

DAILY TROJAN

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New USC study makes strides in neuroscience research

Researchers developed new imaging technology in order to study the human brain.

By **AMANDINE GALAMA**
Staff Writer

USC researchers at the Keck School of Medicine recently developed a new way to examine how blood flow and cellular organization align across layers of a human brain.

The finding may help scientists understand how blood vessels, cells and energy-producing mechanisms work together to support brain function.

This research allows for more understanding of the biological mechanism behind the blood supply and its relation to several cellular architectures.

The cerebral cortex, which is the brain's outermost layer, contains layers with cells that need a continuous supply of oxygen and nutrients, which they get from blood. To track and measure blood flow throughout the brain, the researchers used arterial spin labeling, a noninvasive MRI technique that magnetically identifies water in the blood and tracks it into brain tissue.

The research showed that areas with a better alignment between blood flow and cellular architecture are correlated with better mitochondrial respiratory capacity. Mitochondria generate energy with oxygen, which makes them less useful in environments where oxygen is limited. So, in regions of the brain where there is a good supply of

oxygen, the mitochondria can be efficient, while other areas may have to find alternative metabolic pathways.

The study introduced the cerebral blood flow-cell-body staining intensity similarity index, which measures how closely blood flow and cellular density follow the same pattern across cortex layers. Higher scores indicate that layers dense in cells tended to receive more blood flow.

"Usually, the lower functioning region[s], like a visual motor, match very well because this area — their circuits, their function, cell architecture — are well defined," said Danny Wang, director of imaging technology innovation for the lab and a professor of neurology and biomedical engineering. "But in the association cortex, because the brain is needed to reorganize to meet the kind of environmental challenges, they are more dynamic."

The researchers used a new, cutting-edge high-resolution technology to measure the cerebral blood flow. Chenyang Zhao, co-first author of the study, said this study wasn't previously possible because the high-resolution image technology was not available.

"The cortex is very thin; [if] you want to see it in different layers, you really, really need high-resolution imaging," Zhao said. "But the MRI for the high-resolution imaging, it is really constrained by the [signal-to-noise ratio] and the acquisition time."

Data from BigBrain atlas, a dataset created by dividing a human brain into small sections, was used



Jonathan Park / Daily Trojan file photo

Keck School of Medicine found that areas in the brain with a better alliance between blood flow and cellular architecture are correlated with better mitochondrial respiratory capacity.

to correlate the blood supply with the cellular structure. The researchers segmented the cortical gray matter into 12 equi-volume layers.

"The cortical actually has some of its thickness on the brain surface, and we can detect the different layers, the perfusion of the blood flow and the cell density, so we can know which region the perfusion matches the cell," said Fanhua Guo, co-first author of the paper. "So if it doesn't match, maybe, for example, the oxygen or something else can't be delivered to the cell."

This high-resolution technology allowed them to see not only how much blood was delivered to a volume of brain tissue, but to see, in detail, how blood flow is delivered across different depths of the cortex.

The hope is that this research can lead to learning more about aging and neurodegenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer's, Wang said.

"It's very likely these diseases alter the coupling," Wang said. "Maybe the flow goes down first, maybe the cell dies. So there's also a dynamic kind of change."

The study included 30 healthy adult participants, 14 of whom returned for a second scan to test the consistency of the results. However, the cell density data was not derived from the participants but from an atlas of the brain.

In the future, the plan is to develop this research in vivo, which is a research approach that studies a living organism, as opposed to the BigBrain specimen.

"If we can develop this in vivo, then it will be very nice to track aging, neurodegenerative disease and other disorders," Wang said.

USG allocates \$2,041 in legislative funding for Period Pantry

Senators voted to table the bill of office policy manual for the second week in a row.

By **DANIEL ESQUEDA**
USG Beat Writer

The Undergraduate Student Government senate approved just over \$2,041 in legislative funding for the Period Pantry Tuesday night.

Senate bill 146-07, which was authored by senators Leilani Akwue and Sonali Gupta, will continue to provide funding for free menstrual care products — including pads, tampons, heating patches and menstrual hygiene kits — for students in the Period Pantry, which is located in the Trojan Food Pantry.

The Period Pantry first began when senators approved \$910 in legislative

funding in November 2025 to begin distributing menstrual products to USC students in December 2025.

Since then, senators allocated an additional \$2,000 to fund the Period Pantry in February and purchased an extra 3,546 pads to refill the stock in March.

Akwue said she has seen "great success and utilization" of the Period Pantry in the past.

"We have accounted for [the \$2,041 in funding] to make sure that everything can be fully restocked," Akwue said. "We really wanted to emphasize that we are proud to present this bill because funding the Period Pantry meets a real, everyday need for menstruating students."

All senators voted to approve the bill, except for senator Jasmine Liu, who was not present at the meeting. Liu voted to abstain via a proxy vote.

Senators also voted to table SB 146-06, the office policy manual, for the second week in a row. Last week, senators tabled the bill because chief of staff Shrinidhi Sriram was not in attendance to present the bill.

Speaker of the senate Madison Troup — who moved to table the bill — said the decision was due to senators needing more time to review the changes.

"Given that the senate hasn't had adequate time to converse

with our staff, we would like a one-week extension to be able to have some questions answered [and] get clarification on a few of the [changes]," Troup said.

During reports of officers and directors, president Syrabi Nur Rahman said 12 out of her 20 platform projects have begun, including those to provide students with free Canva Pro and LinkedIn Premium as well as a town hall initiative.

According to Rahman, she has already completed two projects: the president and vice president tabling and the expansion of a recognized student organization role.

Rahman emphasized the importance of her tabling project with regard to student engagement.

"We want [tabling] to be an opportunity where we get to hear what our students are talking about, how their classes are going, how's school, what's been bugging them, what's working for them," Rahman said. "[Tabling] allows us to also connect with the students on a different level, on a personal level."

Beyond projects, Rahman also announced USG has recruited 57 new officers, bringing the total to 202 USG officers.

In her presentation, vice president Diane Kim said she is working on affordable and inclusive workout classes, rest rooms at Leavey Library and restoring the

Living Learning Communities in freshman dorms.

Living Learning Communities were a housing option offered by USC, where students with shared interests or identities could live on the same floor or in the same residential area. The *Daily Trojan* reported that the University removed cultural Living Learning Communities for freshmen from its website in October 2025. In a statement to the *Daily Trojan*, the University said it saw lower interest in "some" of the LLCs that year, leading to the decision.

At the end of the meeting, senator Noa Foruzanfar announced that she successfully worked with the Brightspace team and that students will now be able to view their cumulative grade. Previously, students were unable to do so, and Foruzanfar received feedback from students wanting grade visibility.

"After talks with the Brightspace team, and also tabling on Trousdale Parkway and gathering student feedback, I am happy to announce that now students are able to see their cumulative grades on Brightspace," Foruzanfar said. "[Brightspace] got back to me last week, ... so I am going to send out another form to make sure that this [change] is working out for students in the way that they want to see it."



Adrian Jao / Daily Trojan

Senator Noa Foruzanfar announced that she completed one of her projects to allow students to view cumulative grades on Brightspace.



Kayjel Mairena / Daily Trojan

Members of USC’s South Central Against Labor Exploitation-Students for Justice in Palestine protested the University’s contract to sell cadavers to the United States’ Navy on Sept. 3, 2026.

Cadaver contract rejection reveals political missteps

Don’t take the contract’s rejection at face value; ask why it wasn’t done sooner.

By **ALEX GROSS**

Opinion Editor

When Keck School of Medicine moved to not renew a contract to supply cadavers to the United States Navy last week, much of the campus community reluctantly rejoiced. Yes, the University will stop giving bodies for military medic training. But no, it wasn’t for moral reasons.

Even if Keck wanted to renew the contract — which they did last fall — they wouldn’t have been able to due to UCSD’s recent review of USC facilities to handle cadavers and subsequent halting of such donations to USC.

While the fact that our academic institution has one fewer tie to the military-industrial complex is ultimately a good thing, it shouldn’t warrant celebration.

USC still maintains over 360 contracts with the Navy as well as multiple others with different branches of the military. For those who support the USC South Central Against Labor Exploitation-Students for Justice in Palestine campaign calling on the University to “divest from death,” this rejection is nothing more than a baby step toward that goal.

The news of this one particular contract’s existence caused so much shock in large part because the medical training staff handling the cadavers included members of the Israel Defense Forces — and the reaction was justified. Much of the outrage, however, seemed misdirected for the relative scale of revealed information.

Headlines highlighted the 12 cadavers that were used by non-combat surgeons, anesthesiologists and nurses in the IDF over the past two years, but what’s been overlooked are the far more immediate and pervasive connections that USC has to the Israel-Hamas war.

“There’s a very clear double standard too, with these Zionist organizations and their allowance on campus when ... the sheer fact of [a student’s] relation to Palestine or to other Muslim groups becomes an issue for the administration,” said a member of SCALE-SJP who asked to remain anonymous.

The University meanwhile openly advertises study abroad to Israel and condones USC Hillel-sponsored Birthright trips. If USC is to ever truly divest from war, it must reevaluate all of its tangential relations to the culture that surrounds it — and that includes programs like these which normalize the humanitarian crisis taking place just dozens of miles away from its international campus.

Though IDF training was only one component of the cadaver contract, it proved inflammatory enough to draw student attention back to the Divest from Death campaign. Unfortunately, the impact the contract’s rejection will have on USC’s complicity in war is nowhere near the impact it had on inspiring student activism.

“Our Divest from Death campaign, similar to ones at other universities, calls for our university to look at where [its] investments and tuition goes ... and we’re strongly advocating for that to be taken away from military funding and consciously moved,” the SCALE-SJP member said.

Since the cadaver program’s inception, USC has taken in over \$1.1 million from the Navy, Annenberg Media reported. There has been no clarification on where those funds were allocated, though it can be assumed they didn’t help support the multiple academic advising departments that have been gutted or the student media organizations whose budgets were slashed. The University denied that it profited from the contract in a statement to the *Daily Trojan*.

The reality of USC’s extensive commingling with the U.S. military is that President Beong-Soo Kim has little

to no oversight on the status of these contracts — although the moral responsibility of where the University’s image and money ends up lies on him. No matter how distanced he was from the cadaver contract, its existence alongside Kim’s prized Open Dialogue Project is steeped in irony.

There was no open dialogue given to the families who donated cadavers to USC’s Anatomical Gift Program. Donors were told that their gift would “make it possible for others to live long and healthy lives,” when it really may have been used “by USC’s educational, research, healthcare, governmental, or industry partners in accordance with applicable law and USC policy,” according to the program’s website.

In a statement to the *Daily Trojan*, the University denied that bodies donated to the program were used for training IDF healthcare professionals.

It’s infuriating to know that our tuition dollars spent on education have anything to do with a military that has, on countless occasions, committed the war crime of bombing schools in Gaza. But don’t let the rejection of USC’s lone contract mentioning the IDF count as a conscious divestment.

Productive change has to be ethical, not just logistical, as SCALE-SJP noted in its statement regarding the end of the cadaver contract. Systemic issues like the University’s ties to the military-industrial complex have to be addressed at its source — a solution which starts with an administration wanting to truly understand the needs of its students, not just feigning interest to appear transparent.

Though the Open Dialogue Project seemingly presents growth from a university that called the Los Angeles Police Department on its own student activists just over two years ago, it’s done little to platform voices not aligned with its agenda. Don’t let activism be confined to the boxes that authority is comfortable with it existing in — continue to fight for a change of heart, not just financial interests.

Don’t fall in love with your friends

Andrew Cardenas

NO STRAIGHT ANSWERS



For two months, my days have revolved around one person. When he’s sad, I notice before he says anything.

From dining hall dinners and late-night conversations, I constructed a private future — and convinced myself he was building it with me. Then I learned he has had a girlfriend for several years and is not attracted to men. The facts changed immediately. My feelings did not. That contradiction has forced me to confront whether we can ever just be friends.

The answer, right now, is no. We cannot be just friends while my feelings for him exceed friendship. I know he is straight, but that knowledge doesn’t diminish how deeply I care for him. I care deeply for my friends, too; with him, however, that care is accompanied by a desire for closeness that cannot be reciprocated.

Friendship cannot remain emotionally equal when one person is carrying more feelings. Friendship cannot survive as a waiting room for romance — even when you know that romance will never arrive.

Aristotle distinguished levels of friendships based on utility, pleasure and virtue in Books VIII and VI of “Nicomachean Ethics.” The highest form is one in which two people wish each other well for the other’s own sake. Aristotle attaches an important condition: that goodwill must be mutual and recognized by both people. A relationship requires both people to agree on what it is. I don’t care for him because I expect him to love me back. But even unconditional affection is not neutral, and staying close is not necessarily proof of maturity. When friendship comes at the expense of healing, it can become an excuse to avoid letting go.

At USC, avoiding the grief necessary to let go is easy. Our residential campus compresses entire relationships into a few blocks. The same person can occupy your dining hall, classroom, study spot, friend

group and walk home. Closeness accumulates without either person deciding what it means.

This ambiguity is acute for queer students. Attraction and sexuality cannot be assumed, so we learn to search ordinary interactions for possibility. A long conversation, or a daily invitation to dinner, can begin to feel charged precisely because certainty is rarely available.

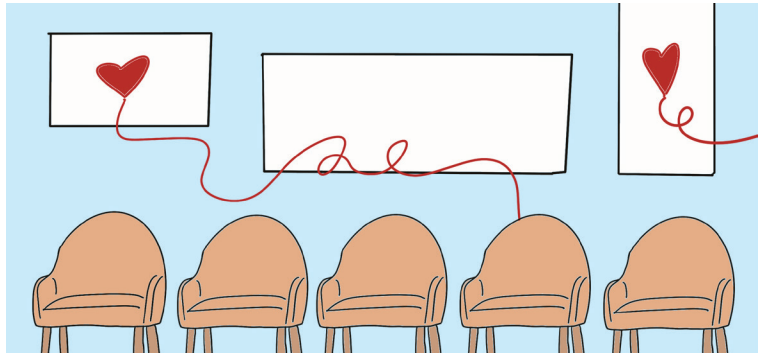
Sara Ahmed’s “Queer Phenomenology” offers a language for this experience. Ahmed describes orientation as the way our lives acquire direction through what — and whom — we turn toward. Desire creates paths: It organizes where we go and which possibilities come within reach. Because he became part of my everyday life, I organized my emotional world around his presence.

But proximity is not reciprocity. Someone can stand beside you every day without moving toward the same future. Romantic rejection does not mean the connection was imaginary. The care between one another may be real; what was imaginary were the conclusions drawn. Iris Murdoch wrote in “The Sublime and the Good” that love requires the difficult realization that someone other than oneself is real. Loving him honestly means seeing him as he is: a person with a girlfriend, a sexuality and a life I do not get to alter. Accepting that reality will require grief. I have to mourn a future that never existed.

It will also require boundaries: fewer daily meals, less constant availability, and less emotional labor. Distance is not punishment; it is how I can determine whether I value the friendship itself or only the possibility I attached to it. The real question is not whether I can stop loving him on command. I cannot. It is whether I can eventually accept the kind of love he is capable of giving me, without treating it as a lesser version of what I wanted.

Maybe we can become friends when friendship stops feeling like a consolation prize. Maybe we can be friends when I can care for him in the way he does for me.

Andrew Cardenas is a senior writing about love in all its forms in his column, “No Straight Answers,” which runs every other Wednesday. He is also the DEIA director at the Daily Trojan.



Andrew Cardenas / Daily Trojan

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

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Xiadani Perez / Daily Trojan

Valeria Gonzalez, a senior majoring in music industry, emphasized the importance of making connections and building professional relationships and hoped that this event would extend the same sentiments to attendees.

USC senior connects identity, music industry

“Backyards to Backstage” invited artists and industry experts for a series of panels.

By **XIADANI PEREZ**
Staff Writer

Valeria Gonzalez spent her spring semester meticulously planning “Backyards to Backstage,” a series of speaker panels intended to bridge the gap between her local Pomona community and the professional music industry.

“I knew I wanted to bring the abundance of resources that I’ve gained these last two years in the music industry program to the very same community that introduced me to this world,” said Gonzalez, a senior majoring in music industry.

Gonzalez culminated her milestone Sunday by returning to the scene that inspired her at The Haven in Pomona. She attended many concerts at local independent venues that ignited her passion for live music.

Initially a Latino studies major, she ultimately transferred into the music industry program and was determined to merge both academic paths into an initiative to empower others.

“A lot of the artists that I brought in were Latinos, and they are passionate about uplifting their people, so that meant a lot to me,” Gonzalez said. “I love empowering other Latino and [underrepresented] professionals in the industry.”

Gonzalez said she considered this mission to be a testament to her own experience, emphasizing the importance of going the extra mile to introduce herself and establish relationships. The event embodied her values, acting as a faucet of knowledge for an eager crowd.

The afternoon opened with a designated space to take free headshots, followed by a workshop that offered tips to strengthen resumes. The workshop covered an overview of suggested structures and terms that catered specifically to aspiring music industry professionals.

The first panel, moderated by USC musicology professor Nate Sloan, featured artists Victor

Campos, Eduardo Arenas, Pablo Sotelo and Jose Corona.

As the musicians each discussed their start in music, they made it evident that they identified with a particular notion: the necessity of finding a space for belonging. For them, not only did music provide a means of creative expression, but it also stood as a symbol of unity for listeners.

“I really appreciate that each of the artists on the panel were from all walks of life,” said Joel Ramirez, an attendee. “Some of them had started their journey a lot earlier, some maybe later, but they all still found their way into music.”

The discussion continued to cover the topic of identity and what it means to be Latino in an underrepresented environment. Corona, drummer of alternative-rock band The Red Pears, expressed his pride in representing his cultural background and understanding the significance of being a figure for others who relate to his experiences.

“As things grow and continue, we learn ... who we are, how we present ourselves, our culture and our community. That’s a big part of you, and people see that,” Corona said.

With a better understanding of themselves as individuals and the growth of their bands, the artists said they learned that music has the power to push back against societal standards and expectations.

The pursuit of their passion came from realizing that their paths didn’t have to be defined by a traditional job. Music allowed them space to find success in a field that called to them, rather than dealing with dissatisfaction in the structure of other workspaces.

For Arenas, the bassist, vocalist and guitarist of psychedelic Latin soul and funk band Chicano Batman, music was about upholding their values and staying authentic to their purpose.

“Chicano Batman was also a rebellion for me against my job, against the status quo,” Arenas said. “Everybody looked at us like we were weirdos, and we were. We were out to not satisfy absolutely anyone, and that’s the root of our success.”

Eventually, music meant something more multifaceted for these artists.

“I loved music and loved making it, but I feel that in this world ... it is a political statement to be Mexican American making the music that we do because we’re existing in these spaces that we weren’t allowed in before,” said Sotelo, the lead vocalist and guitarist of alternative indie-pop band Inner Wave.

The panelists’ identities as Latino musicians fostered a sentiment of optimism that resonated with the audience. For some, they became beams of hope in local music scenes throughout Los Angeles and beyond.

“It really goes to show how community is such an important aspect of music-making, and for me, the most profound part of this panel was seeing the community in person,” attendee Vianey Flores said. “Just knowing that these musicians have been able to make it, and they exist in front of me.”

The second half of the series featured several executive professionals. Together, they shared their journeys spanning from early introductions to music and media to their current positions. The panelists’ experiences varied, from founding artist management and booking companies to promoters and strategic forces.

The official panel event concluded with a happy hour for networking, where guests were encouraged to engage with one another and the panelists. Gonzalez closed the event with a headlining show later that night for Integra Pink with supporting acts Los Frills and Ghetto Foos. She aims to continue her work as an intern with Live Nation and hopes to keep exploring the live production side of entertainment.

“That [connection] is something you can’t replace with anything — being able to foster this space and have people be happy and learn new things,” Gonzalez said. “That’s really valuable, and it means a lot to me to be able to contribute to that.”

Rookies, pros push rooks at the Faye Webster Invitational

The indie musician ended the annual three-day event with a chess tournament.

By **ANNA JORDAN**
Associate Managing Editor

The checkered floors of the Fonda Theatre in Hollywood held a different kind of dancing queen than the typical concertgoer Sunday morning.

Last weekend, the historic venue hosted most of the third annual Faye Webster Invitational, a three-day event featuring a day each for a tennis tournament — at Hermon Park and Tennis Courts, not at the Fonda — a Pokémon card trading tournament and a chess tournament. Saturday and Sunday night also ended with joint yo-yo showcases and concerts in which singer and indie darling Webster herself and opener Laila! performed.

Benét, a musician and the weekend’s host, laid down the law with the help of some seasoned chess officials. Sunday’s chess tournament, done in collaboration with Chess.com, had an amateur bracket and open bracket. Players in both brackets participated in a four-round, Swiss-system format with 10-minute time-controlled matches that culminated in amateur and open knock-out finals.

The tournament, which was free to both play in and spectate, allowed for a range of skill levels thanks to the double bracket format, guaranteeing that all players would play around four games at minimum. For example, attendee Citlalli Calderon embraced the spirit of the entire weekend, participating in both the amateur bracket in the chess tournament Sunday and the beginner clinic in Friday’s tennis tournament.

Despite having “never picked up a racket in [her] life,” nor ever playing against a human opponent in chess, Calderon attended the Invitational as a “big Faye Webster fan” and took the opportunity to spend time with her father, Alfred, after registering him for the tennis and chess tournaments as well.

Along with Webster, the tournament featured several big names, all of whom played at least one match. Chess grandmaster Hikaru Nakamura, the top-ranked player in the United States and the No. 2 player in the world, opened the tournament with a ceremonial first move in a match between Webster and Emmy Award-winning actor Lionel Boyce, and was not slated to compete.

However, when first-round opponents were assigned and the dust settled, participant Doug Chung

found himself facing an empty chair. Before Chung could receive a bye for round two, Nakamura stepped in for an unranked, friendly match, much to everyone’s surprise.

“I was excited to even see him in here, and then I was kind of bummed I didn’t get to play a first-round game,” Chung said in a post-match interview. “So, for him to volunteer to play me, [it was] pretty cool.”

The Chung-Nakamura match was among the longer round-one bouts, putting pressure on the theory knowledge of both players — and Chung put up a fight.

“I played Petrov’s [Defense], which is, in [Nakamura’s] words, ‘boring-old-man style,’ so he kind of spiced it up,” Chung said. “I wasn’t expecting to win or even put up a fight, so it’s like a win-win.”

Webster played one more match, while Boyce went on to win the entire amateur bracket.

However, no participants walked away empty-handed — and it wasn’t just because Benét was giving away wireless Bose headphones and Diamond Chess.com memberships throughout the tournament.

Alfred Calderon, who had significant chess knowledge and experience, walked away with a pair of headphones from winning a match, some satisfyingly challenging games and a weekend spent with his daughter. He also took a whopping third place in the open bracket, after losing on time and shaky knowledge of the King’s Indian Defense in the semi-finals to Joah Rosing, who would go on to take the open title.

“I gotta move faster, but I had fun overall,” Alfred Calderon said in a post-match interview. “This last game [was my favorite]. I think the other ones were [wins] because the guys made mistakes. It was easy. But this one was challenging.”

From participants who didn’t know anything about Petrov’s Defense or the King’s Indian Defense to fiercely knowledgeable competitors alike, the Invitational was a safe space for those interested in enjoying and learning about some of Webster’s favorite pastimes.

“In sports, I didn’t really love the pressure of competing in high school, but just learning for fun [with] chess and tennis — I hope to continue, maybe get better in a year, at least win a game,” Citlalli Calderon said.

The strength of the Faye Webster Invitational proved to be its eclecticism, for chess players, card traders and tennis fiends alike.

“It was a good event ... you have Pokémon, tennis, chess, yo-yo,” Alfred Calderon said. “Webster has something for everyone.”



Anna Jordan / Daily Trojan

The Faye Webster Invitational, a three-day event hosted by the indie musician, invited attendees to play chess, tennis and more in brackets.

More than murals, South Central Arts creates with intent

The local art collective helps preserve the neighborhood's culture and its community.

By **CECILIA DONATO & CONNOR MERRIHEW**
Daily Trojan

As the sun begins to set over South Central, voices fill the air. Residents stop by on their way home as children get the chance to showcase their talent for the first time. In these moments, art becomes something to be shared rather than simply observed.

For USC students moving to South Central, entering the neighborhood can mark the beginning of a new story. But in reality, the place they're coming to already has a deep cultural history of its own.

South Central's identity has been shaped by generations of communities creating culture in the face of exclusion and change. In the early 20th century, discriminatory housing covenants and redlining concentrated much of Los Angeles' Black population along Central Avenue, which became a hub for Black business, jazz and cultural life. Later, growing Latine and Central American communities added new layers to the region's cultural identity.

In 2017, growing gentrification put South Central's cultural identity at risk, and, in response, the South Central Arts — an organization of artists and allies focused on uplifting the artwork of their community — was born.

"It was only a matter of time for South Central to be a target. So we mobilized," said William Flores Diaz, the founder of the South Central Arts as well as a poet.

Flores Diaz said he has a deep connection to the region himself: He's lived in South Central since he was five years old, when he moved from Pico Union with his parents, who had come to the United States from El Salvador.

"Everything that I've done has an identity connected to South Central — poetry being one of them," Flores Diaz said.

He said he developed his artistic voice at a young age, going from singing about his day while walking home from school to writing his first poem in high school; a dedication to his neighborhood even made it into his latest poetry collection.

"[It's about] just being able to tell my story through what I call 'self-literature': telling my own story instead of having somebody else write the story for us," Flores Diaz said.

The idea of telling one's own story extends beyond Flores Diaz's poetry. The South Central Arts has been an essential network through which local artists can shape how the neighborhood is represented and preserve its history.

"Those first opportunities are crucial for a young artist to start believing in themselves," said Daniel Villa, a USC alum who has handled the South Central Arts' behind-the-scenes work in the past.

Villa first worked with Flores Diaz at the South Central Arts in 2017, when Flores Diaz called to get a handful of South Central artists to pitch his idea. Villa immediately saw where he could help.

Villa set up the digital support necessary to transition the South Central Arts from an idea into something much more permanent.

For almost a year, the group held a monthly open mic at Central Avenue Jazz Park run entirely by volunteers.

"[We] had permission from the [City] Council District 9 office to hold [an] open mic night at the Jazz Park for almost a year," Villa said. "A lot of it is just the artists themselves putting it together. ... We're not a 501(c)(3), so we don't have donations or anything like that. So it was out of everybody's volunteer time."

This idea of using art to share a neighborhood's story has manifested on the walls themselves. Jackeline Gallardo, known by her



William G. Flores Diaz

The South Central Arts works to advocate for its surrounding community and use art to combat misconceptions about the neighborhood. Artists work collaboratively on murals as pictured here.

artist name Magical Youniverse, is a muralist who grew up in South Central. She connected with the South Central Arts after attending one of its Jazz Park events, and was later invited to paint live alongside other artists. In her murals, she likes to utilize vibrant colors.

"I feel that those communities need color," Gallardo said. "A lot of walls are empty and a lot of them don't really have art on them. ... [Using color] helps make the area also feel a little safer and can hopefully help uplift people."

Through her work with the South Central Arts, Gallardo's definition of a mural shifted into something interactive.

"Creating something on the spot while community members are passing by and seeing you create art for their communities, it invites conversations," Gallardo said. "People do stop by and ask, 'Oh, what are you all painting?' Or they stop and share their appreciation."

One conversation from a South Central Arts event stayed with her: an older muralist, now an art teacher, whose painting had pulled him out of a hard childhood.

"It just made me realize how important self expression in general is, and having spaces where that is encouraged for young people. ... Younger people, when they look at who's painting, they might see themselves doing that as well," Gallardo said.

For Flores Diaz, the murals were made to be a reflection of the community, by the community, allowing residents to see their own experiences portrayed in their surroundings.

However, Flores Diaz pointed to the criminalization of graffiti as an example of the gap between public art's perception as opposed to its experience within the neighborhood.

"[With proximity and geographical communities] there's a certain

identity that gets adopted," Flores Diaz said. "Because of this affinity, we're able to relate and co-relate to each other and each other's lives ... regardless of how we look, how we identify or represent ourselves as an individual."

Gallardo believes the negative connotations surrounding the South Central community are misleading, harmful stereotypes which she hopes the South Central Arts can combat.

"We're just trying to uplift everyone," Villa said. "It's a collaboration. We're trying to beautify the community."

That's the impact South Central Arts is making, one open mic and one mural at a time: showing that a misjudged neighborhood is full of talent, culture and beauty.

"There's a lot of beauty, and there's a lot of talent," Gallardo said. "A lot of the cultures that people bring flourish here, and people create a home away from home."

Supper club creates connection through homecooked meals

A USC senior began cooking homemade meals to foster her relationships in college.

By **KILEY HUANG & KYLEIGH ZVARA**
Daily Trojan

A perfectly set table. The sound of laughter. The smell of food wafting from the kitchen. A menu with a full dinner course planned. Once every month, this is the reality for a lucky group of USC students who are personally invited into Hiya Vora's apartment for her supper club.

Last year, Vora, a senior majoring in accounting and finance, started a supper club for her fellow classmates. Vora, being a vegetarian, has ensured all the meals are entirely plant-based and center around a specific theme each month. To those granted an invite, Vora hoped her club could help cultivate community over a shared human interest: food.

"I love eating food," Vora said. "I love feeding others. I feel like the supper club is a place where I love bringing people together, having good conversation and good food."

Vora's club is exclusive to invites. She sends out a Google Form to her friends that she wants to join her at dinner and that is how she determines the guest list. If people are interested in joining they can direct message Vora with the Instagram handle @too_matcha_caffeine to ask for a spot.

While the monthly themes differ, one thing that stays the same is Vora in the kitchen. For each dinner, she spends hours cooking a variety of fun dishes for her eight to 10 guests, almost always with a little help.

"Even though [cooking for the club] is such a pain, and I'm occupied completely for two calendar days, it does bring me a lot of joy, and just being there with everybody brings me a lot of joy," Vora said.

Eleanor Tupper, a senior majoring in French and chemistry, met Vora in France during their freshman fall. Tupper has attended every supper club and was there when Vora came up with the idea.

"The food is fantastic, and [Vora] is one of my best friends," Tupper said. "[I love] being able to spend time with her and also see worlds

USC student uses music as gateway to creativity, healing

After fighting liver cancer, Malakai Carey's passion for music has taken off at USC.

By **AANYA BANSAL & MELODY CEN**
Daily Trojan

Six-year-old Malakai Carey was flying first class to Chicago, for free. It was his first acting job, a commercial for Walmart, and Carey's eyes were open wide in excitement.

"I started [acting] because of my mom," said Carey, now a sophomore majoring in music industry. "She did acting when she was in her 20s ... and she asked me if I wanted to do it when I was 6, and I was like, 'Heck yeah!'"

After a guest appearance on "Modern Family," stints on "Jimmy Kimmel Live!," voiceover work for Disney, commercials for multinational companies like Audi and Acer, and other roles in various small films and TV shows, acting has taken a back seat for Carey.

Instead, Carey has begun to pursue another dream with the help of his mom: a career in music. He originally picked up songwriting as a way to express his emotions after being diagnosed with a rare form of liver cancer when he was 11.

Before receiving over 60 rounds of chemotherapy, Carey struggled with weight loss, pain and missing school. Due to the aggressive nature of the cancer, he underwent a liver transplant to prevent a relapse in 2019. The night of his surgery, Carey's doctors told him he was second in line, but Carey still fasted in preparation.

"[At] about 9 [a.m.] I get a call, and they say get down to the hospital as fast as you can. And that was truly an amazing gift. I raced down to the hospital, got my transplant, had about a two- to three-month recovery, and I haven't had an issue since," Carey said.

Music helped him process his own battle against cancer, changes in his family and the death of a friend he made during his hospital stay, who died from blood cancer.

"We met, initially, on each of our first week [at the hospital]. ... We ended up becoming really close, literally getting chemotherapy next to each other," Carey said. "I ended up becoming cancer-free, [but] he was still battling. Unfortunately, when I was 13, he passed away and didn't make it. That was really, really difficult for me."

It was through his cancer journey and the support of his family and community that his love for

music blossomed from a casual hobby to his passion.

"He's always loved music," said Cheri Carey, Malakai's mom. "We've always had music in our home, but his ability to write music really started when he was battling cancer, and he had to figure out how to get it out of his head, and be able to know that he's feeling [emotions], expressing [them] and processing [them] in a way that was healthy."

During his freshman year at USC, Malakai Carey hosted jam sessions in his dorm with over half a dozen other students, playing his guitar alongside friends' instruments and singing. The group would shout out songs and harmonize late into the night, playing anything from "Best Part" by Daniel Caesar featuring H.E.R. to "Sailor Song" by Gigi Perez.

"Being up until 2 a.m., singing and playing guitar with people, it doesn't have to be perfect," Malakai Carey said. "It doesn't have to be the most beautiful [rendition], but you're there with people who love music, who just want to sing and hang out."

Malakai Carey called music his "gateway to creativity" and produces songs using just his computer with the help of his friend,

Club culture tips the balance between academics, extracurriculars

Work hard, play hard often defines the average student at USC, but at what cost?

By MELODY CEN & KAYLEE EIBER
Daily Trojan

Club culture at USC is often associated with lengthy tryout periods, connection-based membership and heightened exclusivity. Such organizations often center on the idea that, to be a part of the group, a student needs to prove they are a cut above the rest — not just in skill or aptitude, but in their more personal qualities as well.

These values garnered the ‘work hard, play hard’ mentality that has since become synonymous with USC’s campus culture. It is a catchphrase that speaks to campus clubs as being a person’s community, their gateway to entry-level employment, and earns them the workload of an added class.

For Michael Amato, a senior majoring in public policy, these stereotypes raise a concern about whether club culture benefits the student population or acts as a hindrance to learning and work-life balance.

“I think it’s made [my mental health] better,” Amato said. “Even when I was stressed about these clubs, at the end of the day, I felt like I was learning and I was growing, and I think that that was the important part. ... Sometimes you get so busy with clubs that you neglect your friendships outside of clubs, and so it’s just kind of being conscious of how much space it’s taking up in your life, and being proactive.”

Hannah Park, a freshman majoring in chemistry as well as data science, said trying out for the Trojan Consulting Group included a written application, interviews, mixers and coffee chats. After

her second round of interviews in September, Park is still awaiting next steps and a decision.

“As a chemistry major, I’m fairly new to finance and business in general, so getting so far into a competitive club and its application process has definitely been nerve-racking,” Park said. “I’ve been getting a little bit of imposter syndrome up until this point.”

According to its website, TCG typically accepts around two to five new members each semester and requires four to eight hours of work a week, similar to that of a typical four-unit class. Despite the long application process and time commitment, students still take their chances every semester in an attempt to advance their professional vocation.

“Joining a consulting club both gives you the experience that you need in order to apply for these firms, and also the network and support that you need from prior members who are just really enthusiastic to help you out,” Park said.

While new member recruitment is most associated with the high-stakes nature of USC club culture, members on the executive boards commit even more of their time running these clubs and recruitment processes.

Amato served as president of Public Policy Undergraduates for two years and was the senior consulting advisor of the Association of Innovative Marketing Consulting. At his busiest, Amato was spending upwards of 15 hours a week on AIM initiatives.

With consulting clubs like TCG and AIM, students work with established companies to create deliverable projects. During his time in AIM, Amato worked with Im’peccable Chicken, a USC alum-founded company that appeared on Shark Tank in October 2025.

“You’re actually delivering recommendations to the company itself,” Amato said. “It’s not a fake product,



Alisha Mark / Daily Trojan

so there’s definitely pressure to succeed and drive and deliver actual recommendations and uphold the name of the club.”

The Marshall School of Business and the related marketing and consulting clubs make up a large portion of the stereotype surrounding rigorous club culture, but among this competitiveness, there is also a sense of connection. In striking a balance between academics, pre-professional development and extracurriculars, many clubs help students find a shared community.

“You make a lot of friends very easily,” Amato said. “Some of the people from my clubs are the closest people I have, and it feels really good because you give so much. [Being in a club] really gives back and develops you as a whole person.”

Ivy Tan, a senior majoring in public policy and pursuing a master’s degree in urban planning,

has prioritized giving back to the community almost every week throughout her time at USC.

Tan serves as president of the Asian American Tutorial Project, an organization that tutors children in Chinatown. AATP doesn’t reject any prospective members, and their application only consists of a short questionnaire indicating which program areas students are interested in.

“The reason why we don’t reject anybody is that we recognize there’s a spirit of volunteerism in every person, and so by rejecting people, that’s [the] very antithesis to our whole club mission,” Tan said.

Member can choose their time commitment for AATP, and this smaller commitment and less intense application process allow for more volunteers and cross-discipline connections.

“We have students who are actively and full-time recruiting [for

jobs] while they’re volunteering, and I think that’s such a huge testament to their character about how they’re able to manage their time,” Tan said.

USC’s ‘work hard, play hard’ culture can have the average student running from a club meeting to a two-hour lecture and back to a club mixer all within the same day.

Yet even within this competitive, busy culture, students like Tan have found balance in their multifaceted lives.

“It really takes a community, a village, to run this club and also actively keep people engaged,” Tan said. “The main thing that’s been holding it all down is being able to rely on other people ... having that support system and knowing that if you fall behind, it’s okay. We’re not here to drag each other down. We’re here to uplift each other’s communities.”

The Trojan Marching Band is USC’s ‘beating heart’

From games to graduation, the Spirit of Troy cultivates harmony to USC’s campus.

By OLAMIDE OLUMIDE & PADMAVATHI NARAYANAN
Daily Trojan

Nerves filled Mason Culp’s senses as he took in the red brick architecture of USC’s campus, hoping to find something that told him he’d made the right decision.

That’s when he heard the sounds of the trumpets, trombones and drums.

“All of a sudden, I just hear the Trojan Marching Band, and boom! It’s right in my face,” said Culp, a freshman majoring in civil engineering and a trumpet player in the Trojan Marching Band. “The band [was] bringing so much energy, so much excitement.”

USC is notorious for its school spirit, and the Spirit of Troy — composed of the Trojan Marching Band, USC Song Leaders, USC Spirit Leaders and the University’s official mascot Traveler — plays an integral part in fostering community within the student body.

“The overall experience that you get when the Spirit of Troy is in the room is unique because they bring such an energy and a passion that you don’t see in a lot of other institutions,” said Henry Barnes, a senior majoring in human biology and a former trumpet player in the band. “This culture really makes the band stand out, not just for football, but for all of our events, whether it be commencement or graduation.”

The harmony the band brings to campus isn’t magically created; rather, it’s built through careful, practiced teamwork — especially ahead of game days.



Henry Kofman / USC Trojan Marching Band

USC Trojan Marching Band performs for the USC community at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum during football games and brings its music to various other parts of campus.

“On game day, we’ll start at 7 a.m. in sectionals ... and then we’ll do about 30 to 45 minutes of practicing, warming up our hands, practicing our music and going through exercises,” said Seth Grushkin, a freshman majoring in music industry in the drumline. “We’ll [join] the rest of the band on our practice field ... and then we’ll run through our halftime show.”

Game-day prep doesn’t stop there; after a quick break, they go right back into marching and filling campus with their tunes.

“We’ll go behind Heritage Hall first. We do a rally there, and then we march over to Associates Park; we do a rally there. We come over to where Tommy Trojan is ... and then we march all the way to [Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum],” Grushkin said.

Yet, behind the grandeur of the band, a strong community and cohesive leadership are what make them the Trojan Marching Band. The director of The Spirit of Troy, Jacob Vogel, plays a crucial role in cultivating the band’s community.

“Vogel is actually terrific. He’s one of the best leaders I’ve had in any organization, being able to manage a 350-person group with the skill he does,” Barnes said. “There’s a unique dynamic when you have 350 people out in the field; you have to respect the shaping of the piece [and] the needs of the director to emphasize different parts, but also be able to resonate within this big stadium.”

According to Grushkin, pre-game traditions, from running through the tunnel to putting on helmets, also foster

the tight-knit community that defines the Trojan Marching Band.

Despite the many different people involved in organizing the band and its performances, the value of the individual is never forgotten, Barnes said.

“I remember [Vogel] coming up to me after practice in [my] sophomore year,” Barnes said. “I’d only spoken to him once in [my] early freshman year, but he comes up to me and says, ‘Henry, how’s organic chemistry going?’ He recognizes the faces, recognizes the names and really creates a special environment where each person feels like they matter.”

Band camp is another fundamental part of how the band creates such a supportive community that shares its wins and struggles. During band camp, students spend the week before classes rehearsing from 7 a.m.

to 10 p.m., according to Mayah Walker, a freshman majoring in psychology and a trumpet player.

“You’re with so many people, [and] you instantly get over 100 friends,” Culp said.

There’s a sense of unity encouraged within the Spirit of Troy — something they aren’t meticulously trained to produce. Unlike other institutions like Ohio State University or the University of Washington, USC’s band doesn’t do cuts, according to Barnes.

One of the most prominent ways Trojans feel the energy of the band is through the football games. For Walker, such USC games would not be the same without the band.

“I know lots of people that just come [to football games] for the band,” Walker said. “We have great football players, but without the band, the games wouldn’t be very hype.”

As a former member of the band who now spectates from the audience, Barnes said his appreciation for the band’s role in football games is amplified.

“As a student watching the games, I can listen to the band and see how meaningfully it contributes to that spectacle, to the game itself,” Barnes said. “Being able to reflect on that really gives me excitement and gratitude for what I’ve been able to do in the Spirit of Troy.”

Barnes explained that the band offers an opportunity to connect with others, and that USC culture wouldn’t be what it is today without The Spirit of Troy.

“It was exciting [to be part of the band], really, because you got to feel like you were a direct part of the athletics program, and really part of the beating heart of the University,” Barnes said.

Exploring film has never been easier for students

Cross-registration in USC’s symposium courses allows exploration of disciplines.

By **MORGAN BAO & ANTHONY MACFARLANE**
Daily Trojan

This summer, blockbusters such as “The Odyssey” and “Spider-Man: Brand New Day” gained almost \$1.7 billion and \$2.5 billion at the box office, respectively, capturing audiences worldwide. But for cinema enthusiasts at USC, engaging with film on a deeper academic level may be more accessible than it seems.

The University has a history of offering various elective courses for students to explore their diverse interests, from programming to Pilates classes. But where the opportunity to explore disciplines really shines is in the courses available through the School of Cinematic Arts, several of which are inclusive and open to all majors.

This semester, SCA is offering “Media Industry Symposium” — also named “Sinners: Art and Industry” for this semester, after the 2025 film — and “Theatrical Film Symposium.” Both have been popular course choices for many different students at the University, with around 250 students enrolled in each.

“Theatrical Film Symposium” takes place every Thursday night from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. and screens a new film ahead of its release for students, alongside a panel including actors, producers or directors of the films shown. The course is taught by Leonard Maltin, renowned film critic and author featured on “Entertainment Tonight,” who has been teaching the course since 1998. He believes the course benefits not only the enrolled students, but the films showcased as well.

“This is where word-of-mouth can really make a difference in the life of a movie,” Maltin wrote in a statement to the *Daily Trojan*. “[Theatrical Film Symposium] was created by Arthur Knight, who was a well-respected film critic. He told the school that he thought they were missing a bet by not inviting filmmakers down to showcase their latest work and meet the students.”

When reflecting on his time teaching the course, Maltin wrote that its most important perk is that all students, no matter their background or major, can take something away from the class.

“I tell each class that I want to make them smarter moviegoers. That’s why we expose them to all kinds of films, from micro-indie features to Hollywood blockbusters,” Maltin wrote. “One of the lessons the class imparts is that no one ever sets out to make a bad movie. You can learn as much from someone that just made a turkey as you can from someone who’s made a gem.”

With how accessible the course is, students from all academic backgrounds have been able

to participate in “Theatrical Film Symposium.” Maltin described how people from different backgrounds can benefit from watching a wider range of films, with some students even reconsidering their focus of study after the course, potentially turning toward cinema.

“I’ve had students tell me they come away with a curiosity about the workings of the film business; some of them even switch majors,” Maltin wrote.

Although these are film-centered courses, students across majors have found them rewarding. Emily Chavez, a sophomore majoring in biological sciences, enrolled in the “Sinners” course this semester because she was inspired by her love of the film to join the class.

“I love ‘Sinners.’ I watched it for the first time in theaters,” Chavez said. “When I got the email that they were offering the course, I had to do it, so I made sure it worked with my schedule.”

For Chavez, attending “Media Industry Symposium” has broadened her interest in cinema studies.

“It’s really cool coming [in as] a science major, because I never realized how much went into film,” Chavez said. “I’ve definitely considered doing things in the film world, but I think it opened my eyes a little more. ... If another symposium opened, I would definitely do it.”

Such courses have also helped students discover interdisciplinary paths of study. Even students who are currently majoring in a cinematic arts branch have found that the class has bolstered their filmmaking flame. Langston Wilkinson, a sophomore majoring in cinematic arts, film and television production, is enrolled in “Theatrical Film Symposium” and believes his takeaway from the course is the practicality of learning filmmaking as a whole.

“I think [the course] is not just good for the film industry, it’s not just good for SCA, but it’s good for humanity in a sense, because art is something that’s inherently meant to be shared between each other,” Wilkinson said. “Art is of people, for people.”

Wilkinson believes extending access to Maltin’s course beyond SCA allows more students to benefit from studying film, and that “Theatrical Film Symposium” exemplifies USC’s access to interdisciplinary study.

“Not everyone gets an opportunity like this,” Wilkinson said. “Obviously, many prestigious universities have really well-tenured, legendary professors, but not every university gives everyone the opportunity to study under [someone like Maltin]. It’s a unique and special experience. I’m glad that USC doesn’t cloister it away for just people who are in SCA.”

Disclaimer: Langston Wilkinson formerly served as a Features staff writer at the Daily Trojan in Spring 2026. Wilkinson is no longer affiliated with this paper.



Kim / Daily Trojan

‘Is it entertainment? Is it misinformation, disinformation?’

In the age of brain rot, this is how young people hope to help redefine engagement.

By **MIA AREVALO & RAFA HORLE**
Daily Trojan

Social media was created with the optimistic ideal of bringing people together. Now, a couple of decades down the line, millions use these same platforms to watch artificial intelligence-generated content of jacked fruits and dancing cappuccinos. This strange, almost absurdist form of content has become known as brain rot.

Merriam-Webster defines this phenomenon as “material of low or addictive quality, typically in online media, that preoccupies someone to the point it is said to affect mental functioning.” This is typically an indication that one’s doomscrolling has officially gone too far.

Brain rot can vary in format. Sally Lao, a junior majoring in music industry, primarily consumes AI-generated cat videos.

“It’s not productive for me. It’s not helping me expand my horizons,” Lao said. “It’s just entertainment.”

But that doesn’t necessarily mean consuming such content is worthless.

“I don’t have to think about what I have to do for class for these five minutes [when I’m scrolling], which is really great. It’s kind of therapeutic for me,” Lao said.

In a digitized world where seemingly anything and everything can be monetized, and constant productivity has become the ideal, brain rot offers an escape for young people.

Still, countries are increasingly pushing for legislation to protect children from internet addictions. Literacy rates among high schoolers in the United States are decreasing, leading to questions surrounding the irreversible damage of social media consumption on young people’s minds and development.

Does being literate require us to engage critically with everything we consume?

Freddy Tran Nager, associate director of the Digital Social Media master’s program at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, said the definition of literacy is shifting alongside technology.

“Digital literacy means understanding what this content is about. Is it entertainment? Is it misinformation, disinformation? We have to apply more and more critical thinking as technology evolves,” Tran Nager said.

Part of that critical thinking, Tran Nager said, is figuring out who is behind what we see. Traditional media offered a visible source, but content on the internet could be made by anyone, even a bot, Tran Nager said.

In an era of addictive algorithms, Tran Nager is skeptical that literacy alone can counter platform design.

“I don’t think [platform design] so much affects literacy as it does creating an addiction that you just can’t stop,” Tran Nager said. “Media literacy is understanding when you’re falling down a rabbit hole, understanding that these algorithms are not your friend, that they just want you to sit there and consume more content and watch more advertising.”

Yet Tran Nager resists the idea that scrolling for pleasure is new or inherently bad. Instead, Nager suggests it is an evolution of the deeply human desire to vent and express creativity. After all, differentiating between mindless and stimulating content is not always an objective task.

“I think it’s a way of venting. We have the tools at our disposal, and human beings are inclined to express themselves creatively ... whether it’s writing on a cave wall thousands of years ago or going to an open mic night at your local comedy club,” Tran Nager said. “Who’s to judge whether something is mindless as opposed to something that’s simulating?”

Tran Nager worries about young people consuming too much of it.

“When you are being spoon-fed video content, you’re not exercising your brain. There’s nothing for your imagination to do. The colors, the shapes, the dialogue — it’s all being fed to you,” Tran Nager said.

Still, he sees absurdist humor as part of a longer cultural pattern. Tran Nager called it a rejection of “influence creep,” where everyone is expected to be a brand, comparing brain-rot content to jazz, punk and rap before it. For Tran Nager, such content is an example of what popular culture has been doing forever.

Tran Nager didn’t offer a tidy verdict. If media literacy today means understanding algorithms, sources and our own moods, it may also mean understanding why we sometimes choose not to analyze at all.

When students at USC were asked about this tension between critical engagement and deliberate respite, their answers were similarly complicated.

Several interviewed students expressed a desire to reduce their screen time, despite using social media for keeping in touch with friends, finding new places to explore and keeping up to date with popular culture. It wasn’t until they were asked about brain rot specifically that they confessed to consuming that content.

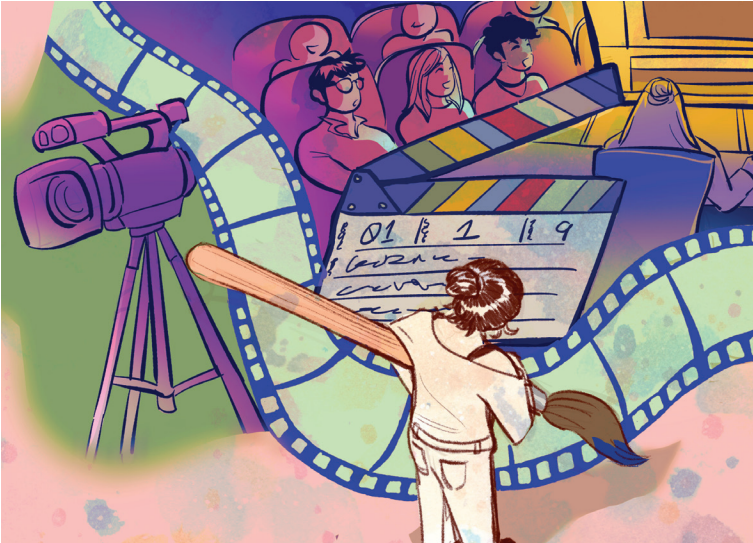
Mailene Polanco, a master’s student studying global media and communication, ascribes cultural capital as one of the reasons why, despite feeling guilty about consuming brain rot, young people continue to do so.

“[Brain rot] can be like a cultural capital, what you’re watching is of the moment and of the world right now. People are feeling the same things. People are watching the same things,” Polanco said. “There’s value in that, and being able to reference things with your friends that you’ve only seen online.”

Younger generations’ relationship with social media, AI content and digital literacy is not as simple as fear-mongering narratives have made it out to be. While there are valid concerns regarding algorithms and digital overconsumption, younger generations remain capable of critical thought.

Digital literacy does not mean refusing to consume mindless content or scrutinizing everything one comes across online. It means discerning when to apply critical thinking, when to indulge and when it’s finally time to turn off the phone. For Tran Nager, that discernment starts with a question.

“We’re spending all our time and our effort and our imagination creating content, hoping it goes viral, hoping it gets us more followers, when we should be thinking: ‘What’s truly valuable to me in life?’” Tran Nager said. “If social media were to disappear today, what would we value more?”



Catherine Flores / Daily Trojan

MUSIC | Malakai Carey is aiming to release a debut album in the summer

I continued from page 5 |

Diego Arratia, a sophomore and fellow music industry student. The two met as freshmen during New Student Convocation and realized they both lived in the Parkside Residential community.

As the director of events for USC's music industry club, Arratia uses his production experience to teach Malakai Carey about digital audio workstations, plugins and sound equalization. Mostly, the pair just end up spontaneously recording.

"[Malakai Carey] heard a police siren outside. He grabbed his phone, opened up the window, started recording, and, in a song he released that we recorded in one night, the intros and the outros are that police siren," Arratia said.

Arratia's tips and tricks have helped Malakai Carey build on the production skills he's been learning in Michael Smith's "Desktop Music Production" class.

Smith, assistant professor of practice at the Thornton School of Music, and Malakai Carey's musical bond traces back to when he was 12. They met through Smith's business partner, TJ Stafford.

Malakai Carey had written his first song while receiving treatment when his mother reached out to Stafford, an old friend from high school. Smith and Stafford brought Malakai Carey into the studio to help produce it — his first time in a recording space.

"That first day he was actually behind a microphone in a studio, recording, and you could just see the light bulbs go off like, 'This is what I want to do,'" Cheri Carey said.

A couple of years later, Malakai Carey returned, this time with newfound guitar skills. Now, with Malakai Carey attending USC,



Malakai Carey is photographed performing at an event raising funds for pediatric cancer. Carey found his passion for music through his struggles.

Smith has been able to see his growth firsthand.

"He doesn't need to be pushed to go for something," Smith said. "You point him in a direction, and he's gonna go for it and come back and be like, 'Alright, I learned these things.' ... [He's] doing the things necessary, basically on his own, which is great."

Moving forward, Malakai Carey plans to develop his production skills, looking to release singles by the end of the fall semester and a debut album or EP this summer.

Beyond his personal endeavors, Malakai Carey also has dreams to start his own nonprofit aimed at providing children undergoing medical treatment with musical instruments.

"[I want] to be able to give children something to get their mind off of chemo or whatever they may be receiving," Malakai Carey said. "Even if it's not cancer, if they're battling another kind of disease, music is healing, truly healing, in a way that some people don't understand until [they] actually experience it."

SUPPER | The club will host a 'Desi Thanksgiving'

I continued from page 5 |

colliding. Because she's a business student, she brings a lot of her friends from the area of USC that I don't really interact with that often, and it's a really warm, welcoming environment."

In the past few years, videos of people creating themed cooking events for close friends and family have taken off, a trend that inspired Vora. She said prior to hosting the supper club, she would create tasting menus for her family and has put on similar themed dinner parties back home.

Vora also drew a lot of inspiration for her supper club from her time with her family in the kitchen.

"I remember my mom telling me that sometimes at our aunt's house I would just go hide in the kitchen cabinets," Vora said. "I was passionate about food."

Ultimately, Vora was moved to host such events to find her own community. Some of the supper club themes at USC have related back to her roots, with one of her favorite meals being "A Journey Back Home" dinner, where she cooked Indian fusion food. Later this year, Vora will host "A Desi Thanksgiving", a cultural community gathering around the food she grew up loving.

Some of Tupper's favorite meals have been a tomato, cheese and bread dinner as well as a banana pudding matcha that Vora made from scratch.

"With the day and age of everything being very automated [with] DoorDash and [artificial intelligence], taking the time to do like cooking a huge meal for a bunch of people is very special," Tupper said. "I think no matter where that's happening around USC ... taking the time to share food ... is a very special experience."

Joy Ndamukunda, a senior majoring in global geodesign, echoed

Tupper's sentiments. Ndamukunda was Vora's sophomore year roommate and listened to Vora's ideas about starting the supper club.

"[The supper club] really inspired me to also make an attempt to service my community," Ndamukunda said. "I believe when people have the conversation about the lack of community they discuss it in [the lens] of 'Why aren't there community events that I can go to that can service me?' But [the club] made me realize that if you want to have community, you have to put in the effort [and] the sacrifices."

Vora usually ends up footing most of the bill for her dinners, even with attendees paying a \$20 deposit. But Ndamukunda believes the experience and memories made from the club are worth it.

"[The club] made me grow in my ability to spark up conversation with strangers," Ndamukunda said. "I know that's something a lot of people struggle with. Also, it helped me realize that when you want to experience something you have to make time for it. ... If you want to be a part of something, you have to make space for it."

With the little time she has left at USC, Vora will continue with her themed dinners. This fall, she will host two more meals that join community and food in a beautiful connection.

"I feel like the people have just been so incredibly kind," Vora said. "Sometimes it may slip that I'm a little bit worried, and I feel like everyone's been incredibly supportive and has cheered me on. I'm really grateful because that's the opposite of the voice in my head."

Vora's next dinner will be hosted Oct. 16, with the theme "Remy's Table," where she will recreate iconic foods from the movie "Ratatouille" (2007) surrounded by old and new friends.

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Hiya Vora, a senior majoring in accounting and finance, was inspired by her family and social media to start a supper club.

DAILY TROJAN | CLASSIFIEDS

PAGE 9 | WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2026 | WWW.DAILYTROJAN.COM/CLASSIFIEDS

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The New York Times Crossword

Edited by Will Shortz

No. 0826

ACROSS

- 1 Modern lead-in to quit or bait
5 Heat source for many hydrothermal vents
10 Act all teenagerly, say
14 [I have something to say ...]
15 He has the weight of the world on his shoulders
16 River by the Royal Shakespeare Theatre
17 Enhancing "blemish" (3x)
19 Rip apart
20 Something to belly up to
21 Tennis's "King of Clay," familiarly
22 Cautious
23 "My guess is ..."
25 Teach, playfully (3x)
29 Pinocchio's tell
31 South American capital where Simón Bolívar was born
32 ____ Wowie (cocktail with a rhyming name)
33 PC key
34 Wait for it!
35 Sweet popcorn coating (4x)
39 Sci-fi pilot ____ Solo
40 Call, as a poker bet
41 Roman author of "Metamorpho-ses"
42 Fred Flintstone's boss at the rock quarry
45 Tech review site
46 Nut in Sausalito cookies (3x)
48 Bundles in a stationery shop
52 Pointed remarks
53 "Famous" cookie entrepreneur
55 Church fixture

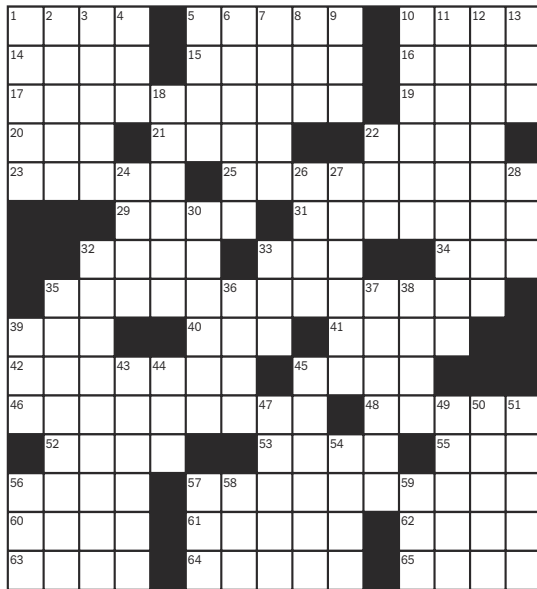
- 56 Black mark on a credit report, in brief
57 "Unbelievable!" ... or what 17-, 25-, 35- and 46-Across are made from, letter-wise?
60 Never Have I ____ (party game)
61 April's ____ Day
62 Bug on a pug
63 Alien incubators in "Invasion of the Body Snatchers"
64 Acrimonious, as a breakup
65 Units of verse

DOWN

- 1 Torah scholar
2 Bridge Out ____ (sign)
3 They have teeth but don't bite
4 Ground-dwelling bird in a eucalyptus forest
5 Chichén Itzá builders
6 Taking charge?
7 Happy-sounding advocacy grp.
8 Scuff up, say
9 Set, as a price
10 Instrument associated with beans and salsa?
11 Was a ham
12 Scrunched hairstyle
13 "The ____" (final track listed on the original "Abbey Road")
18 Audition
22 Word that can precede cry or baby
24 Picky, picky, picky

ANSWER TO PREVIOUS PUZZLE

ACME	CUMIN	BALE
POEM	ASADA	ORES
UNDERWORLD	WANT	
IRIS	DEI	FOE
OMEGA	TIDAL	WAVE
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IRE	EWEL	ELLA
PITH	ANGEL	FALLS
ECHO	SEALS	IKEA
SHAG	ERNIE	RSVP



PUZZLE BY JOHN KUGELMAN AND LANCE ENFINGER

- 26 Sch. attended by Steve Martin, James Dean and Jack Black (none of whom stayed to graduate)
27 Housemother
28 What cards with circles, stars, pluses, squares and wavy lines test for, in brief
30 Day break?
32 Got it all off his chest?
33 Disc golf "hole"-in-one
35 Capital city known as the "Jerusalem of the Balkans"
36 Consider
37 Disinclined
38 Small bug with a strong-sounding name
39 "Well, let me think"
43 Herculean tasks
44 Almost a quarter of the Super Bowl's run time
45 Sometimes-uncredited appearances
47 da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, for example
49 Gift from a teacher's pet
50 Free-for-all
51 Result of a hot pursuit?
54 Grand Ole ____
56 One leg press, say
57 Uncle ____
58 Minecraft resource
59 Command to a jumpy dog

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SPORTS

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Battle in the Bay to feature young talent from women's tennis

The Trojans will focus on their development over the early-season tournament.

By MIKAELLA GASPARYAN

Tennis Beat Writer

After opening the season at the Universal Tennis Rating Pro Fall Slam, four Trojans will be representing USC women's tennis in San Francisco for the Battle in the Bay Classic.

Senior Immi Haddad, junior Simone Kay, freshman Kiara Zabkova and freshman Lexi Wolf make up the group, which Head Coach Alison Swain said was built around development rather than results.

"The way we design tournament plans and schedules for our players is based on their individual goals, our goals for them and their personal player development," Swain said in an interview with the *Daily Trojan*. "We certainly want to give, particularly, our freshmen more match play opportunities."

The tournament runs from Thursday to Sunday at the California Tennis Club, the oldest private tennis club in the West, according to its website. Matches begin Thursday, with a Wild Card Shootout on Saturday before finals Sunday.

The Battle in the Bay features individual competition rather than dual matches. Players compete in four draws — men's singles and doubles, and women's singles and doubles — against opponents from programs across the country. The draw does not come out until the night before play begins,



Nika Chen / Daily Trojan file photo

USC women's tennis had success in its first tournament of the year, and is looking to replicate that at the Battle in the Bay tournament. The team is pictured here in a game against UC San Diego on Feb. 14, 2025.

Swain said, so the Trojans don't yet know their opponents.

The winner of the women's singles draw and the winner of Saturday's Shootout each earn a wildcard into a professional tournament: a bid to either the tournament in Templeton or the one in Rancho Santa Fe.

Swain said the wildcard is not the main focus for the players; rather, it's the experience they'll gain.

"I don't know that [the wildcard is] at the forefront of the minds of my players going to this tournament," Swain said. "It's certainly a

cool opportunity. ... The main goal is good, high-level college competition, gaining more experience [and] trying to put into practice the things we've been training."

Coming off Newport Beach

USC rarely plays UTR events in season, but Swain said the Fall Slam provided the opportunity for guaranteed singles matches.

USC is coming off the UTR Pro Fall Slam in Newport Beach, which ran from Sept. 14 to Sept. 20. Kay went unbeaten in group play alongside senior Lily Fairclough

before they both lost in the semifinals. Zabkova won one match in group play before withdrawing from her semifinal match.

"We almost took that tournament as like a training block, where we were just getting a lot of match play in against other opponents that we don't normally see," Swain said. "Everybody came away from the tournament with good clarity on the things they want to keep working on throughout the fall."

Swain said the group has trained for a week and a half since Newport Beach in preparation for this week's tournament.

Players to watch

Kay, who played in the No. 6 position in USC's singles lineup last season, was the Trojans' deepest runner in Newport Beach. The junior went 7-6 overall in singles last season. Kay will be going into the tournament as a veteran college player and a leader for the team, Swain said.

After winning Slovakia's national women's singles title in July, Zabkova is a part of the Trojan squad for this tournament. The freshman beat UC Irvine senior Bella Pitchford in her opening match at the Fall Slam before falling in her remaining group matches.

Wolf, a freshman from Pacific Palisades, will get valuable experience from this tournament at the beginning of the season. She was the Mission League MVP and was a CIF finalist at Notre Dame High School. She also won three International Tennis Federation doubles titles and has recorded one Women's Tennis Association point.

A historic venue

For the Trojans heading to San Francisco, the setting is part of the draw, according to Swain.

"[The tournament] is played at a really historic tennis club in San Francisco. There's a lot of [USC] support at the club, so they make it a really fun and special event," Swain said. "We're excited to put on a good show and compete really hard [and] continue to establish our identity as a team this year."

The Trojans head to the Battle of the Bay event ready to compete, starting with Thursday's opening matches.

The beer sword is mightier than Trojan football

Julia Ho

SPORTS FOR DUMMIES



By now, the internet has litigated USC's loss to Oregon down to the studs. A late hit put Ducks senior quarterback Dante Moore in an ambulance and got Trojan junior linebacker Desman Stephens II ejected for targeting — the automatic call for a helmet-to-head hit. Stephens lingered on a sideline he'd just been thrown off of, and Head Coach Lincoln Riley reduced the whole ugly thing to six words: "Because he's on our football team."

Oregon Head Coach Dan Lanning called the play "disgusting." Riley and USC announced Stephens' suspension Sunday, with the linebacker apologizing in a statement for his less-than-concerned reaction following the hit.

Daily Trojan Advertising Manager Jeffrey Tylicki missed all of it — not because he looked away, but because he was in line for a beer sword. He was five people from the register when the stand announced it had sold out. He surrendered the game's defining moment for a plastic — but undeniably iconic — saber he never got to buy.

Which brings me to the actual story of USC's (4-1, 1-1 Big Ten) season, the one I'm — as ever — uniquely unqualified to tell. I had never heard of this highly exclusive beer sword until one materialized at a friend's birthday party last week — a gift from someone who'd evidently survived the same line. I had no idea I was looking at the most coveted object on campus.

The beer sword is exactly what it sounds like. There's no frills either: You fill it yourself — a 20-ounce capacity — and it costs over \$30 after tax, no lid and no dignity included. It is the crown jewel of USC's 2026 concession lineup, which also boasts a souvenir popcorn bucket, a mini-cooler and a drum of loaded fries — the athletic department having apparently decided that if it cannot sell you a defense, it can at least sell you a novelty vessel.

The sword has, predictably, gone viral; Fox Sports crowned it one of the year's best new stadium foods, and the rest of the internet has nominated it as college football's next great craze. As such, it now behaves like every viral, limited-edition object before it: It sells out every home game, sometimes before kickoff.

So an over \$30 plastic sword has become a speculative asset. On eBay, unopened ones change hands for upward of \$95 — three times retail, for a cup. Some buyers hoard them still in the wrapper, as though a translucent Modelo sword might one day appreciate into a down payment.

Tylicki is not an outlier; actually getting a sword is an Odyssean quest. Only certain stands carry them, so the ritual goes: find a stand, commit to a 30-minute line in the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum sun that has no regard for your commemorative saber, approach the counter and learn they've just sold out, then set off across the same concourse toward the next stand rumored to have them — where the same fate is usually waiting.

Where is the equity? A good time should be accessible and



Yu-Chen Lin / Daily Trojan

USC football has started selling beer swords along with other souvenir food items relating to Trojan football, which have been successes. The team is pictured here in a game against Oregon on Sept. 26.

inclusive to all — and yet the beer sword has quietly organized the Coliseum into an othering hierarchy of haves and have-nots.

There are the haves: the eBay speculators; the friends-of-friends who know which stand still has stock; the ravenous, insatiable Oregon fans who waltzed into our house and bought them by the armful. And there are the have-nots: the loyal Trojans who waited half an hour in good faith and reached the counter with nothing to show but an emergent sunburn. Gatekeeping is a deplorable thing. USC Athletics, I expect a diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility statement on the matter.

The whole 2026 concession arsenal reads as an answer to a season that has only boasted one

sold-out headline: If the love of the game won't fill the Coliseum, maybe a novelty-alcohol receptacle will. Humiliatingly, it's working. My fellow unathletic friends have discussed this sword more than the Trojans' offense, defense and playoff hopes — or lack thereof — combined.

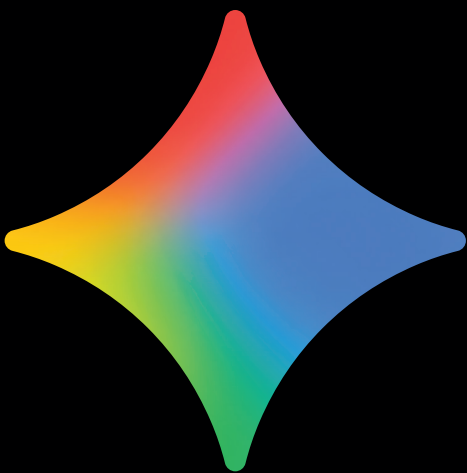
The cruelest twist is the timing: That sellout was the Oregon game, the one Saturday the Coliseum has actually filled this season. A packed house, a ranked opponent, a sport at its most boisterous — and the defining scarcity of the afternoon was a plastic tube.

The sword isn't even all that. It's a vessel shaped like a weapon that pragmatically can only be filled halfway; in every practical sense, it is deeply stupid. Though

I must concede that it is also extremely fun — fun enough that a whole column grieving over it makes me sound like an alcoholic. I'm not. I'm just fiending for giggles; my stake in this saber is purely anthropological.

The Trojans couldn't stop Oregon (3-1, 1-0) and couldn't keep their ejected linebacker off the sideline, but they did sell out of this concession before halftime. That might be the closest thing to a win we'll get this fall.

Julia Ho is a senior writing about sports for newcomers and skeptics alike in her column, "Sports for Dummies," which runs every other Wednesday. She is also a chief copy editor and the staff development director at the Daily Trojan.



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