Hybrid coworking spaces for remote workers: The role of cafés and Discord channels as a unified community hub

Ruang kerja bersama "hybrid" untuk pekerja jarak jauh: Peran kafe dan saluran Discord sebagai pusat komunitas terpadu

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Abstract

Remote work has become increasingly popular in recent years, particularly following the global shift in work dynamics due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Such situations lead to new challenges in maintaining social connections and productivity among workers. Therefore, this study examines how hybrid coworking spaces, including cafés and Discord channels, function as community hubs for remote workers. Using a qualitative approach, the researcher conducted digital ethnography over six months (June-November 2023) on a coworking community for remote workers in Surabaya, Indonesia. In-depth interviews with eleven remote workers were also conducted. The findings show that cafés provide a social and productive environment as it gives remote workers a balance of focus and casual interaction. Discord channels further support this by creating a virtual coworking space that facilitates continuous communication, collaboration, and emotional support. The hybrid coworking spaces then creates a unified community hub that help reduce loneliness and build social connections among remote workers. This approach not only increases workers' productivity but also enhances emotional well-being. It provides remote workers with both social energy and flexibility. The study concludes that the integration of physical and digital spaces can form a sense of community which supports remote workers in maintaining motivation and connection.

Keywords: hybrid coworking spaces; remote workers; work from cafes; virtual coworking spaces

Abstrak

Bekerja jarak jauh (remote work) semakin populer dalam beberapa tahun terakhir, terutama setelah terjadi perubahan global dalam dinamika kerja akibat pandemi COVID-19. Situasi tersebut memunculkan tantangan baru bagi para pekerja jarak jauh dalam menjaga koneksi sosial dan produktivitas mereka. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana ruang kerja bersama "hybrid", termasuk kafe dan saluran Discord berfungsi sebagai pusat komunitas bagi pekerja jarak jauh (remote workers). Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, peneliti melakukan etnografi digital selama enam bulan (Juni-November 2023) pada komunitas pekerja jarak jauh yang berbasis di Surabaya, Indonesia. Peneliti juga melakukan wawancara mendalam dengan sebelas pekerja jarak jauh. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kafe menyediakan lingkungan sosial dan lingkungan produktif bagi pekerja jarak jauh. Hal ini dikarenakan kafe memberikan keseimbangan antara suasana yang mendukung untuk fokus dan mendorong interaksi non-formal. Saluran Discord memperkuat suasana tersebut dengan menciptakan ruang kerja virtual yang memfasilitasi komunikasi berkelanjutan, kolaborasi, dan dukungan emosional. Dalam hal ini, ruang kerja bersama hybrid menciptakan pusat komunitas terpadu yang membantu mengurangi kesepian dan membangun hubungan sosial di antara pekerja jarak jauh. Pendekatan ini tidak hanya meningkatkan produktivitas pekerja tetapi juga meningkatkan kesejahteraan emosional mereka. Hal ini memberi pekerja jarak jauh energi sosial dan fleksibilitas. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa integrasi ruang fisik dan digital dapat membentuk "sense of community" yang mendukung pekerja jarak jauh dalam menjaga motivasi bekerja dan hubungan sosial.

Kata Kunci: *ruang kerja bersama hybrid; pekerja jarak jauh; bekerja dari kafe; ruang kerja bersama virtual*

Introduction

The shift toward remote work has altered the way individuals engage with their professional and personal environments (Aroles et al. 2019). While remote work existed before the COVID-19 pandemic, its normalization and widespread adaptation significantly increased during and after that global health crisis (Kaiser et al. 2022). The circumstances that were caused by the pandemic accelerated the acceptance and integration of remote work practices into mainstream employment. It has shaped new

norms and approaches to how individuals carry out their professional responsibilities (Raj et al. 2023). This shift was not merely a temporary response to such health crisis conditions but marked a more lasting transformation in the way people perceive and engage with remote work as an accepted mode of employment (Choudhury et al. 2020, Gibbs et al. 2021). As professionals increasingly embrace this remote work lifestyle, the social implications of this transformation come into question.

The flexibility of remote work provides workers with various advantages. It can reduce commuting time and increase workers' autonomy (Anderson 2009, Bloom et al. 2015). However, it has also introduced several challenges especially related to social connections and interactions. In traditional workplaces, the office often serves as a hub for socialization because it offers employees opportunities to form relationships, share ideas, and develop a sense of community. But since remote workers can choose their place of residence without being tied to a physical office, it may lead to significant social consequences (Gifford 2022). For example, geographic separation in remote work can alter the way staff members communicate and collaborate with each other. If such situations continue for a long period, the adoption of remote work models can reshape company culture which influences employee engagement, ownership of work, and corporate identity (Kowalsky et al. 2022, Ng et al. 2022, Raghuram 2021).

During the era of pandemic-induced remote working, considerable attention has been drawn to the issue of loneliness among workers. Taser et al. (2022) highlighted the significance of loneliness as an inherent element of feeling disconnected from others. The physical separation from colleagues and the absence of face-to-face interactions deprives individuals of the social connections (Xiao et al. 2021). Remote workers may miss out on the informal socializing that occurs naturally in a traditional office, making it difficult to establish a sense of community and companionship (McPhail et al. 2024). This absence of casual conversations, impromptu meetings, and shared experiences can lead to a sense of disconnection.

Furthermore, the blurred boundaries between personal and professional life in remote work can amplify feelings of isolation (De Laat 2023). In traditional office, workers are provided with particular setup that creates a clear distinction between work and personal space. This kind of setup allows individuals to mentally switch between the work and personal life activities. Meanwhile, remote work keeps work-related tasks in the home environment which can lead to increased feelings of isolation or overwhelm (Gajendran & Harrison 2007). The increase and high frequency of online meetings and constant communication during the transition to remote work can also lead to fatigue and burnout among workers (McPhail et al. 2021).

A recent study by Yang et al. (2022) shows that firm-wide remote work caused the collaboration network of workers to become more static and siloed, with fewer bridges between disparate parts. In addition, there was a decrease in synchronous communication and an increase in asynchronous communication. Together, these effects may make it harder for employees to acquire and share new information across the network which amplifies the challenges of isolation and disconnection. However, the isolation that is often experienced by remote workers has driven individuals to seek alternative means of recreating these kinds of social connections. Two prominent spaces where remote workers are finding these connections are cafés and online platforms like Discord.

Cafés have long been associated with creativity and community, providing an environment where people can work independently while remaining in the presence of others (Oldenburg 1999). An urban sociologist, Ray Oldenburg introduced the concept of "third place", which highlights the significance of spaces outside of home and work that facilitate social interactions and foster a sense of belonging, such as cafés (Oldenburg 1999). Cafés as third places enable remote workers to escape the isolation of their home offices while benefiting from the ambient social atmosphere. The bustling environment combined with the availability of coffee and Wi-Fi makes cafés a popular choice for those seeking both productivity and casual social engagement (Broadway et al. 2019).

Cafés have historically been spaces for social interaction, intellectual exchange, and community building (Oldenburg 1999). As discussed by Tjora & Scambler (2014), cafés have long served as important social spaces that foster community bonds and informal gatherings. However, their study primarily

upholds the classical notion of third places, emphasizing their role in encouraging sociability rather than productivity. In the context of remote work, cafés have taken on a new role as informal coworking spaces. This was highlighted by Nguyen et al. (2019) as they explain how bookstore-cafés cater to both leisure and work-related activities. Droumeva (2021) explains that the ambient noise of a café which she calls "coffitivity," has been shown to enhance creativity and productivity. For remote workers, this unique combination of background activity and personal workspace offers a relief from the solitude of working from home. Additionally, cafés also provide opportunities for spontanious interactions that that helps build meaningful connections (Montgomery 1997, Ferreira 2021). Remote workers in cafés often find themselves engaging in brief conversations with baristas or fellow customers and it can alleviate the feelings of loneliness and create a sense of belonging (Egan et al. 2022). Cafés that often host regular customers create a semi-predictable social environment that resembles the communal aspects of traditional workplaces.

Simultanously, the rise of digital communication platforms has provided remote workers with innovative ways to connect and collaborate with other people (Hafermalz & Riemer 2020, Taser et al. 2022). Virtual communities that provide emotional support and collaborative opportunities can utilize digital platform to build and maintain connectivity. There are many digital platforms for work that is available, such as Slacks and Teams. However, this research chooses Discord as its focus because this platform has gradually changed into a virtual space for diverse communities, including professionals and remote workers. In this platform, remote workers can join communities that share the same interests or have similar professions due to its customizable servers and channels. Remote workers that use Discord can utilize several features, such as coworking sessions, where participants work on their tasks while connected via voice chat. This practice is known as "virtual coworking" (Orel et al. 2023). The concept of virtual third places is also relevant here as Discord channels can be seen as digital extensions of Oldenburg's third place (Soukup 2006). McArthur & White (2016) also argue that some digital platforms can serve as digital gathering sites as they offer opportunities for connection, interaction, and community building.

Many scholars have research the individual roles of cafés and digital platforms like Discord as key spaces for fostering social connections among remote workers. However, none have considered these spaces as a unified platform for social engagement. Therefore, this study aims to bridge that gap by exploring how cafés and Discord work together as interconnected hubs for social interaction. By examining both the physical and digital dimensions of such coworking spaces, the discussion seeks to show how remote workers navigate isolation and recreate a sense of community. With this comprehensive view, researchers can understand better of the way modern workers build and maintain social ties in the absence of traditional office settings.

Research Method

To address the research questions, researcher used a qualitative approach and gathered empirical data through digital ethnography. This method allows researcher to observe and participate in an online community and has been proven useful for studying behaviors and interactions within such community (Hine 2015). The digital ethnography approach includes online and offline observations within 6 (six) months from June to November 2023. According to Garcia et al. (2009), online observations can help researchers in understanding the everyday activities of research subjects within the studied network. In this case, it can help researcher to observe and take notes on the interactions and behaviors of remote workers within the Discord channel. In conducting digital ethnography, researcher started the process of entering a remote workers community in Surabaya with the assistance of a colleague who is already part of it. After a proper introduction and explanation of the research project, the community members agreed to participate and let researcher to join their Discord channel.

Active participation in joint work activities in cafés around Surabaya also complemented the online observations. Researcher also conducted in-depth interviews with eleven remote workers. The occupations of the informants are primarily within the IT field, including software developers, website developers,

mobile application developers, digital marketers, and illustrators. Their remote work experience range from 2 (two) to 6 (six) years. They live in Surabaya but they work remotely for companies located in Jakarta, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Penang.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed in this study, including consent, disclosure, and data security. Informants were explicitly informed by researcher about the study's purpose, the intention to conduct online-offline observations, and the use of their data with efforts to minimize the risk of revealing their identity. Anonymization of informant names was implemented by researcher to mitigate inconvenience and potential disclosure. The data from online-offline observations and interviews were securely stored and only researcher have control over data access. Researcher will securely delete the data when they are no longer necessary to minimize the possibility of informants' disclosure.

After the data is collected from online observations and interviews, researcher used the descriptive coding method to identify and summarize primary themes for analysis. With this method, researchers can assign labels that capture the essence of certain segment in a qualitative data that will be categorized and analyzed based on its themes (Saldana 2013). After organizing and interpreting the data through these themes, the researcher drew conclusions about how hybrid coworking spaces function as community hubs for remote workers. This approach ensures that the conclusions are grounded in the data and accurately reflect the informants' experiences.

Results and Discussion

The following section presents the results and discussion of the study. The discussion is divided into three main subthemes: "Café Environments as Productive Community Hubs", "Discord Channels as Digital Extensions of the Community Hubs", and "The Hybrid Coworking Spaces as a Unified Community Hub". Each subtheme highlights the unique ways in which remote workers handle isolation and create a sense of community through these unified platforms.

Café environments as productive community hubs

Some informants in this study identified café as key spaces for developing a sense of community while working remotely. They found some cafés have lively and social atmosphere that can provide a sense of shared experience and companionship. When researcher joined the coworking group for WFC (Work from Café) activities during an offline observation, researcher noticed the mix of seating of cafes usually includes cozy individual tables, larger communal areas, and window-side bar stools. The group usually chose a communal table near the windows where sunlight streamed in because they find it creating a pleasant backdrop for their work. Around them, the steady sounds of soft or pop-beat music, quiet conversations, and the occasional coffee grinder set the tone for a productive but relaxed environment.

As researcher worked alongside the group, researcher observed how the shared energy of the space seemed to create the sense of comfortable interactions. The group members occasionally exchanged ideas and offered feedback in between working individually. Sometimes, their quiet discussions blending seamlessly with the café's overall vibe. Interactions with others in the cafe were light but friendly. It makes the experience feel more purposeful and engaging than working alone. This kind of setting stimulates a form of connection that is often lacking in the home-based workspaces.

> "When I do WFC (Work from Café), it feels like I'm being in social environment without the pressure to constantly interact. There's something about the atmosphere… It's my way of being surrounded by people and get the social energy without having to perform or initiate conversations. I can do people-watching as well. Even when I'm with my friends, sometimes we just sit together and work individually without too much talking to each other. It's the perfect balance, where I can focus on my work but still feel connected to a community, even if it's just through the shared space and unspoken companionship". (Informant DOS).

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Informant DOS emphasizes the sense of social interaction that cafés provide, even for those who are not actively engaging with others. The "social environment" mentioned here refers to the ambiance of being surrounded by other people, which can reduce the feeling of isolation common in remote work. However, there is no pressure to constantly interact, allowing workers to enjoy the presence of others without the stress of social expectations. This creates a balance where the worker can feel part of a community while still maintaining their autonomy and focus on their tasks. In addition, informant ARA explains:

> "I usually choose café with less crowd and calmer ambience. It's the mix of activity and calm that really helps me concentrate better than when I'm at home. There's just something about being surrounded by people, but not necessarily interacting with them, that keeps me engaged. The hustle and bustle creates this nice background energy, but it's not overwhelming. At home, it's easy to get distracted by things, but in the café, that balance of activity and peace actually helps me stay focused and productive. It feels like the perfect environment to work, busy enough to feel connected, but quiet enough to get stuff done." (Informant ARA).

Similar to informant DOS, informant ARA reflects how the café environment helps with concentration especially through its "mix of activity and calm". In this case, the background noise and general busyness provide a sense of connection that reduce loneliness that might arise from working remotely. At the same time, it does not overwhelm the worker, unlike in a highly chaotic or noisy space.

During offline observations, when researcher joined some of the informants' activity in a café, it can be seen that the café environment subtly influenced their work dynamics. For instance, researcher noted how informants seemed at ease with the social hum of the space. Occasionally, the informants would glance around the café and exchange brief smiles or nods with familiar faces.

On the other hand, café have become informal coworking spaces for some remote workers where they can experience the social benefits of a traditional office environment, such as casual conversations and networking, without the pressure of formal work structures. During the offline observations, researcher observed the dynamic between remote workers and the café staff, as well as the informal social interactions between the workers themselves. Researcher noted that in between works and sips of coffee, workers exchanged words about their tasks, shared ideas, or offered tips. Sometimes, these conversations expanded to light-hearted moments as workers joking and commenting on the day's work or the café's atmosphere.

These casual interactions create a sense of community that often extends beyond just fellow remote workers. The spontaneous socialization mirrors the unplanned interactions found in traditional office settings where workers engage in impromptu conversations that foster connection and collaboration (Oldenburg 1999). It may also lead to meaningful relationships. Informant HID, for example, describe how she has met a few remote workers at cafés who have turned into friends.

> "I've met a few remote workers at cafés who've turned into friends. I remember one of them approached me at a café and asked about the work I was doing. Over time, we started to recognize each other as regulars and began sitting at the same table. We'd exchange tips on staying productive, talk about the challenges of remote work, and even share personal stories or fun facts about our lives. What started as a simple connection over a shared workspace eventually developed into genuine friendships. Now, we make a point of meeting up whenever we can, whether it's for coffee or just to catch up on each other's progress. I am so happy about it because I rarely see my colleagues that work in the same company with me because we rarely turn our camera on during meetings. That kind of situation often makes me lonely. That's why I prefer to work at cafés." (Informant HID).

In addition, informant ZAN explains how he and his colleagues have made friends with baristas and parking attendants at his favorite café.

"We've made friends with baristas and parking attendants at my favorite café. It feels like a community hub where regulars recognize each other. Sometimes the barista gives us free snacks, and the parking attendant lets us leave our vehicle when we want to step out for a bit and then come back later. It's the kind of familiarity that makes the place feel comfortable." (Informant ZAN).

The explanation from informant ZAN reflects the sense of connection and belonging that the informant experiences at his favorite café. The informant acknowledges that there is a social bond that extends beyond a typical customer-service interaction. The café, in this sense, transforms into a "community hub" where regulars (those who comes regularly) recognize one another, establishing a sense of shared space and mutual recognition. The way the barista offers free snacks to the informant is not just a gesture of hospitality, but a sign of closeness that is built over time. It aligns with the observed situations where that sense of familiarity makes the café feel like a welcoming space. Informants are not only treated as customers but a part of the café's extended community. Similarly, when the parking attendant allows the informant to leave his vehicle and return later without penalty, it shows a deeper trust and understanding between the café's staff and the regular customers.

In addition to facilitating socialization, cafés have become valuable informal coworking spaces for remote workers. Sometimes, workers from diverse backgrounds and professions can also meet in cafés. Whether they come only to work on projects or simply enjoy a break. This kind of interaction is enabled because cafés provide accessible coworking spaces and it has the necessary amenities like Wi-Fi, comfortable seating, and a conducive atmosphere for focused work. For some remote workers, cafés provide an environment that replicates the sense of shared experience often found in physical offices. Informant MAL, for example, reflected, "There's a warmth in café that makes you feel like part of a bigger crowd". This feeling of being part of a collective experience is one of the aspects that makes café an attractive environment for remote workers. Some cafés also provide board games and card games that can be used by the customers. Informants find that playing board and card games with fellow remote workers in the café is a good ice breaker.

These findings significantly expand upon the perspectives of Oldenburg (1999), Tjora & Scambler (2014) and Nguyen et al. (2019) by highlighting how cafés are no longer purely social spaces but have evolved into hybrid environments that blend work and leisure. Unlike Tjora & Scambler (2014) who emphasize cafés as third places that facilitate informal socialization and community engagement, this study's findings suggest that modern cafés increasingly function as productive community hubs for remote workers. While their research upholds Oldenburg's classic third place concept, this study challenges it by showing that cafés are no longer distinct from home (first place) and work (second place) but instead serve as an extension of both. Remote workers use cafes as an alternative workplace that is more comfortable than a traditional office, but also more structured than home. In it, they still engage in social interaction, but with the main goal of getting work done.

Similarly, Nguyen et al. (2019) acknowledge the transformation of third places by exploring the rise of bookstore-cafés in Hangzhou which blend cultural, social, and work-related functions. Their study aligns more closely with this study's findings by recognizing the increasing multifunctionality of these spaces. However, while their research focuses on how bookstore-cafés accommodate both relaxation and intellectual engagement, this study's findings emphasize a stronger shift toward work-oriented café culture, where cafés are actively replacing traditional offices for remote workers. Thus, while Tjora & Scambler (2014) maintain a traditional third place perspective and Nguyen et al. (2019) highlight the hybrid nature of some cafés, this study pushes this conversation further by showing how cafés are becoming integral to the digital and remote work economy. This shift suggests a redefinition of third places, not just as social spaces but as fluid, adaptive environments where work and community coexist.

Discord channels as digital extensions of the community hubs

This study found that Discord channel serves as a digital extension of the community hub established among remote workers. Some informants join into the community from café and later into the Discord

channel. For remote workers, Discord can facilitate them with a "virtual coworking space" where remote workers work on their own tasks while maintaining an open line of communication with other members in the channel. In this context, virtual coworking helps replicate the experience of working alongside colleagues in a shared physical space and makes workers feel connected. For example, informant HID who works as a digital illustrator shared:

> "Discord takes it further by letting us interact throughout the day, eventhough we are not in the same place or we are not able to go out of our home. Sometimes I share my sketches to other members on the channel, and it feels like showing them to colleagues in a studio."
> (Informant HID).

Among many digital platforms, Discord stands out as a virtual space for remote workers to establish and maintain community bonds. Even though it was initially created for gamers, Discord has evolved into a versatile platform for various communities. This study found that Discord adds another layer of social interactions among remote workers where they can talk informally and do virtual coworking. As informant ZAR shared:

> "On our Discord channel, we usually share memes and discuss on certain issues, or even talk about random things. It's different than Slacks because it is more informal, and our community is not tied to a certain company or office." (Informant ZAR).

The quote shows how Discord channels not only offer professional collaboration but also strengthen social interactions within the digital space. In this way, Discord goes beyond being a mere communication tool as it becomes a platform where remote workers can bond over shared experiences, celebrate milestones, and even thows jokes for each other in their workdays. Researcher also found that the informants often listen to the same music playlist on the Discord channel while working from their own house. Sometimes one informant makes the playlist and shares it to the channel, but other times they just randomly play classical instruments on YouTube Music. Since Discord has a feature that allows each member to listen or watch the same video and music on the platform at the same time, it makes them feels like they are in the same room with the same sound ambiance.

As seen in the quote and field note above, one of the most important roles that Discord plays for remote workers is providing emotional support and companionship during challenging workdays. Remote workers often face the challenge of maintaining motivation while working in isolation. In this case, Discord help them in creating a space where workers can receive real-time support, share their struggles, and connect with others facing similar challenges. Another entertainment feature that Discord has is online games. Each members of the Discord channel can play a variety of online games that Discord provided, such as Letter League, Gartic Phone, etc. Informant RAN also explains that she really enjoys this feature.

> "What I enjoy the most is when we play Gartic Phone. The game is so hilarious and silly, and it never fails to make me laugh. Only few of us that are illustrators, therefore some of our drawings are so bad that it's impossible not to laugh at them. It's exactly what I need when I'm feeling stressed from work". (Informant RAN).

Not only share memes and play together on the Discord channel, informants also constantly support each others during certain times, whether when one feeling stressed or achieved something. For example, informant AMA highlighted the role of Discord channel in providing ongoing support and companionship throughout the workday. Informant AMA and TEN noted,

> "On Discord, my friends make me feel supported, especially during tough workdays. Especially when some of us or I couldn't join to work in cafés, the (Discord) channel really helps. We also congratulate each other when there is something to celebrate or when someone achieved something." (Informant AMA).

"On Discord, we even coordinate lunchtime chats where we eat together and chat about many things. Sometimes play the same background music playlist while working together and talk about coffee we order that day via GoFood (online food delivery services). So, it feels like sometimes we have a coffee break in a random hour, haha. That's the fun part, because we got to do those kind of things with other people even though we're not in an office." (Informant TEN).

The virtual support system that is going on the Discord channel actually mirrors the emotional bonds formed in physical office environments. In this way, workers can rely on each other for encouragement and motivation during challenging tasks. Discord allows remote workers to engage in the virtual coworking where they can work on their individual tasks while maintaining an open line of communication, much like the shared focus found in physical office spaces. Its values which include "original, reliable, playful, and relatable" (Discord nd) makes the platform suitable for remote workers who seeks fun and informal virtual coworking space. McPhail et al. (2024) argue that emotional support within a community is important for maintaining motivation and productivity, especially in remote work settings where individuals may struggle with feelings of isolation or burnout. In this regard, Discord allows workers to lean on each other, offering a sense of shared purpose and solidarity during difficult tasks or overwhelming workdays.

Furthermore, Discord has an effective tool for remote work communities which is its ability to host a variety of specialized channels. Members can create these channels for specific topics, projects, or even social interactions. With the existence of this feature, remote workers can have specific spaces that can fit into their needs. It can include text-based chats, voice conversations, and even video calls. For remote workers, Discord's organized a user interface that allows them to interact with others in a way that simulates the collaborative and supportive atmosphere of an office environment. By organizing conversations into different channels, Discord enables remote workers to engage in focused discussions while also participating in more casual, social exchanges. Whether it is exchanging work-related advice, receiving feedback on a project, or simply joining in a casual conversation during a virtual lunch break, Discord provides the tools to replicate the variety of interactions that are typically found in a traditional office setting.

These findings complement existing literature on digital third places, particularly those discussed by Soukup (2006), McArthur & White (2016), and Orel et al. (2023). While Soukup (2006) conceptualizes online platforms as digital third places that foster informal social connections, this study's findings show that Discord goes beyond the traditional role of a third place by providing a virtual coworking environment where remote workers engage in both work-focused activities and social interactions. This study reveals that Discord's structure bridges the gap between work (second place) and social relaxation (third place), making it a hybrid space that serves both functions. This evolution of digital third places is more aligned with the changing needs of remote workers who require both emotional support and productivity tools, a nuance that Soukup's (2006) definition of third places doesn't fully capture, as it mostly emphasizes socialization over work-related tasks.

Similarly, McArthur & White (2016) describe how Twitter chats can serve as digital gathering sites that replicate the social functions of third places. However, this study's findings extend this idea by emphasizing that Discord's multifunctionality (from coworking sessions to casual conversations) allows for deeper engagement in work and emotional support than platforms like Twitter chats, which focus primarily on social interaction. Discord's ability to accommodate virtual coworking, where workers can collaborate while maintaining open communication, aligns with Orel et al. (2023) who discuss the concept of virtual coworking in digital platforms. This study provides further insight into how Discord's channels enable remote workers to balance productivity with social engagement more effectively than other platforms studied in these literatures, showing how Discord's tools are particularly suited for fostering community cohesion as well as focus in a work environment.

These findings renew the concept of digital third places by showing that platforms like Discord are not just about socializing or engaging informally, but also about creating a supportive, productive environment for remote workers. These findings highlight the growing complexity of digital third places,

where spaces like Discord are evolving to meet the dual needs of social interaction and professional productivity—something that earlier studies like Soukup (2006) and McArthur & White (2016) begin to hint at but do not fully explore.

The hybrid coworking spaces as a unified community hub

While earlier studies have acknowledged the social benefits of working in cafés (Broadway et al. 2019, Droumeva 2021, Ferreira 2021, Egan et al. 2022), this research demonstrates that these interactions extend beyond the café's physical setting and spill over into virtual spaces. For some remote workers, the combination of physical spaces like café and digital platforms like Discord creates a hybrid form of community that bridges the gap between isolation and social engagement. This hybrid model allows workers to experience the best of both worlds: the physical presence and social energy of café combined with the constant connectivity and digital support offered by platforms like Discord. The hybrid coworking space model also supports professional development, with informants sharing resources and advice on both café and Discord.

> "In my opinion, working from a café or WFC and working from Discord are actually one unified thing. Even though some of us can go to the café and enjoy the atmosphere there, we still stay connected with those who can't come through Discord. So, even if we're not in the same physical location, communication and collaboration are still maintained. Discord acts as a digital bridge that connects all of us, even when some choose to work from home or other places. In this way, we still feel connected, like working as one team despite being separated by distance." (Informant RAW).

Physical spaces with ambient noise can encourage a sense of belonging and social connectedness among remote workers. For them, these spaces provide the necessary social energy that might be missing from a home office. However, the social connection builds in cafés does not stop in that physical setting but extend into the digital realm through Discord channel, especially working from café is not an option whether the worker is sick or the situation is not conducive. As the researcher observed, the interactions moved fluidly between the café and the Discord channel. For example, one time when working in a cafe, one worker who could not make it in person posted a message on the Discord channel: "*I'm stuck on this part of the code. Can someone check if my logic makes sense?*". Then someone at the table who works in the same field as the online member quickly typed back a response. In this way, virtual platforms like Discord complement physical spaces by providing digital rooms for social interaction and collaborative work.

During the week, members frequently used the Discord channel to plan impromptu or regular meetups at the cafe. Messages like "*Anyone up for a cowork session at the cafe tomorrow morning?*" or "*Heading to Tebat* (a café name) *after lunch, feel free to join!*" popped up almost daily. Some weeks, these invitations led to near-daily gatherings, while other weeks saw just one or two meetups depending on everyone's schedules. One afternoon, researcher responded to an invitation and arrived at the cafe to find three other members already there setting up their laptops. They greeted researcher warmly before diving into their own work. Meanwhile, in the Discord channel, a few members who could not join in person wrote: "*Wish I could be there! Maybe Friday instead?*" and "*Let me know how it goes. I'll catch up later.*" These moments made the researcher realize how the channel fostered both spontaneity and continuity as it allows the group to adapt to everyone's availability.

The researcher noticed how the flexibility of the hybrid setup kept the community dynamic. Some members came to the cafe every time an invitation was sent out, while others joined only occasionally depending on their schedules. On some active weeks, the meetups almost felt like a daily ritual where members casually rotating in and out of the group. For the researcher, it was clear how this combination allowed the group to stay connected, whether they worked side by side at the cafe or engaged from afar.

Moreover, hybrid coworking spaces provide a balance between social interaction and focused work. For some remote workers, the shift from a home office to a hybrid coworking space provides them with the mental space to be more creative and productive. Meanwhile, for some other remote workers, the

perceived impact of hybrid coworking spaces extends beyond productivity as it also touches on their mental well-being. The ability to recreate office-like settings hybrid coworking spaces helps mitigate the risks of having mental breakdowns for remote workers. This hybrid coworking space challenges the traditional boundaries between physical and digital workspaces because it shows that remote work is not a matter of choosing one over the other but rather integrating the strengths of both environments.

This study makes a significant theoretical contribution to the discussions within urban sociology and digital sociology by merging insights from both fields. Urban sociology has long focused on how physical spaces like cafés function as community hubs that foster social interaction, collaboration, and emotional support (Oldenburg 1999, Tjora & Scambler 2014, Broadway et al. 2019, Nguyen et al. 2019, Droumeva 2021). However, this study's findings complement the discussion by showing how the digital extension of cafés via platforms like Discord creates a hybrid community hub that spans both physical and digital realms which offers new insights into how digital spaces can enhance urban spaces' social functions. From the perspective of digital sociology, this research advances the understanding of how virtual third places (Soukup 2006, McArthur & White 2016) have evolved into hybrid coworking spaces. The integration of physical spaces like cafés with digital platforms challenges the traditional separation of work and social spaces, illustrating that remote work environments today are defined by a blended experience that combines the spontaneity and community engagement of physical spaces with the connectivity and flexibility of digital platforms.

Conclusion

This study shows that combining physical spaces like cafés with online platforms such as Discord can help remote workers feel less isolated and more connected to a community. Cafés provide a comfortable place for remote workers to focus on their tasks while still being around other people, which helps reduce loneliness. On the other hand, Discord allows workers to stay connected with others even when they are not physically together as it provides a space for collaboration, social interaction, and emotional support. Together, these hybrid coworking spaces offer the best of both worlds by combining in-person and digital connections. In addition, this study finds that the hybrid coworking spaces do more than just improve productivity as they also support workers' mental well-being. The flexibility of the hybrid coworking spaces makes it easy for remote workers to stay connected in ways that fit their schedules and needs.

Unlike the previous studies that primarily focus on either physical coworking spaces or virtual platforms, this study examines the intersection of the two spaces. It provides a novel perspective on how community and work are reimagined in the digital age where the blend between physical and digital spaces is increasingly unified. However, since this study only focuses on individual experiences, it does not cover systemic factors such as access to technology, class disparities, or cultural differences. Therefore, future sociological research could examine how these spaces influence broader social structures. Additionally, it would be valuable to explore the cultural nuances of hybrid coworking spaces across diverse geographical regions to understand how local cultures influence the use of both physical cafés and virtual platforms like Discord. For practitioners, they could consider designing hybrid coworking environments that emphasize flexibility and mental well-being to create more inclusive and supportive environments for workers.

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