



DePaul University
HCI 445

Final Presentation

Graduate Student Stress & Time Management
11 June, 2025



Hello!

In our study, we aim to understand how a technology-based solution can address the issues of stress and time management among graduate students.

Agenda Overview

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- 01 Background of the study
 - 02 Problem Statement
 - 03 Methodology
 - 04 Findings
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 - 06 Scenarios
 - 07 Priority Matrix
 - 08 Discussion

Background of the Study

Our report is based on observations and interviews with graduate students from different backgrounds —like HCI, Computer Science, Public Health, and UX —both from the U.S. and abroad. It looks at how they handle their busy academic lives, manage stress, distractions, and use different tools to stay productive while dealing with the fast pace of a quarter system.



Problem Statement

Our team sought to answer the question: How can a technology-based solution aid graduate students in managing their academic work, avoiding distractions, and handling stress?



Scope of the Study

Our study aims to pinpoint pain points and opportunities, assess behaviors, and offer innovative insights.

Relevance of the Study

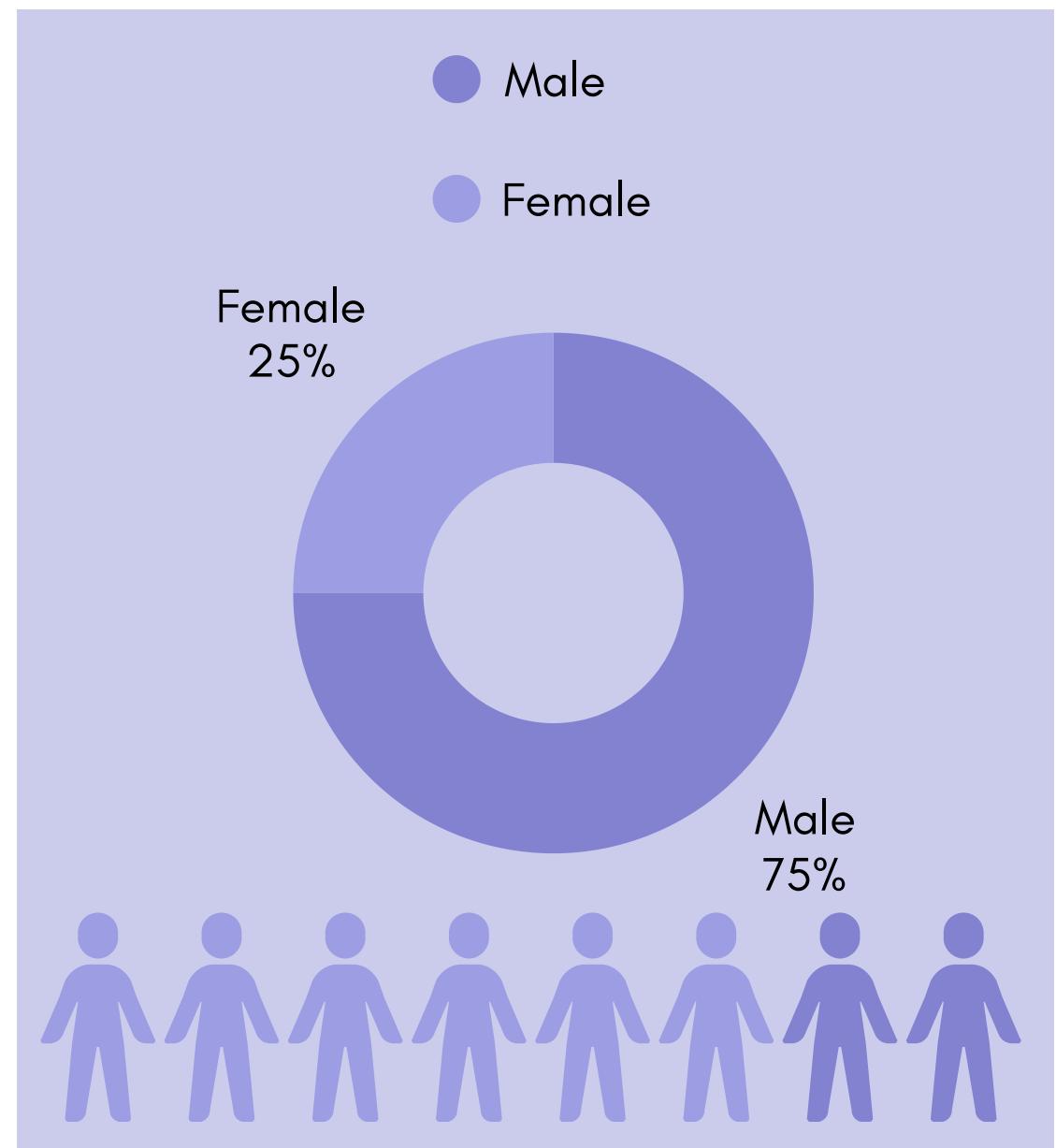
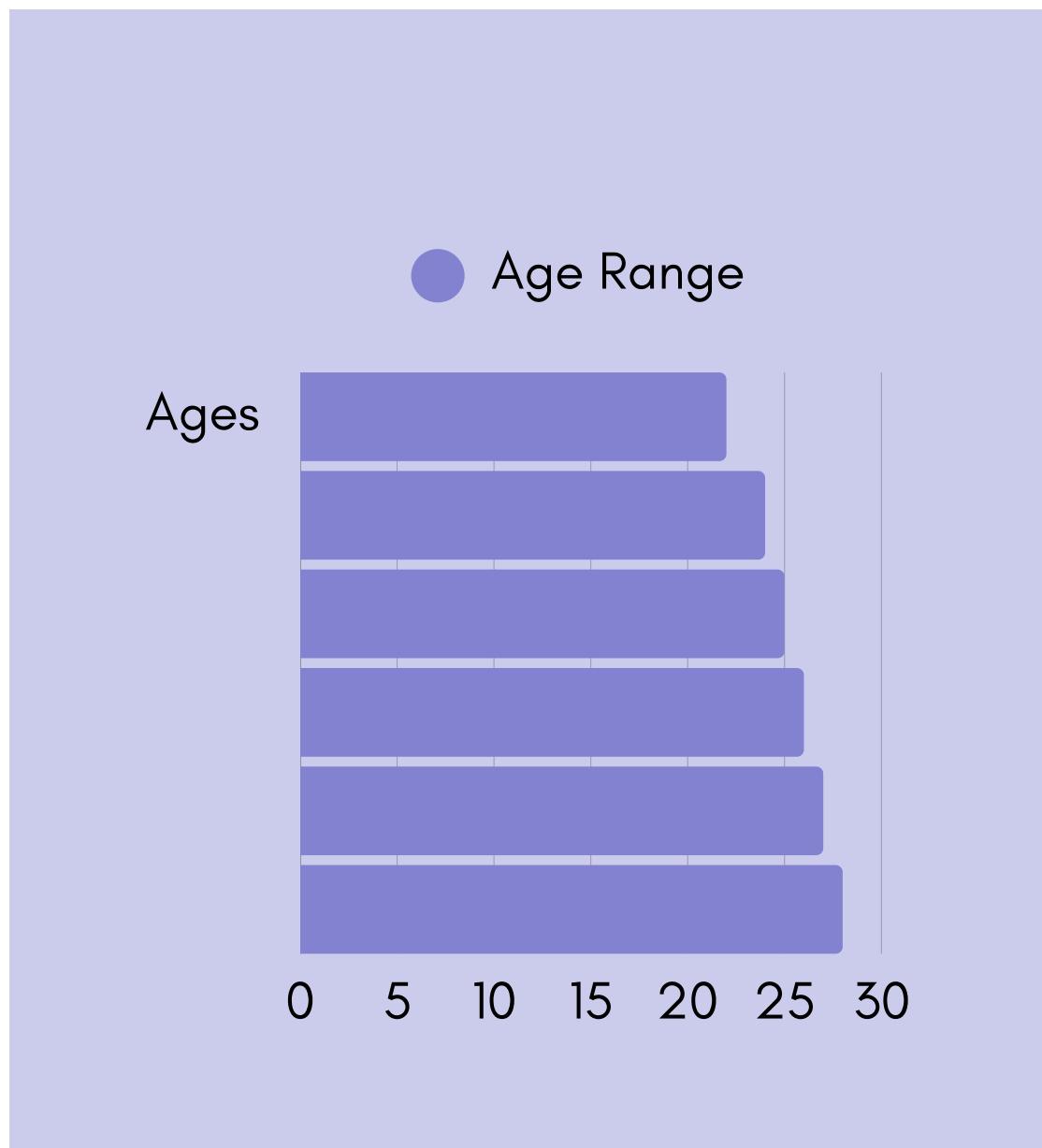
Understanding how graduate students meet or fail to meet the demands placed on them will allow for a technological solution that addresses current problems.

Research Question

How can a technology-based solution aid graduate students in managing their academic work, avoiding distractions, and handling stress?

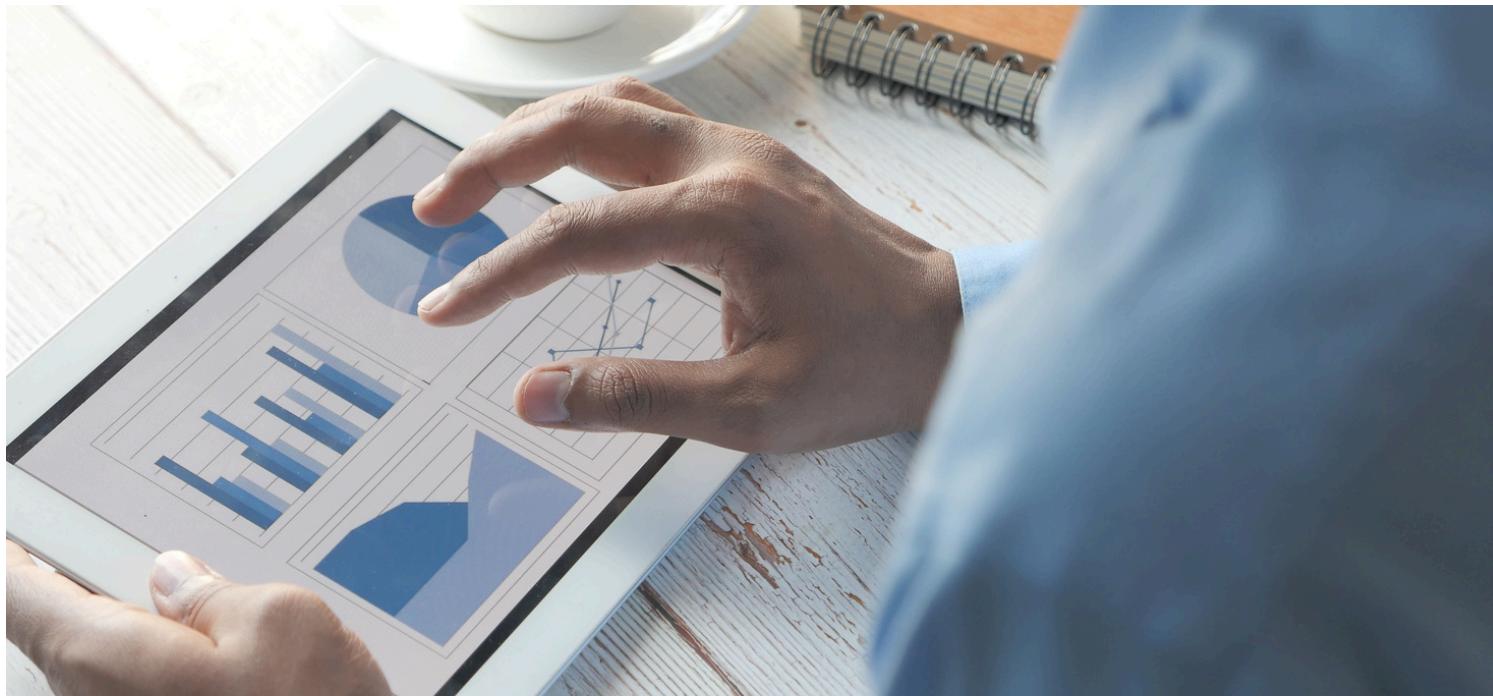
Methodology

- For our observations and interviews;
- Recruited eight graduate students (6 males, 2 females), aged 22 to 28
- With participant consent, we recorded and transcribed each interview.
- Anonymized the data to protect individual identities.
- Used descriptive coding (in- vivo where appropriate) in Atlas.ti
- Figjam to distinguish various catagories.



Findings

We were able to consolidate **5 major** findings through our observations and interviews.



1 Academic Workload & Time Management

Students use varied strategies from proactive planning to last-minute pressure.

2 Productivity Tools & Preferences

Digital tools dominate, but analog tools still have a place.

3. Design Suggestions

Students desire intelligent, adaptive planning tools with minimal input.

4 Stress & Coping Strategies

Stress spikes during finals; coping includes walks, journaling, and less screen time.

5 Distraction & Focus Methods

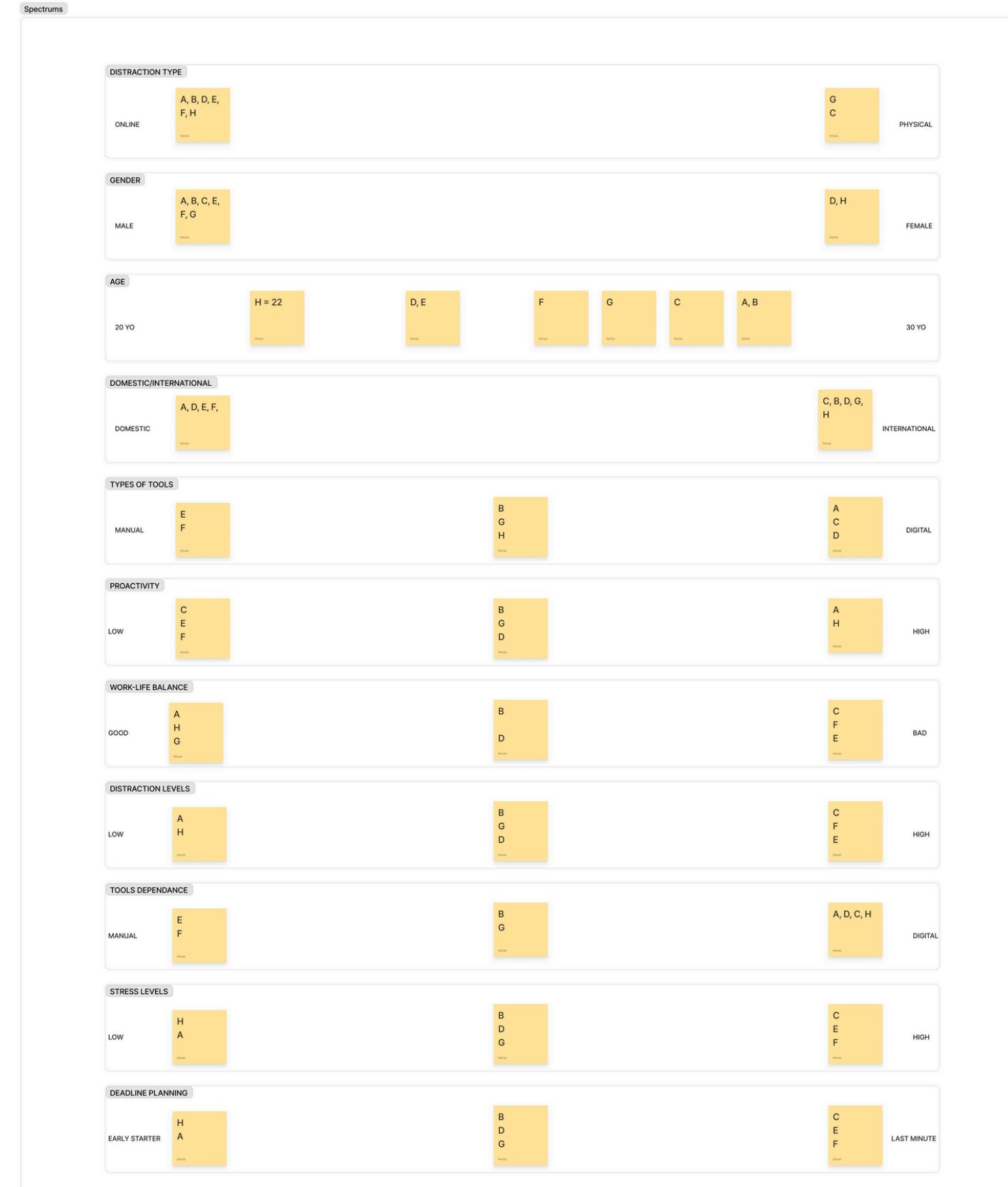
Digital distractions (esp. mobile) are dominant. Students use digital focus tools.

Affinity Diagram



<https://www.figma.com/board/o8W3QmTp1el3zJ4ZMDNi5W/HCI-445-PROJECT?node-id=47-215&t=ZeodlTEHeal5epbM-1>

Spectrums



<https://www.figma.com/board/o8W3QmTp1el3zJ4ZMDNi5W/HCI-445-PROJECT?node-id=47-215&t=ZeodlTEHeal5epbM-1>

Persona 1



"I try to stay ahead, but sometimes I just burn out midweek."

AGE	26
Background	Local student
Gender	Male
Program	Ms in HCI

Jordan

ABOUT

Jordan Reyes is a 26-year-old international student in the MS HCI program. He's highly organized, using tools like Trello and Google Calendar to manage his time. An early riser, he works best in quiet environments like the library and is motivated by deadlines. While he's a strong performer under structure, he often burns out by midweek and feels overwhelmed by juggling too many digital tools.

GOALS

- Submit his assignments in due time.
- Stay focused throughout the week without getting sidetracked.
- Plan efficiently and flexibly.

NEEDS

- Create a more flexible plan for the week.
- Find a way to maintain his energy levels throughout the week.
- Reduce the number of apps and tools he is using.

PAIN POINTS

- Tool Overload: Using too many apps is overwhelming and counterproductive.
- Midweek Burnout: Energy dips lead to guilt and loss of motivation.
- Rigid Planning: Small disruptions derail his entire schedule.

Scenario - Jordan

It's Monday evening. Jordan walks into his apartment after a long day of classes. He feels motivated and ready to tackle the week ahead. He opens his laptop and pulls up his Trello board, Google Calendar, and StayFocusd website blocker. His week is planned out in neat little blocks every task, meeting, and study session carefully scheduled. Jordan feels good knowing he's ahead of deadlines.

By Tuesday, everything is going well. He's knocking out tasks early and feeling productive. But Wednesday, the noise from his roommates gets louder, and the group chat on his phone buzzes nonstop. Jordan tries to ignore it, but distractions creep in. Feeling drained, he decides to open YouTube for just a few minutes. Before he knows it, an hour has passed. The guilt rushes in, and he feels like he's lost all his progress. Frustrated, Jordan remembers hearing about a new app called ShiftSpace that uses AI to help manage focus. He gives it a try. The app notices his energy is low and suggests a simpler, calmer workspace on his screen. It blocks distracting sites and plays a playlist of ambient music designed to calm nerves. The app breaks his work into just one main task, making it easier to start.

After 45 focused minutes, ShiftSpace congratulates Jordan, not on finishing everything, but on simply being present and trying. It asks if he wants to move unfinished tasks to later. He agrees, and the app updates his schedule automatically, so he doesn't have to do it manually.

He realizes that it's okay not to be perfect every day and that smart tools can help him manage stress and distractions without making him feel guilty.

Customer Journey Map

Phase	Emotion	Actions Taken	Touchpoints	Pain Points	Opportunities
Plan (Sun)	Excited, Confident	Creates detailed schedule using Trello	Trello, Calendar	Tool overload	Combine tools into one planning hub
Focus (Mon-Tue)	Productive	Completes tasks early	Chrome extensions, timers	N/A	Reinforce streaks with feedback
Crash (Wed)	Stressed, Distracted	Opens YouTube, ignores planner	Phone, web distractions	Loss of focus, guilt	Smart blocker + adaptive scheduling
Recovery (Thurs)	Relieved	Uses AI app to refocus and reschedule	ShiftSpace app	Manual rescheduling	Auto-update plans, positive feedback
Reflect (Fri)	Calmer, Empowered	Reviews progress, resets next week	Focus tracker, dashboard	Self-judgment	Normalize imperfection, track effort

Personas 2



“Everything feels urgent. I can't tell what to do next.”

AGE	29
Background	International student
Gender	Female
Program	MA in Counseling Psychology

Samira

ABOUT

Samira Khan is a 29-year-old international student in the MA Counseling Psychology program, balancing part-time clinical work with her studies. She uses a mix of paper planners and digital tools like alarms but often feels overwhelmed by urgency and struggles to prioritize tasks. Emotionally driven and easily drained, she focuses best with handwritten lists, calm music, and quiet environments. While her productivity is moderate, fatigue and indecision often derail her workflow.

GOALS

- Organize and plan the week to reduce stress.
- Stays on top of school and takes care of her emotional well-being.
- Plan efficiently and flexibly.

PAIN POINTS

- She feels divided between school, work, and her own emotions.
- Planning feels overwhelming.
- Constantly switching between organizational tools.

NEEDS

- A way to organize and plan effectively.
- Reduce stress.
- Feel more in control of her schedule and emotions.

Scenario - Samira

It's late Thursday evening. Samira drags herself into her apartment after a tiring clinical shift. She sits down at her desk and stares at the handwritten to-do list she made earlier in the week. The list looks long, and her mind feels heavy. Usually, she avoids digital planning apps because they feel too cold and judgmental, making her feel like she's failing if she can't keep up.

Tonight, though, she's desperate for some kind of help. She opens ShiftSpace an app she recently heard about that focuses on emotional support alongside productivity. When the app opens, it doesn't bombard her with tasks or deadlines. Instead, it gently asks, "How are you feeling right now?" Samira selects "tired and stressed."

The app responds kindly: "Let's take one small step together." It suggests a micro-task i.e. just open the article she's been avoiding. Samira hesitates but decides to try. After a few minutes, a soft animation appears with a message: "Great job! You're one step closer."

The small win boosts her mood. She reads the article for ten minutes, then closes the app. For once, she feels calm rather than overwhelmed. The app reassures her that it will remind her gently tomorrow, without any pressure or punishment for what she didn't finish.

Samira smiles, feeling seen and supported for the first time in a while. She's ready to try again tomorrow, knowing it's okay to go slow and take care of herself.

Customer Journey Map

Phase	Emotion	Actions Taken	Touchpoints	Pain Points	Opportunities
Workday (Thurs)	Drained, Heavy	Comes home late, skips tasks	Paper planner, alarms	Too tired to begin	Empathetic onboarding
Avoidance	Overwhelmed	Scrolls phone, feels shame	Instagram, internal guilt	Guilt spiral, task paralysis	Mood check-in and emotional support UI
Reengagement	Curious, Hopeful	Opens ShiftSpace, selects calm mode	ShiftSpace app	App fatigue	Calming interface, mood-based pacing
Progress	Encouraged	Completes one task and rests	Microtask flow	Fear of failure	Feedback based on effort, not outcomes
Reset (Fri)	Relieved, Reflective	Returns next day to gentle reminders	Adaptive schedule UI	Missed tasks guilt	No-reset-needed rolling plan design

Priority Matrix

Feature/Intervention	Impact	Effort
False deadline or soft deadline setting	High	Low
Smart distraction blocker (e.g., DND, adaptive blockers)	High	Low
Gentle emotional check-ins and mood feedback	High	Low
Daily nudges and motivational messages	High	Low
AI planner that auto-imports academic deadlines (e.g., from Canvas)	High	High
Integrated wellness & productivity platform	High	High
Personalized scheduling based on habits and energy	High	High
Analog-digital hybrid support (e.g., sync with whiteboards/planners)	Medium	Low
Micro-tasking mode for burnout recovery	Medium	Low
Focus dashboard with streaks, reflection prompts, and adaptive pacing	Medium	High
Manual planners with reminder support	Low	Low
Gamified rewards system for task completion	Low	High

Discussion



Key Takeaways

- Students need less cognitive load tools
- Digital distraction is the main barrier
- Personalized AI scheduling and gentle nudging are desirable

Design Opportunities

- Adaptive AI Planners
- Distraction Blockers
- Smart Deadline Trackers
- Wellness Nudges

Discussion



Limitations

- Limited number of participants
- Predominantly tech-savvy graduate students
- May not reflect experiences of less tech-inclined users

Future Research

- Include more diverse backgrounds and tech comfort levels
- Incorporate participatory design sessions
- Conduct usability testing of prototypes
- Assess effectiveness of adaptive planning features



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Thank You

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