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Seeking Comfort in the Unchanging: To Feel Good Is a Human Need We Must Cherish

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In Newton Hawker Centre, there is a feeling I am unable to shake, a feeling of familiarity. Despite the tempting diversity of food stalls around me, I am pulled back to the same spot, the same meal. It is not that I do not love variety or the possibility of trying something new; it is that, in this crazy, hectic world, there is something so comforting about returning to something familiar. It is as though, in those instances of sitting in front of a steaming hot bowl of laksa or biting into the perfect satay, I am grounding myself in something that feels safe, stable, and permanent.

These food choices at Newton Hawker Centre are more than just about satisfying hunger. They are wrapped up in recollections, in time spent with friends, in humour and conversations that extend far beyond the meal itself. I have been coming here for years, and each food place I order somehow feels like it carries a part of my past with it. The satay stall is where I first went with friends after a long day of school. The laksa is the food place that reminds me of quiet Sundays spent with family wandering through the stalls, slowing down for just a moment. These are not just meals; they are snapshots of my life, moments that have stayed with me and shaped my connection to this place.

What I am surprised at, though, is how simple it is. There is so much here, yet I always order the same. It is as though my brain is craving simplicity in the midst of distraction and chaos. Going back to what I know, the options are second nature, and no mental effort goes into the decision. My head gets a brief respite from the never-ending flow of choices, the never-ending change. The world may change around me, but by simply returning to the same food place, and the same uncle to speak to, everything feels like it has stayed the same, though for a moment.

It is this desire for constancy that makes me return. With everything else changing around me, new technology, new trends, and new experiences, there's something profoundly stabilising about returning to the unchanging. It is like a quiet rebellion against the mad pace of

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life, a chance to rest in the stability of what I know. In Newton Hawker Centre, however, that feeling of stability is not only sustenance, but also a reminder that even though life goes forward, there are still moments of peace to be found in the familiar.

So why is it that, despite the abundance of choices and the evolution of food trends, we often find ourselves returning to the same familiar food place as if seeking comfort in the unchanging?

This pull toward the familiar is not unique to me. In fact, cognitive science suggests that my habit of returning to the same food place is rooted in something much deeper, our brain's natural tendency toward familiarity. One explanation comes from profound investigations of the cognitive sciences, particularly within the heuristic-preference model by Mir-Artigues (2022). In this detailed framework, brains depend on cognitive heuristics that streamline choices made. When faced with an overwhelming number of choices, we tend to gravitate toward what we already know. Familiarity turns into a psychological anchor, lowering cognitive strain. It also renders decisions quite effortless. This is the key reason people, when in great overwhelm, often revert back to their most familiar preferences, be those in food, brands, or daily routines.

It becomes quite clear why I gravitate toward the same food places repeatedly. It has something to do with being gravitated to what is familiar to me and how I like navigating such a space of the unchanging. Each visit, I follow such a mental path to certain choices, foregoing the need to evaluate many options. This pattern is not just me, it is quite common for many people, as it happens throughout all areas, such as picking a cafe, or doing groceries, along with other consumer habits.

Nevertheless, Mir-Artigues's (2022) model provides only half of the story. Cognitive heuristics can be used to explain how people make decisions, but they are not able to account for why some of those decisions carry a deeper emotional resonance. Simpson et al. (2024) offer a valuable counterpoint by examining how nostalgia aids in the consolidation of attachment to food spaces, places, or other things. They argued that familiar foods carry an emotional weight that goes beyond cognitive efficiency. People return to food places because of the memories, relationships, traditions, and sense of identity tied to them. In short, people return to food places because of nostalgia.

A food place may not only be chosen out of convenience but also because it represents a piece of home, a past experience, or a connection to friends and loved ones. This is evident in how people abroad look for native foods, not just for taste but for familiarity of something that is sought within an unfamiliar place. Dining at Newton Hawker Centre goes beyond consumption, it transcends to become an experience invoking so many memories deposited in my nostalgic

brain. Every bite revives hearty laughter, familiar faces, and memories of past Sundays. I am not going back because of habit but because I want to relive that very sense of comfort and revisit memories that are parts of home – beautiful, at times even melancholic. Even with new choices around, it's that emotional pull, the quiet joy of the familiar, that keeps drawing me back and it seems that I don't mind doing this over and over again.

A clear distinction emerges between the two sources. Mir-Artigues (2022) presents familiarity as a practical cognitive shortcut, while Simpson et al. (2024) suggest that familiarity carries a profound emotional resonance that reinforces our identity and belonging. The difference raises an important question: But which factor is more dominant? Do people return to food places primarily out of convenience or is nostalgia the stronger force?

The answer is not straightforward. In some cases, cognitive efficiency may take precedence. In short, people may revisit a food place simply because it is the easiest option. In other cases, nostalgia may override cognitive ease; someone may go out of their way to visit a childhood restaurant even if it is far, inconvenient, and agonising. What is most likely, however, is that both factors work together. Familiarity reduces cognitive load, making habitual choices easier, while emotional significance strengthens the bond, making those choices more meaningful.

But neither source quite gets at the question of why we actively maintain these rituals. Not just habit or cognitive shortcut, but something else, our desire to feel a connection, to retain the comfort of familiarity. But if there is something, an object that these rituals signify, then, what is it? Returning to a hawker centre or beloved food stall is not only about ease, but also about sustaining a part of ourselves, reinforcing our belonging in a shared, invisible network of human connection. Cultivating familiar bonds can enrich lives, strengthen communities, and offer stability in a changing world.

And here I am sitting in the same booth, and with the first bite, I know the answer was always in the ritual. The allure of the familiar is not at all about being convenient or nostalgic, it's about the want for belonging, for something to stay the same when everything else around you keep changing. But this is only half of the story. Mir-Artigues (2022) and Simpson et al. (2024) might have missed the sensual pleasure of use, the carnal enjoyment of taste, warmth, and feel. I reckon choosing to eat at familiar places is not just a shortcut or nostalgic haven, but rather, this repetitive act generates joy, reminding ourselves that, as human beings, we deserve to feel good, and to enjoy moments of feeling good. We do not merely return to our favourite food stall for remembrance or security, we return since eating is an enjoyable activity. That familiar burst of flavour, the satisfaction of a warm, delectable dish, these small pleasures ground us in the

moment and remind us of what it means to feel human, to be human. And this may be the clearest reason we continue doing the same thing, like eating the same meal from the same food stall, because it brings joy on every level. A steady joy that does not need to be chased or reinvented. It is the joy of knowing what to expect, recognising a part of yourself in the act, and returning to something that satisfies both heart and senses. In that familiar bowl or plate lies more than flavour; it holds the comfort of consistency and the quiet happiness of simply feeling good.

Bionote

Lim Kee Boon is a Computer Engineering student at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore. He is interested in how memory, daily routines, and a sense of community shape the way people interact with places and with one another. Through writing, he explores how small, familiar rituals can offer stability and meaning in a world of constant change, while staying committed to a lifelong culture of learning.

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