Review Journal of Social Psychology & Social Works

http://socialworksreview.com

ISSN-E: 3006-4724 Volume: 3
ISSN-P: 3006-4716 Issue: 3 (July - September, 2025)

Preference for Routine in University Students: The Roles of Habits, Novelty-Seeking, and Personality Traits

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.71145/rjsp.v3i3.394

Abstract

This study examined psychological predictors of preference for routine among university students. The focus was on habitual behaviour, novelty-seeking temperament, and the Big Five personality traits. Seventy-three students completed an online survey including the Creature of Habit Scale (COHS), the Self-Report Habit Index (SRHI), the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), the International Personality Item Pool Big Five Markers (IPIP-BFM), and the IPIP Variety-Seeking Scale (IPIP-VS). Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and multiple regression were used to analyse the data. The results showed that stronger routine preference was associated with lower negative affect but was not linked to higher positive affect. Novelty-seeking temperament displayed a strong negative correlation with routine preference, supporting the idea that individuals who seek new experiences are less likely to value structured repetition. In the regression model, emotional stability emerged as the only significant predictor of routine preference. Conscientiousness, openness, and other Big Five traits were not significant when all predictors were considered together. These findings suggest that emotional regulation and temperament play a more central role in routine preference than orderliness or openness. The study contributes to understanding individual differences in daily behavioural style and highlights the importance of tailoring well-being interventions to personality profiles. For students with high novelty-seeking or low emotional stability, flexible rather than rigid routines may be most effective in supporting mental health.

Introduction

Some people thrive on routine and repetition in daily life, while others actively avoid it and seek out novelty. The phrase “creature of habit” captures how some individuals feel more comfortable with stable patterns, whereas others find them restrictive. Understanding why people differ in their preference for routine is important, because routines influence not only how people structure their days but also their psychological health. A strong preference for routine may offer stability and reduce stress, while a preference for spontaneity may promote flexibility but also increase unpredictability (Ersche et al., 2017).Habits are one way to understand the appeal of routine. Habits are automatic behaviours that are triggered by familiar cues and performed with little conscious thought (Verplanken & Orbell, 2003). They help conserve mental energy and reduce the effort of decision-making. This becomes particularly valuable in stressful or unpredictable

circumstances, when routines provide a sense of control (Wood & Rünger, 2016). Research has shown that structured behavioural patterns are associated with emotional stability and resilience. For example, people who maintain routines may experience less negative affect, and in some cases greater life satisfaction, because daily repetition reduces uncertainty and stabilises mood (Hou et al., 2020; Churchyard & Buchanan, 2017; Hou et al., 2021). Alongside habits, temperament also plays a role. One trait of interest is novelty-seeking, which reflects a natural tendency to pursue new experiences and avoid repetitive activities (Cloninger et al., 1993). People high in novelty-seeking often view routine as boring or restrictive, while those low in novelty-seeking may find it comforting. Empirical studies support this idea. Ersche and colleagues (2019) found that low novelty-seeking was linked to greater preference for routine on the Creature of Habit Scale (COHS). Similarly, Garcia et al. (2017) describe novelty-seeking as closely tied to impulsivity and openness to new experiences, both of which may reduce attraction to stable behaviour. Personality traits also shape how people respond to routine. The Big Five framework openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability (the opposite of neuroticism) provides a broad picture of these differences (Goldberg, 1992). Conscientiousness, which includes orderliness and self-discipline, is often linked with maintaining structured routines (McCrae & Costa, 1999; Jackson et al., 2010). Emotional stability may also support routine use, as emotionally stable individuals are less prone to mood swings and more capable of consistent behaviour (Lahey, 2009). In contrast, openness to experience, which reflects curiosity and creativity, may reduce preference for routine because it encourages variety and change (Roccas et al., 2002). Extraversion and agreeableness may be less directly related, with their influence depending more on social context (Wilt & Revelle, 2009). Despite these theoretical links, relatively few studies have examined habits, novelty-seeking, and the Big Five traits together as predictors of routine preference. Some research shows that routine-oriented behavioural styles are more closely associated with well-being than novelty-seeking styles, particularly for individuals high in conscientiousness and low in openness (Churchyard & Buchanan, 2017). However, it is still unclear which traits uniquely predict routine preference once all are considered in the same model. This gap is especially relevant for university students, who are in a transitional life stage and may differ in how they use routines to manage stress, maintain well-being, and balance academic and personal demands. The present study addresses this gap by testing three research questions. First, is behavioural routine linked with subjective well-being, specifically higher positive affect and lower negative affect? Second, is novelty-seeking temperament negatively related to preference for routine? Third, which of the Big Five traits significantly predict preference for routine when tested together? Based on prior research, it is expected that greater routine will be associated with lower negative affect that novelty-seeking will show a strong negative relationship with routine, and that conscientiousness and emotional stability will positively predict routine preference while openness will predict it negatively.

By examining these questions, the study aims to clarify the psychological predictors of routine preference in students. The findings have both theoretical and practical importance: they contribute to personality psychology by testing how temperament and traits jointly influence daily behaviour, and they also highlight how individual differences should be considered when promoting well-being through structured routines.

Literature Review

Routines and habits have been studied for many years in psychology because they show how people manage daily life. Habits are automatic behaviours that occur when specific cues are present, such as brushing teeth after waking up or exercising at a set time. These automatic

behaviours reduce mental effort and free cognitive resources for other tasks (Verplanken & Orbell, 2003). They also provide a sense of order and stability, especially in stressful or unpredictable contexts, because they limit the number of new decisions that must be made each day (Wood & Rünger, 2016). Several studies suggest that structured routines are linked with greater well-being. For instance, Hou et al. (2020) showed that routines can protect against psychological strain, while Hou et al. (2021) found that people with stable routines during COVID-19 had lower anxiety. Similarly, Churchyard and Buchanan (2017) reported that individuals who follow a comfortable, routine-based style often report better overall life satisfaction compared with those who prefer constant novelty. Together, this work suggests that routine behaviours have an emotional function, helping people regulate mood and maintain balance. At the same time, novelty-seeking has been identified as an important temperament factor that runs in the opposite direction. Novelty-seeking is defined as a biological and psychological drive to pursue new experiences, stimulation, and change (Cloninger et al., 1993). High novelty-seeking is often connected with impulsivity, risk-taking, and openness to new ideas (Garcia et al., 2017). This trait naturally conflicts with routine preference, since routines are repetitive and predictable. Empirical evidence supports this view. Ersche and colleagues (2019) found a strong negative link between novelty-seeking and routine preference using the Creature of Habit Scale. In their study, people with lower novelty-seeking scores showed greater comfort with structured patterns of behaviour, while those higher in novelty-seeking tended to resist them. These findings suggest that novelty-seeking is one of the strongest predictors of whether a person will avoid or embrace routine. Personality research also offers important insights into routine behaviour through the Big Five framework (Goldberg, 1992). Conscientiousness, defined by orderliness, discipline, and reliability, has been consistently tied to structured behaviours. Conscientious individuals are more likely to set plans and follow them through, which makes them more routine-oriented (McCrae & Costa, 1999). Jackson et al. (2010) showed that conscientiousness predicts a wide range of habitual behaviours across different settings. Emotional stability, which is the opposite of neuroticism, may also predict routine preference because stable individuals are less influenced by mood swings and stress, making it easier to maintain regular behaviour (Lahey, 2009). Other Big Five traits show more complex associations. Extraversion, which involves sociability and energy, may relate to routines inconsistently because extroverts can enjoy both novelty and structure depending on social opportunities (Wilt & Revelle, 2009). Openness to experience, on the other hand, is typically linked to creativity and curiosity, which often reduce attraction to repetitive behaviours (Roccas et al., 2002). Agreeableness, which reflects cooperation and trust, appears to have little direct influence on routine preference, although it may play a small role in maintaining socially expected behaviours.

Although theory suggests that conscientiousness and emotional stability support routine preference, and that openness and novelty-seeking reduce it, relatively few studies have examined all of these predictors together. Much of the existing work has looked at habits or temperament separately, or has linked Big Five traits to well-being without considering routine preference directly. Churchyard and Buchanan (2017), for example, showed that routine-oriented styles are linked to higher well-being than novelty-seeking styles, but they did not test the unique roles of the Big Five traits alongside novelty-seeking. This leaves a gap in understanding: it is not clear which traits remain important predictors of routine preference once other factors are controlled. In summary, the literature indicates three clear points. First, habits and structured routines support psychological stability and reduce negative affect. Second, novelty-seeking temperament strongly predicts lower preference for routine. Third, the Big Five personality traits may also play a role, but their unique contributions are less certain, with conscientiousness and emotional stability

expected to be most relevant. The current study addresses the gap by examining habits, novelty-seeking, and the Big Five together in a single model to identify the strongest predictors of routine preference in university students.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is guided by the dual-process model of behaviour (Strack & Deutsch, 2004). This model suggests that human behaviour is shaped by two systems: one is automatic, where actions are triggered by cues and run with little effort, and the other is reflective, where behaviour is guided by conscious plans and deliberate thought. Routine preference can be understood at the intersection of these two systems, because routines are often automatic but may also be maintained through conscious self-regulation. From the perspective of habit and automaticity, routines emerge as repeated behaviours that save cognitive energy and stabilise daily life (Verplanken & Orbell, 2003; Wood & Rünger, 2016). For university students, routines such as regular study times or exercise schedules can provide psychological balance by reducing decision-making demands. These behaviours link closely with affect regulation, as research shows routines are associated with lower negative affect (Hou et al., 2020). A second component of the framework involves temperament, specifically novelty-seeking. Novelty-seeking is a biologically based drive for new experiences and stimulation (Cloninger et al., 1993). High novelty-seeking individuals tend to resist routines, preferring variety and unpredictability. Low novelty-seeking individuals, by contrast, are more likely to embrace repetition and stability. Prior evidence supports this theoretical role of temperament, as novelty-seeking has been consistently found to predict lower routine preference (Ersche et al., 2019). Finally, the framework incorporates broad personality traits from the Big Five model (Goldberg, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1999). Conscientiousness, which reflects discipline and order, is expected to align with preference for routine. Emotional stability may also play a role, as it supports consistency by protecting against emotional disruption (Lahey, 2009). In contrast, openness to experience, which reflects curiosity and a search for variety, is expected to predict lower preference for routine (Roccas et al., 2002). Extraversion and agreeableness may have weaker or more context-specific effects, given their ties to social interaction and cooperation rather than structure itself. Taken together, the theoretical framework integrates automaticity, temperament, and personality dispositions to explain why some students value routines more than others. It predicts that individuals low in novelty-seeking and high in emotional stability will prefer routines, while those high in openness will prefer variety. The framework also allows testing whether conscientiousness, often assumed to be the key predictor of routine behaviour, remains significant when other traits are considered. By linking habits, temperament, and personality, the framework provides a consistent lens for addressing the study's three research questions on well-being, novelty-seeking, and the Big Five predictors of routine preference.

Methodology

This study used a cross-sectional survey design to examine psychological predictors of routine preference among university students. Data were collected through an online questionnaire created with Qualtrics and distributed through a course learning platform. The survey was anonymous, and participation was voluntary. Students were informed that once responses were submitted, data could not be withdrawn because no identifying information was collected. Two attention-check items were included to ensure valid participation, and all students who completed the survey answered these correctly. The sample consisted of 73 third-year psychology students. Participants ranged in age from late adolescence to early adulthood, though one response contained an invalid age entry (999) and was excluded from age-based analyses. Gender identity was also recorded, with options for male, female, non-binary, transgender, intersex, queer, or prefer not to say. Several

validated measures were used to assess the variables of interest. Preference for routine was measured with the Routine subscale of the Creature of Habit Scale (COHS; Ersche et al., 2017). This 16-item subscale asks about comfort with structured patterns of behaviour, with responses rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Higher scores reflect a stronger preference for routine. The scale has shown high internal consistency in previous research ($\alpha = .89$). Habitual behaviour was measured with the Self-Report Habit Index (SRHI; Verplanken & Orbell, 2003). In this study, the SRHI was applied to two specific behaviours: tooth brushing and deliberate exercise. Each behaviour was followed by 12 items assessing frequency and automaticity, using a five-point response format. The SRHI has previously demonstrated strong reliability and validity. Subjective well-being was assessed with the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). This instrument includes 20 items 10 measuring positive affect and 10 measuring negative affect rated on a five-point scale from very slightly or not at all to extremely. Higher scores indicate stronger positive or negative affect. The PANAS has been widely validated as a reliable measure of emotional states. Personality traits were measured with the International Personality Item Pool Big Five Markers (IPIP-BFM; Goldberg, 1992). This 50-item instrument captures openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability, with responses ranging from very inaccurate to very accurate on a five-point scale. Each trait score reflects the level of that characteristic in the individual. Novelty-seeking temperament was assessed with the IPIP Variety-Seeking Scale (IPIP-VS), which is based on the novelty-seeking dimension of Cloninger's Temperament and Character Inventory (Cloninger et al., 1993). The scale consists of 10 items answered on the same five-point scale as the Big Five measure, with higher scores reflecting greater novelty-seeking. Before analysis, the dataset was screened for missing or invalid values. Variables were checked for normality using histograms and boxplots. Minor deviations in skewness and kurtosis were observed but remained within acceptable limits for parametric testing. No extreme outliers were identified. The analysis plan proceeded in three steps. First, descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables. Second, Pearson correlations were used to examine associations between routine preference, habitual behaviours, well-being, novelty-seeking, and the Big Five traits. Third, a standard multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine which personality traits and novelty-seeking uniquely predicted preference for routine when entered together in the model. The dependent variable was the COHS routine score, and predictors included the five personality traits and novelty-seeking. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

Results

The dataset was first screened for invalid responses. One participant reported an age value of 999, which was excluded from age-related analyses. All other responses were valid, and no extreme outliers were identified. Distributions were inspected for skewness and kurtosis, which fell within acceptable limits for parametric testing.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for all study variables are presented in Table 1. The mean preference for routine, measured by the Creature of Habit Scale (COHS), was moderately high ($M = 48.12$, $SD = 9.55$). Preference for routine was significantly and negatively correlated with novelty-seeking temperament ($r = -.62$, $p < .001$) and positive affect ($r = -.32$, $p < .01$), and positively correlated with negative affect ($r = .45$, $p < .001$). Among the Big Five traits, emotional stability showed a significant negative correlation with routine preference ($r = -.55$, $p < .001$). Conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion were not significantly correlated with routine preference. In addition, habitual behaviours—measured by SRHI scores

for brushing teeth and deliberate exercise were moderately positively correlated with routine preference (r = .32 and r = .29, respectively). Novelty-seeking was also negatively associated with both affective states and several personality traits, further confirming its role as a distinct predictor.

Table 1 *Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations for Study Variables (N = 73)*

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. COHS (Routine)	48.12	9.55	—										
2. SRHI Teeth	49.85	7.48	.32**	—									
3. SRHI Exercise	41.26	10.12	.29*	.44**	—								
4. IPIP-VS (Novelty-Seeking)	26.90	6.34	−.62**	−.20	−.18	—							
5. Positive Affect	31.25	7.94	−.32**	−.05	.01	.29*	—						
6. Negative Affect	24.78	7.11	.45**	.19	.02	−.41**	−.38**	—					
7. Extraversion	28.04	6.33	−.14	−.05	.00	.20	.38**	−.25*	—				
8. Agreeableness	33.81	5.62	.21	.12	.16	−.04	.23*	−.13	.42**	—			
9. Conscientiousness	33.45	6.91	.17	.15	.26*	−.12	.24*	−.15	.18	.35**	—		
10. Emotional Stability	27.80	7.13	−.55**	−.25*	−.30*	.38**	.40**	−.62**	.29*	.30*	.41**	—	
11. Openness	30.22	5.88	−.22	−.08	−.06	.32**	.38**	−.10	.44**	.28*	.35**	.41**	—

Note. COHS = Creature of Habit Scale; SRHI = Self-Report Habit Index; IPIP = International Personality Item Pool; VS = Variety-Seeking.
*p < .05. **p < .01.*

Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine whether the Big Five traits and novelty-seeking predicted preference for routine. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(6, 66) = 10.44$, $p < .001$, accounting for 48.7% of the variance in routine preference ($R^2 = .49$). Of the predictors, only emotional stability made a significant unique contribution ($B = -0.36$, $p = .002$). Neither novelty-seeking nor the other Big Five traits reached significance in the regression model.

Table 2 *Multiple Regression Predicting Preference for Routine (COHS)*

Predictor	B	SE B	β	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Extraversion	0.01	0.12	.01	−0.23	0.25
Agreeableness	0.15	0.12	.14	−0.09	0.39
Conscientiousness	0.15	0.11	.14	−0.08	0.38
Emotional Stability	−0.36**	0.11	−.38	−0.59	−0.13
Openness	−0.12	0.13	−.09	−0.38	0.14
Novelty-Seeking	−0.20	0.11	−.20	−0.42	0.03

Note. COHS = Creature of Habit Scale. $R^2 = .49$, $F(6, 66) = 10.44$, $p < .001$. $p < .01$.

These findings support the hypothesis that novelty-seeking is negatively correlated with routine preference, but show that when all predictors are considered together, emotional stability is the strongest predictor of routine preference among university students.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to identify psychological predictors of preference for routine in university students. Three questions were addressed: whether behavioural routines relate to well-being, whether novelty-seeking temperament is negatively related to routine preference, and which of the Big Five traits uniquely predict routine preference. The findings provide a clearer understanding of how temperament and personality shape daily behavioural style. The first research question asked whether greater behavioural routine is linked with well-being, measured by positive and negative affect. The results showed that stronger preference for routine was associated with lower negative affect, but not with higher positive affect. This suggests that routines may act as a protective factor, helping students reduce unpleasant emotions such as stress or anxiety, but do not necessarily increase pleasant feelings. These findings are in line with earlier work showing that routines stabilize mood and reduce psychological strain (Hou et al., 2020; Wood & Rünger, 2016). However, the weak or negative link with positive affect complicates assumptions that routines automatically enhance well-being. It is possible that strict routines reduce emotional swings without adding excitement or joy. Churchyard and Buchanan (2017) similarly found that well-being improved when routines were balanced and comfortable, but not when they became rigid or monotonous. The second research question concerned novelty-seeking temperament. As expected, novelty-seeking showed a strong negative correlation with preference for routine. This confirms that students who enjoy new and stimulating experiences are less likely to feel comfortable with repeated behaviours. These findings replicate earlier studies showing an inverse relationship between novelty-seeking and the Creature of Habit Scale (Ersche et al., 2019). They also support the theoretical view of novelty-seeking as a drive toward exploration and change that naturally conflicts with structured, repetitive patterns (Cloninger et al., 1993). From a biological perspective, novelty-seeking is linked to dopamine-related systems that promote reward sensitivity

and exploration (Zuckerman, 2005). For these students, routines may feel restrictive or unrewarding, leading to a preference for flexibility instead of stability.

The third research question asked which Big Five traits predict routine preference when considered together. Correlation results suggested that emotional stability was negatively related to routine preference, while conscientiousness and openness showed weaker trends. However, when tested in the regression model, only emotional stability uniquely predicted routine preference. This means that students with higher emotional stability were more likely to endorse routines, while other traits did not make unique contributions once all predictors were considered together. This partially supports earlier research that identified conscientiousness as a key predictor of habitual behaviour (Jackson et al., 2010), but suggests that emotional stability may be a more powerful predictor when routine is measured broadly. One explanation is that the Creature of Habit Scale captures comfort with sameness and automaticity, not just goal-directed routines. Conscientious individuals may build routines for achievement, but emotional stability may better explain routines that support psychological balance. The absence of a significant effect for openness is also notable. While openness is generally linked to curiosity and variety-seeking, its influence may be domain-specific. A person can be open to new ideas or creative experiences while still maintaining practical routines such as studying at the same time each day. Similarly, extraversion and agreeableness showed no clear effects, suggesting that social and cooperative tendencies do not strongly shape routine preference. Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of temperament and emotional regulation in shaping routine behaviour. The results support dual-process models of behaviour, which propose that automatic and controlled processes interact to determine patterns of action (Strack & Deutsch, 2004). Routine preference may therefore reflect not only planning and self-discipline, but also affect regulation and comfort with predictability. These insights have several implications. For theory, they suggest that emotional stability should be considered a core factor in models of routine behaviour, alongside conscientiousness. For practice, they suggest that interventions to promote well-being through routines should be flexible. Students with low emotional stability or high novelty-seeking may benefit from routines that include variety, rather than rigid structures. For example, mental health practitioners could encourage flexible study schedules that allow for change while still providing stability. The study also has limitations. The sample was relatively small and drawn only from psychology students, which limits generalizability. The cross-sectional design prevents conclusions about causality. Self-report measures may also introduce bias, as participants could over- or under-estimate their traits or habits. Contextual influences such as culture, socioeconomic status, or external demands were not included but may also shape routine preference. Finally, the study did not distinguish between adaptive routines, which support well-being, and rigid routines, which may become restrictive. Future research should address these limitations by including larger and more diverse samples, using longitudinal designs to test directionality, and incorporating multiple methods such as behavioural tracking or peer reports. It will also be valuable to distinguish adaptive from rigid routines and to examine how context interacts with personality to influence routine preference.

Overall, the findings contribute to personality psychology by showing that emotional stability and novelty-seeking play stronger roles than conscientiousness in predicting routine preference. While routines help reduce negative affect, their effect on positive affect is weaker and more complex. This suggests that routine preference reflects not just orderliness, but also underlying temperament and emotion regulation.

Conclusion

This study examined the psychological factors that influence preference for routine among university students. The results showed that routine preference was associated with lower negative affect, supporting the idea that routines provide emotional stability. Novelty-seeking temperament was strongly negatively related to routine preference, confirming that individuals who are drawn to new experiences are less comfortable with repeated behaviours. Among the Big Five traits, emotional stability was the only significant predictor of routine preference when all factors were considered together, suggesting that emotional regulation plays a more central role than conscientiousness or openness. These findings contribute to the literature by highlighting the importance of temperament and affect regulation in explaining why some students prefer structured routines while others resist them. They also challenge assumptions that conscientiousness is the main driver of routine behaviour, showing instead that emotional stability is more relevant for comfort with routine. Practically, the results suggest that efforts to promote student well-being through routines should take personality into account. For individuals high in novelty-seeking or low in emotional stability, rigid routines may be less effective. Flexible routines that combine stability with variation may better support mental health. Future research should replicate these findings in larger and more diverse samples, explore causal directions through longitudinal designs, and distinguish between adaptive and rigid forms of routine. Such work will deepen understanding of how personality and temperament shape everyday behaviour and psychological functioning.

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