We are a group of four Stanford undergraduate computer science students interested in how communities form and grow.

Problem Domain
Our problem domain is *increasing community engagement*. From our field observations, we determined that many people were involved in multiple communities yet found challenges in interacting with them more.

Preliminary POV
We met Kiana, a college freshman who is interested in classics, ultimate frisbee, and (secretly) calligraphy. We were amazed to realize that although she wants a calligraphy community, she won’t start one because she is afraid no one else will be interested in it. It would be game-changing to help people become confident enough to start niche communities.
Additional Needfinding

Our first round of needfinding led us to focus on community engagement. We went back into the field to conduct more interviews with this new problem statement in mind, looking for participants who were struggling to either engage or get others to engage in their communities.

Tony is a resident fellow at an all-frosh dormitory. We interviewed him because this is his first year as a resident fellow, and we wanted to see how he was adjusting to the new community. We asked Tony about how his community life changed after making the switch to being a resident fellow at Stanford. He said, “back when we were living in Palo Alto, all of our relationships were superficial. There wasn’t much more than a simple ‘hello’ said to our neighbors, because we just didn’t have that much in common. But here, we feel right at home; our shared experiences as leaders of our communities really bring us together.”

Lisa is a teacher at an online high school who volunteers her time as an advisor to student-led clubs, which are looking to expand.

She faces difficulty because even though many students say they want to be more engaged in their online communities, they ultimately don’t engage much because of the ease of “logging in and checking out”. She would like a way to motivate students to engage in their online communities.
Wilson is a Stanford senior who actively participates in various communities on and offline. He served on the board of Stanford’s Applied Cybersecurity club, staffed FroSoCo, and did research in cybersecurity and math. He was initially discouraged by friends and family for pursuing cybersecurity due its association with illegal hacking. This negative stigma has made it difficult for many people to engage in the cybersecurity community.

Wilson also managed a popular Minecraft server, which attracted many members from YouTube. The community had a low barrier of entry, which helped it grow quickly. However, many of the users it attracted were less engaged and left soon after.

Revised POVs and HMWs

POV 1: Kiana
We met Kiana, a college freshman who is interested in classics, ultimate frisbee, and (secretly) calligraphy. We were amazed to realize that although she wants a calligraphy community, she won’t start one because she is afraid no one else will be interested in it. It would be game-changing to help people become confident enough to start niche communities.

Sample HMWs:
How might we...

- Learn about other people’s niche interests
- Connect people to others who have started, or want to start niche communities
- Empower people, especially women, to create communities
- Make niche interests no longer niche
- Hire people / create artificial people to join communities
- Promote intermingling of communities with different interests
POV 2: Lisa
We met Lisa, an online high school teacher who volunteers as a club advisor. We were amazed to realize that although many students want to engage more with their clubs and other online communities, they ultimately don’t because they feel that there aren’t any consequences for disengaging. It would be game-changing to **hold people accountable for remaining engaged with their communities**.

Sample HMWs:
How might we...
- Make it difficult to disengage from communities
- Create external incentives for participation
- Use social pressure to encourage engagement
- Make community engagement fun
- Connect less-engaged people to mentors or people who are more engaged
- Punish people for disengaging with their communities

POV 3: Tyler
We met Tyler, a former teenage political activist from Iowa. We were amazed to realize that although he has many ways to communicate online with members of his activist community, he still feels disconnected from them because he finds these online channels to be impersonal. It would be game-changing to **make online engagement feel more intimate**.

Some HMWs:
How might we...
- Make online communication channels look more human
- Easily facilitate community member reunions
- Connect people to local groups with interests similar to their online groups
- Diversify the subjects that online communities surround
- Train people to enjoy online engagement
- Help introduce people to new local communities
From these, we chose to explore:
1. HMW easily facilitate community member reunions (POV 3)
2. HMW connect people to others who want to start niche communities (POV 1)
3. HMW learn about other people’s niche interests (POV 1)

Our best solutions to these are:
1. Push notifications when community members are nearby
2. “Tinder”-like matchmaking for individuals to form communities
3. Seeing niche interests of individuals as you come in close proximity to them

Experience Prototypes

Prototype 1: Rekindle

Our first prototype tackled the solution “push notifications when community members are nearby”. Our assumption was that people would be open to meeting up with other members of their community if they realized they were nearby, and this would be easier than having to ask and arrange plans.

To test our prototype, we would ask a person what communities they were a part of. Then when they walk around, we’d indicate that a member of their community is in the area by holding up a piece of paper to simulate the notification. Ricky acted as the push notification while Danielle, Tyler, and Jen observed. Oscar was strolling around Stanford Main Quad when he agreed to test our prototype. After he introduced his communities, Ricky walked around with him and occasionally notified Oscar that a member of his community was a certain distance away.
Oscar told us that he liked the idea of connecting with people based on location because he sometimes doesn’t have time to check in with friends far away about their travel plans. However, he mentioned he would prefer that the notification arrive farther in advance, and accompany arrival details, so he could arrange to see the friend.

From this, we learned that while users might be open to the idea of knowing where their friends and community members are, spontaneity is not always an option. Oscar’s remarks contradicted our original assumptions, as he stated that he’s too busy throughout the day to accommodate a surprise visit. Our new assumption is that people want to plan in advance for when they meet others, but appreciate receiving the information needed to do so with as little effort as possible.

Prototype 2: Niche

Our second prototype targeted the solution “‘Tinder’-like matchmaking for individuals to form communities”. We came into testing with the assumption that an obstacle to creating and joining communities centered around niche interests was fear of judgement from others, since not many might share the interest.

To construct the prototype, we made 20 flash cards of relatively niche interests. We would show the deck to our participant and have them swipe right to “like” interests, indicating that they would join a community for that interest, and swipe left otherwise. After swiping right, they were shown a notecard saying there was a certain number of other people who shared that interest, prompting them to interact with this group and hopefully find or form community through it—a community guaranteed to share the interest.
We met Raj in The Axe and Palm. He went through the deck quickly, “liking” seven cards. After finishing, he gave us positive feedback, stating that he loved the concept and had fun swiping across different communities that he didn’t know were out there.

However, one question he had was what would happen after groups were made. Would Niche plan events, or is this up to the community members themselves? We inferred that Raj was hungry for more from the app but still felt that there were some obstacles left to engaging with communities. Even after finding members with shared interests, there was still worry about reaching out to these members. This validates our original assumption—that many people fear judgment when creating and joining niche communities—and suggests that we solve this problem even more aggressively. We can expand on our idea by helping users initiate interactions in a stress-free way.

Prototype 3: AMA

For our final prototype, we implemented the solution “seeing niche interests of individuals as you come in close proximity to them”. We approached this challenge with the assumption that one of the main barriers to meeting new communities is simply not knowing that they exist. From this, the assumption follows that we often don’t think to ask someone about an interest they have because we don’t know to ask. Thus, Ask Me About (AMA) was born.
We constructed our prototypes by each writing a list of lesser-known interests we have under the headline “Ask Me About”. After finding Stanford student Alita on the street, Ricky, Jen, and Danielle acted as passerby who happen to have opted into the AMA app while Tyler observed and took photos. When Alita raised her phone camera at a passerby, they would raise up their list for Alita to see, inviting a conversation about their niche interests.

Alita admitted it was cool to see what interests people had, but her overall impression was that the interaction felt like a *Black Mirror* episode. Even though she knew the passerby consented by nature of opting into AMA, she was still uncomfortable scanning people, and she’s not the type of person to approach strangers, anyway. Ultimately, Alita told us she wouldn’t use the app, but suggested that if it was more Tinder-like, where nearby people’s interests were displayed and users could agree online before meeting in person, perhaps then she would. We found this remark to be especially noteworthy, given our second prototype.

We learned that although the barrier of knowledge was erased, AMA created a new barrier of discomfort by way of its design. Alita was made to know she could ask about an interest, but not made to feel like she could ask. Our assumption that lack of knowledge about interests impedes on community formation was not proven to be invalid, but our solution introduced new discomfort, confounding our test and thus not proving our assumption to be valid either.
Key Takeaways

In each new test, our participants brought things to our attention that we hadn’t even considered, the main ideas being:

1. People want to plan for meeting old friends rather than meet them spontaneously.
2. People not only want help meeting people with shared interests but also want help initiating interactions with them.
3. People think scanning people is dehumanizing, even if the people consent to being scanned, and would prefer a more traditional app interface.

A common theme throughout the encounters was that the amount of effort required at any point in the process of engaging with or forming a community is perhaps the most important determinant of whether any action will be taken. This includes the effort to reach out, lean in, and step outside of the comfort zone.

With these takeaways in mind, we decided that Niche was the most successful of the three prototypes. While feedback on Rekindle and AMA both challenged our assumptions and suggested significant reconstructions to the original ideas—with Alita even unknowingly proposing a structure similar to Niche—Raj confirmed our assumptions and asked questions prompting us to think about next steps. Of the three prototypes, Niche elicited the strongest positive reaction and general enjoyment from the user, which makes us excited to see where we can take it moving forward.