



■ OFF CAMPUS ■

Is your hobby A PERFORMANCE?

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

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The guitar collecting dust in your room, the hardened acrylic paint on your abandoned colour palette, and your expensive unused camera all represent one thing: the skeletal remains of your forgotten hobbies. With social media as our stage and our followers as the audience, there's often pressure to turn our interests into impressive content. While doing so, there's a series of unfortunate events that occur before you hit the red record button.

The first phase is when you discover the hobby. For me, it was during my usual late-night spiral — the time when most reckless decisions come to life.

I was watching "Best Guitar player Amin Toofani at Harvard University" on YouTube, where he shreds the strings in a way that would even impress the great American guitarist Jimi Hendrix. At that moment, with the conviction that only sleep-deprived teenagers possess, I decided that I would become a guitar prodigy. Reality, however, was less romantic. I sacrificed my long nails and suffered a week of blisters from playing chords, only to reach the conclusion that my music prodigy era had come to a sad and abrupt end.

Unlike me, some people can power through the first phase and reach a novice level of skill. This is the stage where most of us pull out our phones, ready to capture our newfound passion and stun our invisible audience. But once the stage curtains fall and you're left alone with yourself, a question lingers: Is your hobby really for you, or is it a performance? It's an uncomfortable thought. One might feel defensive when asked, as most of us deny that we actually thrive on praise and validation.

Humour aside, science also backs this up. A study shows that receiving social approval activates the brain's reward circuits, which are the same areas that respond to food, money, or other tangible rewards. There's a reason why praise feels biologically satisfying. The brain releases dopamine when we receive compliments. So, it's not a surprise that some of us tend to turn our hobbies into performances. Our minds, after all, crave the feel-good hit of approval. It's not just about our pursuits, but also the applause we hope will follow.

The answer to the question arrives quite naturally, though. After a few song intros or still-life paintings from Pinterest-inspired fever dreams, it starts to feel exhausting. Instead of enjoying a hobby, we feel the pressure of mastering it immediately, which is often followed by a sudden burnout. Forgotten lie the dried paintbrushes that begin to resemble fossils, and gone are the artistic ambitions.

The pressing fear of being bad at something feels like embarrassing information that might go public. Not to mention the dread of being put on the spot if someone suddenly remembers your so-called hobby. This chase for perfectionism can also be the reason why we abandon our hobbies so quickly.

Oftentimes, we like the idea of a hobby more than actually doing it. We love the thought of being a painter, but not the work it takes to actually be called one. Instruments require hours of devoted practice and music theory knowledge, while sports demand consistent training and discipline. We picture the goal before the journey, and neglect the art behind actually learning a skill. The reality is

that passion and effort rarely arrive on the same train.

There's also a certain magic in uncovering an interest that excites you. The first time I felt that thrill was watching a pianist play the theme song of *Game of Thrones*. As mystified as I was by the performance, I was just as mesmerised by the way their fingers glided smoothly on the piano, with a grace that comes with years of practice.

I longed for the look of elegance that a pianist has, and on the way, I discovered the tranquillity it brings me. After years of playing the piano, having an audience actually feels like an interruption to the intimacy I share with the instrument. Although having an actual skill is often accompanied by the universal experience of your parents forcing you to perform at family functions.

The bottom line is to ask yourself if your hobbies truly bring you joy, and move forward without the burden of expectations. Some find gardening spiritually connecting, others discover cooking is both therapeutic and a love language. There's also no shame in your hobbies being performative, and if you happen to pick up a skill or two along the way, all the better. What matters is exploring your potential and embracing the simple pleasure of doing something you love.

Reference:

PMC (PubMed Central). (2023). *Reward, motivation and brain imaging in human healthy participants*.

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