

**What role do small repeated behavioural cues play in forming long term habits?**

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## **Abstract**

Habits are actions that we do repeatedly over time, involuntarily. Awareness of our habits can help distinguish between those that align with our goals and those that do not. Habits significantly influence our lives, leading to both positive and negative outcomes. Through repetition and the development of habits, the body creates patterns that help us navigate the world. However, in today's fast-paced, digitally-driven society, attention spans are shrinking, making it more difficult to establish long-lasting habits. Despite these challenges, social media trends are helping people find comfort and connection in shared routines, while theories like Bourdieu's concept of habitus show how deeply our habits are intertwined with our identities. By understanding the relationship between behaviour, repetition, and habit formation, we can better navigate the complexities of the current everyday life and work towards building positive, sustainable routines. Neuroscience has asked how conscious and goal-directed actions are converted into a habit. Neuroscientists also study how habits form and how we can change them. They have found that positive habits can be developed through conscious effort, while negative habits can be broken with the right strategies. Research by Yin and Knowlton in 2006 highlights the brain's role in this process, showing that understanding how our brains work can help us create better habits and eliminate the bad ones. In the article, the formation of habits is explored from both a scientific viewpoint and a personal experience perspective. This means that while there are facts and studies about how habits work, personal stories and experiences also play a significant role in understanding them.

## Literature Review:

Duhigg's (2012) insights into the role of cues in habit formation offer a valuable lens for understanding the habits of younger generations. This interplay between environment and behaviour underscores the critical role of external cues in shaping routines, fostering both individual well-being and broader cultural trends. By examining the intersection of habit psychology, cultural practices, and the everyday organization of objects, we gain a deeper understanding of how the younger generation uses visibility to initiate and sustain meaningful practices. This framework not only enriches discussions on habit formation but also offers practical applications for designing spaces and systems that promote positive behavioural patterns.

*My research builds on insights from the Microsoft Canada (2015) report, Attention Spans: Consumer Insights*, which highlights the decline in attention spans, particularly to look at what happens in the younger generation. This reduced ability to focus, attributed to the prevalence of digital distractions and fast-paced content consumption, presents significant challenges in forming sustained habits.

The essay argues that amidst this backdrop, repetition becomes crucial in creating and solidifying routines. Repetition compensates for the fleeting focus of younger individuals and reinforces behavioural patterns through consistent practice. By engaging with repeated actions, such as using visible cues like books or yoga mats, the younger generation can anchor their routines despite their tendency to shift attention quickly. This process emphasizes the importance of structured repetition in counteracting shorter attention spans and fostering habits that endure over time.

*John Dewey's seminal work, Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (1922), provides a foundational framework for understanding habits as inherently social and cultural constructs. Dewey emphasizes that human behavior is deeply intertwined with the environment, shaped by the norms, values, and practices of the society in which individuals live. His perspective highlights that habits are not merely personal or isolated phenomena but arise from continuous interaction with one's surroundings, influenced by both collective traditions and individual interpretations. Drawing from Dewey's insights, this essay situates its argument within the broader understanding of habit as a reflection of social and cultural dynamics. Dewey's notion that habits emerge through participation in shared practices aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which describes how individuals internalize societal structures and reproduce them through embodied behaviours. *Habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977) underscores the idea that habits are shaped by how we perceive and accept the world around us, reflecting a blend of personal agency and cultural conditioning. For instance, visible cues like a yoga mat or a prominently placed book are not just tools for individual habit formation but also cultural symbols, representing values such as wellness, productivity, or intellectual engagement.

## **Introduction**

Research indicates several effective strategies for breaking negative habits and cultivating more positive ones. First, lowering your stress levels can significantly help, as many negative habits, like smoking, overeating, and oversleeping, often develop in response to stressful situations. Simple stress-reduction techniques, such as going for a walk or practicing yogic breathing and mindfulness exercises, can be beneficial. One of the key processes involved in this is repetition. Repetition allows us to build habits, as each repeated action reinforces a rhythm within our bodies. Over time, this

rhythm leads to the formation of cycles in our daily lives. Every time a behaviour is repeated, it contributes to the development of these patterns, creating a kind of habit loop. The act of repeating something becomes not just mechanical, but also rewarding. The satisfaction gained from completing a familiar action encourages the body to continue this habit, creating a positive feedback loop that strengthens it over time. Habit theory with its contributions from various psychologists like John Dewey (1922), Charles Duhigg (2012) etc.. speaks of the repetition of actions in the body. As per the theory, for the habits to be formed, there is a cue that initiates the actions, after which there is a routine and a reward after the performance of the habit. Although these habits are psychological, the psychological is definitely influenced by the cultural and the social- forming one's personal actions and routines. Eventually, these for certain define one's identity which can be molded with conscious efforts. The concept of "habitus," as described by Pierre Bourdieu (1972), helps explain how deeply ingrained habits are part of our body and identity. Habitus refers to the collection of habits, skills, and dispositions that shape how we see the world and act in it. This internalized framework influences how we interact with others and navigate the social world. From childhood, the habits we develop shape our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Tiny habits—such as how we walk, talk, or even fidget—start as simple actions but evolve into complex systems that guide our behaviour. These habits become so deeply embedded in our bodies that they often operate on a subconscious level.

### **Understanding Behavioural Cues and Habit formation in the digital age**

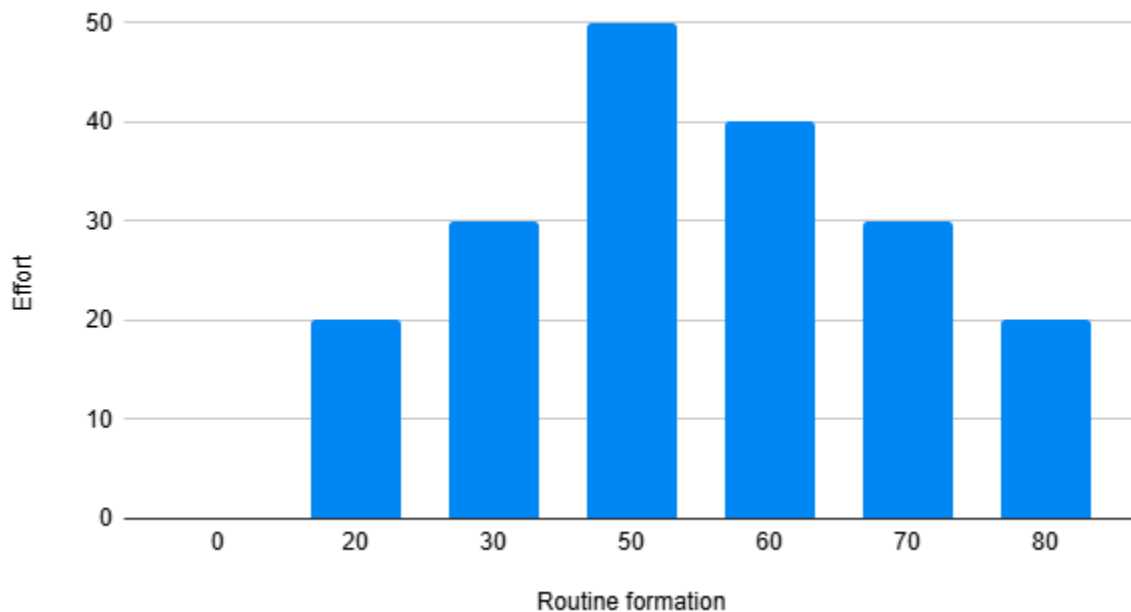
Becoming aware of your negative habits is crucial. Since these habits often operate automatically, we may not recognize them or the experiences associated with them. Mindfulness can help in this regard, making it easier to break these habits. The process of habit formation has become more complex in

today's fast-paced world. One major challenge is the reduction in human attention span, which has been steadily decreasing over the years. As our focus diminishes, it becomes more difficult to establish long-lasting habits that require sustained attention and effort. According to a 2015 study by Microsoft, human attention spans have dropped significantly from 12 seconds to just 8 seconds between the years 2000 and 2015. This decrease is particularly noticeable among teenagers, who have grown up in an era dominated by technology, social media, and constant digital stimulation. The rapid pace of scrolling through online feeds, for example, provides quick gratification, but it also discourages the body from engaging in more mindful, deliberate actions. As a result, individuals may fail to notice important bodily cues, such as physical discomfort or the need for rest. Repeating actions necessary to form new habits becomes more challenging when the body's attention is constantly divided or distracted. This challenge is compounded by the stress and anxiety that many young people experience today, which further disrupts the body's ability to focus and establish healthy routines.

Instant gratification has become an integral aspect of the digital age, particularly through platforms like social media, where actions such as receiving 'likes' or 'shares' provide immediate validation. This rapid, fleeting reward creates a stark contrast to the slower, more deliberate process of habit formation, which often involves consistent effort, repetition, and delayed satisfaction. The challenge then arises: why would individuals, especially younger generations, invest in long-term bodily habits through cues and repetitions when they can experience instantaneous feedback and affirmation in the digital realm? The process-oriented approach to habit formation is inherently more exhausting, requiring daily reaffirmation, motivation, and small rewards to keep the mind engaged. This stands in direct contrast to the product-focused mindset prevalent in digital spaces, where the focus is often on the outcome, such as receiving likes, views, or shares, rather than the effort or

process it takes to reach a goal. What this bifurcation between product and process ultimately highlights is the friction between two fundamentally different approaches to reward systems. In a product-centric world, success is immediately visible, often measured by tangible markers of progress such as likes or shares, which offer instant gratification. On the other hand, process-centric habits, such as those involved in bodily routines or skill development, rely on repetition, consistent action and delayed gratification, which may not be immediately visible or measurable. The absence of instant validation in this process-oriented approach makes the daily repetition necessary for habit formation seem burdensome, often discouraging people from committing to these long-term investments in their well-being or personal development. This tension between the immediate rewards of digital platforms and the slow, often exhausting process of forming meaningful habits is particularly challenging for younger generations, who have grown accustomed to quick cycles of feedback and reward. Habits rooted in external cues and repetition can be undermined by the constant bombardment of quick satisfaction from social media, highlighting the growing need for strategies to integrate process-based rewards into habit formation. These strategies might include creating environments that encourage gradual reinforcement or introducing small but frequent rewards that validate the effort involved, slowly shifting the focus from the product to the process of achieving personal growth over time. Hence the same as below highlights that one needs lesser effort eventually as the habit takes shape in our daily lives and bodies. It is the initial push or frequency that needs to be higher. As we go towards the right hand side of the graph, one sees that the routine formation eventually takes form and we need lesser efforts for the same.

### Effort vs. Routine formation



*Figure A: Effort Vs Routine Formation based on personal analysis*

However a study like "The Instagram Effect: Social Media Photography and Individual Memory" by Wagner, Aguirre & Dirik (2021) shows how the development of intentional social media practices affect attention and memory formation positively. The study that was conducted on 157 participants over the period of 6 months showed that those who maintained a consistent posting schedule developed better observational capacity, and also showed increased pattern recognition ability and attention span. The participants who shared posts about 3 to 4 times a week, showed a 23% improvement on visual pattern recognition tests, increased attention span during visual search tasks, and a better recall of environment details. These participants also reported an increased engagement with their environment as they spent more time observing before taking photos, which was encouraged by an increase in recognition and interaction with their posts. In this case, an



increased visibility and validation led to a shift from a mere instant-gratification relationship to a process-based approach to social media.

Even though this study highlights positive impact on habit formation and development of social identity on social media, these were specifically tied to – intentional and planned posing rituals and not mindless scrolling, also highlighting the difference between content creation rather than passive consumption, the restriction of posting to 3 to 4 times per week instead of multiple times in a day, and that the posts were required active engagement with their environment. By implementing the strategies of lowering stress, increasing awareness, and avoiding triggers; you can effectively break negative habits and foster more positive behaviors. Robert Kanaat, writing as R. L. Adams (Adams, 2013), emphasizes five habits for enhancing health, finances, career, and psychological well-being. One key health habit is walking 10,000 steps daily, which supports other positive behaviours like exercise. For financial improvement, he advocates expense journaling, a practice exemplified by John D. Rockefeller, who attributed his financial success to tracking his spending and saving habits instilled by his mother.

The physical presence of words and tasks written in bold letters serves as a visual “shout” to the practitioner, urging them to complete what they have set out to do. The act of writing tasks on a visible surface creates a tangible connection between the individual and their responsibilities, making the tasks harder to ignore. This principle of visibility extends beyond whiteboards. Sticky notes in various colors, strategically placed in high-traffic areas like desks or mirrors, serve as eye-catching cues. These small but bright reminders break through the monotony of the environment, grabbing attention and reinforcing the need to act. Similarly, daily planners and journals are tools designed to externalize tasks, giving them a physical form that occupies space and demands recognition. Social

media platforms like Instagram have amplified this trend by creating a marketplace for tools aimed at combating procrastination. Advertisements for daily planners, app-based scheduling tools, and beautifully designed planner diaries become particularly prominent around the New Year, capitalizing on people's resolutions to be more organized and productive. These tools are often marketed as stylish, aspirational products, appealing to younger audiences who seek to balance their chaotic lives. This commercialization of productivity reflects the broader cultural shift towards monetizing solutions to procrastination, which has become a defining challenge of the digital age.

### **Definition of behavioural cues in psychology and the current placement post-pandemic**

Understanding behavioural cues is crucial in the study of psychology, particularly when examining their role in habit formation. These cues serve as triggers that activate specific responses. But our actions are also not just done, but influenced strongly by our social and cultural environment and the triggers in our surroundings. For example, behavioural cues like sticky notes or yoga mats like mentioned in the passages above, lead one to question the accessibility and social placement of the individual in order to create these visibilities around.

The Covid-29 pandemic marked a steep fall in the overall mental well-being of individuals. In just April to June 2020, CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) declared that 40.9% of adults globally reported at least one adverse mental health condition, where symptoms of anxiety increased approximately threefold (from 8.1% to 25.5%) in comparison to 2019, while depression symptoms increased fourfold (from 6.5% to 24.3%). At the same time, the Lancet study showed that young adults (18-34) showed the highest increase in anxiety symptoms at 65%.

Majority of these symptoms were also a result of a significant break in normalcy that was tied to regular routines. With schools and workplaces moving to virtual formats, many individuals no longer receive the external prompts that helped them stay on track. Without these external structures in place, it becomes more difficult to establish new habits or maintain old ones. On the other hand, a new trend has emerged in which people turn to social media for inspiration, sharing their routines and self-care practices online. Platforms like Instagram are filled with posts about skincare regimens, hair care routines, sleep habits, and more. These social media trends not only highlight the importance of routines but also create a sense of comfort and belonging. Celebrities, influencers, and everyday users share their personalized routines, which have become a form of social currency. People are increasingly using these shared habits as a way to feel connected to others, while also developing their own sense of identity.

Kanaat (Adams, 2013) highlights active goal setting, which involves regularly tracking progress on goals, contrasting with passive goal setting, where long-term goals are often forgotten. In today's fast-paced world, where young people face constant distractions and struggles with procrastination, creating visibility for objects in everyday spaces can be a powerful tool for habit formation and task completion. The visibility of such objects acts as a persistent reminder, helping individuals overcome the inertia associated with procrastination and ensuring that tasks remain at the forefront of their attention. One common example of this practice is the use of a whiteboard in a student's personal study space. A whiteboard, often positioned prominently on a wall, provides a plain but effective surface for listing tasks or goals.

**Types of Cues: Importance of visibility, auditory and contextual cues in habit formation**

William James (1890), an American philosopher, defined habits as actions repeated in similar circumstances until they become ingrained in our brain circuitry, automatically triggered by strong cues. B.F. Skinner (1953), a Behaviourist built on this through studies with pigeons, demonstrating that habits form through a cycle of stimulus, behavior, and reward. His experiments showed that pigeons would repeatedly press a button for food, indicating that behaviors associated with rewards can become habits, even without the reward. Other theories sought to move beyond just observable behavior.

These cues act like reminders that tell us to do something. When we keep responding to these cues, they help make the behaviour a habit. So, even little reminders can lead to big changes over time, making it easier to stick to good habits and reach our goals. The visibility of tasks plays a central role in this process. When tasks occupy physical or digital space in an obvious, persistent manner, they act as a constant cue to action. For example, seeing a colorful sticky note on a laptop screen or a notification from a planner app interrupts the usual flow of procrastination, gently nudging individuals toward productivity. Even in the virtual realm of social media, where vertical scrolling dominates daily interactions, reminders of procrastination and productivity creep in. Posts showcasing productivity tools or organized planners act as subtle cues, reminding users of the tasks they've been putting off or inspiring them to adopt similar strategies to combat delays. This visibility-based approach addresses one of the most significant hurdles faced by young people today: the tendency to procrastinate in environments overloaded with distractions. By creating cues through physical objects or digital reminders, individuals can mitigate these challenges, making it easier to form habits, stay organized, and maintain focus amidst the noise of the current living scenarios. Similarly, auditory triggers like an alarm or a specific song can easily take one to an atmosphere for us to initiate the habit. Contextual Cues might include the person needing to go to a specific location

to write or work. Cafes are nowadays seen as a popular place for people to go work/read. The visibility of the same is seen through charging points, book corners and reading spaces incorporated within eateries or cafes in metropolitan cities.

CueType	Examples	Impact On Habit Formation	Reliability Source
Visual	Posters, reminders, habit trackers	Enhances memory and encourages action	Journal of Behavioral Medicine (2022)
Auditory	Alarm clocks, motivational podcasts, music	Triggers responses through associative learning	Psychology of Music (2023)
Contextual	Location-based cues, social environments	Influences behavior based on situational factors	Behavioral Psychology Review (2023)

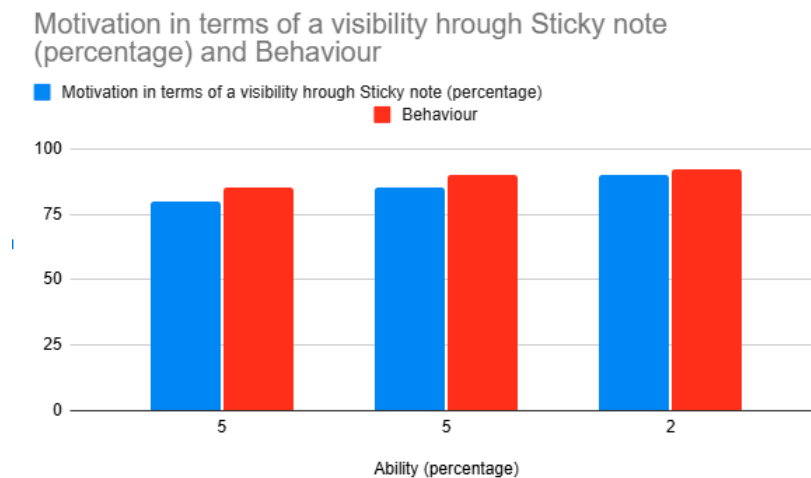
*Figure B : Types of Behavioral Cues and Their Impact on Habit Formation*

### **The relationship between small cues and habit formation**

Imagine a sticky note on a student's desk that says, "*Complete the assignment.*" This small, visible cue plays a significant role in bridging the gap between intention and action, especially when motivation fluctuates. The sticky note serves as a catalyst by reducing the cognitive load associated with remembering or prioritizing the task. Instead of relying solely on internal motivation, the physical presence of the sticky note ensures the assignment stays visible and mentally accessible, lowering the barrier to starting the task. Over time, the sticky note reinforces behavior by acting as a

consistent trigger. Each time the student sees the note, it gently nudges them toward completing the task without demanding significant mental effort. This low-effort action is essential in the formation of habits, as it allows the behavior to become routine even on days when motivation is not at its peak. Additionally, the satisfaction of checking off the task or discarding the sticky note after completing the assignment provides a small but meaningful reward, further encouraging repetition. The above example is also inspired by the work of B.J.Fogg (2019)- ‘Tiny Habits: The Small Changes That Change Everything’.

Figure C: Motivation and Ability through Cues



By keeping the assignment front and center, the sticky note effectively moves the student into the habit zone. It transforms a potentially overwhelming task into a manageable one, ensuring that the action of working on the assignment becomes a consistent part of their routine. Over time, this simple practice not only helps in completing tasks but also builds a foundation for long-term productive habits.

Visibility plays a crucial role in shaping bodily patterns and actions, acting as a cue to initiate specific behaviors. The arrangement of everyday spaces to highlight certain objects such as the book

one intends to read or the yoga mat for daily practice creates an environment that subtly triggers the body to engage with these activities. This phenomenon stems from the idea that visible and accessible objects serve as gentle reminders, seamlessly integrating desired habits into daily life. For instance, a book placed on the bed or prominently displayed on a side shelf not only encourages a student to read but also cultivates a sense of curiosity and engagement with knowledge. This spatial arrangement, often seen in households that value education, transforms the act of reading into an inviting and effortless practice. Beyond promoting learning, such setups can also be inherently relaxing, as they create a physical and mental incentive for the body to pause, unwind, and absorb information. The interaction with these objects becomes a moment of appreciation, reinforcing the person's connection to self-improvement and personal growth. Similarly, the culture of organizing spaces to support bodily actions has gained prominence in recent years. Consider the yoga mat: its mere presence, unrolled or leaning visibly against a wall, acts as a powerful nudge to practice yoga. This practice is not limited to homes but extends to broader cultural trends, where creating visibility for objects associated with health and wellness has become a norm. The visibility of such objects adds habits into the rhythm of daily life, transforming wellness activities from conscious decisions into automatic responses.

### **Psychology of Cue Recognition**

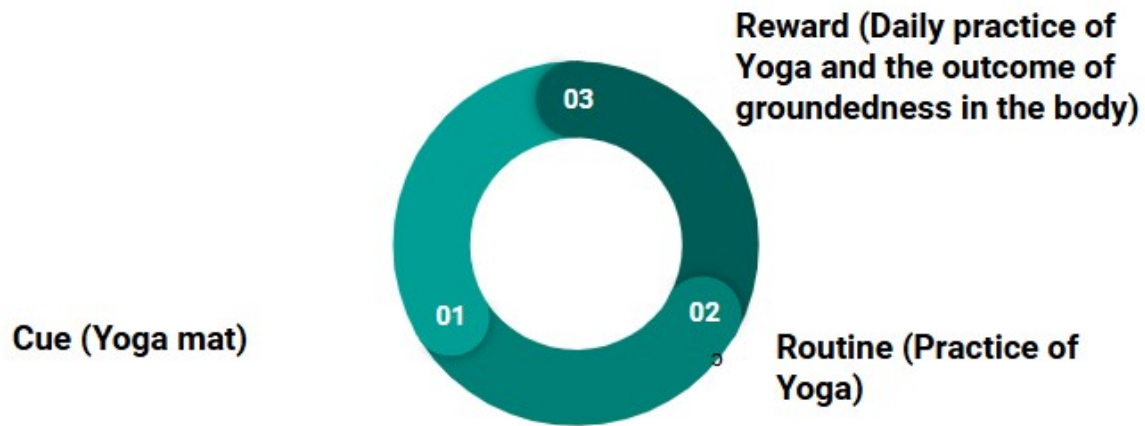
The arrangement and visibility of objects go beyond utility; they create a culture of intention, encouraging consistent actions while simultaneously making these actions feel effortless and inviting. Whether it's a thoughtfully arranged bookshelf, a prominently displayed yoga mat, or travel-friendly fitness gear, these everyday objects not only trigger physical habits but also foster a deeper connection to self-discipline and well-being. In this way, the thoughtful placement of objects

becomes a practice in itself, a practice that appreciates the interplay between the environment, the body, and the mind.

Over time, the act of practicing yoga can become a deeply ingrained habit, particularly when small cues, like the presence of a yoga mat, serve as constant reminders. Initially, starting a new yoga routine might feel like a significant effort, requiring both motivation and deliberate planning. However, as the frequency of the practice increases, the effort required to initiate and complete the activity decreases. For instance, keeping a yoga mat in a visible, easily accessible spot such as near the bed or in the living room acts as a gentle nudge to begin the practice. Each time the mat is unrolled, the brain starts to associate the sight and feel of the mat with the act of practicing yoga. This mental association reduces procrastination because the action feels familiar and requires less conscious decision-making. With repeated use, the habit of practicing yoga transitions from being an intentional task to an automatic part of the daily routine. The physical effort of unrolling the mat, setting up a space, and beginning the poses becomes less intimidating as it blends into a rhythm. Moreover, the rewarding experience of completing a yoga session whether it's the relaxation it brings or the sense of accomplishment reinforces the behavior, motivating consistency. As the habit solidifies, even on days when motivation might be low, the minimal effort required to begin (simply stepping onto the mat) ensures the practice continues. This process of reducing cognitive and physical barriers through repetition not only makes the habit sustainable but also helps overcome procrastination. What once felt like a challenge becomes a natural and effortless part of daily life, driven by the positive associations and reduced effort linked to the consistent use of the yoga mat.



## Habit Loop and Repetition



*Figure D: Habit Loop*

One way to understand this relationship is by viewing the body as a kind of machine. This machine is not static but is continuously forming patterns of movement and action, helping one to make sense of one's existence. One of the key processes involved in this is repetition. Repetition allows us to build habits, as each repeated action reinforces a rhythm within our bodies. Over time, this rhythm leads to the formation of cycles in our daily lives. Every time a behaviour is repeated, it contributes to the development of these patterns, creating a kind of habit loop. The act of repeating something becomes not just mechanical, but also rewarding. The satisfaction gained from completing a familiar action encourages the body to continue this habit, creating a positive feedback loop that strengthens it over time. Thus, repetition serves not only to engrain behaviours within an individual's routine but also to align them with their emotional responses and environmental contexts.

ID	Behavioral Cue	Repetition Frequency (days/week)	Habit Establishment Rate (%)
1	Daily Exercise	5	80
2	Reading	7	75
3	Meditation	4	65
4	Healthy Eating	6	70
5	Sleep Schedule Consistency	7	85

*Figure E: Habit Establishment on Personal Analysis*

## Habit, body, and the society

The same logic that ties the individual's mind and body to the environment on a micro scale can be extended to show how habits inform our place as individuals within a society with its moral, ethical, social and cultural reality. Let's take an example – I have a habit of flipping pens or erasers with my fingers. This is a small, seemingly insignificant action, but it helps me connect my body to my social and physical environment. Flipping these objects has become a habit that bridges the gap between my body and the world around me, whether I am at home, at school, or in social settings. It allows me to manage my nerves or pass the time when I am waiting for something. These simple actions also help me engage with others. When I am with friends, this habit becomes something we share, and it can even lead to moments of fun or competition. In this way, my habit of flipping pens is not just a personal quirk—it's something that enriches my social interactions and helps me feel

connected to those around me. This for me has transformed from a mere bodily cue for socialization into its entry into a habit ingraining in my body. The triggering loop for the same would be the body carrying an object like a pen here. The cue here is to take a pen. The pen acts like a bait here for the person to initiate the action of fidgeting.

As we grow older, these habits continue to evolve and play an important role in defining our identities. The way we act, react, and engage with the world is shaped by the accumulation of these habitual behaviors. Our habits help us navigate the social environments we find ourselves in, whether that involves interacting with others, engaging with objects, or simply existing within a cultural context, indicating an interdependent relationship between a repeated action, forming a habit and the ability to form social relationships.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to explore the important interplay between body, habits, repetition, and environment, while it brings to light the dynamic nature of habits. The traditional understanding of habits as fixed routines that makes a distinctly identifiable trait also leads one to have an understanding of cues through a traditional format. However, more studies and research towards digital cues are also relevant for formations of cues especially for the futuristic society.

Behavioural patterns that are encouraged by our immediate environment during our early development stages allow us to integrate these as habits into our everyday lives. But this does not mean that we are determined by these habits. The learned habits are our instinctual responses that were rewarded. Positive feedback like validation, increased social interaction, a sense of cultural belonging leads to an increased motivation to merge behavioral cues into repeated patterns of

behaviour, which will also help us in finding meaning, community and easier adaptability to changes around us.

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