



# PRIMARY RESEARCH REPORT ON HABIT TRACKING OF POST SECONDARY STUDENTS

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# Executive Summary

## Understanding Habit Formation and Tracking Among post-secondary Students

A Study of Students Ages 20-29 who want to form or track habits



How do students track existing habits?



How do students form new habits?



Why do students track their habits?

## Research Methodology


### Approach

- Screening Survey
- Semi-structured Interviews

### Participants

- Post-secondary students aged 20–29
- Varying levels of habit-tracking experience

### Recruitment

- Social media platforms  

- In-person outreach

## Research Process

Screening Survey



Consent Form



Primary Research:  
Interview  
(recorded)

## Key preliminary findings

### **Usage and Abandonment Patterns**

- Users struggle to maintain consistent habit tracking
- Specialized features drive app selection
- Abandon tools when academic/professional demands increase
- Drop tracking if it feels tedious or obligatory

### **Motivation Factors**

- Prefer external motivation over intrinsic motivation
- Respond positively to digital rewards and immediate feedback
- Require persistent reminders or external triggers to stay consistent

### **Feature Desires**

- Greater customization options
- Alignment with personal preferences and lifestyle
- Desire for accountability partners
- Preference for automation and integrated platforms

# Research Methodology

## Secondary Research Summary

Previous findings highlighted that:

- Recovery from missed habits greatly affects whether students continue using a tool
- Different formats (apps, games, journals) appeal to different preferences
- Tools requiring too much time investment are often abandoned
- Students want both guidance and personalization
- Linking behaviors with cues strengthens habit formation
- Simplicity and ease of use increase consistency
- Positive reinforcement (progress visuals, encouragement) sustains use longer
- Flexibility is critical—rigid systems fail during exams or irregular schedules

## Research goals and Questions

- Identify when students typically abandon habit-tracking tools
- Identify which goals students track
- Understand emotional responses to missed habits

## Rationale for interview methods

Google Form survey used for initial screening. This allows for quick and easy responses from a variety of participants and requires low resource allocation.

It was then follow by a semi-structured interview which provided deeper insights into behaviors, motivations, and needs. The open-ended nature of interviews allows us to capture more rich data.

## Participant inclusion criteria and recruitment approach

Inclusion Criteria:

- Students aged 20–29
- Different degrees and backgrounds
- Mixed experience levels with habit tracking

Recruitment:

- Social media (Discord, WhatsApp, Instagram, WeChat)
- In-person outreach through networks

## Ethical considerations

- Privacy: All personal data was anonymized and stored securely
- Clear consent: Students understood how their data would be used
- Inclusive scheduling: Flexible scheduling accommodated student availability

# Interview protocol overview

## Introduction

This interview aims to understand how post-secondary students like yourself manage habits. There are no right or wrong answers.

Before we start, we received your consent form and just want to review some quick reminders.

- Taking part in this interview is completely voluntary. You may stop at any time for any reason.
- Everything shared today will remain confidential and to be used for research purposes only.
- With your permission, I would like to record an audio recording of this interview, so I don't miss anything. This recording will not be shared with anyone but my professor and TA. An anonymized transcript will be shared with my group mates.
- Please feel free to ask question at any point during the interview.
- If you are not comfortable answering any questions that come up during the interview, then you may abstain from answering.
- This interview will take approximately 10 minutes.

Do you have any questions before we start?

## Interview Questions

- What's your experience been like with habit tracking?
- What motivates you to create a habit?
- In the past, what have you done to establish a new habit?
- What motivates you to track your habits?
  - What makes you decide if a habit needs tracking or changing?

- What factors influence whether you continue or abandon habit tracking?
- What specific methods do you use to track your habits?
  - What about these tracking methods do you find most helpful?
- How has your approach to habit tracking changed during your time at university?
- In what ways has habit tracking been useful to you?
- Which supports might help you to improve your habit tracking?
- Do you have any questions for me about this research?

### Closing

That's everything that I have planned for today. Thank you for your time and sharing your thoughts and experiences with me. Your insights will be valuable in helping us understand how university students approach habit formation and tracking.

After this interview, your input will be anonymized and combined with the input from other interviews. Your individual responses will remain confidential.

Once again, thank you for coming in today. We really appreciate your help.

# Research Execution

## Participant Recruitment

The participant recruitment process began with distributing a **secure Google form that contained our screening survey**. The Google form link (<https://forms.gle/Na2PER2kz8QjA773A>) was **shared in servers (private group chats for multiple people) on the social media platform Discord**. Those servers consisted of users where the predominant ages are between 20-30 years old.

Google form was used for the screening survey to ensure that all responses remained confidential, and viewers could only access screening questions through the form link. Responses are exclusively accessible to research team members.

The screenshot shows a Google Form with several sections. Blue callout boxes with arrows point to specific questions, indicating the research team's interests:

- Contact Information:** Points to the "Email \*" field.
- Looking for participants ranged 20-29:** Points to the "How old are you? \*" question, specifically highlighting the "20-25" and "25-30" age ranges.
- Looking for anyone that identifies as a student:** Points to the "What is your occupation? (Select all that apply) \*" question, specifically highlighting the "Full time student" and "Part time student" options.
- Seeing how candidates define a habit helps interviewer understand candidate responses more during interview:** Points to the "How do you define a habit? (check all that apply) \*" question.
- We would prefer to screen for those that also track goals but those that don't could also be interviewed:** Points to the "Do you track your progress when working towards a goal? \*" question.
- Looking for participants that track habits currently:** Points to the "Do you track any habits? \*" question, specifically highlighting the "Yes" option.



What is your primary motivation for tracking habits? (select all that apply) \*

- ☒ Academic improvement
- ☒ Health/Fitness goals
- ☒ Personal development
- ☐ Reducing anxiety/stress
- ☒ Time management
- ☐ I don't track habits
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Are you willing to discuss your personal habits and routines for research purposes? \*

☒ Yes

☐ No

This recruitment method yielded **six survey responses**, of which only two respondents qualified as interview candidates, representing a **33% success rate**. The qualification criteria included active habit tracking behaviors, status as a full-time or part-time post-secondary student and alignment with our target age demographic.

For the qualified candidates, I contacted them through Discord's private messaging system. Given standard research protocol, it would have been better to communicate through email using the email address provided in the survey to maintain anonymity and establish a more formal communication channel during the initial communication phase.

## Conducting Interviews

After establishing that candidate was willing to participate in an interview, consent forms were individually sent to both participants. After receiving consent forms [Research Materials Appendix – Consent Forms], I scheduled individual interview sessions with each participant. The interviews were conducted on the outdoor patio of my apartment building, which **deviates** from the original plan for indoor interviews. This location change was due to unexpected presence of visitors in my apartment on the scheduled interview day, which would have compromised the confidentiality promised to the participants.

An unforeseen **challenge** emerged from the selected interview location as I had failed to account for the significant urban noise pollution of downtown Toronto. Throughout both interview sessions, we experienced constant disruptions from traffic sounds, car horns, and nearby construction activity. These environmental sounds not only affected the audio quality of the interview recordings but also periodically interrupted the participants' thought processes and responses. This challenge **highlights the importance of thoroughly vetting interview locations** for potential sensory disruptions prior to scheduling sessions with participants.

## Interview Summaries

### Interview 1 – Chrysanthemum

28-year-old post-secondary student (10 min)

#### Key insights:

- Utilizes Finch, a self-care app with habit tracking functionality that includes reminders and rewards through digital pet care
- Primarily tracks health and wellbeing habits (hydration, hygiene, skincare, hobbies)
- Struggles with consistent physical self-care, requiring external motivation
- Responds positively to gamification elements that provide immediate dopamine rewards
- Developed creative habit alternatives (e.g., daily dancing instead of traditional exercise)
- Abandons habit tracking when it feels obligatory or when academic/professional demands increase
- Perceives insufficient consequences for missed habit tracking as a barrier to consistency

#### Notable Quotes:

- “I often find that if I constantly hear alarms going off for something, I'll just turn them off”
- “When I start forming a habit, it's very difficult to maintain it”
- “I abandon habit tracking when they start to feel like obligations”
- “There are no major consequences [to skipping habits] so I don't feel any detriment to me to not do them”

#### Pain point and emerging patterns:

- Difficulty with maintaining consistency of habit tracking and maintenance
- Strong preference for external reward systems and gamification
- Desires more customizable tracking methods aligned with personal preferences

#### Confounders and Contextual factors:

- Outdoor interview setting introduced multiple distractions and environmental noise disruptions affected interview focus
- Possible social desirability bias evidenced by frequent use of phrases like "should be doing"
- Participant displayed notable nervousness about being recorded

## Interview 2 – Lavender

23- year-old post-secondary student (7.5 min)

### Key insights:

- Uses myTherapy app for medication management and lifestyle tracking, which provides daily motivation, medication reminders, and medical information storage
- Primarily tracks medication compliance and academic assessment deadlines
- Heavily relies on digital reminder systems due to self-described memory challenges
- Discontinues tracking when habits become intuitive, scheduling conflicts arise, or perceived benefit diminishes
- Shows sustained motivation when tracking connects to meaningful long-term goals
- Requires multiple, persistent reminders due to occasionally dismissing initial notifications
- Academic demands and stress significantly impact habit maintenance, particularly medication adherence and exercise routines
- Reports improved personal health maintenance through consistent habit tracking

### Notable quotes

- “I know that if I can't remember independently on my own, that I'll rely on other tools to remind me to do it”
- “I'll need consistent reminder and independent motivation that it's something I should do.”
- “[Habit tracking] has helped me to keep tabs on myself”

- “I wish I could just have all of [my tracking apps] seamless in one final system”

#### Pain point and emerging patterns:

- Desires greater customization options within tracking applications
- Maintains habits only when perceived as necessary or obligatory
- Prefers consolidated tracking solutions rather than using multiple specialized apps

#### Confounders and Contextual factors:

- Outdoor interview setting introduced multiple distractions and environmental noise disruptions affected interview focus
- Medication consumption appears frequently in interview as a tracked habit, possibly reflecting participants' personal health circumstances

## References

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