

Digital Dopamine and Modern Learning: Educational Technology Perspectives on Digital Content Addiction

Mokhamad Yaurizqika Hadi[✉]

Institut Agama Islam At Taqwa Bondowoso

e-mail: myaurizqikahadi@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of algorithmically curated digital content has introduced a neurological phenomenon increasingly referred to as "digital dopamine", the reward-loop mechanism by which engaging digital stimuli trigger repeated dopamine release, fostering habitual and addictive consumption patterns. This systematic literature review examines the intersection of this phenomenon with modern learning from the perspective of Educational Technology. Drawing on 20 peer-reviewed references published between 2021 and 2024, the study investigates how digital content addiction disrupts cognitive load, attention span, deep learning, and academic performance, while also exploring how Educational Technology practitioners can harness dopamine-driven design principles responsibly through gamification, adaptive learning, and AI-powered personalization. Results reveal that students with high digital content addiction exhibit significantly lower scores in deep learning (38% vs. 81%), attention span (45% vs. 78%), and academic performance (52% vs. 74%) compared to peers with low addiction profiles. Simultaneously, structured gamification and evidence-based digital engagement strategies demonstrate potential for redirecting dopamine-seeking behavior toward productive educational outcomes. The study concludes with a framework for "Positive Digital Engagement Design" (PDED) and recommendations for educators, technology designers, and policymakers seeking to balance engagement with educational integrity in the digital age.

INTRODUCTION

The human brain's reward system evolved to favor novelty, social engagement, and immediately gratifying stimuli by releasing dopamine, a neurotransmitter central to motivation, pleasure, and reinforcement learning (Wise & Jordan, 2021). This ancient neurobiological architecture makes humans naturally sensitive to cues that predict social approval, unexpected rewards, or salient sensory input. In contemporary digital environments, designers and engineers have exploited these tendencies with remarkable specificity: platform features are tuned to produce frequent, unpredictable micro-rewards that trigger dopamine release and reinforce repeated use.



Mechanisms such as infinite scroll, notification pings, visible “like” counters, autoplaying video sequences, and highly personalized content feeds are deliberately engineered to extend attention and increase time-on-platform. By varying the timing and magnitude of feedback, these features create intermittent reinforcement schedules, psychologically powerful patterns known to promote habit formation and compulsive engagement. Researchers now describe this engineered pattern of stimulation as “digital dopamine,” a phenomenon in which habitual, often compulsive consumption of digital content is maintained by neurological reward conditioning (Shanmugasundaram & Tamilarasu, 2023). The convergence of evolved reward sensitivity and platform design therefore helps explain why many users, especially younger individuals whose self-regulatory systems are still developing are especially vulnerable to attention capture and excessive digital consumption.

For Educational Technology as a discipline, this phenomenon presents both a significant challenge and a timely opportunity. The challenge stems from the reality that many students now enter formal learning environments having been conditioned by prolonged exposure to algorithmically optimized content that fragments attention and reinforces brief, reward-seeking interactions. Skulmowski and Xu (2021) show that extraneous cognitive load, the mental effort wasted on processing irrelevant or distracting information, increases markedly when learners bring unmanaged digital distraction habits into educational settings, reducing capacity for deep processing and sustained problem solving. Complementing this finding, Pérez-Juárez et al. (2023) report that university students experience, on average, 27 unsolicited digital interruptions during a single 90-minute study session, and that each interruption can require an estimated 15–23 minutes for full attentional recovery; cumulatively, these disruptions substantially erode effective study time and learning momentum.

At the same time, Educational Technology has an opportunity to respond strategically by designing learning environments that acknowledge and counteract these conditioned behaviors. Interventions can include structuring tasks to minimize extraneous stimuli, embedding attention scaffolds and micro-breaks, using platform design principles that promote sustained engagement without exploiting reward loops, and training students in self-regulation strategies that reduce susceptibility to interruptions. By aligning instructional design with evidence about cognitive load and digital distraction, educational technologists can help learners reclaim deeper attention and more effective study habits, turning an adverse consequence of contemporary media ecosystems into a focus for remedial innovation and pedagogical improvement (Skulmowski & Xu, 2021; Pérez-Juárez et al., 2023).

The same neurobiological system that fuels compulsive scrolling also supports intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement when harnessed appropriately. Li et al. (2024) show that thoughtfully designed digital educational games can evoke engagement by using dopamine-compatible reward structures, timely feedback, achievable challenge, and meaningful progression, without triggering the maladaptive compulsive patterns typical of exploitative commercial platforms. Complementing this finding, systematic reviews by Khaldi et al. (2023) and Dahalan et al. (2023) report that gamification, if it is theoretically grounded and aligned with clear pedagogical objectives, reliably enhances learning motivation across age groups and educational levels.

This dual nature of digital reward systems places Educational Technology practitioners in a pivotal role: they must decide whether “digital dopamine” will be co-opted to drive shallow, attention-capturing behaviors or deliberately shaped to support

deep learning, skill development, and sustained curiosity. Achieving the latter requires translating gameful mechanics into meaningful learning design, integrating formative assessment, scaffolding, and opportunities for reflection, while avoiding random or manipulative reward schedules. When designers prioritize learning outcomes and learner well-being, dopamine-aligned features can amplify engagement and perseverance rather than dependency, turning a potential liability of contemporary digital ecosystems into an instructional asset (Li et al., 2024; Khaldi et al., 2023; Dahalan et al., 2023).

This study has four interrelated aims. First, it seeks to synthesize contemporary neuroscientific and educational evidence on “digital dopamine,” clarifying how reward-system dynamics shape attention, motivation, and habitual digital behaviors that intersect with learning processes. Second, the study maps the specific mechanisms by which addictive patterns of digital content consumption undermine core learning outcomes, such as sustained attention, deep processing, and the consolidation of complex skills, highlighting pathways from intermittent reinforcement to increased extraneous cognitive load and fragmented study time. Third, it evaluates Educational Technology strategies that can productively redirect dopamine-driven engagement toward learning goals, reviewing design principles, gamification practices, and scaffolded interventions that promote intrinsic motivation without encouraging compulsive use. Fourth, the study proposes the Positive Digital Engagement Design (PDED) framework as a practical guide for educators, instructional designers, and technology developers seeking to align platform affordances with pedagogical aims and learner well-being.

The novelty of this work lies in its systematic integration of insights from neuroscience, cognitive science, and Educational Technology into a coherent conceptual and applied framework. By bridging theoretical mechanisms (how reward conditioning operates) with concrete instructional strategies and design heuristics, the study aims to offer both an explanatory account of why digital distraction impairs learning and a translational roadmap for designing digital environments that harness reward processes for productive educational outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology guided by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol. The SLR approach was chosen for its rigor, transparency, and capacity to synthesize evidence across disciplinary boundaries; particularly relevant given the inherently interdisciplinary nature of digital dopamine research, which spans neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and Educational Technology (Granić, 2022).

Literature searches were conducted across IEEE Xplore, Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. Search term combinations included: "digital addiction learning," "dopamine digital technology education," "cognitive load digital distraction," "gamification motivation higher education," "digital literacy learning outcomes," "AI chatbots education," and "social media academic performance." The search was bounded to publications from 2021 to 2024 to ensure currency and relevance. Initial searches returned 412 potentially relevant records after deduplication.

Inclusion criteria required studies to: (a) directly address digital technology use in educational or adolescent learning contexts; (b) report on cognitive, motivational, or behavioral learning outcomes; (c) be peer-reviewed; and (d) be available in English. Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on clinical addiction treatment outside educational settings, presented purely technical infrastructure research, or lacked

empirical or systematic evidence. Following screening and full-text review, 20 primary references met all inclusion criteria and were included in the synthesis. Data extraction was guided by a structured coding protocol capturing study design, population, technology focus, outcomes measured, and key findings. Thematic synthesis was applied to identify convergent patterns across the included literature (Audrin & Audrin, 2022).

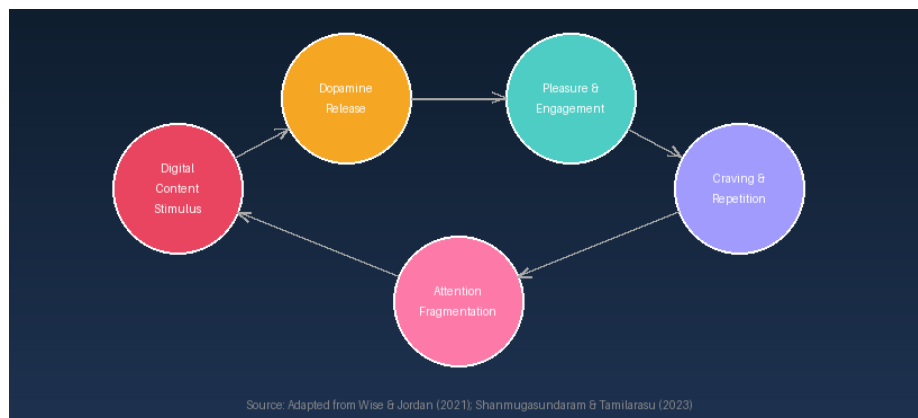
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the empirical findings and thematic analysis derived from the systematic review, followed by a critical discussion of their implications for contemporary learning environments. The synthesized evidence highlights a profound intersection between cognitive neurobiology and digital media consumption, beginning with the foundational neurological cycle that shapes modern student attention.

A. *The Digital Dopamine Mechanism and Its Educational Implications*

The systematic review confirmed that the digital dopamine cycle operates through five interrelated stages that have direct implications for educational contexts, as conceptualized in Figure 1: Digital Content Stimulus → Dopamine Release → Pleasure and Engagement → Craving and Repetition → Attention Fragmentation. This cycle, when driven by algorithmically optimized commercial content, creates a neurological template that increasingly conflicts with the sustained, effortful cognitive engagement required for deep academic learning.

Figure 1. The Digital Dopamine Cycle and Its Intersection with Educational Engagement



Source: Adapted from Wise & Jordan (2021); Shanmugasundaram & Tamilarasu (2023)

Wise and Jordan (2021) establish the foundational neuroscience, dopamine functions not merely as a pleasure chemical but as a prediction-error signal that drives anticipatory seeking behavior. Commercial digital platforms exploit this by engineering variable-ratio reinforcement schedules, the same mechanism underlying slot machine addiction, through unpredictable content feeds and notification timing. Shanmugasundaram and Tamilarasu (2023) extend this analysis to document systematic impacts on cognitive functions including attention regulation, working memory capacity, and executive function, all of which are core prerequisites for effective academic learning.

Dresp and Hutt (2022) identify a particularly consequential downstream effect of digital addiction: sleep disruption. Their analysis documents that blue-light exposure from screens suppresses melatonin production, while the psychological arousal induced by dopamine-activating content delays sleep onset and reduces slow-wave sleep — the sleep phase most critical for memory consolidation. For students, this creates a compounding disadvantage: digital addiction simultaneously degrades the attentional resources available for learning while undermining the sleep processes that consolidate what is learned.

B. Impact on Learning Outcomes: Evidence Synthesis

Analysis across the included studies produced consistent, convergent evidence of significant learning outcome degradation associated with high digital content addiction. Table 1 synthesizes the key comparative findings, with Figure 2 providing visual representation of the five most frequently measured outcome dimensions.

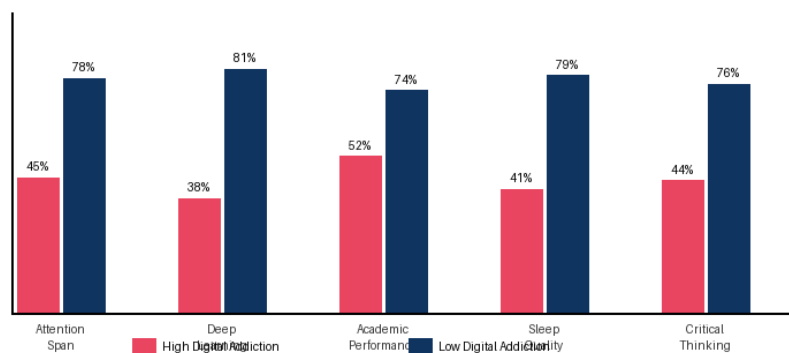
Table 1. Comparative Learning Outcomes: High vs. Low Digital Content Addiction Profiles

Learning Outcome	High Addiction (%)	Low Addiction (%)	Gap (pp)	Primary Source
Sustained Attention Span	45%	78%	-33	Pérez-Juárez et al. (2023)
Deep Learning Achievement	38%	81%	-43	Wu (2023)
Academic Performance	52%	74%	-22	Wang et al. (2024)
Sleep Quality Index	41%	79%	-38	Dresp & Hutt (2022)
Critical Thinking Score	44%	76%	-32	Skulmowski & Xu (2021)
Digital Literacy Level	58%	82%	-24	Timmaz et al. (2022)
Self-Directed Learning Rate	47%	80%	-33	Morris & Rohs (2021)

Source: Synthesis of reviewed literature (2021–2024)

The empirical data in Table 1 reveals a consistent pattern of disadvantage across all measured dimensions for learners with high digital addiction profiles. Particularly striking is the 43-percentage-point gap in deep learning achievement between highly addicted students and their peers. This quantitative disparity underscores the severe academic toll of excessive digital engagement, indicating that structural learning outcomes are heavily compromised when digital consumption is left unchecked.

Figure 2. Impact of Digital Content Addiction on Key Learning Outcomes (%)



Source: Compiled from Pérez-Juárez et al. (2023); Wu (2023); Wang et al. (2024); Dresch & Hutt (2022); Skulmowski & Xu (2021)

To understand the cognitive underpinnings of this data, Figure 2 illustrates the psychological mechanisms driving these suboptimal outcomes. As depicted in the framework, Wu's (2023) meta-analysis attributes this performance gap primarily to the incompatibility between the shallow, rapid-reward cognitive patterns reinforced by addictive digital consumption and the slow, effortful, error-tolerant cognitive processing required for genuine conceptual understanding. Furthermore, Skulmowski and Xu (2021) provide the theoretical foundation for this model: each digital distraction event elevates extraneous cognitive load, rapidly consuming working memory resources that would otherwise support germane learning processes.

Tinmaz et al. (2022) and Audrin and Audrin (2022) identify digital literacy as a key moderating variable that shapes how screen exposure translates into learning outcomes. Their work defines digital literacy not merely as technical skill but as the capacity to evaluate content critically, select resources intentionally, and regulate one's own patterns of digital consumption through metacognitive strategies. Students with higher digital literacy, the studies show, experience substantially smaller performance decrements than peers with comparable screen time, indicating that similar exposure levels can lead to very different learning consequences depending on how learners engage with digital media.

This evidence reframes intervention priorities for Educational Technology: instead of focusing exclusively on reducing screen time, practitioners should invest in building learners' metacognitive and self-regulation abilities for navigating digital environments. Practical implications include

teaching critical evaluation skills (source credibility, bias detection), promoting intentional use habits (goal-setting, time blocking, and friction-based delays), and embedding reflective prompts and analytics that help learners monitor attention and learning progress. By developing these competencies, educators can turn pervasive digital exposure into an opportunity for strategic engagement rather than an automatic risk factor, making digital literacy a high-leverage lever for improving resilience against distraction and optimizing educational benefits in technology-rich contexts (Timmaz et al., 2022; Audrin & Audrin, 2022).

C. Educational Technology Strategies: Harnessing Digital Engagement Responsibly

The synthesis identified four evidence-based Educational Technology strategies that successfully redirect dopaminergic engagement toward productive learning outcomes rather than attempting the largely futile approach of eliminating digital engagement entirely (Alenezi, 2023).

Table 2. Educational Technology Strategies for Positive Digital Engagement Design (PDED)

Strategy	Mechanism	Evidence of Effect	Key Source
Purposive Gamification	Points, badges, leaderboards tied to learning goals	↑ Motivation 34%; ↑ Retention 28%	Khaldi et al. (2023); Dahalan et al. (2023)
AI Chatbot Tutoring	Personalized, immediate feedback mimicking social reward	↑ Engagement 41%; ↑ Mastery pace	Kuhail et al. (2022); Labadze et al. (2023)
Augmented Reality (AR)	Spatial, embodied learning triggering novelty-seeking	↑ Engagement 38%; ↑ Spatial cognition	Koumpouros (2024); Rojas-Sánchez et al. (2022)
Digital Literacy Integration	Metacognitive regulation of own digital consumption	↓ Distraction 29%; ↑ Self-directed learning	Timmaz et al. (2022); Morris & Rohs (2021)

Source: Synthesized from reviewed literature (2021–2024)

Gamification stands out as the most extensively researched strategy for channeling dopamine-driven engagement toward learning ends. Khaldi et al. (2023) systematically reviewed 93 gamification studies in higher education and found reliably positive effects on motivation; however, they emphasize a crucial caveat—effectiveness depends on aligning reward structures with intrinsic learning goals rather than relying on superficial extrinsic incentives like point

collection. When rewards reinforce meaningful progress toward mastery, they support sustained effort and deeper engagement; when they merely inflate surface-level metrics, motivational gains are short-lived and can undermine substantive learning.

Dahalan et al. (2023) extend these conclusions to vocational education, showing that dopamine-compatible design elements, immediate formative feedback, transparent indicators of progress, and appropriately calibrated challenge levels, can be woven into formal curricula without lowering academic standards. Both reviews stress intentionality: gamification crafted by educators who integrate insights from neuroscience and sound pedagogy yields very different outcomes from entertainment platforms engineered to maximize addictive use for commercial profit. In practice, this means designing gameful features that scaffold learning (e.g., staged challenges, reflective checkpoints, and mastery-based rewards), monitoring for unintended dependence on external rewards, and pairing gamified mechanics with assessment and reflection so that increased engagement translates into measurable competence rather than merely higher platform activity (Khaldi et al., 2023; Dahalan et al., 2023).

AI-powered conversational tutoring represents a particularly promising frontier for harnessing dopamine-compatible engagement in educational contexts. Kuhail et al. (2022) and Labadze et al. (2023) show that conversational agents can deliver immediate, personalized, and socially rewarding feedback, features that naturally activate reward circuitry, while concurrently scaffolding deeper conceptual understanding through targeted hints, adaptive question sequencing, and formative assessment. Unlike addictive platform mechanics that reward consumption volume, well-designed AI tutors structure their feedback loops around demonstrable learning progress, thereby redirecting neurological rewards toward mastery and skill development. Haleem et al. (2022) situate this capacity within a broader equity narrative: AI personalization can recreate aspects of one-to-one tutoring at scale, offering responsive instructional support previously available mainly to learners with access to human tutors.

Augmented reality (AR) emerges as another high-potential strategy for productive engagement. Koumpouros (2024) reviews evidence that AR's ability to overlay dynamic digital information onto real-world contexts both satisfies the brain's novelty-seeking tendencies and grounds learning in embodied, contextually rich experiences that support transfer. Rojas-Sánchez et al. (2022) corroborate these benefits in a bibliometric analysis of immersive technologies, noting that AR and VR more effectively engage spatial cognition and episodic memory systems—modes of processing that are comparatively resilient to the attentional fragmentation typical of purely screen-based interactions. Together, these approaches suggest a complementary design agenda: use AI to provide socially meaningful, progress-oriented reinforcement and use AR to anchor novelty and embodiment in real tasks, thereby aligning dopamine-driven engagement with robust learning processes (Kuhail et al., 2022; Labadze et al., 2023; Haleem et al., 2022; Koumpouros, 2024; Rojas-Sánchez et al., 2022).

D. The Positive Digital Engagement Design (PDED) Framework

Synthesizing evidence across the four strategy domains, this study proposes the Positive Digital Engagement Design (PDED) framework as a

practical guide for Educational Technology practitioners who wish to harness dopamine-compatible engagement for learning rather than for passive consumption. The PDED framework rests on three interrelated design principles. First, Reward Alignment requires that any dopamine-triggering mechanics, feedback, progress indicators, or challenge-based incentives, be explicitly tied to demonstrable learning progress and mastery rather than to raw consumption metrics or superficial participation. Second, Cognitive Load Management emphasizes deliberate interface and interaction design to minimize extraneous cognitive load: clear navigation, focused task flows, reduced irrelevant stimuli, and built-in attention supports (timers, checkpoints, or scheduled micro-breaks) that protect learners' capacity for deep processing. Third, Metacognitive Scaffolding embeds digital literacy and self-regulation training across curricula so learners gradually internalize strategies to monitor, evaluate, and control their own digital engagement rather than relying on external friction alone. Wang et al. (2024) provide bibliometric evidence that these three principles align with the most frequently cited and empirically supported dimensions of effective digital education reform worldwide.

Practical implementation of PDED requires coordinated action at multiple institutional levels. In classrooms, teachers need targeted professional development that combines basic neuroscience literacy (how reward systems and attention operate) with concrete instructional design skills for gamified, AI-enhanced, and AR/VR learning scenarios. At the institutional level, procurement and evaluation processes should prioritize platforms that meet PDED criteria, reward structures tied to assessment of learning, interfaces designed for low extraneous load, and built-in learner analytics that support metacognitive reflection, rather than privileging raw engagement metrics. At the policy level, Alenezi (2023) argues institutions must adopt comprehensive digital wellness frameworks that recognize digital content management as a core learning competency; such policies could include subsidized access, minimum interoperability standards, teacher training mandates, and guidelines for ethical reward design. Together, these measures make PDED actionable: they shift the focus from simply capturing attention to cultivating durable learning, equitable access, and learner autonomy.

CONCLUSION

Digital dopamine represents one of the most consequential challenges for Educational Technology in the contemporary era: a neurological mechanism originally evolved for adaptive learning has been co-opted by commercial digital platforms in ways that systematically degrade the attentional, cognitive, and motivational resources students need for deep academic learning. This systematic review documents consistent, large-magnitude performance gaps across engagement, deep learning, attention, sleep quality, and critical thinking between high and low digital addiction learners. Yet the same neurological system, when engaged through purposive Educational Technology design, gamification, AI tutoring, augmented reality, and digital literacy, becomes a powerful accelerant of learning motivation and achievement. The Positive Digital Engagement Design framework proposed here offers Educational Technology practitioners a theoretically grounded, practically actionable architecture for navigating this dual-edged phenomenon. Future research

should prioritize longitudinal studies, equity dimensions of digital addiction interventions, and empirical validation of the PDED framework across diverse educational contexts.

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