

Beyond Zoom: Humanistic Virtual Gatherings for the Remote Revolution

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Introduction

In the wake of a pandemic-era revolution in the popularity of remote communication technologies, traditional video calling tools like Zoom can be especially fatiguing, as evidenced by the novel term “Zoom fatigue.” This inspired me to create a platform for communication that is informed by cognitive science literature, dedicated to minimizing fatigue and maximizing comfort for informal online gatherings.

Methods

In the first phase of my project, I dug into cognitive science literature on computer-mediated communication and recent articles on Zoom fatigue. In my second phase, I iteratively designed a user experience according to my findings and implemented my designs into a web application. For example, to challenge Zoom users' feelings of physical entrapment (Fauville et al.), my tool allows users to move themselves as avatars; to target visual overwhelm (Bennett et al.), the size of users' faces are reduced in that virtual space and avatars are attached to the familiar virtual object of a cursor; and in order to create a shared environment to enhance nonverbal communication (Lee), limit mirror anxiety and the effects of hyper-gaze (Fauville et al.), and to elevate perceptions of group belongingness to reduce emotional fatigue (Bennett et al.), I established a customizable, shared virtual space which users can explore and gather by proximity into multiple concurrent conversations.

Conclusion & Future Directions

My work has culminated in a prototype-stage web application, *together*, named for its motivation and dedicated purpose. A live version can be accessed at togather-rho.vercel.app.

In the future, I hope to incorporate original experimental research assessing the benefits of the program's design features in comparison to traditional video calling tools, as well as continue to grow the platform to afford for richer nonverbal communication techniques and a richer social experience within this intentionally naturalistic communication paradigm.



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