



# Working from Home

Managing a remote work-life balance

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# Overview

Poster

Problem

Background

Principles

Research Process

Proposed Solution

# Working from Home

Managing a remote work-life balance

## The Problem

Because of the pandemic, working from home has become increasingly common as college students got to stay home for the semester/year, blurring the line physically and mentally between our "work" and "life" spaces. Many students fall into the routine of waking up right before class, walking two steps from their bed to their work desk, and only leaving their room for a quick water or snack break. This blend of work and life environment often throws off our perception of time and priorities, damaging our mental and physical health, motivation, and productivity. In addition, the social isolation and lack of face-to-face conversations have strained many personal relationships, a crucial element in the "life" sphere.

## Background

With limited social interaction due to the current global pandemic, many students use applications such as Facetime and Zoom to maintain personal relationships and find company in completing work together.

Nevertheless, the formality of a "Zoom" call, often associated with meetings, lectures and class time, often destroys the casual and spontaneous charm of face-to-face conversations. Remote students working from home face additional barriers for socializing, and often lack an environment conducive to productivity.

Through this project, we hope to help remote students navigate their work-life balance by using social accountability and collaboration to encourage students to complete their work. We aim to create a more accessible and approachable communal digital workspace so students have a designated environment to work alongside their peers.

## Guiding Questions

Does the lack of separation between physical spaces negatively influence both work and life?

How does the design of the space in a home affect different activities?

How does being distanced from one's peers affect the culture and community around students' work and life?

Does digital collaboration improve productivity and it a viable alternative to face-to-face interaction?

How do remote CMU students navigate the balance between work and life when living with their families?

## Research Process

### Research Questions

- How do remote CMU students navigate work-life balance when living with their families?
- Is there a difference between their current and ideal work-life balance?
- How can we help improve the quality of their work-life balance?

### Methods

- Survey**  
A general set of questions made available to all CMU students. The questions revolved around situations with their living conditions, where people spent the most time, and the factors that help/hinder achieving the best balance.
- Activity**  
As part of extensive interviews, participants selected images of their work and living spaces, accompanied with some notes and descriptions.
- Interview**  
15-20 minute individual conversations that allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of how physical spaces factor into the relation, personal experiences, and balancing work and leisure.

### Principles

#### Immersion

Participants selected the images used in our final deliverable.  
Our final design intends to help immerse participants in their lives by encouraging social accountability and timely digital and social barriers during Zoom/Facetime calls.

As part of our research, we ask students their biggest at-home distractions, and what methods they have used to overcome lack of motivation and productivity, such as setting screen time limits, creating schedules, calling friends, or establishing different physical spaces to complete tasks such as coffee shops, libraries, the living room, etc.

#### Desire Lines

Part of our research methods relied on collecting images from participants showing their work and living spaces. Having these results allowed us to observe what words often fail to mention in terms of someone's habits and routines.



#### Weakest Link

The person in a picture that is most likely to fail. One person's experience with their current environment is the most likely to fail.

We can apply this principle both in finding the failure points of current systems during our research as well as identifying potential failure points in the solution we design through either active steps the system design (like better UI/UX) or passive components (the system form, creating, but stress current operations) methods.

In our research, "see they we have looked at in the way classes taught through Zoom or Discord differ from normal class time. So far, our current conclusion is that the most common failure point with Zoom classes has to do with the failure to replicate the casual types of interaction that physical classes do.

#### Personas

Personas are the creation of profiles for a small number of archetypal users, each profile representing a composite of a subpopulation of users. Information for the profiles is gathered from user and stakeholder interviews, reviews of market research and customer feedback, and datasets around how a product is used or installed.

### Results



### Personas

Out of the six interviews we conducted, we found many similarities between the biggest participants were being their activities based work-life balance, and the ways in which they are navigating time management. We then constructed three user personas to combine their characteristics, experience situational differences, and organize participant data.

While most of the information is summarized and reported, the quotes shown are shared straight from our interviews.

**Susan**  
21, Female, Graduate Student, lives with her parents in a 2-bedroom apartment in a city.

**Source of Struggle:**  
"I struggle with staying motivated to study when I'm at home. I often find myself procrastinating and getting distracted by social media or other activities. It's hard to create a routine when I'm not going to school."

**Brian**  
23, Male, Undergraduate Student, lives with his parents in a 3-bedroom house in a suburb.

**Source of Struggle:**  
"I struggle with finding a quiet space to study at home. My parents' house is always busy, and it's hard to concentrate when there are other people around. I often end up studying in a library or coffee shop."

**Emma**  
22, Female, Undergraduate Student, lives with her parents in a 2-bedroom apartment in a city.

**Source of Struggle:**  
"I struggle with balancing my work and my social life. I often feel like I'm not getting enough sleep or exercise, and it affects my productivity. I also struggle with staying motivated when I'm not in a classroom setting."

**Martisol**  
24, Female, Undergraduate Student, lives with her parents in a 3-bedroom house in a suburb.

**Source of Struggle:**  
"I struggle with staying motivated to study when I'm at home. I often find myself procrastinating and getting distracted by social media or other activities. It's hard to create a routine when I'm not going to school."

### Conclusions

After consolidating survey findings, reviewing interview notes, and observing the images submitted, we were able to make a few major conclusions about the nature of work-life balance for remote students at CMU. Participants noted significant impacts in the following areas:

#### Peer Relationships

As a whole, being away from campus had diminished a sense of "casualness" in social interactions, without being in the same space, reaching out to peers became a more deliberate choice both for formal and informal. For the same reason, but most students are finding it difficult to form meaningful friendships with those on campus, as group chats aren't always active and zoom meetings hold a formal connotation.

#### Motivation

Most of participants noted a loss of motivation to either the survey, interview, or both, due to the combination of online classes and lack of social accountability. Being in an environment where others are working tends to increase work ethic, even if it's just via video chatting or calling a friend.

#### Time Management

The use of a journal or To-Do List was commonly mentioned as a way to keep track of tasks and decide on the time spent between work and life. However, as different time zones continued to put a strain on students' ability to participate and get used to new time zones, consistent routines became less feasible.



### Proposed Solution

#### Narrowing our Focus

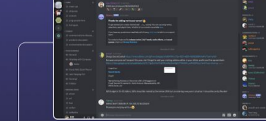
After our interviewing and data collection process, we realized that the two factors that most affected students' work-life balance were the lack of physical separation between work-life spaces and the social isolation that can lead to this.

As a result, our environment was limited to have a different level of impact to each student. Our environment was more about the social isolation of remote learning, as well as the types of interpersonal that we needed to overcome. Because the majority of our interviewees study in a common space, we decided to focus on a solution that increasing the casual environment of students' homes. We considered students to improve students' physical work environments, however, this proved too many variables and uncontrollable external factors. We instead

#### Solution

We selected the key characteristics of the studio environment as well as the key types of interpersonal that we needed to overcome. We focused on our solution: a casual atmosphere, social accountability, and structure. During the process of research for the project, we also began identifying some of the products we found through the iterative solution of mapping an existing application (Discord) for use as a case.

#### Discord Overview



#### Casual Atmosphere

The goal of this solution is to create a casual atmosphere that encourages students to interact and collaborate in a more relaxed and informal setting. This is achieved by using a more casual and conversational tone in the chat, and by encouraging students to share their work and life experiences in a more open and honest way.

#### Time Management

The goal of this solution is to help students manage their time more effectively by providing them with a structured and organized environment. This is achieved by using a more structured and organized chat format, and by encouraging students to share their work and life experiences in a more open and honest way.

#### Social Accountability

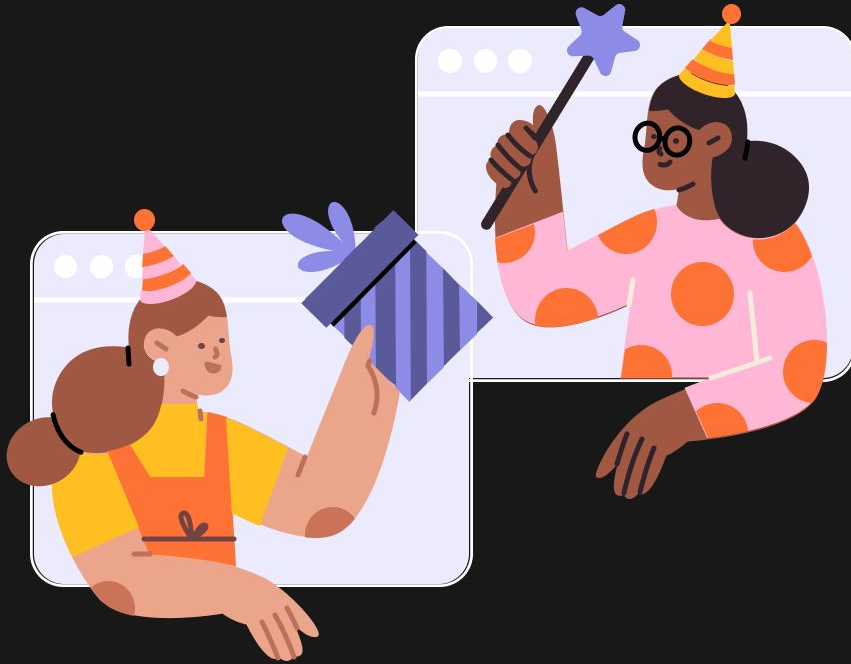
The goal of this solution is to create a social accountability environment that encourages students to interact and collaborate in a more relaxed and informal setting. This is achieved by using a more casual and conversational tone in the chat, and by encouraging students to share their work and life experiences in a more open and honest way.

# Problem



- At-home environment blurs “**work**” and “**life**” **physical and mental spaces**.
- **Lack of motivation** to complete work throws off mental and physical health.
- Lack of face-to-face interactions between peers due to **social isolation** discourages **collaboration** and damages relationships.

# Background



- The **formality** of Zoom calls destroys the **casual and spontaneous charm** of face-to-face interactions when working alongside friends.
- Too many social and emotional **barriers** to initiate Zoom meetings

# Principles of Design

Immersion

Desire Lines

Weakest Link

Personas

# Principles of Design

**Immersion**

Desire Lines

Weakest Link

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Personas

# Principles of Design

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**Personas**

# Research Questions



How do remote CMU students navigate work life balance when living with their **families**?



Is there a difference between their **current** and **ideal** work/life balance?



How can we help **improve** the quality of their work/life balance?

# Research Process

## Methods

### Survey

Made available to any remote CMU student

General questions surrounding satisfaction with work/life balance, living conditions, and time management

### Activity

An opt-in exercise mentioned in the survey

Participants submitted images of their work and living spaces, accompanied with some notes.

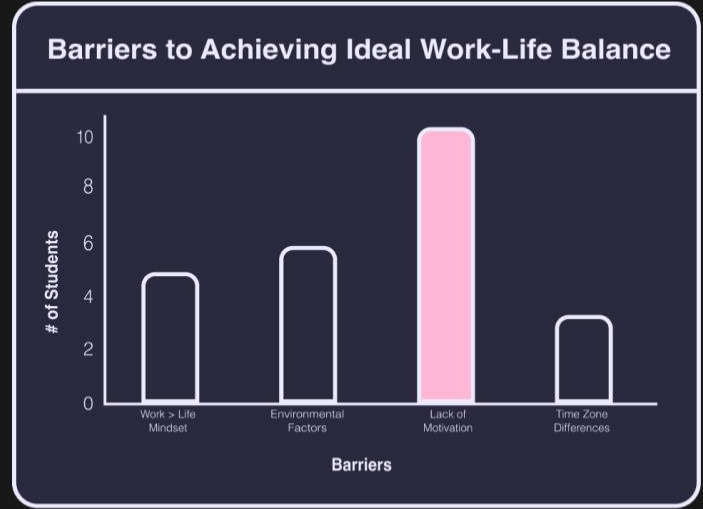
### Interview

An opt-in meeting mentioned in the survey

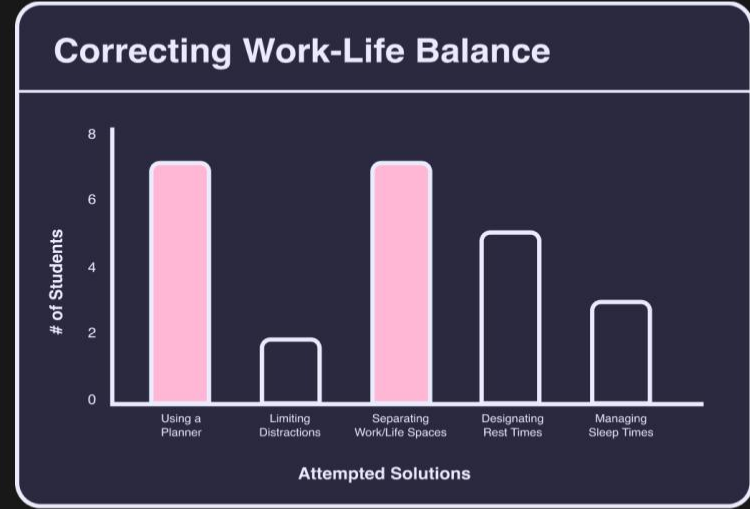
15-20 minute individual, in-depth conversations regarding physical spaces, motivation, personal relationships, and health.

# Results

## Graphs



**70%** of students cite a **lack of motivation** to achieve a better work-life balance.



**56%** of students have attempted to **use a planner** or **designated workspaces**.

# Results

## Pictures of Workspaces



# Personas



**Susan**

Satisfaction Level: ●○○○○

Age: 18  
Location: Korea  
Major: Design  
Year: First year

*"...I feel like there's no balance because my focus is mostly on work."*

**Sources of Struggle:**

- Being a remote student w/ english as second language makes it difficult to make friends on campus.
- 14 hour time-zone difference severely disrupted her sleeping, eating, working, and socializing habits.
- To limit at home distractions and separate work/living spaces, she prefers to work at coffee shops.



**Brian**

Satisfaction Level: ●●●●○

Age: 20  
Location: CA, USA  
Major: Architecture  
Year: Second year

*"I feel like I don't need to remain in constant contact in order to stay friends with others. I work on my own terms, but with more time I always end up finishing work."*

**Sources of Struggle:**

- Throughout the course of a large project, his motivation to do work slowly drops until he gets good feedback from professors or students, which brings him back up again.
- His environment effects his productivity greatly. At home, he had trouble getting work done until he moved to a new room which helped him stay focused.



**Emma**

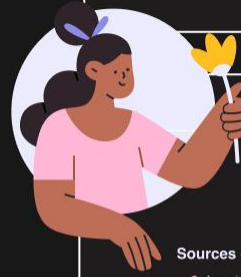
Satisfaction Level: ○○○○○

Age: 20  
Location: RI, USA  
Major: Design  
Year: Second year

*"This isolation has abolished any sense of casual...it's just so much worse than hanging out with people and sitting next to them and talking to them."*

**Sources of Struggle:**

- She feels too lonely and unmotivated to work alone in her room, but also feels like a burden to ask peers to work together on a Zoom call.
- Always struggled with time management because of ADHD. Isolation has made her ADHD symptoms the worst it has ever been.



**Marisol**

Satisfaction Level: ●●○○○

Age: 19  
Location: NY, USA  
Major: ECE  
Year: Second year

*"As an introvert, it's gotten more difficult to start conversation, and I feel even more disconnected from my classmates."*

**Sources of Struggle:**

- As an introvert, she wasn't involved in the community when on campus. Now as a remote student, she lost any opportunity for casual face-to-face conversation.
- Messed up sleep schedule throws off motivation, health, and work/life balance.

# Result Conclusions

## Peer Relationships

Being remote had eliminated a sense of “**casualness**” in social interactions. First year remote students especially found it difficult to form friendships with those on campus.

## Motivation

Most participants noted a loss of motivation due to a combination of online classes and lack of **social accountability**.

## Time Management

As differing time zones continue to put a strain on students’ ability to perform self care and sustain relationships, consistent routines become less feasible.



# Proposed Solution

## Narrowing our Focus

Lack of physical separation between work/life spaces

Social isolation from friends and peers

Interviewee demographics: mostly Design/CFA students

## Problem Impact

Physical separation had a varied level of impact on each student

Social isolation universally cited as the biggest detriment to work/life balance.

## Solution Leverage

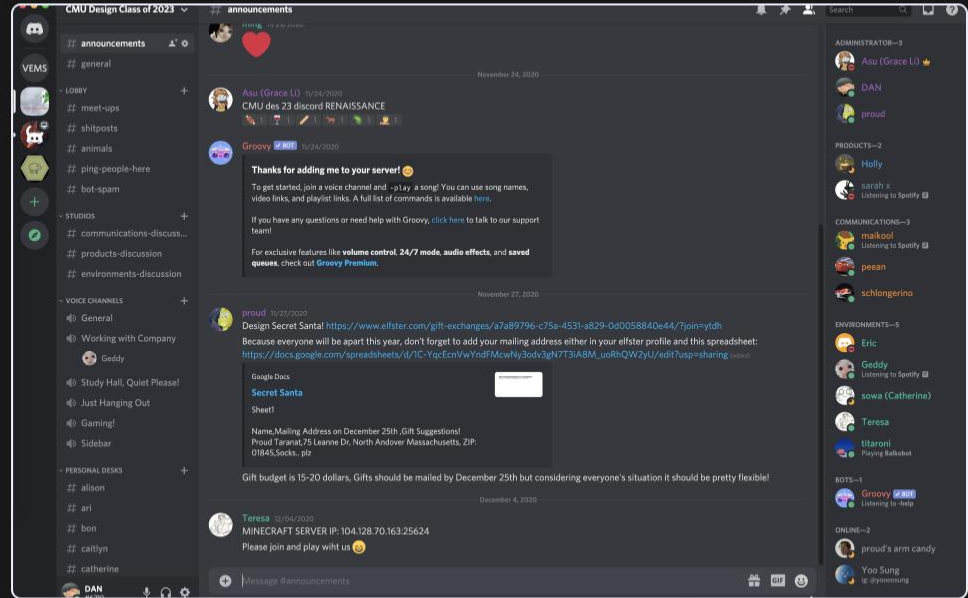
Solutions for influencing physical environments posed too many limitations and uncontrollable factors.

# Proposed Solution

## Solution

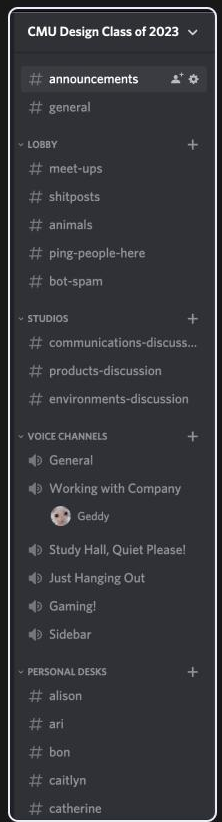
We isolated the key characteristics of the studio environment as well as the key types of interaction that we needed to replicate or afford in our solution:

- casual atmosphere
- social accountability
- time management



temporary solution of modifying and adapting an existing application (Discord) for use as a class.

# Proposed Solution



## Casual Atmosphere

- Barrier to reaching out/having casual conversations digitally
- More limited interactions with closer groups of friends
- Voice channels without scheduling, transparency of who is currently using the channel
- labeled for interactions that normally take place in studio:
  - Working with Company, Silent Study, Hanging Out, Gaming, and so on.

# Proposed Solution

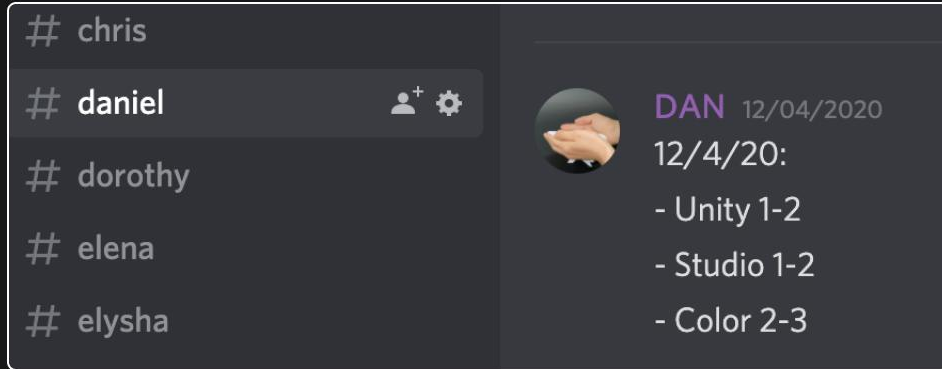
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## Social Accountability

- Proximity and desk space affords discussion about work and grounding own work
- The presence of other students provides a sense of social accountability
- Voice channels, video sharing capabilities, text channels
- Imperfect solution, but a step up in effort required

# Proposed Solution

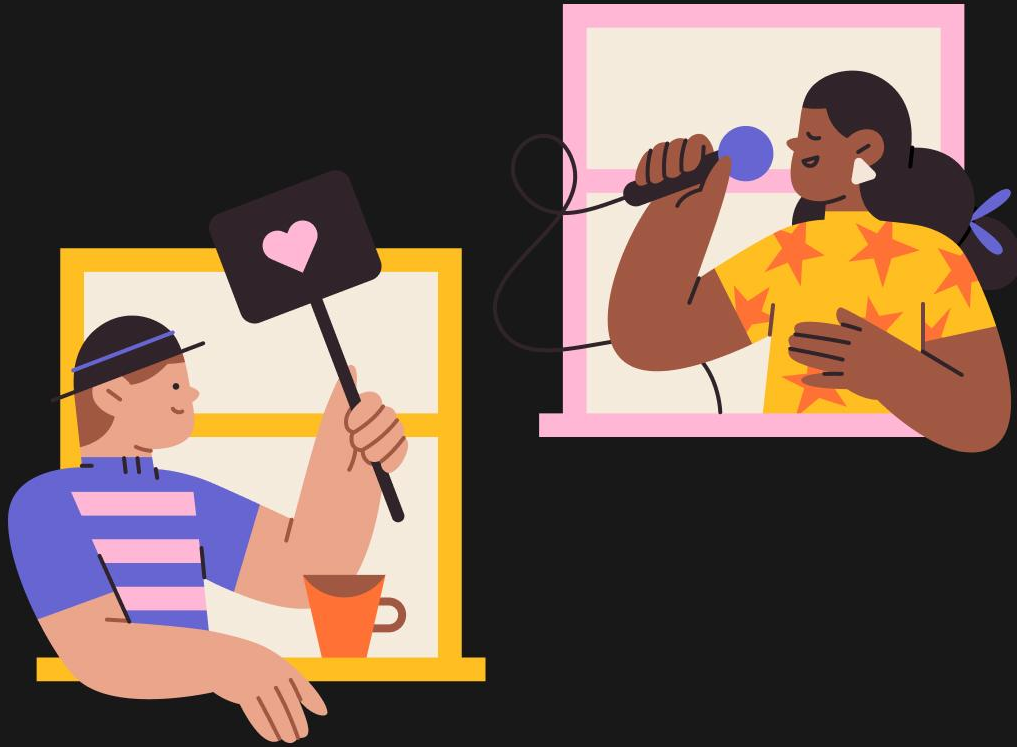


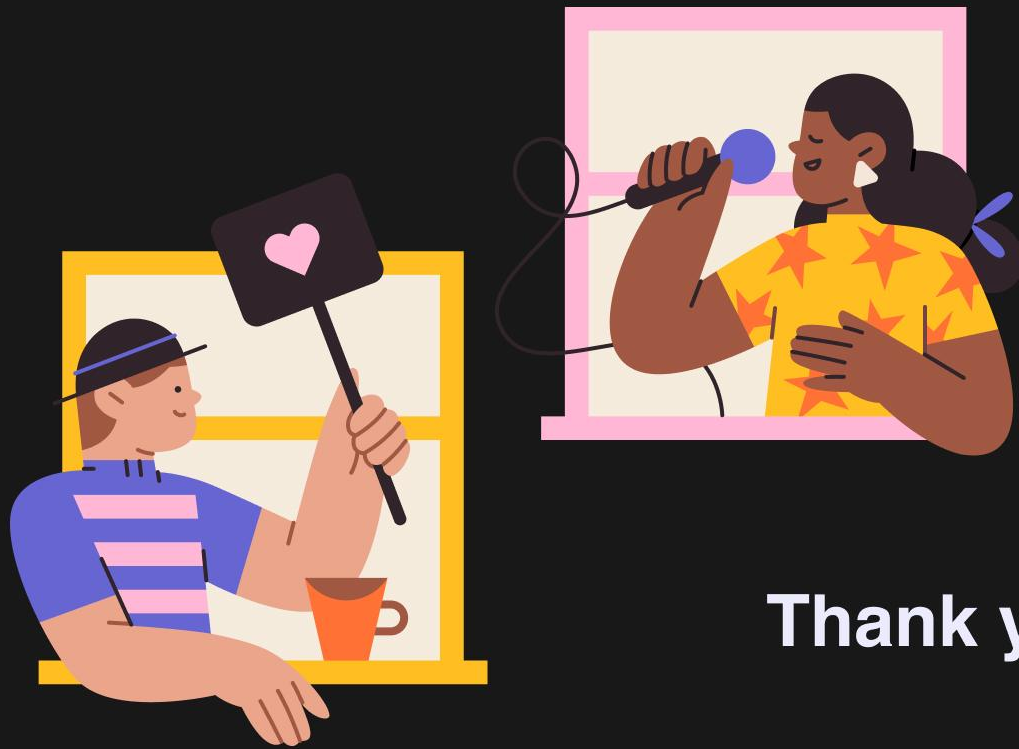
*Daniel posts his to-do list for the day in his public channel for a sense of social accountability*

## Time Management

- Schedule and structure were linked to the physical divide between working and living spaces
- to-do lists in text channels, simulating a public space for a sense of social accountability

# Final Summary





**Thank you!**