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Counselors' Strategies in Addressing Students' Learning Concentration Problems in the Digital Distraction Era: A Narrative Study

[1]*Gipa Gisnando, [1]Eko Sujadi
[1]IAIN Kerinci, Jambi, Indonesia.

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ABSTRACT

Background: The rapid development of digital technology has increased distractions, negatively affecting students' concentration during learning. While previous studies have widely examined the impact of digital distraction on students' academic performance, limited research has specifically explored school counselors' professional experiences in addressing students' concentration problems in digitally saturated learning environments. *Aim: This study explores* school counselors' experiences in addressing students' concentration problems in the era of digital distraction. The study employed a qualitative narrative approach, with data collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation involving three school counselors at junior and senior high school levels in Kerinci Regency. *Method:* Data were analyzed using Riessman's narrative analysis model. The findings reveal three interrelated themes. First, digital distractions such as smartphone notifications, online games, and social media are perceived as the primary sources of students' concentration problems. Second, counselors emphasize strengthening students' self-regulation through time management, control of digital device use, and mindfulness as central counseling strategies. Third, the sustainability of behavioral change in learning concentration depends on collaboration among counselors, teachers, and parents. This study contributes to theory by enriching narrative counseling perspectives on digital distraction as a systemic issue in school contexts. Practically, it provides experience-based strategic implications for school counseling interventions to improve students' learning concentration in the digital era.

Keywords: Digital Distraction, Learning Concentration, School Counselor, Self-Regulation, Educational Counseling

Corresponding Author:
Gipa Gisnando
Islamic Educational Guidance and Counseling
IAIN Kerinci
Kapten Muradi Road, Sungai Liuk, Pesisir Bukit District, Sungai Penuh City, Jambi 37112
Email: gipagisnando@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of technology has facilitated various aspects of life, although it has also introduced new challenges for children (Mutiah, 2017; Sujadi & Ahmad, 2023). Digital transformation has had a significant impact on multiple sectors, including education, which is now supported by various internet-based applications and learning media (Mulyani & Haliza, 2021). The presence of digital media has made daily activities faster, more practical, and more efficient (Maritsa et al., 2021). This technological shift is clearly reflected in the transformation of mobile phones into smartphones, which are increasingly used as entertainment tools and may even trigger tendencies toward dependency (Zulfa & Mujazi, 2022). The internet has also become a basic necessity for people of all ages (Senge, 2023). Overall, technology now plays a central role in supporting human activities, including education and social interaction (Fricticarani et al., 2023).

Despite its many benefits, technological advancement also generates negative impacts, such as decreased concentration ability and increased distraction among children and adolescents (Salman et al., 2024). Excessive use of digital devices, such as online games and social media, conditions the brain to respond strongly to visual stimuli, making it difficult to focus during learning (Mauryn, 2024). Online game addiction can reduce concentration, disrupt memory, and cause physical complaints such as headaches and eye strain (Wijaya et al., 2024). Many students also struggle to detach from their devices before bedtime, leading to poor sleep quality and impaired focus during learning (Aditia et al., 2023). In addition, constant notifications contribute to distraction, hindering concentration and productivity (Kamaruddin et al., 2023).

Digital distraction refers to disruptions arising from technology use that divert attention away from primary activities (Pérez-Juárez et al., 2023). Continuous notifications and messages fragment focus, making it difficult for users to sustain attention and complete tasks optimally (Maqfiro et al., 2021). Among children and adolescents, excessive gadget use can decrease learning motivation and reduce interest in academic subjects (Lahiwu et al., 2021). Other impacts include dependency, sleep disturbances, eye fatigue, poor posture, and cognitive decline (Aykutlu et al., 2024; Pramudita et al., 2024).

Although notifications can be beneficial, an excessive number of them may still disrupt concentration (Dekker et al., 2025).

Concentration is a mental process of focusing attention on a particular object or task (Nisa & Khotimah, 2019). In learning contexts, concentration refers to the ability to focus on instructional material while ignoring distractions, influenced by psychological factors, environment, learning style, and sleep quality (Febrian et al., 2024). Concentration also involves directed mental and physical activity during learning (Sobon et al., 2020). It represents a conscious effort to remain engaged in an activity even when it is not always enjoyable (Riinawati, 2021). Students with good concentration tend to achieve more optimal academic performance (Sari et al., 2020). Conversely, poor concentration hinders problem-solving abilities and reduces learning effectiveness (Adelia et al., 2021; Zulfa & Mujazi, 2022). This condition also leads to decreased reading interest, learning awareness, and student motivation (Mujazi, 2020). Selvia et al. emphasize that one of the major challenges in Indonesian education is students' difficulty in maintaining focus during learning (Selvia et al., 2024).

Currently, increasing digital disruption has become one of the primary causes of declining concentration. Digital device usage has continued to rise, from 3.2 billion users in 2019 to 3.9 billion in 2020, particularly in developing countries (Susilo et al., 2020). Children and adolescents are increasingly accessing the internet via mobile phones, with high connectivity rates in the United States (95%), Asia (90%), and Europe (80%). In Italy, people spend an average of two to three hours per day on the internet and social media (Benedetto et al., 2024). In Indonesia, 64.8% of the population used the internet in 2019, and 95.4% of them accessed it via mobile phones (Budiman et al., 2024). Excessive digital use negatively affects concentration, learning motivation, and the quality of social interaction, especially among children and adolescents.

Students' concentration problems amid widespread digital technology use can be explained through several learning psychology theories. Cognitive Load Theory explains that excessive information flow from gadgets and social media can overload cognitive capacity, thereby impairing focus (Wong et al., 2012). Meanwhile, Self-Regulated Learning Theory highlights the importance of students' ability to manage their attention, time, and learning behavior, which has become increasingly challenging due to constant digital stimuli (Daleiden et al., 2025). Attention Control Theory suggests that notifications and visual stimuli from digital devices can disrupt attentional control mechanisms, making attention easily diverted (Fournier et al., 2025). From a behaviorist perspective, the habit of repeatedly checking smartphones is formed through immediate reinforcement such as notifications or engaging content (Norwood & Przybylski, 2025). Social Cognitive Theory further emphasizes that students' digital behavior is shaped by their social environment, including peers' social media usage patterns (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2023). Overall, these theories indicate that declining concentration results from the interaction between cognitive factors, self-regulation abilities, and the digital environment.

Based on this theoretical understanding, school counselors implement various measures to help students manage digital distractions and improve their focus on learning. Counselors begin by identifying patterns of device use and situations that most trigger concentration loss, followed by empathetic counseling to help students recognize the impact of their digital behavior. Interventions include time management training, the Pomodoro technique, notification adjustment, and limiting unnecessary applications during study time. Counselors also introduce digital literacy to reduce unnecessary information overload and teach mindfulness techniques to strengthen attentional control. To ensure consistency in behavioral change, counselors collaborate with teachers and parents to create supportive environments and establish proportional rules for device use.

Previous studies have shown that digital distraction significantly affects students' concentration and academic outcomes. Research by Uncapher revealed that individuals who frequently engage in media multitasking exhibit lower cognitive control and are more easily distracted (Uncapher et al., 2016). Kushlev (2016) found that smartphone notifications—even when not opened can increase cognitive load and disrupt sustained attention. In Indonesia, Padmasari (2025) reported that social media use is a primary source of distraction that reduces junior high school students' focus on learning. Lalahi et al. (2026) found that non-educational gadget use triggers unfocused behavior among elementary school students, while Aini et al. (2023) identified a negative correlation between TikTok usage intensity and students' concentration ability. These findings illustrate that digital distraction is a real issue affecting students' focus and learning quality across educational levels.

Although numerous studies have examined digital distraction and its impact on students' academic performance and cognitive outcomes, most focus primarily on students' behavioral and psychological aspects. Research that specifically investigates school counselors' practical experiences, intervention strategies, and professional challenges in managing these issues remains limited, particularly in Indonesia. Therefore, this study provides direct insight into counseling dynamics in the digital era. Based on this background and the identified research gap, this study aims to explore counselors' experiences in addressing students' declining concentration caused by digital distractions.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative narrative approach to explore school counselors' lived experiences in addressing students' concentration difficulties amid digital distraction. Narrative research emphasizes individuals' stories as a means of understanding how they interpret and give meaning to their experiences (Choi, 2024). This approach was considered

appropriate for examining how counselors construct their professional responses to digital-related learning challenges (Fadli, 2021).

The study was conducted from July to September 2025 in Kerinci Regency, Jambi Province. The participants were three school counselors at the junior and senior high school levels, selected through purposive sampling, meeting the inclusion criteria. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants based on characteristics relevant to the research objectives (Andriani et al., 2025; Severiano et al., 2025). The inclusion criteria were: (1) having at least two years of professional experience as a school counselor, (2) having handled students experiencing learning concentration difficulties related to digital device use, and (3) willingness to participate in in-depth interviews. The number of participants was determined by data saturation, in which recurring themes and patterns emerged, and no substantially new information was obtained.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting approximately 60–90 minutes for each participant. Each participant was interviewed twice to deepen narrative exploration. The interview protocol included guiding questions such as: "How do you identify students who experience concentration difficulties related to digital use?" "What challenges do you face when handling these cases?", and "How do you interpret your role in addressing digital distraction issues?" Follow-up probing questions were used to delve deeper into personal reflections and contextual experiences.

In addition to interviews, non-participant observation was conducted during the interview sessions to capture non-verbal expressions and contextual interactions. Documentation, such as counseling service records and relevant school documents (with participants' permission), was also used to support and validate the data.

Data analysis followed Riessman's narrative analysis model. The analysis was conducted in several stages: (1) transcribing interviews verbatim, (2) repeatedly reading transcripts to gain holistic understanding, (3) coding meaningful narrative segments related to digital distraction and counseling practices, (4) identifying narrative themes and plot structures, (5) reconstructing participants' stories to preserve chronological flow and contextual meaning, and (6) interpreting how counselors constructed meaning from their professional experiences (Aisyah et al., 2025). Coding was conducted manually by identifying recurring patterns and aligning them with thematic categories aligned with the research focus.

To ensure trustworthiness, credibility was established through source triangulation (comparing data among participants) and method triangulation (interviews, observations, and documentation). Member checking was conducted by returning summarized interpretations to participants for confirmation. The prolonged engagement during the data collection period also enhanced contextual depth and dependability.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed. Before data collection, participants were provided with informed consent forms explaining the research objectives, procedures, voluntary participation, and confidentiality assurances. Participants' identities were anonymized using pseudonyms to protect privacy. All data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study employed a narrative approach to understand the experiences of three school counselors in addressing students who experience learning concentration difficulties amid the high prevalence of digital distractions. Therefore, the findings are presented as individual narrative accounts from each counselor. In contrast, the main themes emerging across narratives are discussed in the discussion section, linking them to relevant theoretical frameworks.

Interview with Informant A

Counselor A (RA) interpreted students' learning concentration difficulties as a direct impact of high exposure to digital distractions, particularly repeated smartphone notifications. In her experience, students often lose focus even when the learning process has just begun. The sound or vibration of a mobile phone becomes the primary trigger that diverts students' attention, making it difficult for them to sustain concentration for a relatively short period.

> *"Nowadays, once the phone rings, they immediately lose focus, even though the lesson has just started."*

To address this condition, RA implemented counseling strategies that emphasized strengthening students' self-regulation through time management and control of digital stimuli. She guided students to turn off smartphone notifications during study time and to divide study sessions into short, timed intervals using the Pomodoro technique. According to her, this approach is more realistic and aligned with students' current attention capacity.

> *"I teach them to turn off notifications while studying and focus for just 20 minutes first."*

RA also emphasized the importance of collaboration with subject teachers. Subject teachers monitored students' focus in the classroom so that behavioral changes fostered through counseling could be observed and reinforced in daily learning activities.

Interview with Informant B

Counselor B (SN) viewed students' concentration difficulties as mainly influenced by digital multitasking habits. In her experience, students often study while using social media or messaging applications, which can result in suboptimal processing of information.

"They study while opening TikTok or WhatsApp. So nothing really goes into their brains."

SN noted that many students lack awareness that excessive smartphone use directly contributes to decreased concentration during learning. Therefore, she applied a reflective counseling approach by asking students to record and evaluate their own smartphone usage patterns. Through this process, students were encouraged to understand the relationship between their digital behavior and the learning difficulties they experienced.

"I ask them to write down when and for what purpose they use their phones."

To sustain behavioral change, SN emphasized the role of parents. According to her, without family involvement in controlling screen time and students' sleep patterns at home, the outcomes of school counseling would be difficult to sustain.

"Without parental support, they still stay up late because of their phones."

Interview with Informant C

Counselor C (AM) interpreted students' concentration difficulties as a consequence of habitual consumption of fast-paced and instant digital content, such as short videos. Such exposure was believed to create stimulus addiction, making students easily restless and unable to persist in learning activities for an extended period.

"They're used to fast content, so even studying for five minutes makes them restless."

In his counseling practice, AM used a behavior modification approach with positive reinforcement. He believed that changes in students' study habits require reinforcement to be sustained. Every effort made by students to reduce smartphone use or improve their focus on learning was acknowledged and appreciated as a form of motivation.

"When they manage to reduce phone use, I appreciate it. That motivates them."

In addition, AM emphasized the role of homeroom teachers as communication bridges between school and family, particularly in monitoring students' behavioral consistency across school and home.

Discussion

This discussion is grounded in a cross-narrative analysis of three school counselors' experiences in addressing students' learning concentration difficulties amid digital distractions. Rather than conceptualizing concentration problems as isolated cognitive deficits, the counselors interpreted them as patterned behaviors shaped by sustained interaction with digital environments. The analysis, therefore, emphasizes how attention instability is experienced, interpreted, and managed in everyday counseling practice.

Digital Distraction as a Source of Learning Concentration Difficulties

All three counselors consistently identified digital distraction as the primary source of students' concentration problems. Their narratives emphasized not only a temporary loss of focus but also the normalization of fragmented attention. Students were described as increasingly accustomed to rapid stimulation, resulting in reduced endurance during sustained academic tasks.

A range of cognitive perspectives supports this interpretation. Research on media multitasking demonstrates reduced attentional control and working memory capacity (Ophir et al., 2009), while Cognitive Load Theory and related models explain how excessive external stimuli burden processing resources and reduce learning effectiveness (Lauc et al., 2023; Sweller, 1988). Continuous stimulation has also been associated with attentional fatigue (Pham & Sanocki, 2024), and broader analyses indicate that digital exposure affects fundamental cognitive functioning (Costanzo, 2024).

However, previous studies largely examine these mechanisms under controlled or experimental conditions. In contrast, the present findings show how such cognitive strain becomes embedded in habitual learning behaviors within school contexts. The counselors did not merely observe overload; they described a restructuring of students' attentional habits. Thus, this study extends prior research by demonstrating how digital distraction operates simultaneously as a cognitive constraint and a socially reinforced behavioral pattern.

Strengthening Self-Regulation as the Core Counseling Strategy

The second theme highlights strengthening self-regulation as the central counseling response. Concentration difficulties were interpreted as reflecting limited time management, impulse control, and self-monitoring capacity. Interventions, including structured scheduling, reflective dialogue, mindfulness practices, and behavioral modification, were implemented gradually to foster sustainable change.

The emphasis on regulatory strengthening aligns with theoretical and empirical work on self-regulated learning and metacognitive development, which stress planning, monitoring, and reflective awareness as key learning processes (Sinkkonen & Tapani, 2024; Sugiarto, 2023). Mindfulness-based approaches have also been shown to enhance attentional stability, while structured time management improves academic effectiveness (Satrianta et al., 2024; Smits et al., 2025). Empirical evidence further indicates that regulatory capacity mitigates the negative effects of digital distraction (Martin et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, unlike much of the existing literature that treats self-regulation as an individual variable to be measured, the counselors described it as a relational and developmental process. Behavioral change was framed as emerging through sustained interaction, guidance, and student readiness. This finding reframes self-regulation from a static internal trait into a contextually cultivated capacity within counseling practice.

Environmental Collaboration in Sustaining Behavioral Change

The third theme underscores the importance of collaboration with teachers and parents in sustaining behavioral change. Improvement in concentration was perceived as more stable when behavioral expectations were reinforced consistently across school and home environments.

This perspective is consistent with ecological and social support frameworks, which highlight the role of microsystem interactions and environmental backing in shaping individual behavior and resilience (Dharma, 2023; Saputri & Surawan, 2025). Collaborative reinforcement has also been linked to the long-term effectiveness of counseling interventions (Fitriyani & Seplyana, 2024).

However, unlike theoretical assumptions of coordinated systems, the counselors reported variability in collaboration quality. Differences in parental supervision and teacher engagement influenced the durability of behavioral change. These findings nuance ecological perspectives by showing that environmental support is not inherently effective; its impact depends on communication consistency and shared responsibility.

The novelty of this study lies in integrating digital distraction, self-regulation, and environmental collaboration within a single interpretive framework grounded in counseling practice. Whereas previous studies often examine these dimensions separately, this research demonstrates that practitioners perceive them as interconnected elements of a unified problem structure that requires coordinated internal and external responses. Nevertheless, this study has limitations. The small number of informants restricts transferability, and reliance on interview narratives emphasizes subjective perspectives. Future research should incorporate broader samples and mixed-method approaches to strengthen analytical depth and generalizability.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that digital distraction functions as a structural factor contributing to the decline in students' learning concentration. Through counselors' narratives, the findings show that concentration difficulties are not merely individual cognitive deficits but are shaped by habitual exposure to fragmented digital stimulation. Counselors address this condition by strengthening students' self-regulation through structured time management, controlled smartphone use, reflective guidance, and behavioral modification. Sustainable improvement is further supported by consistent collaboration between teachers and parents.

Scientifically, this study contributes in three ways. First, it integrates digital distraction, self-regulation development, and environmental collaboration into a single analytical framework grounded in counseling practice. Previous studies have tended to examine these variables separately; this research demonstrates their interdependence in real school contexts. Second, the findings extend Cognitive Load Theory, Self-Regulated Learning Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory by showing how these theoretical perspectives intersect in explaining concentration dynamics in the digital era. Third, this study provides contextual evidence from counseling practice that nuances predominantly experimental findings in prior literature.

However, this study has several limitations. The small number of informants limits the transferability of findings to broader educational contexts. In addition, reliance on interview data emphasizes subjective perspectives and does not measure behavioral change quantitatively. Future research should involve larger samples, multi-site designs, and mixed-method approaches to enhance generalizability and empirical robustness.

In practice, the findings imply that counselors should adopt a holistic intervention model that combines strengthening self-regulation, developing digital literacy, and structured collaboration with teachers and parents. Counseling programs in the digital era must therefore move beyond individual problem-solving toward coordinated environmental support systems that sustain students' learning focus.

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