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DIGITAL DETOX MOTIVATION THROUGH NARRATIVE MEDIA AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

University students' lives now revolve around social media, but excessive use can lead to anxiety, sleep disturbances, and addictive behaviours. Having digital detoxification as an approach of intentional abstention from social media, therefore, emerged as a self-regulation strategy. Guided by Expectancy–Value Theory (EVT), this study explores how narrative media can influence university students' motivation for digital detox. EVT offers a pertinent paradigm for comprehending students' willingness to disconnect from digital platforms by arguing that expectation beliefs, perceived value, and the cost of completing a task determine behavioural intention. Additionally, the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach is applied to explore how university students interpret their experiences after watching the narrative short video Unplugged: A Journey Back to Life. Five Malaysian university students aged 18–25 were selected through simple random sampling and participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was chosen to identify patterns of meaning across participants' reflections. The findings showed that three major themes emerged from this study. Firstly, is Emotional Resonance, where participants relate strongly to the protagonist's feelings of digital overload; secondly, the Visual Symbolism, where colour transitions from cold to warm tones were interpreted as psychological recovery; and finally, the Motivation for Detox, where behavioural intentions varied based on individual expectancy beliefs and perceived benefits. Findings show that while visual cues boost emotional engagement, narrative media can improve digital self-awareness by enhancing perceived value and relatability. According to the study's findings, university students can benefit from storytelling-based treatments that promote better social media practices and digital well-being.

Introduction

University students who depend on digital platforms for communication, education, entertainment, and social interaction have made social media an indispensable part of contemporary life. However, excessive social media use can result in undesirable mental states and addictive behaviours. Addiction to social media and mental health are still hotly debated topics, and both are becoming more common among young people, particularly university students (Agyapong-Opoku, Agyapong-Opoku & Greenshaw, 2025). The increased anxiety, sleep disruption, and addictive patterns of behaviour are issue that occurs among university students (Coyne & Woodruff, 2023; El-Khoury et al., 2021). These consequences often coincide with academic responsibilities, leading to fatigue and decreased productivity (Plackett, Blyth & Schartau 2023). Because of that, students need to control themselves or detoxify their use of digital tools to take on their own responsibilities. Digital detoxification is defined as the deliberate abstention from social media and electronic device use, and it has emerged as a strategy to counter these adverse effects. Yangmang, Horsiriluck and Chinwong (2025) explain it in more detail, as taking a certain measure of break from social media, as a self-regulation strategy to control screen time and reduce the negative effects of unnecessary use.

Most of the research related to the digital detox phenomenon is dictated by the context of Western countries (Balqis, 2025). Despite increasing interest, research on the experiences, motivations, and outcomes of digital detox remains limited and uncertain (Coyne & Woodruff, 2023), especially in the Malaysian context. To bridge this gap, this study explores the mental health advantages and behavioural intentions linked to digital detoxification applying the narrative media towards the perspectives of university students. This study will apply a short video *Unplugged: A Journey Back to Life* as a case study demonstrating the cinematic storytelling and psychological theory in influencing awareness of digital behaviour. This study aims to explore audience view through a short video narrative to motivate digital detoxification among university students in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Digital Detox and Well-being

Technology nowadays became progressively embedded in daily life; the word "digital detox" was created. Digital detox can be described as a time of measured abstinence from digital gadgets which contribute to a lowering stress and rebuilding in-person social commitment (El-Khoury, Haidar, Kanj, Bou Ali, & Majari 2021). Internet addiction has become one of the most researched areas by previous study, while contemporary research explores the behavioural and emotional underlying forces of frequent engagement. Alanzi, Arif, Aqeeli, Alnafisi, Qumosani, Alreshidi, Alhawsawi, Alnakli, Alotaibi, AlOthman, Khamisi and Alanzi (2024) conducted a study on digital detox involvement and its ability in reducing the anxiety and depression among youngsters. Participants were recruited from varied demographic backgrounds. Hence, applying a quantitative method, it is discovered that there are considerable reductions in anxiety and depression among youngsters while freeing from social media. The findings proof the

presence of digital withdrawal times in controlling the mental health in educational and occupational settings, proving that there is a positive marker for youngsters to improve themselves.

Digital detox methods are also has been taking place in Indonesia, specifically to youth from Generation Y and Z. A study done by Balqis (2025) on the evaluation of the social media detoxification method towards Generation Y and Z in Sleman Regency, Yogyakarta. The survey of 153 respondents discovered that digital detox method across these generations are mostly determined by internal influences. The internal influence are anxiety and unnecessary social media use. Nevertheless, generation Z encounters extreme emotional and social pressures during detox, involving increased feelings of FOMO and fear of social belief. Remarkably, generation Y manages to preserve their detox periods for a prolonged duration. It is also uncovered that both groups normally practice the act of detoxification, most commonly from Instagram, where they delete the app or deactivating their accounts. Overall, the research improves the sense of digital detox in Indonesia by suggesting a general assessment and containing multiple theoretical views.

Current Trends in Digital Detox and Youth
Digital detox practices now emphasise personalised strategies, such as screen-time limits, device-free zones, and app trackers. Social media detox is particularly prevalent among youth who experience algorithm-driven overstimulation. Research consistently associates reduced screen time with better sleep, reduced anxiety, and improved mindfulness (Coyne & Woodruff, 2023; Plackett et al., 2023). A lot of public health campaigns nowadays have increasingly addressed the idea of digital detox, which can also be related to FOMO and social media addiction. As stated by Liu et al. (2025), university students grow addicted to short videos, spend excessive time, and lack self-control, which can lead to anxiety and depression. A study carried out by Kunhao, Azeqa, Naqiuddin, and Dahamat (2024) on FOMO and anxiety related to social media addiction among Malaysian youth. By using a quantitative method, they found that the higher levels of social media addiction were significantly associated with increased social anxiety, while the presence of FOMO and frequent social comparison further exacerbated this anxiety. Hence, there is a need to implement the idea of detoxing from social media for a specific period of time.

A digital detox is not only the advantage for university students, it also can be beneficial for mature adults. Scheppe, Seiffen and Berndt (2025) conduct a study on Generation Y experience on Instagram platform at various stages of a digital detoxification practices. By applying an inductive qualitative approach, data were collected at different points alongside the journey. The data were collected from focus groups, self-completion diaries, and interviews. They then discovered that there are two important elements emerge which is motivations for going through a detox: by means of regaining control and self-improvement. In the detox period, researchers acknowledged that there are five key themes, which is mood and satisfaction, desires for technology, mental well-being, physical well-being, and social connections. Then during post- detox, three behaviours emerged which is the boomerang effect, awareness intake, and a reassessment of the platform, where it has the ability to influence future Instagram consumption. Therefore, a digital detox is necessary for daily task and also can help to reduce mental health issues of the mature adults.

Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT)

Expectancy-value theory (EVT) is one of the major theories of motivation. EVT by Wigfield and Eccles (2000) explains that motivation depends on expected success and perceived task value. Applied to digital detoxification, individuals engage in detox when they believe they can successfully disconnect and perceive benefits such as mental clarity and productivity. Motivation is one of the influential factors in promoting university students' learning achievement (Shang, Moss, & Chen, 2023). Enhancing their motivation is necessary for improving learning in physical education (Shang, Moss & Chen, 2023) without feeling disturbed by social media entertainment.

There are elements of expectancy, value and cost in EVT theory. This theory suggests that achievement-related choices are driven by a mixture of people's expectations for success and personal task value in a certain domain. For example, university students are more likely to follow an activity if they have intention to do well and they value the activity. Hence, achievement-related choices and behaviours are directly affected differently according to a person's values (Values) and what that person expects to happen (Expectancy) (Whitaker et al., 2018). Meanwhile, cost, can be initially described as affecting how a person values an activity, meaning, how effort they are going to put for that activity (Whitaker et al., 2018). Thus it relates to the choices made by students to digital detox themselves from social media content (Karapinar et al., 2024; Whitaker et al., 2018).

For many university students, social media carries high intrinsic and utility value. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok are perceived as crucial for social interaction, entertainment, academic communication, and maintaining a sense of belonging among peers. These perceived values can increase motivations for heavy social media use, even when students recognise its adverse effects on mental health (Karapinar, Das & Das 2024; Kunhao et al., 2024). Simultaneously, the element of cost of the EVT component such as stress, sleep disruption, FOMO, and emotional fatigue has become primary concern in forming students' willingness to participate in digital detox (Karapinar et al., 2024). Recent studies on youth behaviour indicate that emotional pressures, comparison tendencies, and social expectations intensify the psychological cost of constant online presence (Alanzi et al., 2024; Balqis, 2025; Mohamed et al., 2022). Thus, EVT helps to explain why students may feel conflicted: they value the benefits of social media but also perceive high emotional and cognitive costs from overuse. In the short video titled Unplugged: A Journey Back to Life, the protagonist's internal conflict aligns with EVT's constructs, demonstrating how narrative storytelling can shape behavioural intentions.

Narrative Video and Youth Preference and EVT Theory

Narrative media involvement, also referred to as edutainment, merges messages into a story that entertains and educates (Bilali, 2023). Narrative media, such as short videos, have become students' preferred way to watch, as they use storytelling to effect change (Granic et al., 2020; Jevtić & Milošević, 2021). Different communication strategies use direct persuasive techniques through providing information, and the university students get immersed in the story, connecting with its characters (Jevtić & Milošević, 2021). Narrative media use fictional role models to portray desirable and undesirable behaviours, encouraging students to adopt behaviours that change their personal or social circumstances. This situation has become very fascinating to university students to engage with social media frequently and for hours, without realising that it has the potential to contribute to the increase in mental health issues.

As stated by Hayvon (2024), social media can take diverse narrative formats, both cultural and scholarly, encompassing cinema, drama series, animations, serious games, graphic novels, medical humanities, and oral histories. Therefore, this phenomenon has motivated students in higher education to see the increased opportunities, through which social media becomes a vehicle for achieving their satisfaction, while developing the general decline in real-life satisfaction (Amirthalingam & Khera, 2024; Hayvon, 2024). However, some short videos on social media might boost their motivation to improve their well-being as they get immersed by the characters shown in the short-video narratives. EVT theory explains this phenomenon by positing that students' knowledge and familiarity with a story that relates to them may influence their expectancy beliefs (Granic et al., 2020; Ka et al., 2023). It is the degree to which a person believes that a system can help them improve their performance in studying (Ye, Lee, He, & Lee., 2022) by following the message of the short video to digitally detox from social media. As Scheppe et al. (2025) found, practising digital detox helps students regain control and improve their university studies. Therefore, by watching a short video titled Unplugged: A Journey Back to Life in this study, university students can gain motivation to explore their perspectives on digital detox from social media and focus on their studies.

Methodology

Research Design
To investigate research concerns, this study employed the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), which considers people's lived experiences. The reason for choosing (IPA) is that it aims to recognise people's experience of a particular phenomenon, such as digital overload, emotional detachment, and social media detox (Li, Wu, & Wong, 2025). By asking participants to watch the short video entitled Unplugged: A Journey Back to Life, the video itself consists of life experiences related to the participants' real-life experiences. Frechette, Bitzas, Aubry and Kilpatrick (2020) explained that the interpretation of meaning from individuals' lived experiences is the primary result of phenomenology. Therefore, it is easy to capture participants' subjective insights by focusing on personal narratives related to the video Unplugged: A Journey Back to Life.

This study employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with five university students as the audience. They were interviewed after viewing the short video titled "Unplugged: A Journey Back to Life." Semi-structured interviews were chosen to ensure consistency and comparability while reducing bias (Bryman, 2016). It also helps the researcher to obtain in-depth information (Mashuri, Sarib, Alhabsyi, Syam & Ruslin 2022). Participants aged 18-25 were selected through simple random sampling. This type of sampling ensures that everyone has an equal opportunity to be selected, without bias (Khalid, 2024). It is an effective method of ensuring that every member of the population has a chance of being selected (Khalid, 2024). Thus, every university student has an equal chance of being selected for this study. Choosing university students or young participants in this research is because they have the highest percentage of problems where they cannot detoxing from social media (Balqis, 2025; Karapinar et al., 2024; Nguyen, 2022). They use social media daily. Data were collected with these participants after they watched the short video. Therefore, the interview questions were more focused on understanding the video's message, including emotional responses, behavioural intentions toward detox, and feedback on the narrative and visuals.

Data Analysis

Data from the interviews were then analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is well-suited to this study, as it is highly flexible. It is one of the most widely utilised methods for analysing qualitative data, offering a structured yet flexible framework for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within datasets (Ahmed et al., 2025). Data were analysed within the six steps, that is firstly, the researcher needs to familiarize with the data set by reading it, secondly, generate the initial codes, thirdly, searching for themes, fourthly, review the potential themes, fifthly, defining and naming the themes and lastly, writing up the report (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Based on this step of analysis, three themes emerged from this study.

Theme 1: Emotional Resonance

Participants expressed a deep emotional bond with the main character, especially regarding feelings of emotional alienation and technology overload. As stated by Minh, Thi, Linh, Ngoc, Huong (2021), the young people are likely to watch and share the video that they love and get emotional. They can also relate the digital overload from simultaneously receiving information across multiple sources within the same device, especially the short video algorithmic recommendation (Liu, Li, Wang, Lan, Gou 2025). The way participants connected with the narrative shaped how they saw themselves in the story. Their reactions show that emotional engagement is at the heart of how they process digital well-being messages.

"*From watching the video, I saw myself in the character. I get her completely. With so much entertainment and information out there, pulling away takes real motivation.*" (Participant 1)

"*I can understand her emotions, as I have experience exactly like her in the situation, for so many times, it's tough to leave social media. But I agree if not controlling ourselves, it may lead us to fall sick.*"

(Participant 3)

These views from participants supported by EVT theory which it emphasised that students' knowledge and familiarity with the story can affect their expectancy beliefs of success in performing task in the university (Granic et al., 2020; Ka et al., 2023). According the EVT theory, a person who believes that a system can help them improve their performance in studying, also will help them to develop expectancy of self-capabilities to success (Ye et al., 2022).

Theme 2: Visual Symbolism

For visual symbolism theme shows that participants sighted the shift from cold to warm colours in the short video. They read them as a sign of the character's psychological recovery. They are found to interpret the visual symbols, such as pointing on the design choices to interpret them as the emotion and transformation. Gorea (2021) emphasised that visual is the first attraction to the university students to watch short video narrative. It shapes young people views on social media connection every day. This can be viewed from the participants' viewpoint.

"*The colour tones, like a cold colour, [shows] as she was numb, like no way out. Then, the transition happened, with the warm colours are coming in the visual ... as she is getting better... and was trying to connect with herself again.*"

(Participant 2)

"*The combination colour of blue and grey scenes, it shows like tiredness, and loneliness then, [the transition happened] the warm colours are coming as it shows that there is a hope. [The visual symbol is showing] that the character is in the recovery mood.*

(Participant 3)

"*the girl was moving from a darker situation to something more cheerful. The change from cool colour to warm orange really showed that the girl is recovering.*"

(Participant 4)

Based on the participants' views, it is clearly shows that they are able to interpret the colour transitions in digital video as message to digital detox themselves from social media. Consistent with Lyu (2025) argument that colour functions as an sentimental and communicative signal, participants construed the change from cool to warm tones as representative of psychological recovery. Therefore, it can be seen as the participants can interpret accurately on the message of the short video as the colours transition in the video attract the attention and evoke emotional response. This type of visual narrative can push students toward reflecting on a digital detox.

Theme 3: Personal Expectation at Cost
Participants have different views related to the digital detox in short video narrative. There is one participant wanted to start a digital detox, another participant gives its view on connection to the theories they learned, and a third person preferred a moderate approach to start digital detox period. These changes of views show that short video narrative of Unplugged: A Journey Back to Life, can give the expectation, according to each participant acceptance and situation.

"*…this video, making me realised that I've become so dependent on my phone. I can't even imagine my life without phone. But yeah, I think I have to take a step back sometimes*."

(Participant 5)

"*I was thinking to take a short detox, like turning off notifications and limiting myself from social media.*" (Participant 1)

"*…digital detox is not realistic for me, but I want to control and limit myself from watching short videos in social media. This is a good first step, especially for university students who need to focus on their study.*" (Participant 2)

Personal expectation at cost can be defined as student's expectation of performing a task while considering the effort that they need to put. This is consistent with Whitaker et al. (2018), where they emphasised that a person values an activity can also be related to the choices made by students to digital detox themselves from social media content (Karapinar et al., 2024; Whitaker et al., 2018). From the above viewpoints shows that it strongly linked to the element of expectancy in EVT theory, where students can pick to participate in digital detox based on their level of cost. This is in line with Whitaker et al.(2018), arguments that EVT theory highlights different students will have different level of capabilities to believe they can perform the task successfully. Thus, it can be understood that the element of cost is more on the students 'expectancy of capability that they need to put on to digital detox themselves from social media.

Conclusion
Digital detox is very important for university students, and it is positively influenced by symbolic media narratives, emotional exhaustion, and digital overload. The visual narrative helps university students to mirror on their digital behaviours. As such, improving emotional engagement, message clarity and motivation will help them to practices digital detox. The

psychological benefits of digital detox as an involvement have been supported, however, motivation differs significantly based on personal expectations, value and cost.

Thus, Expectancy-Value Theory grants a robust theoretical framework for understanding students' digital detox behaviour. Short video narrative enhances digital self-awareness and induce university students to improve better digital behaviour by integrating emotional significance, and symbolic visual cues, that can leads to motivational contexts (Shang et al., 2023). The study extends EVT's elements particularly related to emotional resonance, and visual symbolism which can be known as the expectation of achievement value. Meanwhile, the personal expectation at cost is more on positioning them within the cost value of digital detox. Findings suggest that students only have expectation of achievement value if they found the digital detox content align with their emotional resonance and personal well-being through visual symbolism. Besides that, students also evaluate digital detox based on Personal Expectation at Cost for example, they want to put effort to enhance their academic productivity by disconnecting from social media. Hence, this study theoretically expands EVT beyond instrumental outcomes to include holistic student well-being through narrative media of digital detox.

This study completes that the short video narrative titled Unplugged: A Journey Back to Life successfully links to the emotional and psychological effects of social media excessive usage while encouraging the university students to reflect on digital detox. The video story, proved by EVT, where reflection on digital behaviour can serve as a media-based involvement for digital well-being. The findings suggest that digital detox is the approach to assists emotional and psychological behaviour of university students in their daily productivity. Therefore, based on this study findings, universities can create a digital wellness program that may integrate narrative media. Hence, future research should explore the longitudinal digital detox behaviour, include diverse demographic groups, and contain interactive storytelling elements. The limitation of this study includes the reliance on publicly available YouTube detox narratives, which may not represent all user experiences. Future research should incorporate longitudinal observations, diaries, and diverse demographic samples.

Acknowledgement

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