises, frames and presents an event (genre/tone, headline and other textual elements, section and positioning, sources and temporal follow-up, etc.), thereby transforming it into news (Charaudeau, 2003; Entman, 1993; Gomis, 1991; Marañón, 2023). In the case under consideration, “the event” is the emergence in mid-January 2025 and subsequent viralisation on social media of Italian Brainrot: absurd characters created by GenAI, without recognised authorship, disseminated in the format of short videos — primarily on TikTok— and especially popular among Generation Z (Gen Z) and Generation Alpha (Gen Alpha).

The relationship between virality and conventional media has received limited attention in the scientific literature. Nevertheless, some studies exist on the characteristics that news items possess or should possess in order to become viral (Ahmed Al-Rawi, 2017; Yeste et al., 2025). Denisova (2022) explores how conventional media must invent and employ viral strategies that do not erode their credibility and reputation, while clearly avoiding clickbait. In this regard, the findings of Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2019), based on a mathematical model, suggest that the high information flows generated by AI and GenAI (arising from rates of content production and consumption) inherent in highly viral phenomena such as IB would reduce attention capacity and exposure to content, as well as accelerating information turnover via scrolling, particularly among Gen Z and Gen Alpha.

There are studies on the impact of viral news on public discourse (Sangiorgio et al., 2025). Wold (2022), for example, investigates social media as a source of information for journalists in traditional media. Other contributions, such as that of Martella (2025), analyse how traditional media outlets can draw inspiration from the codes that succeed on TikTok. Most studies focus on how social media phenomena become viral or on comparisons between conventional media and social networks, especially among young audiences.

Particularly noteworthy is the analysis by Sun et al. (2025) of the involvement and responsibility of the media in the treatment of Pepe the Frog memes, a comic character appropriated since 2016 by right-wing and far-right political movements, particularly in the United States. There has been scant analysis of the media representation of highly viral memetic phenomena such as Skibidi Toilet in 2023 (Harmon, 2024; Lindner, 2024) or the more recent Shrimp Jesus (Hern and Milmo, 2024). Nor do we find comparable studies on the coverage and news treatment of the Brain Rot trend (literally, brain rot), AI Slop (literally, AI slop) or enshittification (literally, enshittification).

No studies similar to the one proposed here have been identified concerning the news coverage of highly viral phenomena on short-video social media platforms (TikTok, Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts, among the main ones) created by GenAI. The present work focuses precisely on the coverage and news treatment that traditional media outlets give to the viral memetic phenomenon of IB.

2. Objectives

The present research takes IB as a case study in order to situate it within the convergence between virality on social media and its representation in digital news media. A corpus of journalistic coverage of the phenomenon has been compiled (classified by date, country, outlet name and type, section, publication format, etc.), together with the news treatment (themes, framing, perspective, etc.).

The main objective (MO) is to analyse how news media from different countries report on the IB phenomenon, with the aim of understanding the perspectives of newsworthiness and contributing to studies on the media representation of highly viral phenomena mediated by GenAI on short-video digital platforms. The specific objectives are:

- SO1: Identify the chronology of media coverage of IB, determining the earliest appearances in digital media and how journalistic interest in IB evolves over the study period (from 15 January to 2 October 2025).
- SO2: Examine the geographical distribution (countries) of the news items, to ascertain whether there are significant differences between regions such as Asia, Europe or America, for example; or by the typology of the media covering the phenomenon (generalist, specialised, audiovisual, print...), as well as the journalistic sections (Society, Culture, Technology, Health, Economy, Legal, etc.).
- SO3: Analyse and detect possible patterns in the media representation of the IB phenomenon: the predominant frames, for example emphasis on cultural aspects, generational gaps, warnings to parents and mental health issues among young people, the GenAI technology employed, the business model/monetisation, or legal issues such as intellectual property, among others, and how these frames reflect the concerns and news values of each outlet.
- SO4: Determine which IB specimens and which social media platforms receive the greatest newsworthy prominence.

2.1. Research Questions

The following research questions are formulated:

- RQ1: How and when does the Italian Brainrot phenomenon enter the agenda of journalistic media?
- RQ2: What types of media and news sections provide coverage of IB, and what does this indicate about the newsworthiness criteria applied to a viral memetic phenomenon based on GenAI?
- RQ3: What are the central themes highlighted by the press in covering IB: cultural, artistic, technological, entertainment, psychological, or economic and legal perspectives?

3. Methodology

3.1. Materials and Methods

The aim is to delimit and document the coverage and treatment of the IB phenomenon in the media, from its emergence in January 2025 to 2 October 2025, generating a structured database of news items for descriptive and comparative analysis. To ascertain the news coverage of the IB phenomenon, a mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology is applied through content analysis. The corpus is compiled using the Google News aggregator as an initial tool for identifying media coverage of the Italian brainrot phenomenon. The search is conducted between January and October 2025 using the keywords “Italian brainrot”, “Italian brain rot” or, secondarily, the names of main specimens such as “Tralalero Tralalá”, “Ballerina Cappuccina”, “Tung Tung Tung Sahur” or “Bombardiro Crocodilo”. The results obtained are manually reviewed with the objective of identifying relevant journalistic pieces. Only articles published in digital news media that explicitly address the analysed phenomenon —whether through news coverage, feature reports or cultural analyses— are included. Content from blogs, corporate pages, secondary aggregators or publications that mention the phenomenon only tangentially is excluded. Duplicates and republications of the same content across different outlets or versions of the same article are also removed. Although Google News employs algorithms for content aggregation and prioritisation, the construction of the corpus does not rely exclusively on this algorithmic logic, as the final selection of items is carried out through manual review applying predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The selected news items are recorded in a structured database that systematises variables such as outlet, country, publication date, section, authorship and main theme. This procedure enables the creation of a

systematic and replicable corpus of media coverage of the phenomenon. Between 1 January and 2 October 2025, 107 news items containing “Italian Brainrot” in the headline were obtained, published in 66 media outlets across 23 countries.

3.2. Measures and Instruments

In Table 1 the main methodological characteristics of our study are summarised, focusing on the identification, description, and quantitative and qualitative analysis of news items about the IB phenomenon. The objectives, time frame, sample, and variables employed are detailed, along with the selection criteria and the analysis technique used. Regarding the study corpus, the unit of analysis is any news item about IB published within the indicated time interval that also meets the following requirement: 1) that “Italian Brainrot” or “Italian Brain Rot” is present in the first-level elements of the news item: headline or lead paragraph.

Table 1. Methodological design and study variables

Element	Description
Name of the study	Media coverage of the viral phenomenon <i>Italian Brainrot</i>
Main objective	To analyse the media coverage of <i>Italian Brainrot</i> in international media
Media of the news	Names of international newspapers or magazines, general or sector-specific, with an active website
Time frame	From 1 January 2025 to 2 October 2025
Geographical scope	International media with an active URL
Number of news items	107
Media outlet name	The name of the media outlet that has published at least one news item about IB is recorded
Number of international media outlets included	66 different media outlets are registered: ABC News, Afisha Daily, ANSA, Animal MX, Animal Político, Asbury Park Press, AP (Associated Press), BBC, Business Insider, Campaign, Cebu Daily News, CincoDías, CNA (Channel News Asia), CTRL+SHFT, Cybernews, Daily Dot, Detik News, Detik.com, Detik Jatim, EL PAÍS, El Comercio, El Confidencial, El Universal, Euronews, Excélsior, Fast Company, Financial Times, Forbes, Fortune, FRANCE 24, Gazeta.ru, Good Morning (America/Britain), Il Post, Infobae, Informativo, Interaksyon, KYM (Know Your Meme), Kompas, Los40, La Repubblica, La Vanguardia, Le Figaro, Le Monde, Medium, Milenio, News.com.au, News24, Parents, Philstar, Pitchfork, Purewow, RFI (Radio France Internationale), RNZ (Radio New Zealand), RTÉ, Radio France, Scary Mommy, South China Morning Post, TN (Todo Noticias), The Guardian, The New York Times, The Straits Times, The Times, Vechernyaya Moskva, Vulture, Wired Italia, Yle Areena, Zeit Online, 20minutos.
Country of origin of the media outlet and language of the news item	The country where the media outlet is headquartered and the language of the news item are recorded. Media outlets from 23 countries are recorded: Argentina, Australia, Finland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Mexico, New Zealand, the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Thailand, the United Kingdom, the United States and.
Date of the news item	The date (day/month/year) of publication of the news item is taken into account
Headline of the news item	The full headline of the news item (and its translation into Spanish) is recorded
Lead of the news item	The lead of the news item is recorded (and its translation into Spanish)
Section where the news item is published	The section of the publication where the news item appears is recorded IB: 1. (TEC): “Technology” and similar 2. (CULT): “Culture/art” and similar 3. (SOC): “Society/lifestyle” and similar 4. (SALU): “Health/mental health” and similar

	5. (FAM): “Family/parenting” and similar 6. (ECON): “Economy/business” and similar 7. (LEG): “Legal/intellectual property” and similar 8. Others
Author of the news item	The name of the author of the news item is taken into account, if provided
Objectives of the news content	Eight categories are defined: 1. (EXPLICAFEN): “Explanation of the IB phenomenon (genesis and coverage included)”. 2. (DESCRIPER): “Description of main IB specimens”. 3. (SALUDMENT): “Association of IB with mental health, cognitive decline and conditions affecting young people”. 4. (ALFAPARENT): “Parental and family literacy: advice on screen and social media use”. 5. (ASOBRAISLOP): “Association of IB with <i>Brain Rot</i> , <i>AI Slop</i> , or <i>enshittification</i> and low-quality digital consumption”. 6. (ASOCULT): “Association of IB with algorithmic digital culture and networked lifestyles”. 7. (EXPLICAECOPRO): “Explanation of the IB phenomenon from the perspective of commerce, business, its extension to other sectors such as video games, and/or issues of authorship and intellectual property”. 8. (ASOABSDURD): “Association of IB with artistic, humorous, musical and/or philosophical currents of the absurd”.
Type of medium	Can take the following values: 1. (TV): Generalist television 2. (DIAR): General-interest newspaper 3. (RAD): Generalist radio 4. (REV): Specialist magazine 5. (AGEN): News agency 6. Other type of news media 7. Other
Social media platforms mentioned in the news item	The names of the social media platforms mentioned in the news item are recorded: TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, Facebook, Roblox, etc.
Name of the Italian Brainrot mentioned in the news	“Tralalero Tralala”, “Ballerina Cappuccina”, “Bombardiro Crocodilo”, “Tung Tung Tung Sahur”, “Chimpanzini Bananini”, “Brr Brr Patapim”, “Bombombini Gusini”, “Capuchino Assassino”, “Trippi Troppi Troppa Trippa”, “Lirilí Larilá”, “Trulimero Trulichina”, amongst others.
Analysis technique	Content analysis and semantic analysis, based on Google News articles

Source: own work, 2025.

3.3. Data Collection

A manual search protocol is implemented in Google News to identify news items related to the IB phenomenon, temporally delimited from the phenomenon’s emergence in mid-January 2025 to 2 October 2025. The news search process is carried out between 15 September 2025 and 2 October 2025. The inclusion criterion is established that sources must come exclusively from verified journalistic outlets or platforms. Consequently, only articles published on digital news platforms are considered. Each identified news item undergoes individual verification and coding to confirm its relevance and authenticity according to the established criteria.

Language review and spot translation to understand the news item: the record is kept in the original language. Following this detailed review, coding proceeds in an Excel spreadsheet. In the database, multiple variables are recorded for each entry: publication date, country of origin of the outlet, type of outlet, language, news outlet, section, name of the journalist or news source, news headline, lead paragraph of the news item, objective of the news item, IB characters mentioned, access URL and, where applicable, the explicitly mentioned social media platform. The main themes addressed and the characters mentioned are documented based on a personal reading of all the news items. The collected information is progressively incorporated into a consolidated master file. This process enables data

cleaning and ensures the reliability of the sample. The final sample obtained comprises 107 verified news records.

3.4. Validity and Reliability

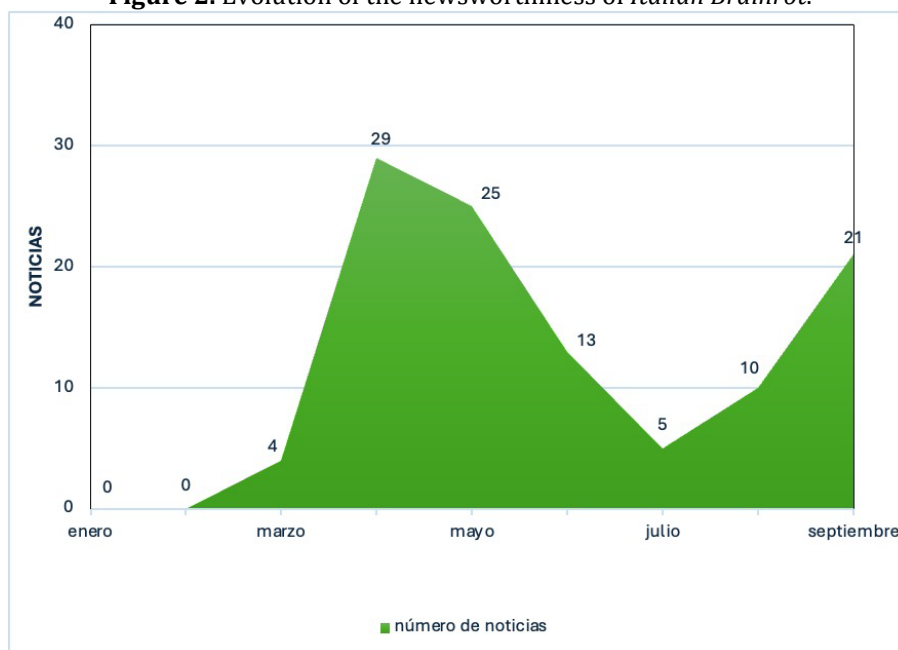
The research ensures its internal validity through coherence between objectives, methodology and analysis of results, using a random sample of the news items. Variables commonly employed in similar studies are considered. To reduce intersubjectivity in coding and ensure consistency in categorisation, a team of three researchers participates. These coders work collaboratively, first agreeing on the inclusion, exclusion and classification criteria, and jointly reviewing doubtful cases, with the aim of maintaining a high level of agreement in the selection and characterisation of each collected news item. Reliability is ensured through repetition of the analytical model employed and the clarity of the observed variables, which allows the study to be replicated in future research.

4. Results

4.1. Modelling and Evolution of the Newsworthiness of Italian Brainrot During the Analysis Period

The analysis of the evolution of the newsworthiness of the IB phenomenon (from 1 January to 2 October 2025) reveals an apparently logical viral life cycle, marked by a phase of explosion, saturation and pronounced decline, albeit with a certain resurgence in newsworthiness in September (Figure 2). The following phases are observed:

- Incubation phase and first echoes (January–March): the first IB characters emerged in mid-January 2025 on TikTok, and no news coverage of the phenomenon was identified until March. Data from March suggest that during the initial weeks IB remained in an incubation phase. The absence of news at the beginning of March and the scarce appearance of news at the end of the month (only 4 records in the last two weeks) indicate that it was at this point when media outlets and major content generators began to perceive its potential, marking the start of journalistic attention towards IB.
- The explosion occurred in April 2025: this month constitutes the epicentre of both viralisation and newsworthiness, accumulating a total of 30 records. The third week, with 11 news items registered, represents the absolute peak. During this month, IB ceased to be an internet curiosity and became a topic of significant media attention. The high frequency of news suggests intense coverage: from explanatory reports and analyses of its origins to opinion pieces and critical articles.
- Plateau (May–July 2025): following the climax of April, May is a period of high visibility, with 25 records distributed more homogeneously; media attention remains strong. The phenomenon is now established, and coverage shifts from novelty to ongoing monitoring. From June (13 records) and especially in July (5 records), a notable and sustained decline is observed. This indicates that the novelty has worn off and the phenomenon has already become popularised.
- Resurgence and the “long tail” phase (August–September): when interest appeared to be residual, August presents an interesting anomaly: a significant uptick in the second week (10 records). This isolated peak, following a declining July, is related to treatment of the phenomenon from new perspectives.
- After this echo, September (21 records) shows that IB has not disappeared, but has entered its “long tail” phase.

Figure 2. Evolution of the newsworthiness of *Italian Brainrot*.

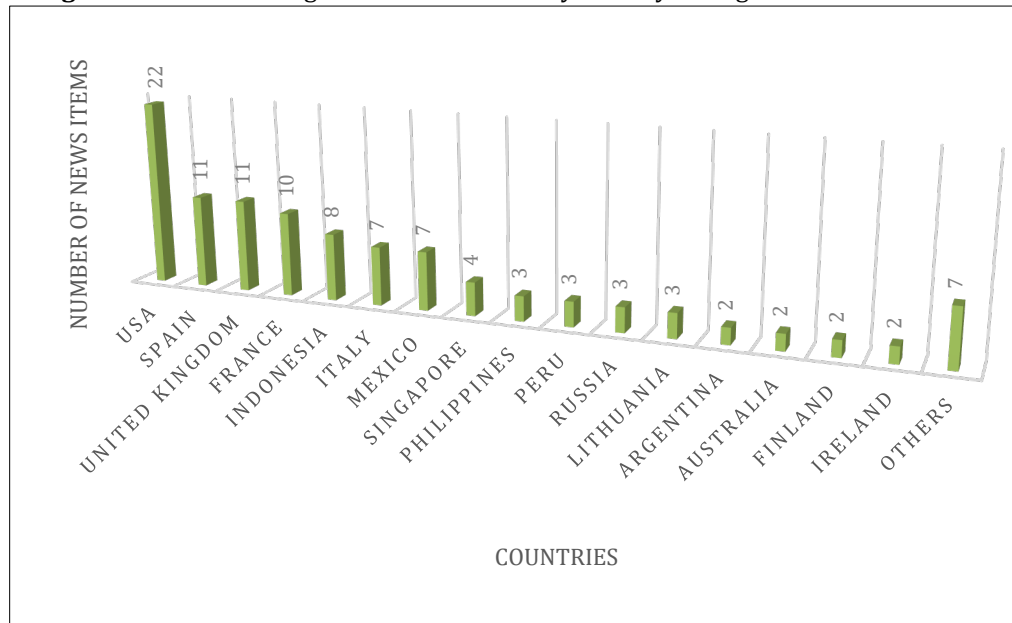
Source: Author's own work, 2025

In summary, the model of newsworthiness for viral memetic phenomena based on GenAI could follow these guidelines, according to the case of IB (Figure 2):

- Rapid rise: from obscurity to peak in one month.
- Slow decline: interest fades gradually.
- It does not die: when it reaches its lowest point in July, it rises again in August (this final “V” shape is the key to a model of sustained high public attention, as interest in its multidimensional implications persists over time).

4.2. Media Coverage of Italian Brainrot by Country and Publication

The figure showing the distribution of news items by country provides a precise snapshot of how a viral phenomenon spreads and is amplified within the media ecosystem of 23 countries (Figure 3). The United States acts as the main media catalyst for the IB phenomenon (22 news items). Nevertheless, European countries collectively register the highest number of news items: Spain and the United Kingdom (11 news items each), France (10 news items) and Italy (7 news items). These countries represent large media markets with highly active digital populations. Italy is of particular interest due to its global identification and association with the IB phenomenon. The Indonesian origin and identity of some IB characters, especially Tung Tung Tung Sahur as a foundational specimen, and others such as Ta Ta Ta Sahur or Boneca Ambalabú, is one of the main reasons for newsworthiness in Indonesia (10 news items). The phenomenon is also newsworthy in culturally proximate countries such as the Philippines (4 news items), Singapore (3 news items), and Hong Kong, Thailand and India (one news item each). Finally, the “Other” category includes 7 news items from 7 different countries (Germany, Hong Kong, India, Portugal, New Zealand, South Africa and Thailand), which underscores the global reach of the phenomenon. Although coverage in these locations is not intense, the content tends to be treated in depth and from critical and reflective perspectives by authoritative voices. For example, in the German weekly Die Zeit, on 9 July 2025, a video lasting just over seven minutes was published in which the editor-in-chief, Giovanni di Lorenzo, offers his view of the central characters of the IB phenomenon and their connection with Italy (di Lorenzo, 2025).

Figure 3. Media coverage of *Italian Brainrot* by country of origin of the media outlet.

Source: own compilation, 2025

4.3. Media Representation of Italian Brainrot by news section.

Figure 4 shows how the records are distributed according to the section of the outlet in which the news item about IB appears. The section can be understood as the frame through which each outlet interprets the IB phenomenon and the lens through which the reader will understand it (to produce this chart, the various section names used by the outlets in our analysis have been grouped). Under the resulting labels —“Technology”, “Society”, “Culture”, “Economy”, “Health” or “Legal”— a heterogeneous nomenclature of sections across media outlets worldwide has been encountered. Sections such as Virals, Social Networks, AI or Memes have been assimilated under Technology; Current Affairs, Trending or Lifestyle under Society; and Art and Entertainment under Culture.

The dominant axes according to the results are Technology and Society. The overwhelming predominance of the Technology category (42 records) and Society (31 records) establishes the primary framing of the narrative. Together they account for nearly 70% of the total coverage: the phenomenon originates in AI technology, with the popularisation of comprehensive and accessible freemium versions of GenAI platforms, and the impact of its exponential production reaches society, particularly young people from Gen Z and Gen Alpha. By placing IB in sections such as Virals, Memes, Pixel, Artificial Intelligence or Generative Artificial Intelligence, the media present it as “something technological”. The approach here is typically descriptive: explaining what it is, how it spreads through TikTok algorithms and on other short-video platforms. The audience for this type of representation is one interested in the internet, “tech enthusiasts” or those curious about online dynamics.

The Society block reveals the second phase of newsworthiness. This is where the phenomenon transcends the digital realm and moves beyond the screen to become a topic of general conversation and interest. When classified under headings such as Trends, Current Affairs or Lifestyle, Italian Brainrot ceases to be a niche digital matter and is presented as a phenomenon for the ordinary citizen. This framing legitimises it as an event of public importance, worthy of discussion beyond specific internet forums. The Culture block (19 records) frames IB as a cultural, artistic, aesthetic manifestation, and even with extensions to music (there is specific IB music). News items in sections such as Culture, Art or Entertainment analyse it as a form of contemporary expression, situating it as an artistic and aesthetic current, humorous or even philosophical. Here there is critical debate about the low quality and aesthetic value of this algorithmic digital culture. The Family/Parenting category (9 records) and Health/Mind (1 record) align with this framing. Their presence, though scarce, indicates that the rise of this “incomprehensible”, “absurd”, “surreal”, “nonsensical”, “algorithmic slop”, “brain rot”, “manic”, “ugly”, “low-quality content”, “enshittified” phenomenon, with “addictive”, “hypnotic”, “dopaminergic” or “anaesthetising” consequences (qualifications explicitly stated in the analysed news items), is a

matter of concern for families and educators due to the presumed cognitive deterioration of exposed young people. The framing here is one of education and health: Is this positive for my children? How does it affect their mental development? Should I be worried? What can I do? This family and parenting perspective in the news indicates that IB is a significant phenomenon and that it is leaving a mark on Gen Z and Gen Alpha.

The Economy, Business and Legal block (4 records) reveal the commercial and economic dimension of the phenomenon. In these sections, Italian Brainrot focuses on monetisation by creators of AI slop content, and the debate on how business is conducted with synthetic content farms produced by GenAI, such as IB. The perspective of intellectual property over an imaginary without recognised authorship and with participatory or collaborative creation is generating intense debate.

The thematic distribution of news items about IB results from a logical progression in the treatment of a multidimensional phenomenon: from its emergence as an algorithmic object (viral meme) with social repercussions and transformations, through its proliferation and consolidation as a cultural, playful, humorous, aesthetic and artistic artefact (absurdism, surrealism, amongst others), to its analysis through more specific and complementary lenses, such as family-related concerns (parenting, responsibility, digital literacy, screen overexposure) and mental health (cognitive dulling, addiction, concentration difficulties, doomscrolling, amongst others), or economy and intellectual property.

Figure 4. Section of the media outlet where the news item on *Italian Brainrot* is published



Source: own compilation, 2025

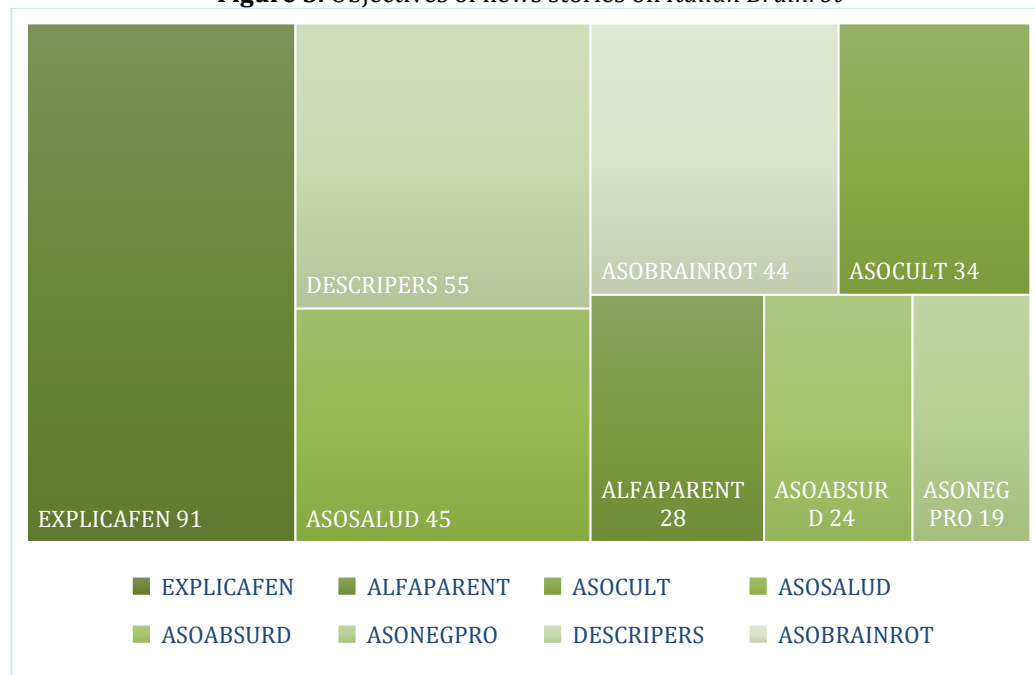
The *Detik* conglomerate (*Detik.com*, *Detik News* and *DetikJatim*) from Indonesia accounts for a total of eight articles, which demonstrates the notable interest of Southeast Asia in the IB phenomenon. In second place is *The Daily Dot* (USA), a publication specialising in internet culture, with 6 articles published. Third position goes to the *ANSA* (Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata) news agency from Italy, which features with 3 articles. Other media outlets, such as *Cybernews* (Lithuania), also appear with 3 articles. The family-oriented medium *Parents* (USA) expresses concern about the content consumed by minors.

4.4. Objectives of News Coverage on Italian Brainrot

Beyond the sections in which the stories are placed, we dissect the inherent objectives of each and every news item on the IB phenomenon. This allows us to establish media frames and approaches with greater consistency (Figure 5). Each article pursues at least two objectives, according to our analysis. Among the objectives considered:

- To educate audiences about the viral IB phenomenon, which is difficult for non-Gen Z and non-Gen Alpha publics to understand, and to describe its iconic specimens (variables EXPLICAFEN and DESPRIPERS). Explanation of the IB phenomenon constitutes the backbone of media coverage: its genesis, its internal logic and its hybrid nature (91 news items). In addition, 65 pieces are devoted to describing the most representative specimens, chiefly Ballerina Capuccina, Tralalero Tralalá, Tung Tung Tung Sahur and Bombardiro Crocodilo. These articles explain the codes of the meme, onomatopoeia and absurd creatures created by GenAI within digital platforms such as TikTok.
- Parental occupation and concern regarding the risks to their children's mental health. The purposes of digital parenting (28 records; variable ALFAPARENT) and mental health (45 records; variable ASOSALUD) are present in 73 records, constructing a discourse of social concern and generational conflict in the face of the risks: "What is this doing to our children?"
- To frame IB as a cultural and artistic manifestation of algorithmic youth: a new digital folklore (34 records; variable ASOCULT), with rich connections to music and its links with absurd aesthetics and humour, as well as surrealist artistic currents (24 records; variable ASOABSURD) resulting from GenAI systems.
- The economy, monetisation and intellectual property surrounding IB. Although less prominent, there are 19 news items (variable ASONEGPRO) that address the economic dimension and reveal its extension into the real economy: merchandising, video games, licences, stickers, brands and platforms. Questions such as "Who owns Tung Tung Tung Sahur?" or "Who monetises these videos?" lead to debates on authorship and intellectual property rights over GenAI outputs.
- IB as a sub-phenomenon of Brain Rot and associated with AI Slop and enshittification (44 records; variable ASOBRAINROT). There are 44 news items that link IB to the concept of brain rot (Oxford's Word of the Year 2024), to other absurd viral brain-rot memes such as Skibidi Toilet or Shrimp Jesus (Vatsa, 2024), or to enshittification (Macquarie Dictionary, 2024) or, in Spanish, "mierdificación" (Maldita, 2024) associated with AI Slop.

Figure 5. Objectives of news stories on *Italian Brainrot*



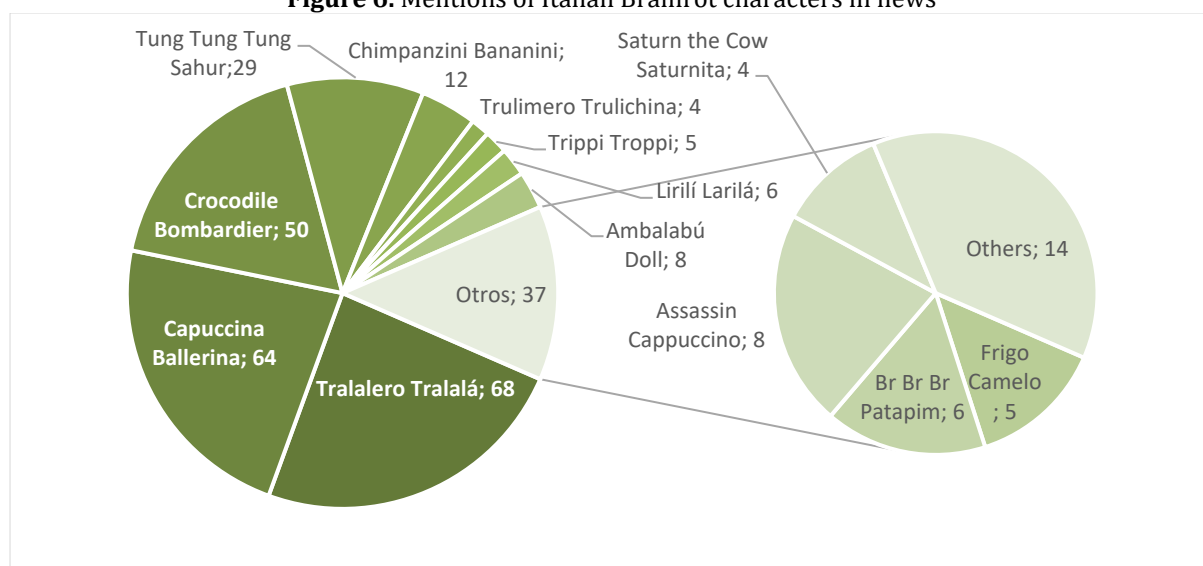
Source: own work, 2025

4.5. Italian Brainrot Characters Mentioned in the News Coverage

The media universe of IB features a quartet of protagonists (Figure 6): Tralalero Tralalá and Ballerina Cappuccina remain the iconic duo. They are followed by Bombardiro Crocodilo and Tung Tung Tung Sahur. The rise of Tung Tung Tung Sahur underscores the importance of Indonesian and Asian coverage of the phenomenon. Its newsworthiness demonstrates that the media treated it as one of the backbone elements of the viral trend, an emblem of Indonesian Brainrot in contrast to Italian Brainrot. Most of the

articles made use of images: when a single image was featured, Tralalero Tralalá appeared most frequently, followed by Ballerina Capuccina and Bombardiro Crocodilo. Bombombini Gussini and Chimpanzini Bananini had greater visual presence (in the image collage of the news item) than verbal mentions.

Figure 6. Mentions of Italian Brainrot characters in news



Source: own work, 2025

5. Discussion and Conclusions

In the light of the results obtained from the content analysis of 107 news items published in 66 media outlets across 23 countries, it can be stated that the research objectives and research questions (MO, SO1-4, RQ1-3) have been satisfactorily addressed. The main objective (MO) of analysing the newsworthiness of IB and advancing understanding of the relationship between digital virality and the traditional media agenda was fulfilled through the modelling of the public attention cycle and the mapping of international coverage. This confirmed that the irruption of a highly viral phenomenon on social media (primarily TikTok) achieves legitimization and sustained attention on the traditional media agenda. Regarding the specific objectives and research questions (SO/RQ):

- SO1 and RQ1 (chronology and entry into the agenda): the analysis identifies precisely how and when IB enters the journalistic agenda. The phenomenon, which emerged in mid-January 2025, had its first identifiable news appearance on 18 March 2025 in Wired. The explosion and absolute peak of newsworthiness occurred in April, confirming the viral life cycle of “explosion, saturation and pronounced decline”, with a resurgence in August and September linked to new thematic approaches.
- SO2 and RQ2 (types of media, distribution and sections): the geographical distribution is examined, highlighting the role of the USA as the main media catalyst (22 news items), followed by the European bloc (chiefly Spain, the United Kingdom, France and Italy) and notable coverage in Southeast Asia (primarily Indonesia). Regarding the sections, the predominance of Technology (42 records) and Society (31 records) indicates that the newsworthiness criteria applied to this GenAI-based memetic phenomenon initially frame it as a technological event and, subsequently, as a topic of social interest and even concern that transcends digital novelty.
- SO3 and RQ3 (treatment patterns and central themes): the thematic patterns are analysed, revealing a plurality of approaches and a logical evolution in news treatment. The central themes evolve from the mere explanation of the phenomenon and the description of specimens (91 and 65 records, respectively) towards social concerns related to mental health and parental literacy (73 combined records), its consideration as a cultural and aesthetic manifestation of the absurd (34 and 24 records), and finally, discussion of the economy, monetisation and intellectual property (19 records).

- SO4 (characters and social media): it is determined that the quartet of IB specimens that dominate media coverage comprises Tralalero Tralalá, Ballerina Cappuccina, Bombardiro Crocodilo and Tung Tung Tung Sahur. Specifically, Tralalero Tralalá tends to be the iconic image of the entire phenomenon (its image appears in a large proportion of the articles; and when only one character's photograph is shown, it is usually this one).
- The phenomenon emerges and expands predominantly on TikTok, which is the platform mentioned in all records. The analysis also notes, albeit to a lesser extent, mentions of other platforms such as Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, Facebook and Roblox, the latter being relevant due to the extension of the phenomenon into the video game *Steal a Brainrot*, and into Fortnite.

The plurality of approaches, ranging from the technological to the legal, shows how the media attempt to make sense of content that many describe as “absurd”, “mierdificado”, “AI slop” or characteristic of “brain rot”. Media concern focuses on the implication that this GenAI content could lead to a reduction in attention span and greater information turnover, a finding that resonates with the model proposed by Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2019) on the accelerated dynamics of collective attention.

A fundamental axis of the discussion lies in GenAI and algorithms (Seaver, 2017) that appear to have driven the viralisation of IB among Gen Z and Gen Alpha, as well as its newsworthiness in news media. This contributes to transferring a multidimensional digital phenomenon of major impact into the public sphere: academics and educators, legal scholars, psychologists, parents and guardians.

The analysis of the temporal evolution of IB allows us to propose a model of newsworthiness for viral memetic phenomena based on GenAI. This model is characterised by three patterns:

- Rapid rise: from the initial incubation period (January–March 2025) to the media explosion (April) in a single month.
- Slow decline: a plateau of high visibility (May) followed by a sustained decline (June–July–August 2025), possibly motivated by the summer holidays in newsrooms.
- It does not die: the phenomenon enters a “long-tail” phase with a significant newsworthy resurgence, particularly in September and early October.

The key to this model is the persistence of public attention for a phenomenon that, precisely because it is so absurd and incomprehensible, proves highly newsworthy and interesting (the final “V” shape, Figure 3). This resurgence is also directly related to the aforementioned multidimensionality of the IB phenomenon which, once its initial technological novelty is exhausted, finds new anchors in the media agenda through its economic implications (monetisation, commerce, licences, extension to video games), legal aspects (intellectual property without recognised authorship, disputes over rights) and social dimensions (parenting, mental health). This sustained interest confirms the success of IB as a phenomenon that not only generates views on TikTok but also becomes a cultural object worthy of debate in the spheres of law and business at an international level.

Media coverage of IB acts as a process of legitimisation and contextualisation. The media pay attention to absurd, chaotic digital content produced by GenAI and filter it through the traditional frames of newsworthiness: technology, society, culture, economy and law (and family, in some cases). In doing so, they transform it from a meme with an expiry date into a globally relevant cultural and economic phenomenon. It is confirmed that extreme virality driven by GenAI is forcing the media agenda to integrate new categories of newsworthiness, to the extent that *ABC News*, *The New York Times*, *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *La Repubblica*, *Le Figaro*, *El País* and *El Confidencial* consider newsworthy a shark walking along the beach wearing Nike trainers.

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