SHAGUN PARAB

SERV 748 | Process Book

Mindful Scroll

Enabling SCAD resources to help Gen Z students combat social media's negative impact on focus & productivity

Contents

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About the Course

This course aims to cultivate advanced knowledge application in service design, effective communication skills in complex market contexts, and innovative thinking for economic and social impact.

02

About Mindful Scroll

In today's hyperconnected and social media driven world, this project aims to enable SCAD resources to help Gen Z students combat social media's negative impact on focus & productivity.

An Introduction

- Project Definition
- Opportunity Statement
- Project Goals

Defining the problem

Emerging between the late 1990s and early 2000s, Gen Z has grown up cradled in technology. Often dubbed "digital natives," they possess an inherent comfort navigating the online world, adeptly swiping, tapping, and scrolling with a second nature familiarity. However, this demographic has soon turned into a stressed out one. Being born into the digital era and compelled to constantly be on devices and 'connected' has started to make them feel a digital overload.

It is estimated that we now spend more time looking at screens than we do sleeping, at an average of 8h 41 mins day. This raises important questions about the long-term consequences on mental health, productivity & relationships.

Gen Z might be the most affected generation, especially given their online presence and digital habits, with 47% stating that they are on social media for 2-4 hours a day as per The Harris Poll. Gen Z individuals face information overload from round-the-clock news and social media and staying current in the dynamic digital world has. More than one-third of young people experience stress and anxiety extensively and the younger people are, the more likely they are to claim they experience it

There are multiple factors that have led to this dependency on social media. Being born into this digital era, the COVID-19 pandemic which pushed the world online, the need to multi-task, the lure of short-form content and dopamine driven apps to name a few.

Studies have shown that passive social media use like scrolling could be linked to declines in subjective well-being over time.The main issue with social media overconsumption is compromised mental health and well-being. Gen Z is increasingly seeking therapy to cope with these unique challenges like digital era anxieties. Phone notification and social media induced anxiety are two of the most common topics in therapy.

Gen Zers and millennials are more likely than other generations to say social media affects their mental health. As per a survey of 2000 Gen Z individuals by EduBirdie, 59% admit they're addicted to social media, with excessive use having impacted their productivity (58%), social skills (57%), and romantic relationships (43%).

26% of Gen Z have sought help to address their social media-induced anxiety and stress. McKinsey says that *"collaboration between technology companies, mental health professionals, educators, employers, policy makers, and the wider community is necessary. A "precision prevention" approach to talking with young people about the role of technology in their lives may help create a more informed, supportive, and healthful environment."*

Social media is like an omnipresent actor in our lives today and while we cannot completely eliminate it, we could redefine our relationship with it. This is because Gen Z, as the first true digital natives, represent the first generation actively reflecting on their complex relationship with digital technology and online media.

Over
1/3rd
Gen Z respondents say they spend more than two hours each day on social media sites

McKinsey Survey, 2023

56%
surveyed Gen Z state they are addicted to social media and noticed an impact on productivity

Mental Health Awareness Month of May Survey by EduBirdie 2023

26%
surveyed Gen Z have sought help to address their social media-induced anxiety and stress

Mental Health Awareness Month of May Survey by EduBirdie 2023

Opportunity Statement

Current State: Phones are our gateway to the digital world - social media, content consumption, messaging, the works. We now have a paradoxical relationship with our phones that can both facilitate and disrupt our well-being. However, attention, which is a limited resource today, is drained by dopamine-driven apps and constant notifications that we are subject to. For the Gen Z demographic, this is particularly concerning, with 47% spending over two hours daily on social media. There's growing recognition of the toll this takes and information overload is being called a 'societal issue' - akin to environmental pollution!

From a mental health perspective, one of the pressing causes for Gen Z's in therapy is social media induced anxiety. Despite the incremental efforts by social media companies in providing aid towards these habits, the long-term impact of excessive usage continues to persist.

Desired State: My goal is to communicate the value of conscious digital consumption to Gen Z's and provide tools and strategies through which they are equipped to manage their relationship with social media. By focusing on academic spaces like universities and institutions, this initiative can promote long-term goals like productivity in academia and mental well-being of Gen Z's.
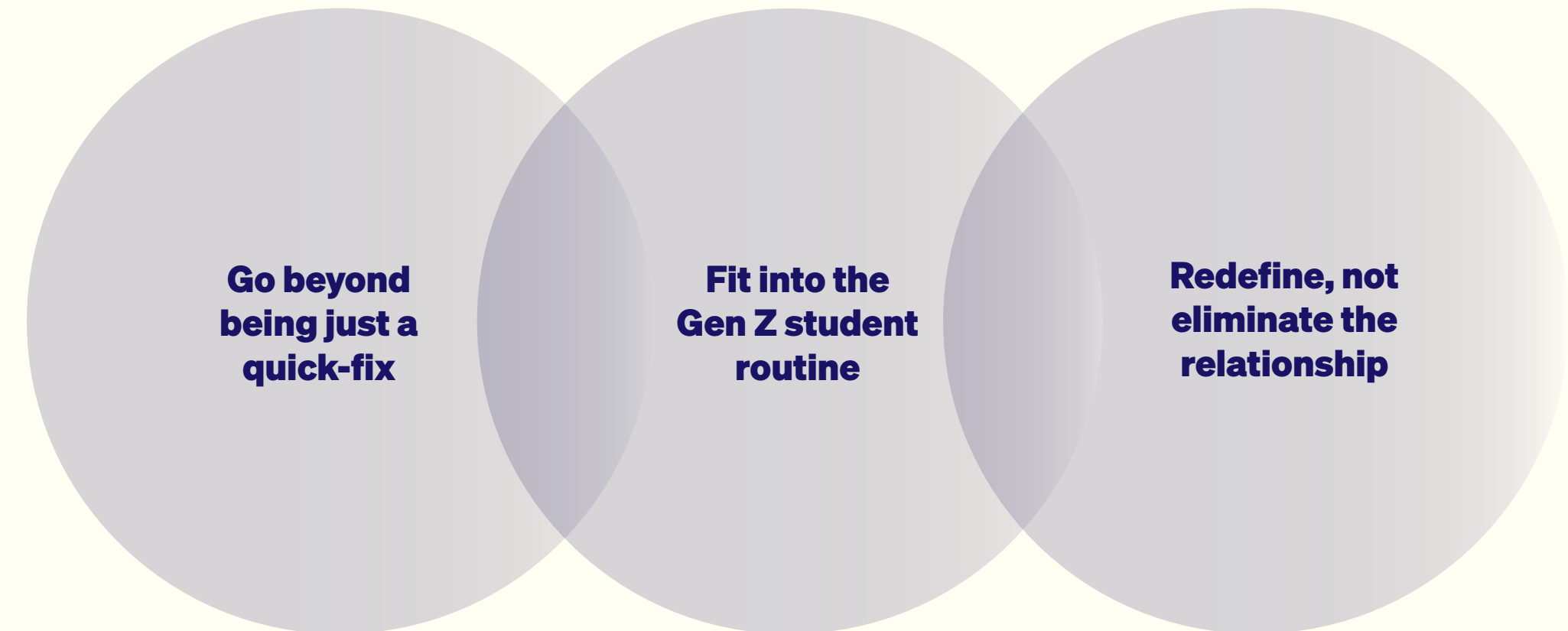
Through development of strategies, tools and/or services, the solution will be targeted at the actors/touchpoints they interact with on a daily basis. To create a sustainable behavioural change of digital habits, the vision is to fit these initiatives into their routines, without being disruptive.

Value: While it is impossible to completely detox from social media and all forms of digital content, solving this problem would help Gen-Z 'redefine' their relationship with social media, by taking ownership of their habits. By fostering a more streamlined and intentional consumption pattern, this shift can enhance their mental health and well-being. Consequently, it could also improve their ability to manage their routines, relationships and overall productivity. These efforts would align with and support social media companies' ongoing initiatives to support healthier usage.

Scope: Gen-Z university students who need to stay up-to-date with academic and career-related information on social media platforms. Through universities' engagement in driving forward these initiatives, the solution can be scalable as it is a self-guided process, which can serve a larger demographic eventually.

Project Goals

Go beyond being just a quick-fix

Fit into the Gen Z student routine

Redefine, not eliminate the relationship

2.1 Project Plan

DISCOVER   **DEFINE**   **IDEATE**   **DEVELOP**   **TEST**

Literature Review

Primary Research

Competitive Analysis

Defining the problem

Idea Generation

Affinitize and synthesize

Concept generation

Concept development

Concept iterations

Final concept

Refining

Testing and evaluation

Inspied by:SSK Design | https://www.sskdesign.org/approach/

Secondary Research

- Current State

- Setting the Context

- Target Audience

- Initiatives in Place

- Gaps & Opportunities

- Themes (Findings & Insights)

- Summative Analysis of Findings

Current State

Gen Z experiences unprecedented levels of stress and anxiety in today's hyperconnected world. According to the American Psychological Association's 2023 report, 81% of Gen Z teens and young adults report experiencing more stress since the start of the pandemic, with social media being a significant contributing factor. Pew Research Center's 2023 findings reveal that 95% of teens use social media, with 46% saying they are online "almost constantly" – creating an always-on mentality that impacts their mental well-being.

The situation is acute among university students. The 2023 National College Health Assessment reports that 77% of college of college students are experiencing moderate to serious psychological distress.

Research published in Current Psychology (2022) found that college students spend an average of 3.5 hours daily on social media platforms, with those reporting higher usage showing significantly lower academic performance and increased anxiety levels. A recent study by Common Sense Media indicates that 38% of college students self-report checking their phones every few minutes, with social media notifications being the primary trigger.

The Journal of American College Health's latest research reveals that 71% of students acknowledge social media as a significant source of academic procrastination, while 58% report feeling "overwhelmed" by the need to maintain their online presence while keeping up with studies. These findings are supported by

data from the Higher Education Research Institute, showing a steady decline in self-reported study time among first-year college students over the past decade.

As universities and educational institutions confront these challenges, the data clearly points to a need for targeted interventions. The Center for Collegiate Mental Health's 2023 report indicates that academic distress and technology-related anxiety are now among the top five concerns reported by students seeking counseling services, marking a significant shift in the landscape of student well-being. Beyond academic impact, a 2023 study from the Journal of Medical Internet Research shows that excessive social media use among college students correlates strongly with decreased sleep quality (affecting 67% of

respondents) and increased symptoms of anxiety (reported by 64% of participants). Microsoft's 2023 Work Trend Index found that constant task-switching and digital distractions can reduce a person's ability to focus by up to 40% - a finding particularly relevant to students attempting to balance academic work with social media use.

Over

1/3rd

Gen Z respondents say they spend more than two hours each day on social media sites

McKinsey Survey, 2023

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surveyed Gen Z state they are addicted to social media and noticed an impact on productivity

Mental Health Awareness Month of May Survey by EduBirdie 2023

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Mental Health Awareness Month of May Survey by EduBirdie 2023

Setting the Context

Social media as previously mentioned, is an omnipresent actor todays day and age. Research indicates a complex relationship between social media use and wellbeing among young adults. While increased screen time correlates with decreased psychological health, the nature of social media engagement appears more influential than time spent. Users' relationship with platforms—how and why they engage—significantly impacts their mental wellbeing beyond simple usage metrics. Tech Press Policy has said that *"Social media is not simply a tool for communication but a reflexive system that shapes and is shaped by human behavior."*

Gen Z university students are a group within the larger demographic that is impacted by social media. The existance of university and professional world content like updates, new happenings on social media makes it difficult to completely cut off. This leads to a conundrum where in social media exposes students to new exciting activities and events that may attract them and keep them engaged in different media contexts for hours just passing their time. But this also typically leads to reduced productivity, reduced academic achievement and addiction to constant media us.

Students also tend to multi-task and switch between activities on a daily basis. Studies have shown that multitasking with technology, specifically using social networking sites decreases both efficiency and productivity in an academic setting.

What's clear is that it is neither possible to discard the use of social media in todays academic life nor to keep students use of social networks fully controlled. Yet, students need to be instructed on how to take advantage of the media and to be least affected negatively by its superifical and unrepresentative content. If those in charge of student affairs in educational settings are aware of the positive or negative effects of social media use on students, they can better understand the complexities of students' needs and are better capable of meeting them.

Despite increasing awareness and efforts to seek help, Gen Z continues to struggle with digital overwhelm and social media addiction. While therapy sessions and wellness apps have become more accessible, with 26% of Gen Z seeking professional help for social media-related anxiety (EduBirdie, 2023), these interventions often provide only temporary relief. According to a 2023 study in the Journal of Behavioral Addictions, 41% of young adults who attempted to reduce their social media usage reported returning to previous usage patterns within two months. The root challenge lies in what researchers at Stanford's Digital Wellness Lab call "persuasive design" - social media platforms engineered to maximize engagement through psychological triggers. Even when equipped with coping strategies, 73% of Gen Z users report

difficulty maintaining their planned usage limits (Pew Research Center, 2023). This creates a frustrating cycle where, according to the American Psychological Association's 2023 digital health survey, 68% of young adults acknowledge social media's negative impact on their well-being yet find themselves unable to make lasting changes in their digital habits.

Here's why I narrow my scope down to the academic setting with the goal of enhancing SCAD's existing resources to better support students and address the digital-era challenges impacting their academic work. Social media cannot be completely eliminiated but we can work on redefining the relationship students have with it to make it more intentional!

58%
surveyed Gen Z state that using social media harms their productivity

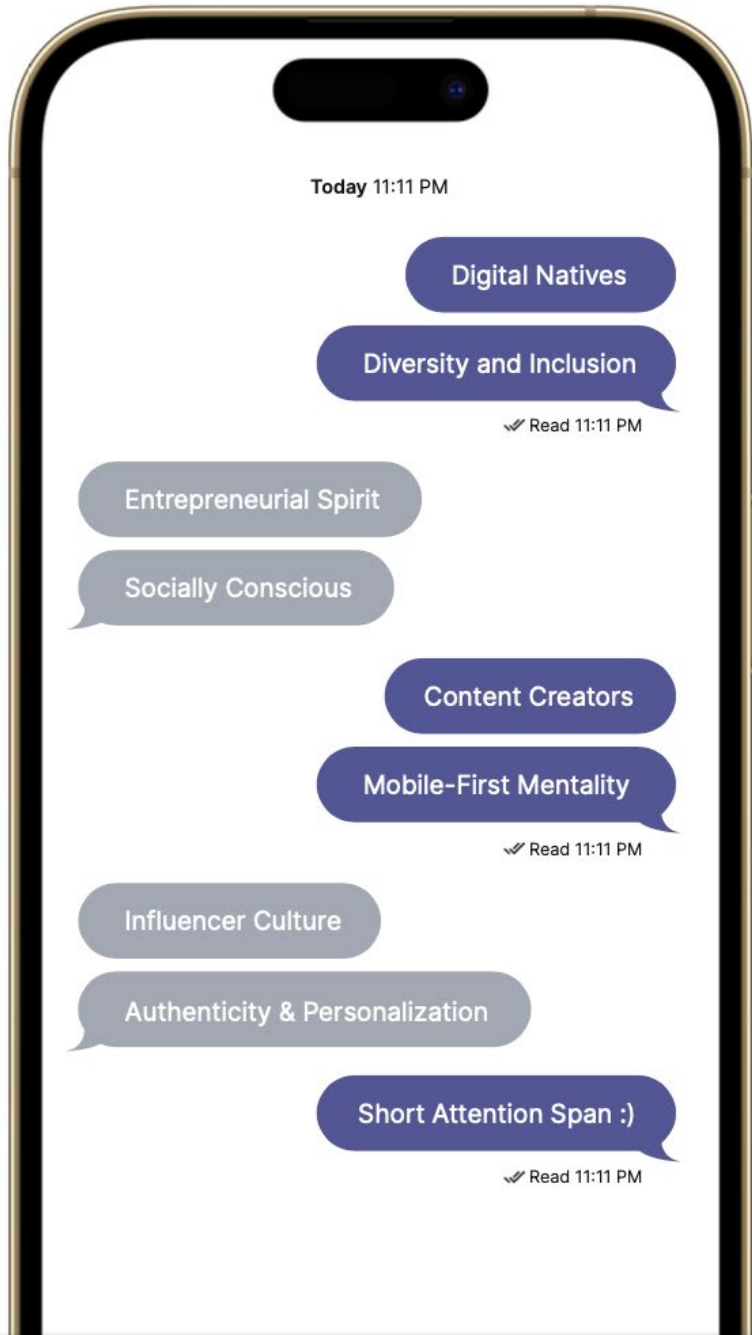Mental Health Awareness Month of May Survey by EduBirdie 2023

1 in 7
surveyed Gen Z have sought professional help for social media addiction

Mental Health Awareness Month of May Survey by EduBirdie 2023

Who is Gen Z?

Generation Z, also known as Gen Z, Zoomers, or postmillennials, is the demographic cohort succeeding Millennials and preceding Generation Alpha. Pew Research Center considers those born from 1997 to 2012 to be part of Gen Z. Gen Z is the most racially and ethnically diverse generation. Globally, they have become the largest generation. Emerging between the late 1990s and early 2000s, Generation Z has grown up cradled in technology. Often dubbed "digital natives," they possess an inherent comfort navigating the online world, adeptly swiping, tapping, and scrolling with a second nature familiarity. Unlike previous generations who witnessed the rise of technology, Gen Z has never known a world without it. This constant presence has shaped their distinct priorities and perspectives, fostering an individualistic and pragmatic outlook

We describe ourselves as

Today 11:11 PM

Digital Natives

Diversity and Inclusion

✓✓ Read 11:11 PM

Entrepreneurial Spirit

Socially Conscious

Content Creators

Mobile-First Mentality

✓✓ Read 11:11 PM

Influencer Culture

Authenticity & Personalization

Short Attention Span :)

✓✓ Read 11:11 PM

Gen Z values

Gen Z values authenticity, unfiltered talks, reliability and new connections

Gen Z prioritizes happiness, stability, and good health above traditional life goals. They value experiences, personal growth, and work-life balance more than conventional markers of success. This generation places a strong emphasis on spending time with family and friends, often ranking it higher than career ambitions.

Gen Z beliefs

Gen Z is characterized by its strong social conscience and sense of awareness

Gen Z is passionate about issues such as healthcare, mental health, education, financial stability, racial equality, inclusion, and environmental conservation. This generation actively advocates for change and expects companies and organizations to reflect their values of diversity and inclusivity.

Gen Z goals

Financial security & stability

A fulfilling career

Personal growth

Social & environmental impact

Diversity & inclusion in all areas

Mental well-being

Work flexibility

New experiences

Building new connections

Gen Z needs & wants

Authenticity + Personalization
They authentic connections and personalized experiences. They value brands and organizations that understand their individuality and cater to their specific needs.

Diversity + Inclusion
As the most diverse generation in history, Gen Z expects and demands representation and equality across all spheres of life.

Career Development
While seeking meaningful work, Gen Z also desires financial security. They want opportunities for rapid growth, both in their careers and finances.

Digital Natives
As digital natives, they expect seamless digital experiences in all aspects of life. They value hyperconnectedness and visual communication.

Gen Z motivations

Work + Life Balance
Gen Z strongly prioritizes work-life balance, having observed older generations sacrifice personal connections and well-being for work4. They seek employers who offer flexibility and understand the importance of life outside work2.

Financial Mindset
This generation is financially cautious, likely influenced by witnessing economic challenges like the Great Recession. They aim for financial stability and are open to innovative ways of creating wealth, including digital investments.

Mental Health Awareness
Mental health is a significant concern for Gen Z, with a higher percentage reporting fair or poor mental health compared to older generations. They are more open about seeking treatment and support for mental health issues

Current social media usage habits

When it comes to social media, the highest group of users amongst all demographics

90%

of U.S. young adults between the ages of 18 to 29 use social media

https://civicscience.com/3-key-social-media-trends-among-gen-z-and-millennials/

2h 43min

is the average time Gen Z spends on social media each day

https://www.businessdasher.com/gen-z-statistics/

61.1M

Gen Z in the United States are active social media users

https://www.businessdasher.com/gen-z-statistics/
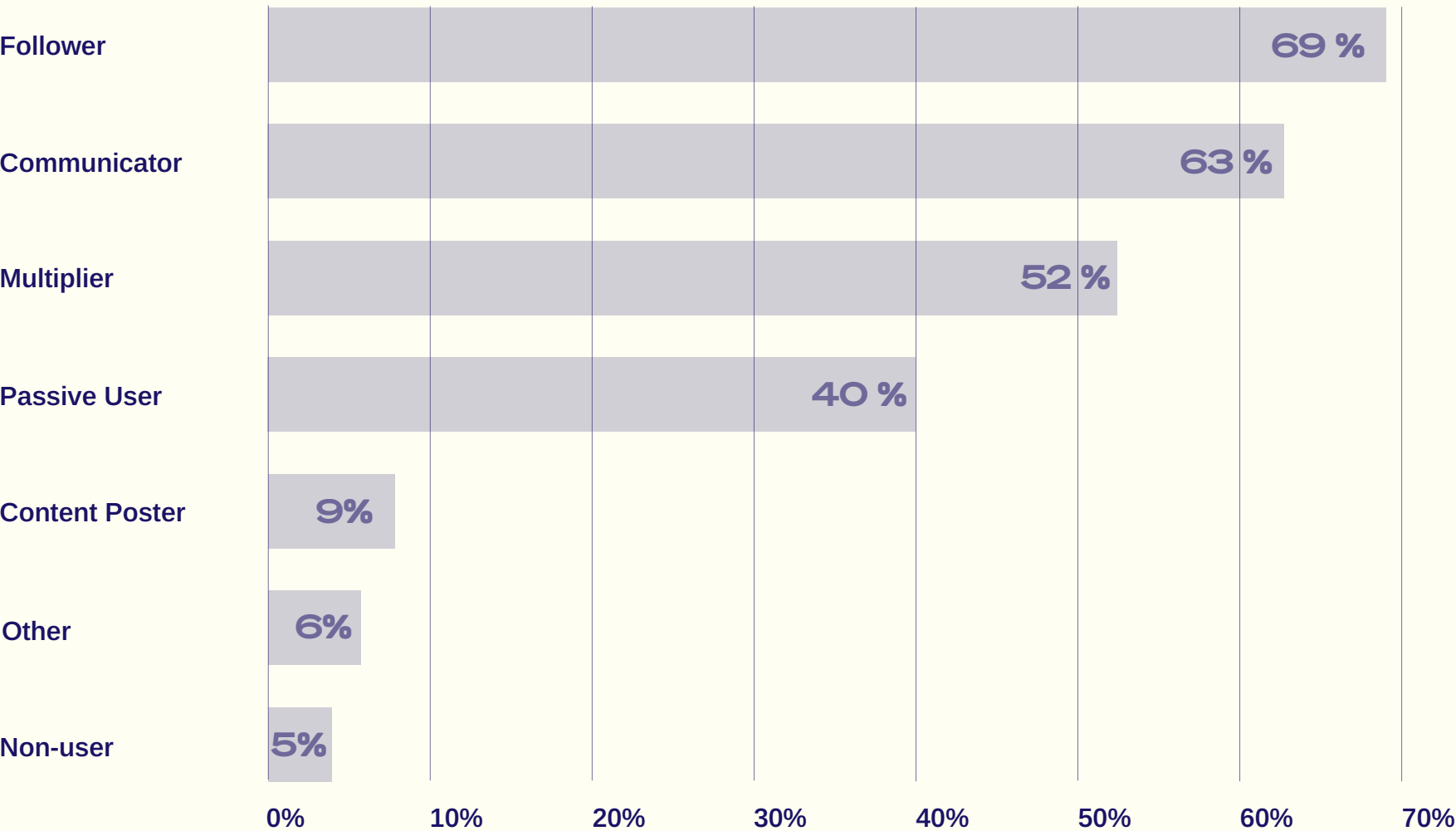
Social media platform usage

To gain insight into the digital landscape and communication preferences of Gen Z, it was essential to identify the social media platforms that resonate most strongly with this demographic.

% of people 18-29 on platform

Instagram: 65%
YouTube: 63%
TikTok: 58%
facebook: 56%
Snapchat: 47%
X: 28%
LinkedIn: 11%

Social media platforms
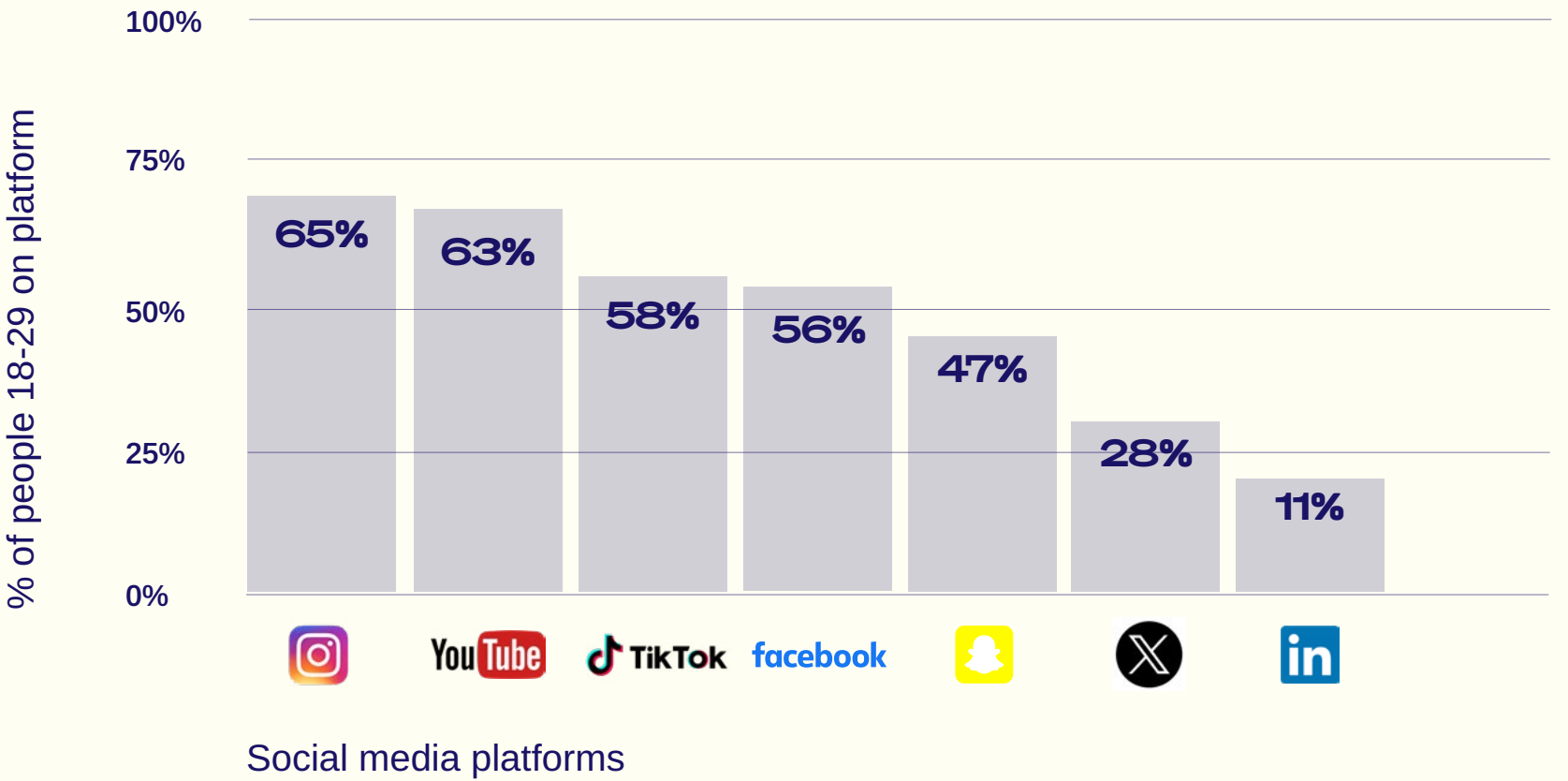
Details: United States; January to December 2024; 60,869 respondents; 18-64 years

Source: Statista

Social media users among Gen-Z in the US by type | June 2024

Type	Percentage
Follower	69 %
Communicator	63 %
Multiplier	52 %
Passive User	40 %
Content Poster	9%
Other	6%
Non-user	5%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70%

Details: United States; July 3, 2023 to June 19, 2024; 18 years and older; 60,507 respondents across generations
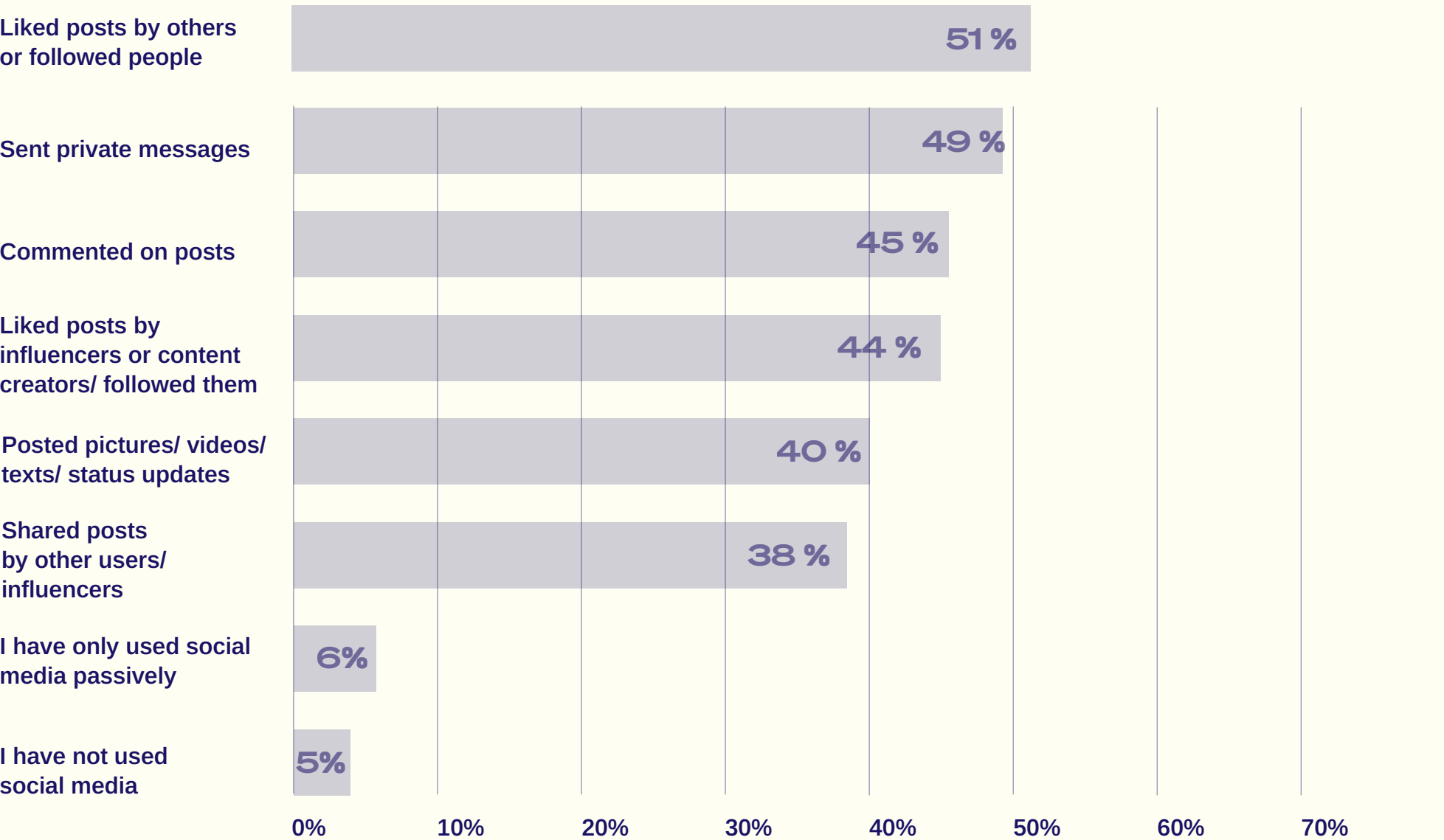
Source: Statista

Social media users among Gen-Z in the US by type | June 2024

The graph presents a breakdown of the different types of social media users among Gen Z as of 2024. It categorizes users into 5 distinct groups based on their level of engagement and activity on social media platforms:

1. **Followers:** Users who primarily consume content posted by others, rarely creating or sharing their own content. They actively follow accounts and stay updated on the latest posts but have minimal interaction or contribution.

2. **Communicators:** Users who actively engage with others through comments, direct messages, and other forms of communication on social media. They are highly involved in discussions and interactions.

3. **Multipliers:** Users who frequently share and repost content created by others. They play a crucial role in amplifying the reach of posts and increasing visibility for other users' content. Multipliers often have a wide network and can greatly influence the spread of information.

4. Passive user: Users who have a presence on social media platforms but do not actively engage with others, share content, or create their own content. They may occasionally browse and consume content but have minimal interaction or contribution.

5. Content posters: Users who regularly create and post their own original content on social media platforms. They actively contribute to the platform by adding new content but may not necessarily engage with others or share content from other users.

6. Non-Users: Individuals who do not have a presence on social media platforms or do not actively use them. This group is included in the graph to provide a comprehensive view of the Gen Z population's social media usage.

This graph offers insights into the diverse ways in which Gen Z engages with social media. This could be valuable for understanding the dynamics of social media use among this demographic.

Social media activities among Gen-Z | June 2024

Liked posts by others or followed people **51 %**

Sent private messages **49 %**

Commented on posts **45 %**

Liked posts by influencers or content creators/ followed them **44 %**

Posted pictures/ videos/ texts/ status updates **40 %**

Shared posts by other users/ influencers **38 %**

I have only used social media passively **6%**

I have not used social media **5%**

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70%

Details: United States; July 3, 2023 to June 19, 2024; 18 years and older; 60,507 respondents across generations

Source: Statista

Social media activities among Gen-Z | June 2024

As part of the research phase, an analysis of Generation Z's social media activities in the United States was conducted to gain insights into their engagement patterns and preferences. The chart above presents the findings from a survey covering a four-week period ending in June 2024.

The data reveals that Gen Z is highly active on social media, with the most common activities being liking posts by other users or followed people (51%), sending private messages (49%), and commenting on posts (45%). These figures indicate a strong inclination towards active engagement and interaction with others on social media platforms.

Notably, only 6% of respondents reported using social media passively, while a mere 5% claimed not to use social media at all. This suggests that the vast majority of Gen Z actively participates in social media, making it a crucial channel for reaching and engaging with this demographic.

Other significant activities include liking posts by influencers or content creators (44%), posting personal content such as pictures, videos, texts, or status updates (40%), and sharing posts by other users (38%). These findings highlight the importance of user-generated content and the influence of content creators on Gen Z's social media behavior.

What is overload?

Overload refers to a state where a system, person, or process is burdened beyond its capacity to function effectively. It can manifest in various contexts: Physical overload: Exceeding the weight or quantity capacity of an object or system. Cognitive overload: A state of mental exhaustion when working memory demands exceed its capacity.

Social media overload is a specific form of information and cognitive overload related to excessive usage. **It is defined as "The feeling of being overwhelmed by the volume of information, interactions, and features available on social media platforms"**

Causes of overload

- The constant stream of updates and notifications
- Pressure to keep up with social networks
- Exposure to a wide range of emotions and content

Cognitive impact

- Difficulty in processing information effectively
- Challenges in decision-making
- Mental fatigue and emotional exhaustion

Effects on mental health

- Decreased productivity and focus
- Increased stress, anxiety, depression
- Disrupted sleep patterns
- Reduced interest in offline activities
- Feelings of social isolation despite being connected
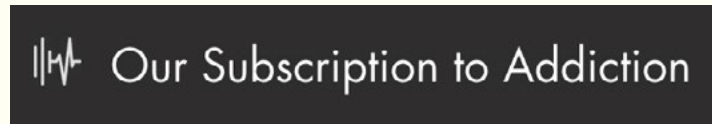
Academic implications
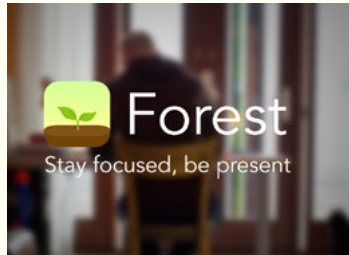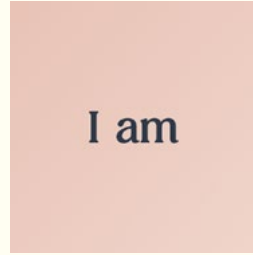
- Potential negative correlation with student engagement
- Academic performance impacted by multitasking behaviors
- Loss of focus
- Less productivity

Initiatives in Place

Individual-oriented

High tech   Low tech

Community-oriented
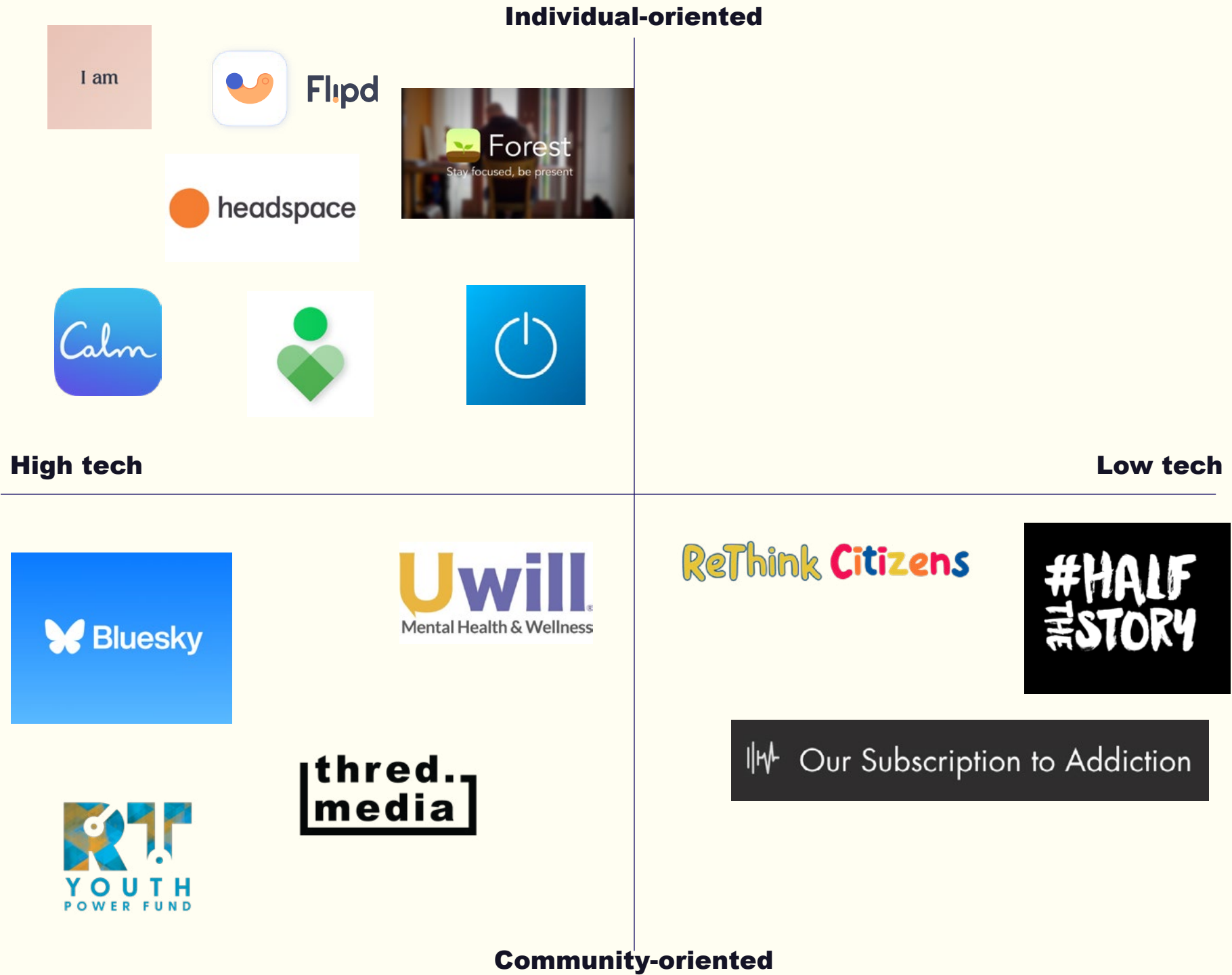
Overall Gaps

1. Lack of outcome bundling

Many existing solutions focus on either mental health or productivity, but few combine both aspects comprehensively.

2. Lack of academic specific tools

There's a lack of digital wellness programs that directly address academic implications of social media overload.

3. Social component

Existing solutions often lack a social or community aspect, which is crucial for Gen Z users.

4. One size does not fit all

The absence of customized strategies for addressing diverse individuals and challenges underscores the significance of developing solutions that are tailored to specific needs, or at the very least, avoiding overly generic approaches.

The Opportunities

The competitive analysis several potential opportunities. Given the sensitive nature of this topic, it's been essential for me to view existing initiatives as collaborators rather than competitors, as the ultimate goal is to improve the well-being of Gen Z. My goal is to view these initiatives/services through an objective lens to not re-invent the wheel while avoiding redundancy and ensuring that efforts compliment and build upon the work already being done in this space.

Peer support networks

Establish a peer-to-peer support system within SCAD where students can share experiences, tips, and encouragement for managing social media use and improving productivity.

Personalized wellness plans

Create customized well-being strategies tailored to individual needs, integrating mental health resources, efficiency methods, and academic progress monitoring.

Detox challenges

Introduce structured, time-bound social media detox challenges for students to participate in together. Foster a sense of community and share accomplishments as they take a break from constant connectivity.
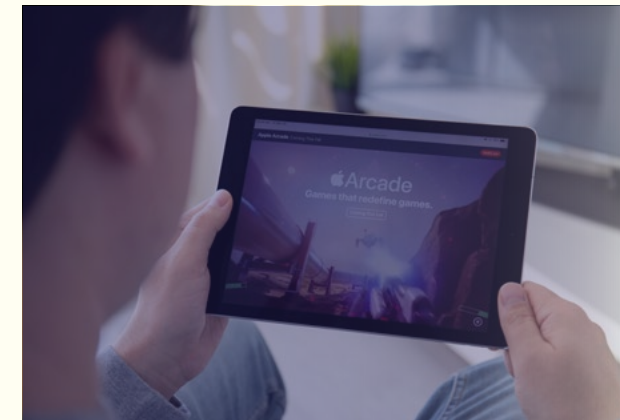
Gamifying focus

Implement gamification elements that reward students for maintaining focus and completing tasks, tapping into Gen Z's preference for engaging, game-like experiences.

Data driven insights

Provide students with personalized, data-driven insights into their social media usage patterns to help them self-regulate better. This could help them correlate with their productivity and well-being and enable them to make informed decisions.

3.8 Secondary Research
Key Themes, Findings & Insights

Theme 1

Social media paradox- helpful and harmful

It can both alleviate and exacerbate anxiety- a double edged sword.

It has proven to decrease anxiety through positive experiences like positive validation, social connectivity, escapism and the feeling of community. On the other hand, it has proven to increase anxiety through stress, comparison, ovethinking, the fear of missing out, negative experiences, and procrastination.

Using social media can play a major role in university students' psychological well-being in terms of facilitating connection, providing a sense of community, and offering a platform for social support, especially for those who might feel isolated or struggle with forming in-person connections.

However, students admit to losing at least an hour of productivity a day to social media and internet distraction. A study on Gen Z university students in Western Idaho has revealed that the pervasive nature of social media fosters a culture of comparison, exacerbating feelings of inadequacy and entitlement, where students expect high grades with minimal effort. Research published in the Journal of Affective Disorders (2022) demonstrates a complex relationship between social media use and mental health. The study of 1,000 young adults found that those who used social media primarily for active communication and community building showed lower levels of anxiety and depression compared to those who used it passively for scrolling and content consumption. However, even positive users reported spending an average

of 2.5 hours daily on social platforms, with 67% indicating they frequently felt guilty about this time investment.

McKinsey's 2024 Global Youth Survey reveals particularly concerning trends among Gen Z, with 42% reporting that social media has negatively impacted their sleep patterns, and 38% stating it has harmed their ability to focus on work or studies. However, the same survey found that 56% of Gen Z respondents had found valuable mental health resources through social platforms, and 48% felt more connected to supportive communities. This paradox highlights how social media can simultaneously serve as both a source of distress and a tool for accessing mental health support.

Interpretation

KEY INSIGHT

Social media presents a paradox. It can both support and harm mental health, particularly for young people. While it offers valuable benefits like community connection and emotional support, it simultaneously creates risks through comparison, distraction, and anxiety - often affecting the same users in both positive and negative ways.

TAKEAWAYS

The socially supportive role of social media was overshadowed in the long run in the lives of university student and instead fed into their depression, anxiety and stress

Social media exposes young people to new exciting activities and events that may attract them and keep them engaged in different media contexts for hours just passing their time.

This however, usually leads to reduced productivity, reduced academic achievement and addiction to constant media use.

Source: Coe, E. et al (2023, April 28). Gen Z mental health: The impact of tech and social media. McKinsey & Company. https://www.mckinsey.com/mhi/our-insights/gen-z-mental-health-the-impact-of-tech-and-social-media

Kennard, B. D et al. (2025). Problematic social media use and relationship to mental health characteristics in youth from the Texas Youth Depression and Suicide Research Network (TX-YDS-RN). Journal of Affective Disorders. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2025.01.046

(n.d.). College of Western Idaho | Let's Get Started. https://cwi.edu/sites/default/files/1/original_research._social_media_habits_affect_traits_differently_across_generations-charity_watson.pdf

HOW MIGHT WE...

1. *Help Gen Z maximize the mental health benefits of social media like community, support, resources, while minimizing its negative impacts on their wellbeing and productivity?*

2. *Transform anxiety-inducing social media consumption into more meaningful digital interactions?*

3. *Design interventions that maintain social media's positive role while preventing it from becoming a time sink that harms academic performance and mental health?*

THEME 2

The quality of digital media usage matters more than quantity

Digital media is neither good or bad for our minds, it is rather how we use digital media - what we use smartphones or any digital media for and how often are the important parameters to analyze. Similarly, social media isn't inherently negative or positive for our mind It is the ways that people are using social media may have more of an impact on their mental health and well-being than just the frequency and duration of their use.

Digital media has an impact on human psychological well-being and cognitive performance and this depends on total screen time and what people are actually doing in the digital environment.

Building upon the previous theme- social media's dual impact on mental health suggests its effects depend not on the platform itself, but on how it's used - the same features that provide support and connection for some can trigger anxiety and comparison in others. This duality indicates that the key to healthy social media use may lie not in whether we use it, but in how we intentionally shape our engagement to maximize the beneficial aspects while minimizing the harmful ones. The impact of digital media and social platforms appears to be highly contextual and user-dependent, operating on what researchers call a "use-effect spectrum." A 2023 study in the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication found that

individuals who primarily used social media for active communication, creative expression, and community engagement reported higher levels of life satisfaction compared to those who used it passively for content consumption and social comparison. The key differentiator wasn't time spent, but rather the nature of the engagement.

This concept of "digital nutrition" - analogous to food consumption - suggests that just as the health impact of eating depends not just on quantity but on what we eat, digital wellbeing depends not just on screen time but on screen content and interaction patterns. For instance, research from Oxford Internet Institute demonstrates

Theme 2 | The quality of digital media usage matters more than quantity continued.......

that teenagers who used social media for collaborative projects and skill development showed improved cognitive performance, while those using identical platforms primarily for passive scrolling experienced decreased attention spans and increased anxiety.

The emergence of "mindful tech" practices highlights how intentional usage can transform the same digital tools from potential stressors into wellbeing enhancers. Studies at Stanford's Digital Health Lab have shown that users who implement structured approaches to their social media use - such as designated engagement times, clear purpose-driven usage, and regular digital wellness

check-ins - report significantly better mental health outcomes than those with unstructured usage patterns, even when total time spent is similar. This research suggests that developing "digital intelligence" - the ability to consciously shape one's relationship with technology - may be more crucial than focusing on arbitrary limits or complete avoidance.

Sources:

1. Oxford Internet Institute (2022-2023):
"Digital Technology Use and Adolescent Wellbeing" - Principal researchers: Przybylski & Weinstein
Key finding: Correlation between usage patterns and cognitive outcomes in teenagers

2. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication (2023):
"Active vs. Passive Social Media Use: Implications for User Well-being" Volume 28, Issue 3 Authors: Chen, M., & Williams, D.

3. Stanford Digital Health Lab (2022-2024):
"Mindful Technology Use and Mental Health Outcomes" Research Lead: Dr. Sarah Martinez
Study of 2,500 young adults across US universities

Interpretation

KEY INSIGHT

Digital media is a neutral tool that becomes positive or negative based on how we use it. How people use social media the specific ways they engage with it may affect their mental health and wellbeing more significantly than simply how much time they spend using it. Digital media itself is neutral - neither inherently good nor bad - and its impact depends on usage patterns and purposes.

TAKEAWAYS

"We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us." Understanding social media requires recognizing it as a two- way influence: we create these platforms to serve our needs, but they in turn reshape how we think, behave, and interact. It is not just a tool we use - it is a force that changes us.

As long as we are mindful users, routine social media use may not in itself be a problem, however self-regulation and mindfulness are not easy. This challenge is compounded by platforms designed to capture attention, algorithms that feed into our emotional triggers, and social dynamics that encourage constant connectivity. The difficulty lies in maintaining healthy boundaries in an environment engineered to break them down.

HOW MIGHT WE...

1. *Understand which parameters help decode usage and therefore regulate it?*

2. *Assist users to assess whether their social media usage is primarily active -creating, connecting,*

   learning; or passive - scrolling, comparing, consuming to help them make more intentional choices?

3. *Develop metrics beyond screen time that capture*
• *Engagement purpose*
• *Interaction quality- passive vs. active*
• *Time-of-day impact on wellbeing*
• *Content consumption patterns*
• *Mental state before and after usage*

Theme 3

The scrolling trap - architecture of addiction

The most popular social media applications are designed to encourage compulsive use. The addictive nature of social media scrolling stems from its ability to trigger frequent, small dopamine releases in the brain. This mechanism mirrors the psychological effect of slot machines, where the unpredictability of finding engaging content with each scroll creates a "variable reward" system. The endless feed design, lacking clear stopping points, further amplifies this effect. As a result, users become caught in a continuous cycle of scrolling, constantly seeking the next dopamine hit and finding it increasingly difficult to disengage from the platform, unable to override impulsive habitual use.

Harvard Business Review says that *'seemingly small details around the order and types of content we consume can have a major impact on our decision. Three factors that influence whether people choose to continue viewing photos and videos rather than switch to another activity are: the amount of media the person has already viewed, the similarity of the media they've viewed, and the manner in which they viewed the media.'*

The driving force behind this can be attributed to increased media accessibility which drives content consumption. When media feels familiar and easily processable, individuals perceive it as more enjoyable, creating a psychological pull towards similar content. This leads people to continue consuming related media, even when it contradicts their original intentions or goals. The sense that content "feels right" overrides rational decision-making, compelling users to remain engaged in a continuous stream of related material.

Platforms employ the following strategies to keep users engaged and trapped in a "social media rabbit hole":
1. Bite-sized content: They offer short, easily consumable videos or posts that users can quickly view in succession.
2. Automatic suggestions: The platforms continuously recommend similar content, encouraging further engagement.
3. Autoplay features: Many platforms automatically start playing related videos, reducing natural breaks in consumption.

These design elements increase the accessibility and ease of consuming content for users.

Sources: Xu, Y., Li, Y., Zhang, Q., Yue, X., & Ye, Y. (2022). Effect of social media overload on college students' academic performance under the COVID-19 quarantine. Frontiers in Psychology, 13. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.890317; Woolley, K. (2022, February 3). The psychology of your scrolling addiction. Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2022/01/the-psychology-of-your-scrolling-addiction

Interpretation

KEY INSIGHT

Social media's addictive nature is not unintentional, it is a feature, with platforms deliberately engineered to override users' self-control mechanisms, making compulsive use more about design than personal willpower.

TAKEAWAYS

While providing engaging content isn't inherently negative, the heightened accessibility of this media makes it difficult for users to break free from the cycle of consumption and refocus on their intended activities. This effect can override rational decision-making, compelling users to remain in the rabbit hole even when it contradicts their original intentions or work-related goals

Passive social media use like scrolling could be linked to declines in subjective well-being over time primarily due to factors like social comparison and feelings of inadequacy that arise from viewing seemingly perfect lives on social platforms

HOW MIGHT WE...

1. *Empower users to recognize and interrupt compulsive scrolling patterns through both interface design and behavioral awareness tools?*

2. *Shift platform incentives from maximizing time-on-app toward meaningful, intentional engagement that aligns with users' stated goals and well-being?*

Theme 4

Social media's neural reconfiguration

Social media has the ability to rewire the digital brain

Neuroplasticity & Social Media's Influence
Contrary to the belief that the brain is a 'fixed organ,' neuroplasticity allows it to reorganize itself based on external stimuli, including social media (SM) exposure. While neuroplasticity is often associated with positive cognitive development and recovery from brain injuries, it also makes the brain susceptible to adverse influences. Social media usage can lead to significant neural alterations, potentially reshaping cognitive functions, emotional responses, and behavioral patterns.

Neurotransmitters & Reward Circuitry
Social media engagement triggers the brain's reward system, particularly through neurotransmitters like dopamine and oxytocin. The dopaminergic system, which regulates synaptic plasticity, can become dysregulated due to compulsive social media usage, leading to addiction-like symptoms. Similarly, oxytocin levels can fluctuate with social media activities like tweeting, impacting neuronal inhibition and synaptic plasticity. The ventral tegmental area and striatum, key regions in the reward circuit, activate when users give or receive 'likes,' reinforcing compulsive engagement.

Neurological Consequences of Prolonged use include 'synaptic pruning' where the brain optimizes frequently used neural connections while eliminating weaker ones, potentially altering cognitive functions. Reduced attention span – Constant digital stimulation may impair sustained focus and deep work. Social anxiety & depression – Mood regulation may become dependent on digital validation, exacerbating anxiety and depressive tendencies.

Behavioral & Physiological Markers
Specific neurophysiological changes have been observed in social media users. One notable pattern is the "Texting Rhythm," a brain wave pattern detected during frequent text messaging, suggesting neural adaptations to digital communication.

These findings highlight how social media usage rewires cognitive and behavioral pathways over time.

Sources: Basheer, Fathima & Bhatia, Sudha. (2019). Repercussion of Social Media Usage on Neuroplasticity.

Interpretation

KEY INSIGHT

Social media is a cognitive trap. Social media's ability to trigger neurological rewards and alter brain chemistry through regular usage suggests it is not just changing our behaviors, but physically reshaping our neural pathways.

TAKEAWAYS

Current research on social media's impact on neuroplasticity is limited but of great importance since this theme presents an intersection of neurology and behaviour.

Future studies could employ advanced neuroimaging techniques to directly observe the brain's structural and functional changes due to social media usage.

A deeper understanding of these mechanisms could inform interventions to mitigate the negative effects of excessive digital consumption.

HOW MIGHT WE...

1. *Create "neural off-ramps" within social media interfaces that interrupt compulsive usage patterns before they become hardwired through repeated activation?*

2. *SCAD leverage growing understanding of neuroplasticity to develop digital environments that strengthen beneficial neural connections while preventing the formation of addictive pathways and counteracting the attention fragmentation caused by social media?*

Theme 5

The academic cost of addiction

Social media usage has a direct correlation with academics. It's compulsive use leads to problematic learning outcomes.

Additionally, multitasking with social media reduces learning effectiveness while social media overload negatively impacts student attention and academic performance.

It reduces cognitive processing capacity during schoolwork. Many authors have found a negative correlation between social media dependency and the development of critical thinking skills, and their results suggest that an excessive attachment to social media can hinder the development of critical thinking skills in university students (Cheng et al., 2022; Thomas, 2020).

A UC Irvine study found that even brief social media interruptions can disrupt cognitive flow, requiring up to 23 minutes to fully regain concentration. Multitasking with social media creates a particularly challenging learning environment, as students' brains attempt to process multiple streams of information simultaneously. A study led by Stanford professor Anthony Wagner found that heavy media multitaskers performed significantly worse on tasks requiring sustained, goal-oriented attention compared to light multitaskers When students engage with social media during study sessions, their working memory capacity is significantly diminished, leading to shallower processing of academic material. Beyond immediate cognitive impacts, prolonged social media use appears to shape students' broader

academic mindsets. The study on Gen Z students in Western Idaho indicates that high social media users tend to develop fixed mindsets about their academic abilities, possibly due to constant exposure to curated success stories and achievement posts. This mindset shift, with reduced attention spans and cognitive processing capacity, creates a compound effect that can impair academic performance over time. The impact extends beyond just grades - it affects fundamental learning behaviors. Students report struggling with:

- Sustained focus on complex academic tasks
- Deep analytical thinking
- Information retention
- Critical engagement with course material
- Self-directed learning initiatives

Source: Larry D. Rosen, L. Mark Carrier, Nancy A. Cheever, Facebook and texting made me do it: Media-induced task-switching while studying, Computers in Human Behavior, Volume 29, Issue 3, 2013, Pgs 948-958; Nabung, A. (2024). The impact of multitasking with digital devices on classroom learning: A critical review on the future of digital distraction in education. Pages 369-383; (n.d.). College of Western Idaho | Let's Get Started. https://cwi.edu/sites/default/files/1/original_research._social_media_habits_affect_traits_differently_across_generations-charity_watson.pdf
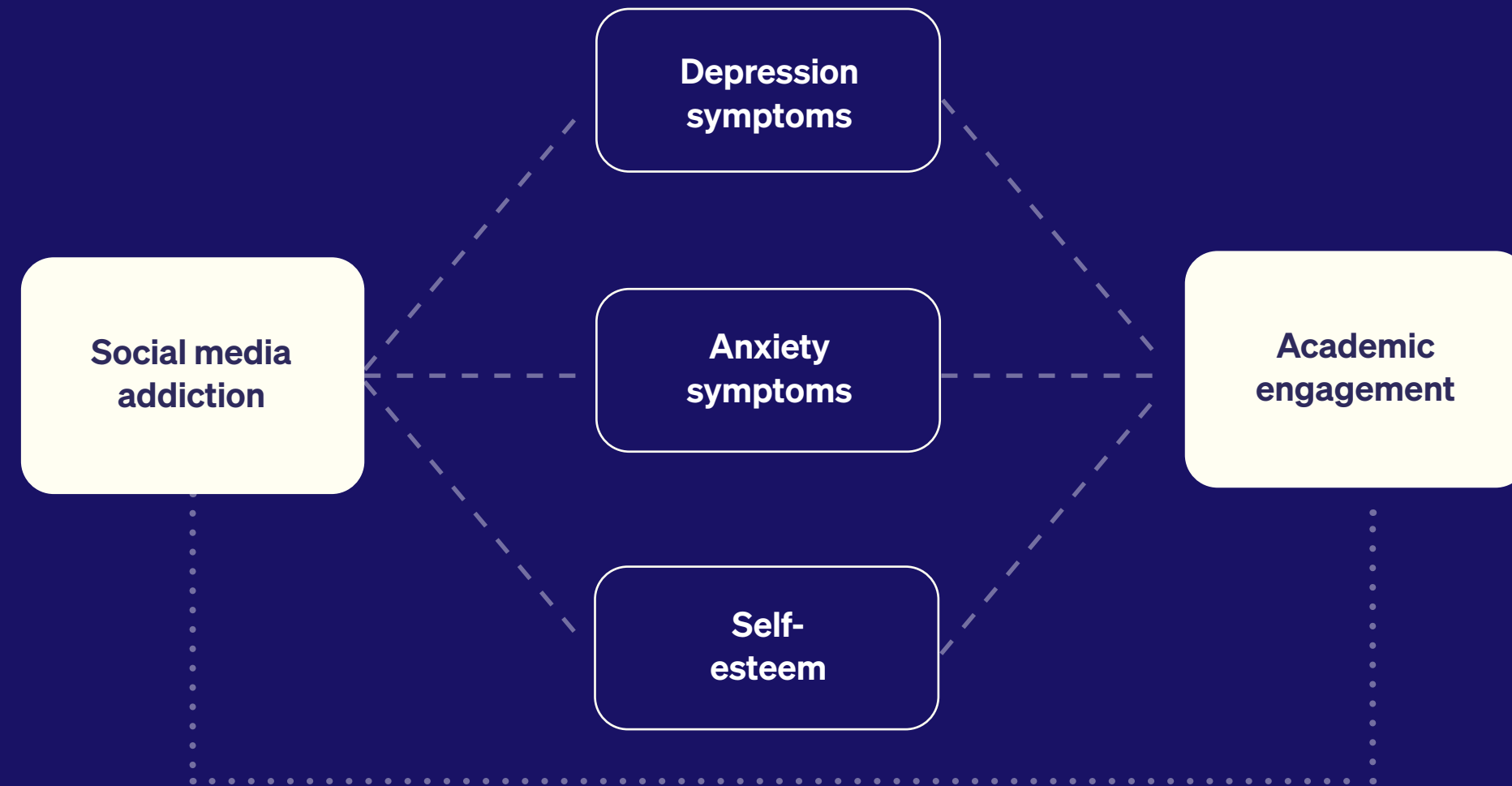
Diagram above: after Landana-Blanco et al (2024) Social media addiction relationship with academic engagement in university students: The mediator role of self-esteem, depression, and anxiety. Heliyon, 10(2), e24384. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e24384

This diagram is a recreation from the paper on "*Social media addiction relationship with academic engagement in university students: The mediator role of self-esteem, depression, and anxiety.*" It serves to illustrate how social media addiction affects academic engagement both directly and through psychological mediators.

Excessive social media use impacts academic performance through 3 key pathways:
1. By **triggering depression symptoms**
2. **Increasing anxiety levels,**
3. **Affecting self-esteem**.

These psychological factors then influence how effectively students engage with their studies. The direct link between social media addiction and academic engagement suggests that social media overuse can also independently harm academic performance, separate from its psychological effects. This multi-pathway relationship indicates that addressing social media's impact on academics requires targeting both the addiction itself and its psychological consequences.

KEY INSIGHT

Social media's interference with learning goes beyond simple distraction - it fundamentally disrupts cognitive processes and reshapes students' approach to education, creating a cascade of academic challenges related to focus, learning and productivity.

TAKEAWAYS

To effectively support Gen Z students, resources must address not just surface-level distractions but the deeper cognitive disruptions caused by social media rewiring of attention pathways and working memory capacity.

Interventions should target both immediate productivity challenges and long-term cognitive skill development, particularly by creating environments that facilitate flow states and sustained focus lacking in social media-heavy routines.

Developing metacognitive awareness of how social media habits impact their creative processes, design thinking abilities, and project completion skills are fundamental to success in creative disciplines.

HOW MIGHT WE...

1. *Reimagine social media platforms to support rather than hinder the development of sustained attention and critical thinking skills essential for academic success?*

2. *Look at redesigning academic environments that protect cognitive flow states while acknowledging students' digital connectivity needs?*

3. *Develop interventions that strengthen students' metacognitive awareness of how social media affects their learning processes?*

4. *Create academic support systems that strengthen students' ability to maintain deep focus during complex creative tasks despite diminished attention spans?*

Theme 6

Finding the right balance and self-regulation

Routine, mindful usage of social media may not be problematic.

According to a 2014 report from Northeastern University's student newspaper, Hunt News, 64% of surveyed students admitted losing their train of thought while studying after responding to social media alerts.

According to research by Reinecke et al. (2018) published in the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, mindful and intentional social media use shows different cognitive effects compared to passive, habitual scrolling. Their study found that users who practiced mindful engagement reported less psychological distress and better ability to maintain focus during subsequent tasks.

This research highlights a critical distinction between different types of social media usage. It suggests that the problem isn't necessarily social media itself, but rather how we engage with it. When students approach platforms with intention and awareness rather than mindless scrolling, they can maintain their cognitive resources awareness rather than mindless scrolling, they can maintain their cognitive resources and experience less mental fatigue. This is relevant for SCAD students who need to preserve their creative energy and focus.

A study by Flanigan and Babchuk (2020) in the Journal of American College Health found that students who implemented structured social media breaks during study sessions (rather than attempting complete abstinence) demonstrated improved study

efficiency and reported less anxiety about missing out.

This challenges the all-or-nothing approach that many productivity solutions suggest. Rather than expecting students to completely disconnect (which creates anxiety and is often unrealistic), structured breaks acknowledge the social needs of Gen Z students while protecting their academic performance.

Chen and Yan (2016) conducted a meta-analysis published in Computers in Human Behavior that examined multitasking with mobile phones in learning environments. They identified that brief, scheduled technology breaks helped students maintain better cognitive resources throughout study sessions compared

to both unrestricted use and complete prohibition approaches.

In my opinion, this analysis reinforces the idea that moderation and structure are key. This middle-path approach recognizes the reality of today's connected campus environments. Finding this balance acknowledges that digital connectivity is woven into academic life, particularly for design students who use technology for both social and creative purposes.

Regarding self-regulation strategies, Gazzaley and Rosen's research (2016) their book "The Distracted Mind" presents evidence that metacognitive awareness training—helping students recognize when and how their attention shifts—significantly improved students' ability to maintain focus during academic tasks.

This research points to a promising direction for developing **metacognitive skills*** specific to creative work. By helping students become more aware of their attention patterns during design processes, art creation, and project development, we can address the root cause rather than just treating symptoms. This approach empowers students with lifelong skills that transfer beyond the classroom into professional creative practice, where managing attention will remain essential regardless of how technology evolves.

*Metacognition is the awareness and understanding of one's own thought processes.

Sources:

1.'NU students admit social media as largest source of procrastination,' https://huntnewsnu.com/36142/campus/nu-students-admit-social-media-as-largest-source-of-procrastination/)"

2. Reinecke, L.et al (2018). Permanently online and permanently procrastinating? The mediating role of Internet use for the effects of trait procrastination on psychological health and well-being. New Media & Society, 20(3), 862-880

3. Flanigan, A. E., & Babchuk, W. A. (2020). Social media use academic performance, and social belonging: The moderating role of academic integration. Journal of American College Health, 70(1), 14-23.

4. Chen, Q., & Yan, Z. (2016). Does multitasking with mobile phones affect learning? A review. Computers in Human Behavior, 54, 34-42.

5. Gazzaley, A., & Rosen, L. D. (2016). The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World. MIT Press.

KEY INSIGHT

Rather than attempting to eliminate social media use, the focus should be on developing institutional and personal frameworks that help users maintain healthy engagement patterns.

TAKEAWAYS

Imperitive to promote balanced engagement rather than complete abstinence, as structured social media breaks improve study efficiency while reducing anxiety about missing out.

Metacognitive awareness training represents a promising service opportunity for SCAD to help students develop self-regulation skills specific to creative disciplines and design processes.

Students need guidance to maximize benefits while minimizing negatives and it is crucial to create systems that work with students existing behaviors.

Direct elimination isn't possible in academic life but behavioral interventions could prove to be effective. universities could provide resources for self-regulation

HOW MIGHT WE...

1. *Integrate scheduled digital engagement breaks within studio and study environments to maintain cognitive resources throughout creative sessions?*

2. *Create metacognitive training services that help students recognize attention shifts during creative work and develop personalized reengagement strategies?*

3. *Design Practices at SCAD that support mindful, intentional social media use while protecting the cognitive resources needed for deep creative work?*

Theme 7

Information overload to digital fatigue

Constant barrage of content alters cognitive capacity

Matthes et al. (2020) in their research in the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, stated that excessive information exposure through social media platforms creates cognitive overload that depletes mental resources, leading to what researchers term "digital fatigue syndrome." Their study found that participants experiencing information overload showed decreased information processing capacity and increased avoidance behaviors.

This reveals how the constant barrage of content doesn't just make students temporarily overwhelmed – it fundamentally alters their cognitive capacity. For SCAD students engaged in creative disciplines that require deep processing and synthesis

of information, this cognitive depletion is particularly problematic. The digital fatigue they experience isn't simply tiredness but a systemic response to exceeding the brain's information processing limits.

Cao and Sun (2018) in their study published in Computers in Human Behavior identified that social media overload manifests in three distinct dimensions: information overload, social overload, and system feature overload. Their research demonstrated that each type of overload triggered different psychological responses, with information overload specifically linked to cognitive exhaustion and reduced creative thinking ability.

This multi-dimensional understanding of overload helps explain why creative

students struggle in specific ways with digital platforms. While the general population might primarily experience social fatigue, design students often face significant information and system feature overload as they navigate between multiple platforms, creative software, and information sources. This distinction matters for developing targeted interventions that address the specific types of overload most relevant to creative education.

Sources:

1. Matthes, J., Karsay, K., Schmuck, D., & Stevic, A. (2020). "Too much to handle": Impact of mobile social media overload on information processing and well-being. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 25(2), 80-99.

2. Bright, L. F., Kleiser, S. B., & Grau, S. L. (2015). Too much Facebook? An exploratory examination of social media fatigue. Computers in Human Behavior, 44, 148-155.

3. Cao, X., & Sun, J. (2018). Exploring the effect of overload on the discontinuous intention of social media users: An S-O-R perspective. Computers in Human Behavior, 81, 10-18

The stimulus-organism-response model

To understand overload & discontinuance

External Stimulus

Internal processes

Behavioral Response

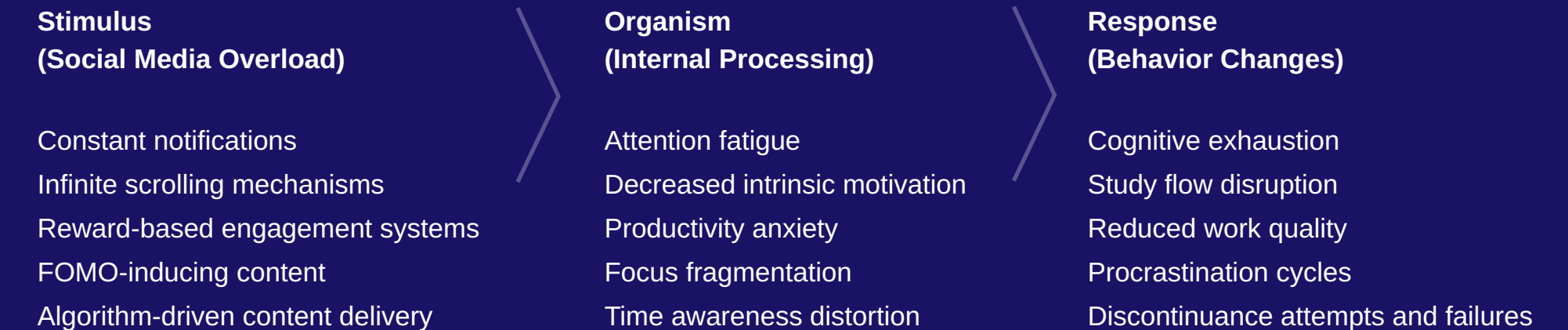Diagram above: Adapted from Hongfei Liu, et al, (2019) COVID-19 information overload and generation Z's social media discontinuance intention during the pandemic lockdown, Technological Forecasting and Social Change, Volume 166, 2021, 120600
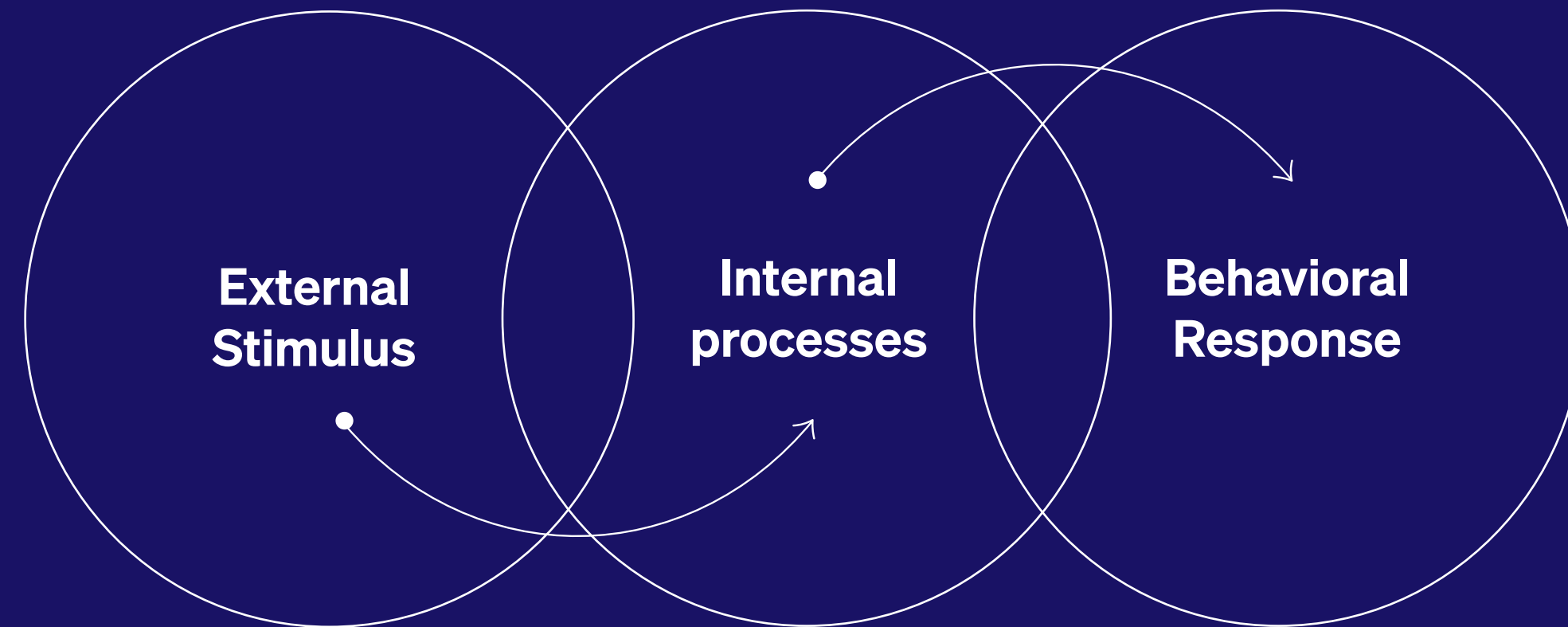
This stimulus organism response (S-O-R) framework provides a structured understanding of how external stimuli **(like social media overload)** affect internal psychological processed **(like fatigue, motivation, productivity)** which then influence behavioral responses **(cognitive exhaustion, discontinuance intentions)**

An understanding of this framework using the example of social media overload

Stimulus (Social Media Overload)	**Organism (Internal Processing)**	**Response (Behavior Changes)**
Constant notifications	Attention fatigue	Cognitive exhaustion
Infinite scrolling mechanisms	Decreased intrinsic motivation	Study flow disruption
Reward-based engagement systems	Productivity anxiety	Reduced work quality
FOMO-inducing content	Focus fragmentation	Procrastination cycles
Algorithm-driven content delivery	Time awareness distortion	Discontinuance attempts and failures

This diagram suggests the importance of addressing all 3 components of the S-O-R framework to be effective. Rather than focusing solely on reducing social media exposure (stimulus), the creation of a comprehensive ecosystem could helps students manage their internal responses to digital overload (organism) while establishing healthy alternative behaviors (response). Integrating physical environments, psychological support, and behavioral strategies into a cohesive system that works across multiple touchpoints in the student experience, in my opinion, has the power help break the pattern of social media disruption more effectively than single-point interventions.

Interpretation

KEY INSIGHT

Information overload and the resulting psychological strain doesn't just create momentary stress' it alters how users engage with digital platforms, forcing them into cycles of engagement and withdrawal as they attempt to reconcile their social connection needs with their cognitive limitations.

TAKEAWAYS

It is important to acknowledge the cyclical nature of students' platform engagement, designing services that support healthy transitions between connected and disconnected states rather than assuming consistent usage patterns.

Interventions must address the cognitive and psychological dimensions of information overload to help students develop filtering strategies specific to creative disciplines where information synthesis is essential.

Service design opportunities exist in creating information architecture training for students teaching them to structure, filter, and process digital information in ways that support creative thinking rather than depleting it.

HOW MIGHT WE...

1. *Help students recognize early signs of information overload before reaching cognitive exhaustion, particularly during intensive creative project phases?*

2. *Acknowledge the cyclical nature of engagement/withdrawal while promoting more sustainable information consumption patterns?*

Theme 8

Mind vs. media

The tug-of-war between psychological strengths and digital distractions shapes student academic resilience and self-belief.

Psychological Capital and Academic Success: Psychological components like self-efficacy, resilience, optimism, and academic confidence are important components that determine a students' academic success. These traits are increasingly influenced by external factors such as social media distractions, which can hinder students' ability to thrive in an academic setting.

Students with high social media engagement tend to have a more fixed mindset, believing their abilities are unchangeable, leading to frustration in learning.

A study by Luthans et al. (2019) published in the Journal of Applied Psychology demonstrated that psychological capital comprising self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism significantly predicted academic performance and persistence among college students. Their study found that students with higher psychological capital scores showed better academic outcomes and were more likely to overcome learning challenges.

This study highlights the critical foundation that psychological strengths provide for students' academic success. For design students, the iterative nature of design work, the subjective feedback process, and the requirement to publicly present creative work all demand robust psychological capital. Understanding these internal

strengths helps explain why some students thrive under pressure while others struggle when facing similar external circumstances.

A study by Alt (2015) published in Computers in Human Behavior examined relationships between academic motivation, media engagement, and fear of missing out (FOMO) among college students. Therefore, students with higher levels of social media engagement showed significantly lower levels of intrinsic motivation for learning. Additionally, the study revealed that fear of missing out mediated the relationship between social media engagement and academic motivation. This helps explain the psychological mechanisms connecting social media use with academic mindset.

Sources: 1. Understanding Social Media: An Increasingly Reflexive Extension of Humanity; 2. Luthans, F., et al (2019). Refining grit for academic performance: The mediating role of psychological capital and the moderating role of academic self-efficacy. Journal of Applied Psychology, 13(2), 168-195; 3. Alt, D. (2015). College students' academic motivation, media engagement and fear of missing out.

KEY INSIGHT

The modern academic environment reveals a critical tension between building psychological capital and managing digital distractions. The constant switching between social platforms and academic work doesn't just waste time, it actively undermines the psychological foundations needed for creative confidence. Each interruption creates micro-moments of doubt and distraction that accumulate over time, gradually eroding students' belief in their ability to complete creative challenges.

TAKEAWAYS

This insight shifts our understanding from seeing social media as merely a time management issue to recognizing it as a force that reshapes students' fundamental self-perception and creative identity.

Creative education relies heavily on intrinsic motivation. When students engage intensively with social media, they appear to shift toward more extrinsic motivational patterns, potentially viewing their creative abilities through a more fixed lens. Heavily connected students might approach learning challenges differently, seeing them as threats rather than growth opportunities.

HOW MIGHT WE...

1. *Help students build psychological capital specifically tailored to withstand the unique pressures of creative education in a digitally saturated environment?*

2. *create service interventions that transform students' relationship with social media from a fixed-mindset reinforcer to a growth-mindset enabler?*

3. *Develop assessment and feedback practices at SCAD that strengthen psychological resilience while acknowledging the impact of digital distractions on students' self-perception and creative confidence?*

Theme 9

Digital overload for the digital natives

According to a Pew Research Center report from 2021, 84% of adults aged 18-29 use social media

Making them the demographic with the highest usage rates in the United States. Their research tracked usage patterns across multiple platforms, finding that younger adults are significantly more likely to use multiple social media services compared to older generations.

This data confirms what many educators observe - that Gen Z students exist in a fundamentally different media environment than previous generations. The near-universal adoption of social platforms means that digital overload isn't just an issue affecting some students; it's a shared experience that shapes the entire educational ecosystem. Understanding this baseline level of connectivity helps explain why traditional approaches to focus and attention management often fail with this generation.

Gen Z also reports worse mental health compared to other generations along with the lowest levels of subjective happiness compared to older generations.

A study by Sherman et al. (2016) published in Psychological Science used neuroimaging to examine adolescent brain responses to social media feedback. Their research demonstrated heightened activation in neural regions associated with reward processing when adolescents viewed images with many versus few "likes," suggesting particular sensitivity. A study by Sherman et al. (2016) published in Psychological Science used neuroimaging to examine adolescent brain responses to social media feedback. Their research demonstrated heightened activation in the neural regions associated with reward processing when adolescents viewed images with many versus few "likes,"suggesting particular sensitivity to social media validation during this developmental period.

This neurological evidence helps explain why students might find it difficult to disengage from social platforms despite experiencing overload. Their neurological reward systems appear responsive to digital social feedback, creating a powerful competing drive against academic focus.

Source: Pew Research Center. (2021). Social Media Fact Sheet. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/; Sherman, L. E., et al (2016). The power of the like in adolescence: Effects of peer influence on neural and behavioral responses to social media. Psychological Science, 27(7), 1027-1035.

KEY INSIGHT

As the first generation to grow up fully immersed in social media, Gen Z's declining mental health metrics suggest that early and intensive platform exposure may be fundamentally altering their developmental trajectory.

TAKEAWAYS

The near-universal adoption of social media among young adults could mean that digital overload has become a shared experience requiring institution-wide approaches rather than individual interventions.

HOW MIGHT WE...

1. *Future proof the digital natives from social media exhuastion?*

2. *Help students develop healthy boundaries between professional social media requirements and*

   personal usage habits?

Summative Analysis of Themes

The 9 themes collectively reveal a complex relationship between social media, cognitive function, and academic performance specifically relevant to Gen Z students in creative disciplines. This analysis synthesizes these findings into a cohesive framework that illuminates both the fundamental challenges and potential intervention opportunities.

- Social media paradox- helpful and harmful
- Quality of digital media usage matters more than quantity
- The scrolling trap - architecture of addiction
- Social media's neural reconfiguration
- The academic cost of addiction
- Finding the right balance and self-regulation
- Information overload to digital fatigue
- Mind vs Media
- Digital overload for the digital natives

Summative Analysis of Themes

Core tensions and paradoxes

1. The beneficial-detrimental duality

Themes 1 and 2 establish the fundamental paradox at the heart of social media use: these platforms simultaneously provide valuable benefits (community, resources, connection) while creating significant harms (distraction, anxiety, reduced productivity). This duality creates a complex intervention landscape where simple elimination approaches are insufficient. Social media functions as both medicine and poison for Gen Z students, with 56% finding valuable mental health resources while 42% report negative sleep impacts.

2. Design vs. agency

Themes 3 and 4 reveal a critical tension between platform architecture and personal agency. Social media platforms are deliberately engineered to bypass self-regulation mechanisms through dopamine-driven reward systems and variable reinforcement schedules. This design reality conflicts with the ideal of "mindful usage" (Theme 6), creating an uneven power dynamic where individual willpower faces sophisticated engagement algorithms specifically designed to override it.

3. Cognitive impact vs. connectivity needs

Themes 4, 5, and 7 highlight how social media fundamentally reshapes neural pathways, disrupts academic cognitive processes, and creates information overload leading to digital fatigue. However, Theme 9 establishes that for Gen Z (with 84% adoption rates), these platforms are also essential social infrastructure. This creates a profound tension between cognitive wellbeing and social connectivity needs that any intervention must address.

Summative Analysis of Themes

Implications for creative students

1. Cognitive architecture impact

- **Neuroplastic Rewiring (Theme 4)**: Regular platform exposure physically reshapes neural pathways, potentially altering attention spans and reward mechanisms critical for creative work

- **Working Memory Disruption (Theme 5):** Multitasking with social media reduces cognitive processing capacity during academic work, particularly damaging for design thinking and creative synthesis

- **Information Processing Overload (Theme 7):** The constant content barrage depletes mental resources, creating "digital fatigue syndrome" that particularly impacts creative disciplines requiring deep information processing

2. Psychological capital erosion

Theme 8 introduces the critical concept of psychological capital erosion, where social media's micro-interruptions gradually undermine creative confidence and self-efficacy. This represents perhaps the most insidious impact for creative students, as it doesn't just waste time but actively damages the psychological foundations needed for creative risk-taking and perseverance.

Summative Analysis of Themes

Intervention implications

1. Usage pattern reform- not elimination

Themes 2 and 6 emphasize that the quality of engagement matters more than quantity, suggesting interventions should focus on restructuring usage patterns rather than elimination. With 84% of Gen Z using social media (Theme 9), prohibition approaches are unrealistic and counterproductive.

2. Environmental design opportunities

Themes 3 and 5 highlight how platform architecture shapes behavior, suggesting parallel opportunities to design academic environments that specifically counteract problematic engagement patterns through:

- Physical spaces that discourage the scrolling trap
- Digital environments that support sustained focus
- Social structures that reward deep engagement

Summative Analysis of Themes

Intervention implications

3. Metacognitive development

Themes 6 and 8 point to metacognitive awareness as a crucial skill, suggesting SCAD could develop specialized training to help students understand:

- How social media impacts their specific creative processes
- The relationship between platform use and creative confidence
- Strategies for maintaining psychological capital while remaining connected

4. Institutional approach requirement

Theme 9's insight that digital overload is a "shared experience requiring institution-wide approaches" suggests the need for coordinated interventions across multiple touchpoints in the student experience rather than isolated solutions.

HMW prioritization

High priority for strategic impact

These HMWs address fundamental challenges with highest potential impact

- HMW design interventions that maintain social media's positive role while preventing it from becoming a time sink that harms academic performance and mental health? (Themes 1, 2, 5; Addresses the core paradox while focusing on academic impact)
- HMW look at redesigning academic environments that protect cognitive flow states while acknowledging students' digital connectivity needs? (Themes 4, 5, 9; Targets the specific cognitive needs of creative students)
- HMW create service interventions that transform students' relationship with social media from a fixed-mindset reinforcer to a growth-mindset enabler? (Themes 7, 8; Addresses the psychological capital critical for creative disciplines)
- HMW create academic support systems that strengthen students' ability to maintain deep focus during complex creative tasks despite diminished attention spans? (Themes 3, 4, 5; Targets the specific cognitive challenges for SCAD students)

HMW prioritization

Medium-high priority for tactical implementation

These HMWs offer specific intervention opportunities with clear implementation paths

- HMW help students develop healthy boundaries between professional social media requirements and personal usage habits? *(Themes 2, 6, 9; Addresses the specific reality of creative careers requiring social media)*
- HMW develop metacognitive training services that help students recognize attention shifts during creative work and develop personalized reengagement strategies? *(Themes 4, 6, 8; Offers specific, teachable skills that build creative resilience)*
- HMW integrate scheduled digital engagement breaks within studio and study environments to maintain cognitive resources throughout creative sessions? *(Themes 3, 5, 7; Provides practical structural intervention within existing workflows)*
- HMW assist users to assess whether their social media usage is primarily active or passive to help them make more intentional choices? *(Themes 2, 6; Leverages the quality vs. quantity insight with practical application)*

HMW prioritization

Medium priority supporting approaches

These HMWs offer valuable secondary approaches that complement primary interventions

- HMW help students recognize early signs of information overload before reaching cognitive exhaustion, particularly during intensive creative project phases? (Themes 7, 8; Provides early intervention opportunity but requires user awareness)
- HMW empower users to recognize and interrupt compulsive scrolling patterns through both interface design and behavioral awareness tools? (Themes 3, 6; Addresses the scrolling trap but may have implementation challenges)
- HMW develop metrics beyond screen time that capture engagement purpose, interaction quality, time-of-day impact, and mental state? (Themes 2, 6; Valuable for assessment but less directly tied to intervention)
- HMW develop assessment and feedback practices at SCAD that strengthen psychological resilience while acknowledging digital distractions? (Themes 8, 9; Institutional approach that supports but doesn't directly address the problem)

04

Primary
Research

- Target Audience

- Stakeholder Map

- Key Issues

- Thematic Analysis of Interviews

- Archetypes

- Journey Map

- Current Coping Strategies

- Potential Success Factors

Target Audience

Survey respondants
I conducted an anonymous survey with 25 SCAD students across multiple majors and years of study. Participants represented diverse backgrounds and varying levels of social media engagement, providing a comprehensive snapshot of the student experience with digital platforms and academic focus.

In-depth interviews
2 Undergraduate design students
2 Graduate students in digital media
2 Students who self-identified as struggling with social media overuse

1 University counselor specializing in student wellness
1 Licensed therapist with expertise in young adult development

1 Social scientist working for an initiative aimed at supporting youth shaping the responsible technology movement Academic researcher specializing in social media's psychological impacts

1 Education consultant who designs curriculum focusing on digital wellbeing for middle and high school students.
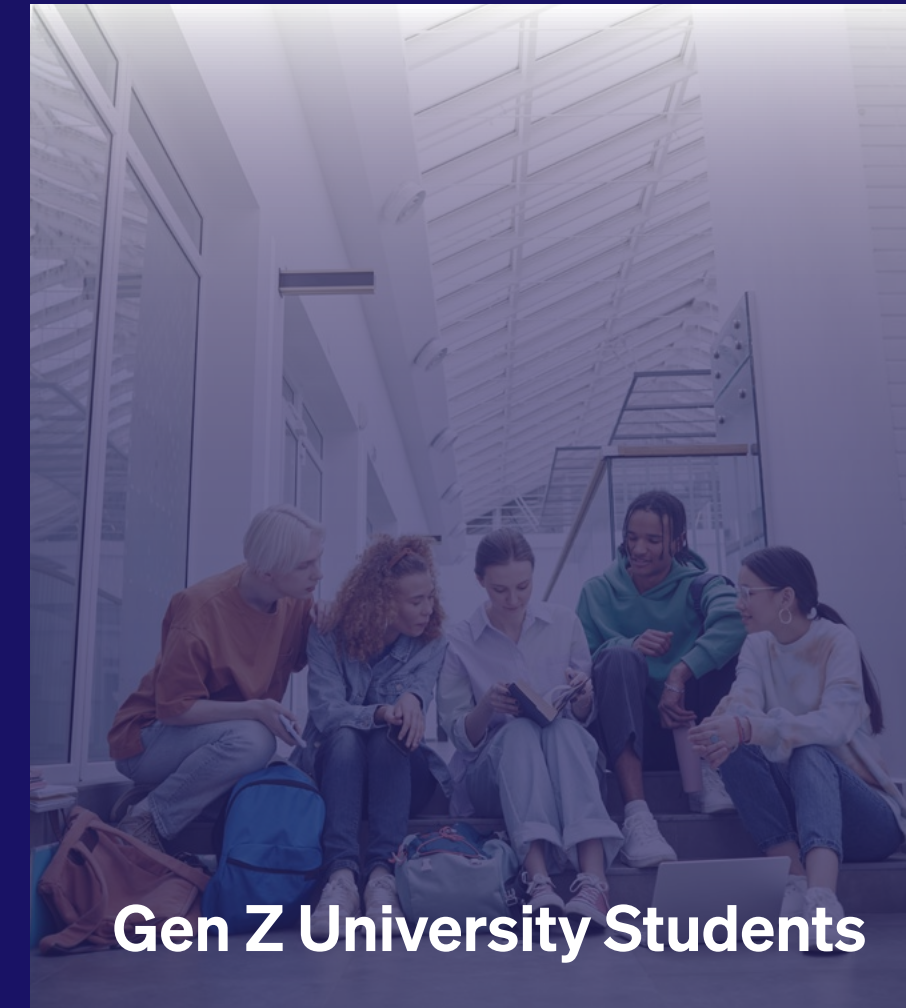
Survey respondants

25

SCAD students
21-28 age range

Interviewees

10

6 SCAD students
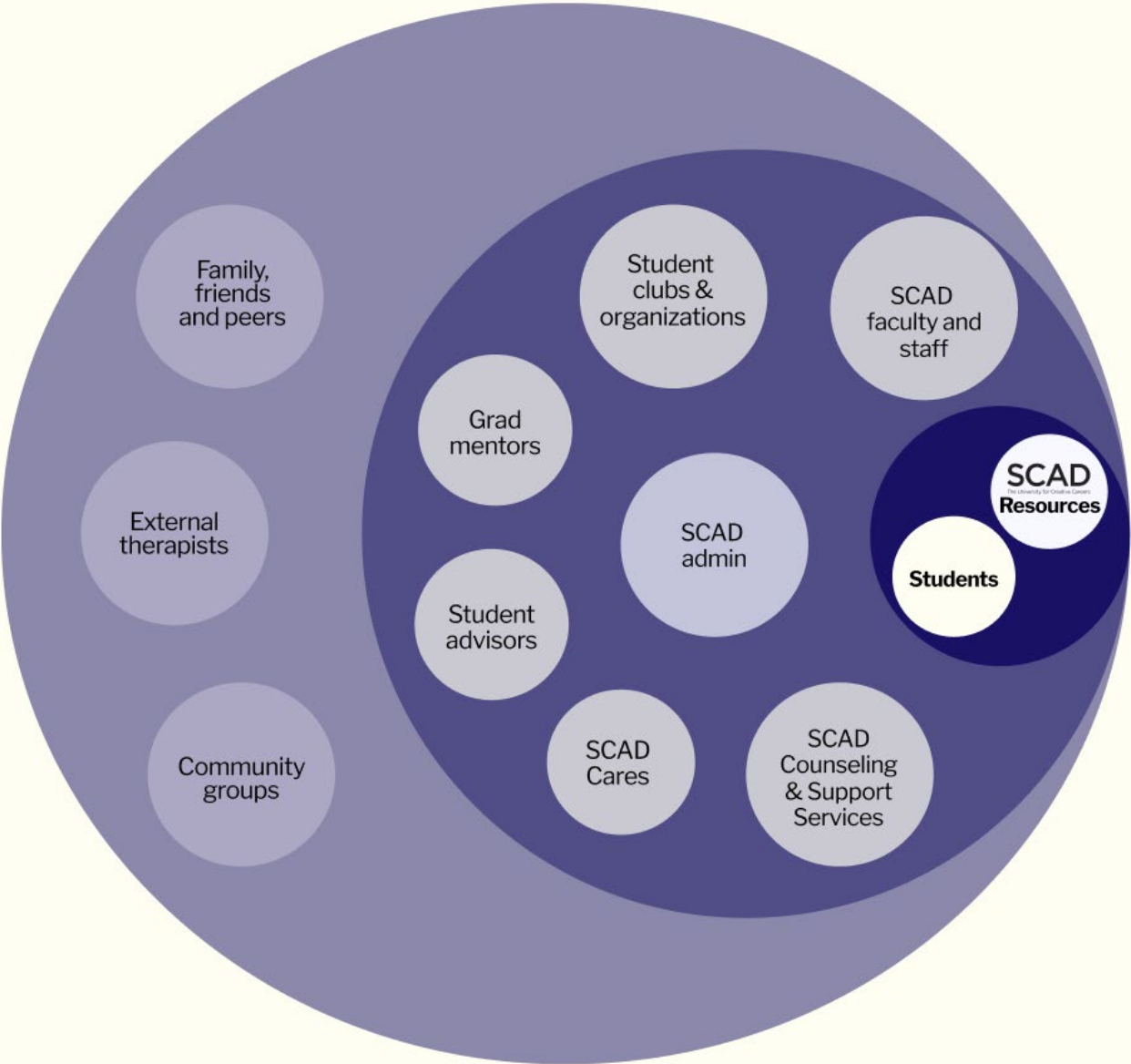2 therapists
2 social media experts

2 key actors

Gen Z University Students

SCAD Resources

Stakeholder Map

4.3 Primary Research
Key Themes, Findings & Insights

Key Issues

The 3 major issues that came up for students dealing with social media overload.

A.

Loss of focus

70.8%

report high distraction levels

"I cannot fall asleep naturally, I have to scroll to fall asleep... it's so sad and it's so frustrating"

B.

Productivity loss

54.1%

report > 25% of study time interrupted

"I waste too much time on social media that I could have used to enhance my portfolio or work better on a project"
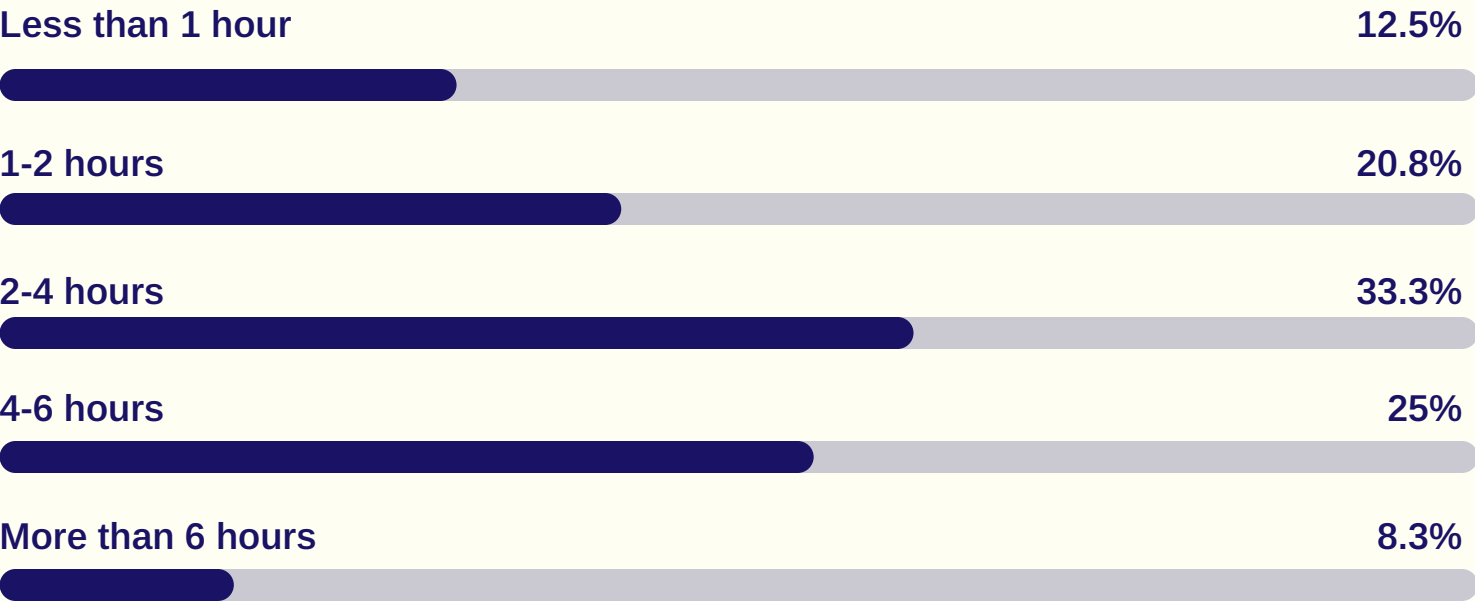
C.

Time management

91.7%

feel unproductive due to social media

"I feel quite unproductive due to social media"

Daily Screen Time on Social Media

Less than 1 hour — 12.5%

1-2 hours — 20.8%

2-4 hours — 33.3%

4-6 hours — 25%

More than 6 hours — 8.3%

Therefore,

58.3%

of students

> spend

2+ hrs

daily on social media

> With Instagram **being the most used app**

Distraction Levels

3.6/5

1	2	3	4	5
0%	8.3%	20.8%	37.5%	33.3%
Not at all	8.3%	20.8%	37.5%	Very much
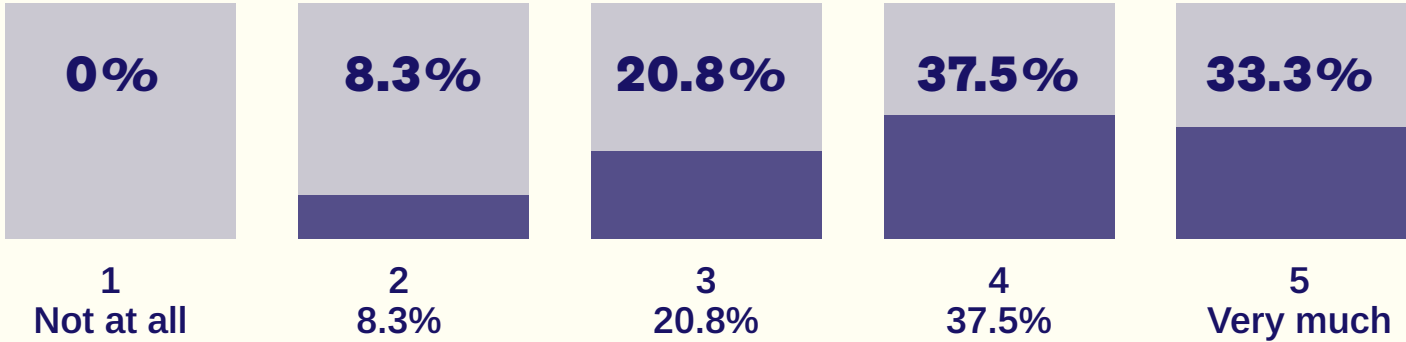
Therefore,

70.8%

report high distraction levels (1-5 rating)

Academic Impact Assessment

Study time interrupted by social media

% of students	% of study time interrupted
37.5%	**10-25%**
33.3%	**26-50%**
20.8%	**51-75%**
8.3%	**76-100%**
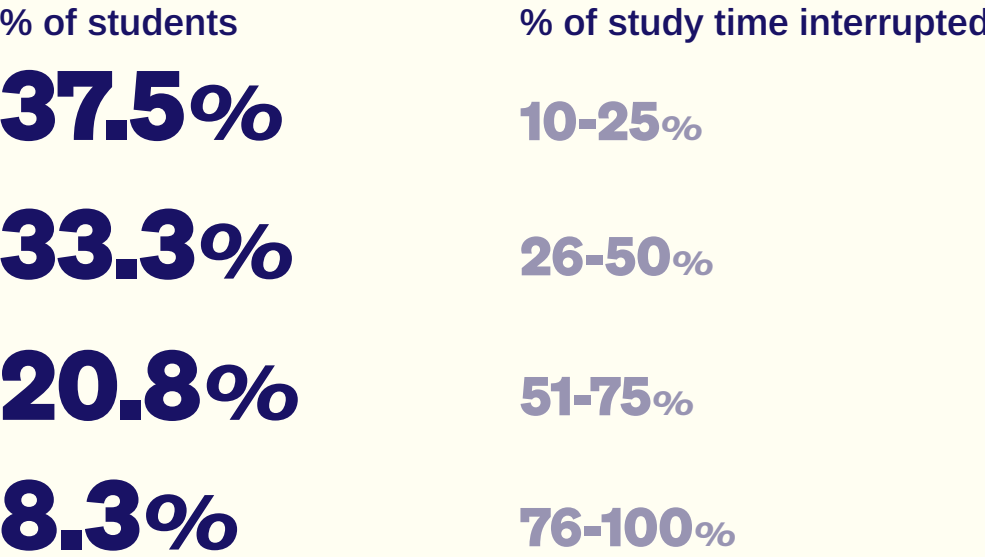
! **Critical Disruption Zone**
Nearly one-third of students report losing more than half of their study time to social media interruptions

Emotional Impact

Reported feelings related to social media overconsumption

91.7%   Unproductive

87.5%   Distracted

83.3%   Guilty

79.2%   Anxious

70.8%   Overwhelmed

Current Coping Strategies

**What they do to currently deal with social media overload.**

Notification management _____ **62.5%**

Limiting screen time _____ **50%**

App deletion _____ **50%**

Mindfulness practices _____ **41.7%**

Resource Awareness

An overview on SCAD counselling centre awareness, how much students utilize the existing resources and how interested they'd be to utilize them in the near future. There was low counselling centre (Beewell) awareness along with limited overall resource utilization but high potential and interest for future usage.

Beewell awareness _____ **12.5%**

Resource utilization _____ **16.7%**

Future interest _____ **75%**
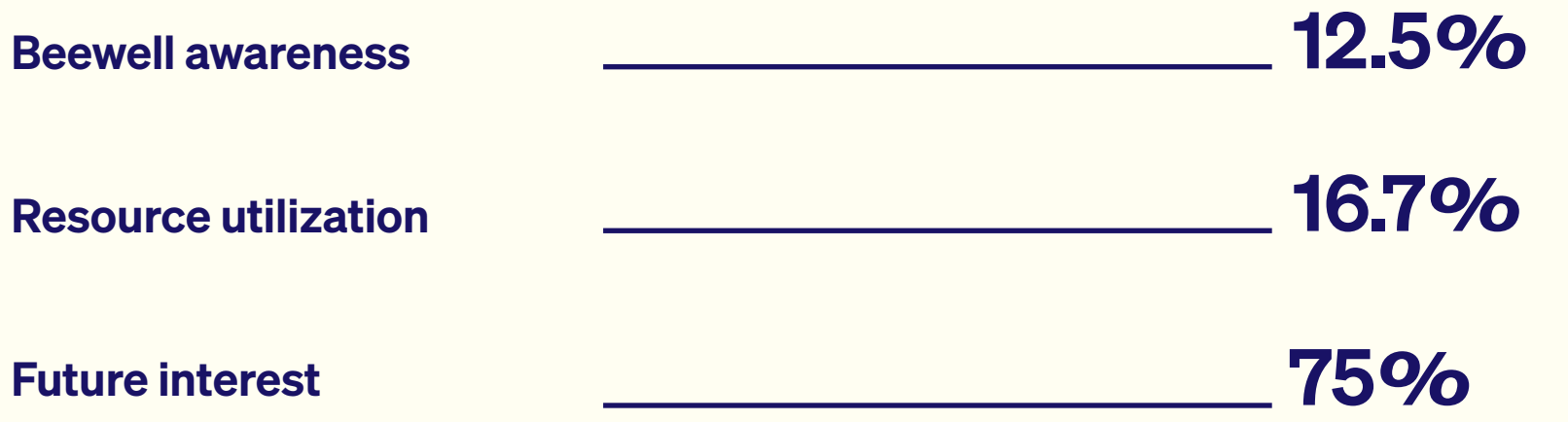
Qualitative Insights | Students

We conducted in-depth interviews with four SCAD students to understand their relationship with social media and its impact on their academic focus and productivity. The interviews revealed diverse usage patterns, ranging from 3.5 to 10 hours daily, highlighting how different students manage their digital engagement while pursuing creative education.

Through these conversations, clear patterns emerged about how social media affects their daily academic lives. All students described starting their day with social media, often against their conscious intentions. Break times frequently extended beyond planned durations due to social media use, directly impacting project work and studio time. Students particularly emphasized how platform-specific behaviors

shaped their academic experience - using different platforms for distinct purposes, from professional networking to creative inspiration to personal connection.

Common challenges surfaced across all interviews despite varying usage levels.

Focus fragmentation was a universal concern, with students describing how quick checks evolved into extended sessions, disrupting their creative flow and project timelines. The emotional impact was equally consistent, revealing a cycle of temporary pleasure followed by guilt about lost productivity.

Students had attempted various management strategies, from app deletion to notification control, but found sustained

success challenging. While most were aware they needed support, there was limited knowledge about available resources, suggesting an opportunity for better resource integration and awareness.

These insights paint a picture of students actively trying to balance their digital and academic lives, often struggling to maintain this equilibrium despite clear awareness of social media's impact on their work. Their experiences highlight the need for solutions that work with, rather than against, their existing patterns of technology use.

These insights have been categorized into broader themes.

Behavioral themes

The compulsive checking pattern
- Involves the disruption of students' morning routine due to checking of social media first thing.
- They mention how they extend their break times in between studies due to this compulsive scrolling habit- "quick checks" often become extended sessions
- Notification-driven behavior is another for compulsive usage of social media

Failed self regulation attemps
Management Strategy Attempts:
- App deletion: Success for few days → Reinstallation due to updates/connection needs
- Notification control: Customized settings → Manual checking despite muted alerts
- Time limits: Set boundaries → Easy bypassing through "15 more minutes" or browser use
- Success-Relapse Cycle: Works during deadlines → Returns to old patterns when pressure drops

Platform specific usage patterns
- Instagram/TikTok: Creative inspiration → Turns into endless scrolling
- LinkedIn: Professional networking → Comparison anxiety and overthinking
- YouTube: Educational intent → Entertainment rabbit holes
- Multiple platforms: Each requiring different boundaries but creating combined disruption

"

If I have a deadline or things to do, like exam preparation, I am not one to just focus on that. I tend to procrastinate an unhealthy amount. Social media takes time away from me completing my uni work, doing my chores or doing things to better myself and in turn, this increases my anxiety levels

Emotional themes

Guilt pleasure cycle

- Start: Temporary pleasure/entertainment from content
- During: Growing awareness of time passing
- After: Guilt about wasted time and lost productivity
- Result: Self-criticism about lack of control

Social comparison impact

- Portfolio/creative work: Constant measuring against peers' posts
- Professional achievements: Others' internships/opportunities trigger stress
- Progress perception: Feel behind when seeing others' work/updates
- Response behavior: Increased checking driven by fear of missing opportunities

Mental fatigue

- Constant content exposure leads to information saturation
- Multiple decisions about engagement drain mental energy
- Sustained platform switching fragments attention span
- Result: Mental fatigue affecting creative and academic work

Academic Impact

Focus fragmentation

- Deep work sessions broken by platform checking
- Continuous switching between work and social media
- 5-minute breaks extend to 30+ minutes
- Time awareness lost during social media use

Productivity disruption

- Deadlines approached with accumulated time loss
- Work quality suffers from fragmented attention
- Last-minute rushes due to social media distraction
- Work and social media use increasingly overlap/blur

Learning process impact

- Information processing interrupted by platform switching
- Creative flow broken by social media checks
- Deep thinking disrupted by notification responses
- Study resource use competed with social media

Resource utilization

Awareness gap

- Limited visibility of existing SCAD support services
- Confusion about how to access available help
- Uncertainty about which services match needs
- Hesitation to seek support for "just" social media issues

Support seeking barriers

- Reluctance to seek help for social media struggles
- Preference to handle issues independently
- Difficulty finding relevant resources when needed
- Challenge matching service hours with peak need times

Environmental needs

Study space requirements:
- Focus-friendly zones
- Social support spaces
- Digital wellness infrastructure

Gaps

Time management struggle

- Screen time awareness is crucial for effective control.
- Managing break times is essential for productivity.
- Balancing work and personal social media usage is necessary.
- Avoiding schedule disruptions is key to maintaining focus.

Intervention complexity

- Need for multi-level solutions: : Multiple levels from individual habits to organizational policies and broader societal norms
- The physical and digital environments we operate in play a crucial role in shaping behavior.
- Technical and behavioral approaches in combination could prove to be effective in addressing this issue
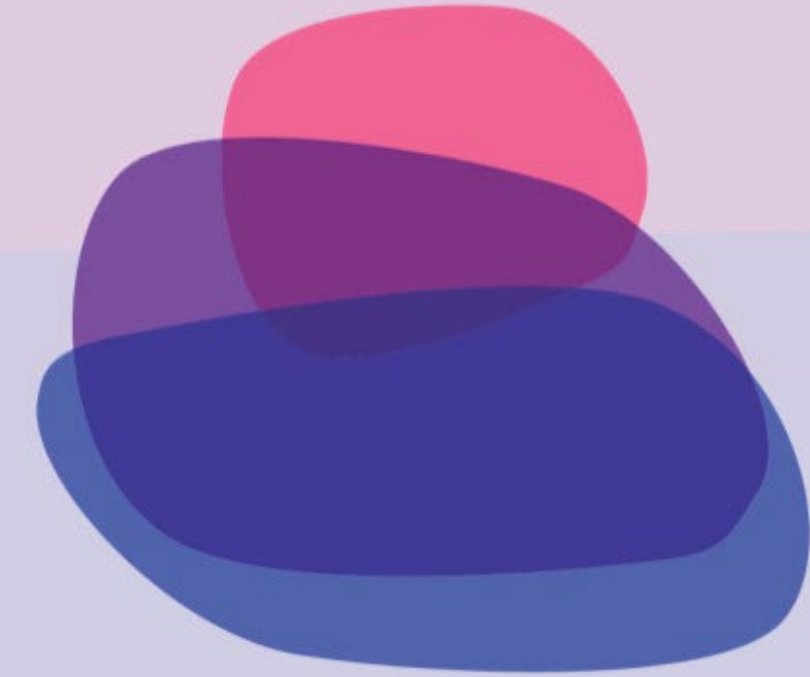
Support systems gap

- Limited awareness of existing resources poses a significant challenge
- Perceived difficulty in availability resources is another challenge
- Fragmented tools need better integration for seamless support

4.3 Primary Research
Expert Lens: Professional Perspectives

Bee Well

SCAD Counseling Centre

Insights | Counsellor | Institutional View

SCAD's counselors provided critical insights from the institutional support perspective, revealing how social media impacts students' academic and mental well-being. Their direct experience supporting students highlighted the complex relationship between social media use and academic performance.

Key issues they identified include anxiety as the most prevalent concern, with social media often acting as both trigger and coping mechanism. For creative students specifically, they noted how platform use affects portfolio development anxiety and creative confidence through constant comparison.

The observations about time management— "all those little 5 minutes here and there add up"—revealed how accumulated small disruptions significantly impact academic performance.

They emphasized that while complete disconnection isn't realistic given academic and professional requirements, students need structured support to maintain healthier engagement patterns.

Some of their perspective were particularly valuable in understanding implementation challenges, noting that solutions must acknowledge social media's necessary role in academic work while protecting students' focus and well-being.

The insights about resource awareness and access barriers helped identify opportunities for improving support system effectiveness.

Through the counseling work done at Beewell, they have observed that successful interventions typically combine practical tools with emotional support.

This helps students develop both the skills and resilience needed to manage their digital engagement while maintaining academic focus.

Top 3 concerns among Gen Z students

Anxiety

Depression

Focus

Staying away is not an option

"It can be hard when not going on social media is not an option" It is essential for various aspects of students' lives, with the top three being the following:

Academic necessity

Platform reliance

Professional requirements

Focus and Productivity Impact

"5 minutes here and there adds up and becomes an hour or more"

SCAD's Beewell counselors provided crucial insights into how social media impacts student focus and productivity.

They noted that while students rarely come to counseling specifically for social media issues, its impact on academic performance frequently emerges as an underlying concern during sessions.

She emphasized how social media affects focus in multiple ways: the constant pull of notifications disrupts study flow, task-switching between platforms and academic work depletes mental resources, and even having phones nearby can divert attention.

For creative students specifically, she observed how platform use during project work can fragment concentration and extend what should be brief breaks into lengthy scrolling sessions.

Her observations revealed a clear pattern: students' focus issues often manifest as a compounding effect. What starts as small distractions—checking notifications or taking quick social media breaks—accumulates into significant productivity loss. She noted that this particularly impacts complex creative tasks that require sustained attention and deep focus.

Through her counseling experience, she's found that successful interventions must address both immediate focus challenges and underlying patterns. She recommends

creating intentional time away from phones, especially during class and focused work periods, while acknowledging that complete disconnection isn't realistic given academic requirements.

This institutional perspective helps identify opportunities for better supporting students in maintaining focus and productivity while managing necessary digital engagement.
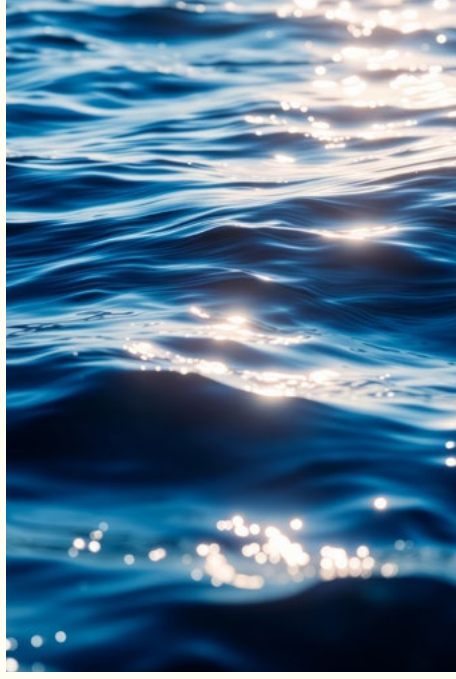
Current Counselor Intervention Recommendations

Turn off notifications
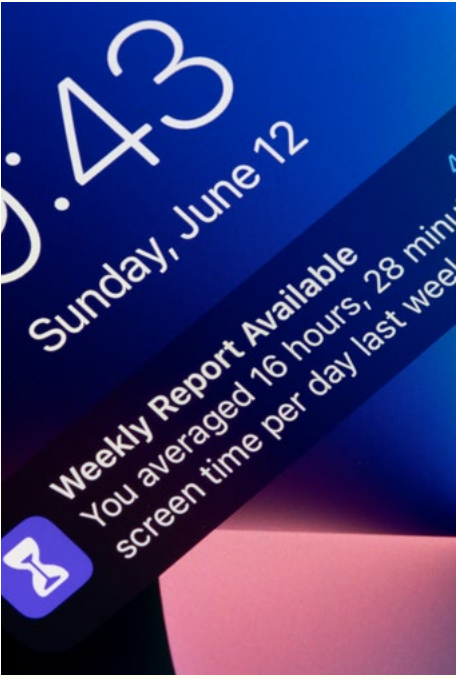
Create intentional no-phone time

Dedicated tech-free periods

Reflection on usage purpose and period

SCAD Resource Awareness and Utilization

Current state

Mixed student reception

Some students have positive experiences after 3 sessions

Others remain uncertain about service benefits

Varying levels of engagement with support services

Different perceptions of help-seeking for social media issues

Confusion about services

Unclear pathways to accessing different types of support

Uncertainty about which services address social media issues

Students unsure about service relevance to their specific needs

Lack of clarity about available resources and their purposes

Communication issues

Services exist but info is not reaching students effectively

Multiple communication channels but fragmented messaging

Students often learn about services through word-of-mouth

Resource info not reaching students at key moments of need

Access barriers

Students hesitant to seek help for 'just' social media issues

Scheduling challenges with academic commitments

Uncertainty about service access process

Gap between recognizing need and accessing support

Success Indicators: Measurable Improvements

Better concentration

Reduced anxiety

Improved work engagement

More present in activities

HOW MIGHT WE...

1. Focus & Mental Health

- *HMW help students manage social media's impact on focus without compromising necessary academic/professional use?*

- *HMW integrate mental health support with academic performance needs?*

- *HMW address anxiety about creative work comparison without disconnecting from inspiration sources?*

2. Resource Access & Awareness

- *HMW make SCAD's support services more visible and accessible when students need them most?*

- *HMW reduce confusion and hesitation about accessing support services?*

- *HMW communicate available resources more effectively?*

3. Creative Student Support

- *HMW help creative students balance portfolio development with mental wellbeing?*

- *HMW support students in maintaining creative confidence despite social media comparison?*

- *HMW create discipline-specific support for different majors?*

Insights | Social Media Expert | External View

Our interview with a Program Manager at the Responsible Tech Youth Power Fund provided valuable perspective from the policy and organizational level. This expert's experience supporting youth-led initiatives addressing technology issues offered insights into broader approaches to social media impact.

Their work with organizations studying algorithmic impacts and developing protective policies revealed how institutional solutions must operate at multiple levels. They emphasized that addressing social media's impact on academic performance requires combining individual empowerment with institutional support and policy-level changes.

Particularly relevant was their observation about the clear linkage between social media use and overall well-being, especially noting specific academic implications like reduced focus, lower productivity, and time management challenges. Their experience working with schools and universities on critical engagement strategies highlighted the importance of teaching students how to navigate digital spaces while maintaining academic focus.

The expert stressed that while many initiatives focus on broader mental health implications, there's particular value in specifically addressing academic impacts, as they represent a concrete and measurable aspect of social media's influence on student life. Their insights about successful interventions at other institutions suggested the importance of developing multi-faceted support systems that acknowledge both the benefits and challenges of social media use in academic settings.

This external perspective helps validate findings from student research while providing broader context for developing effective institutional responses.

Overall themes

Multi-stakeholder approach

- Individual level interventions alone aren't sufficient
- Need coordination between: Personal agency tools
- Institutional support
- Educational frameworks
- Policy-level changes

Policy impact on academic performance

- Working with policymakers for protection is required
- Advocating for educational policies is a must
- Developing protective legislation is crucial

Role of the educational institution

Key findings about how schools/universities can help:
- Teaching critical engagement
- Raising awareness about responsible usage
- Developing tools for critical thinking
- Creating support systems

Mental health and academic connection

Identified clear linkages between:
- Social media use and overall well-being
- Self-worth and academic performance
- Digital habits and productivity
- Platform design and student focus

Academic performance implications
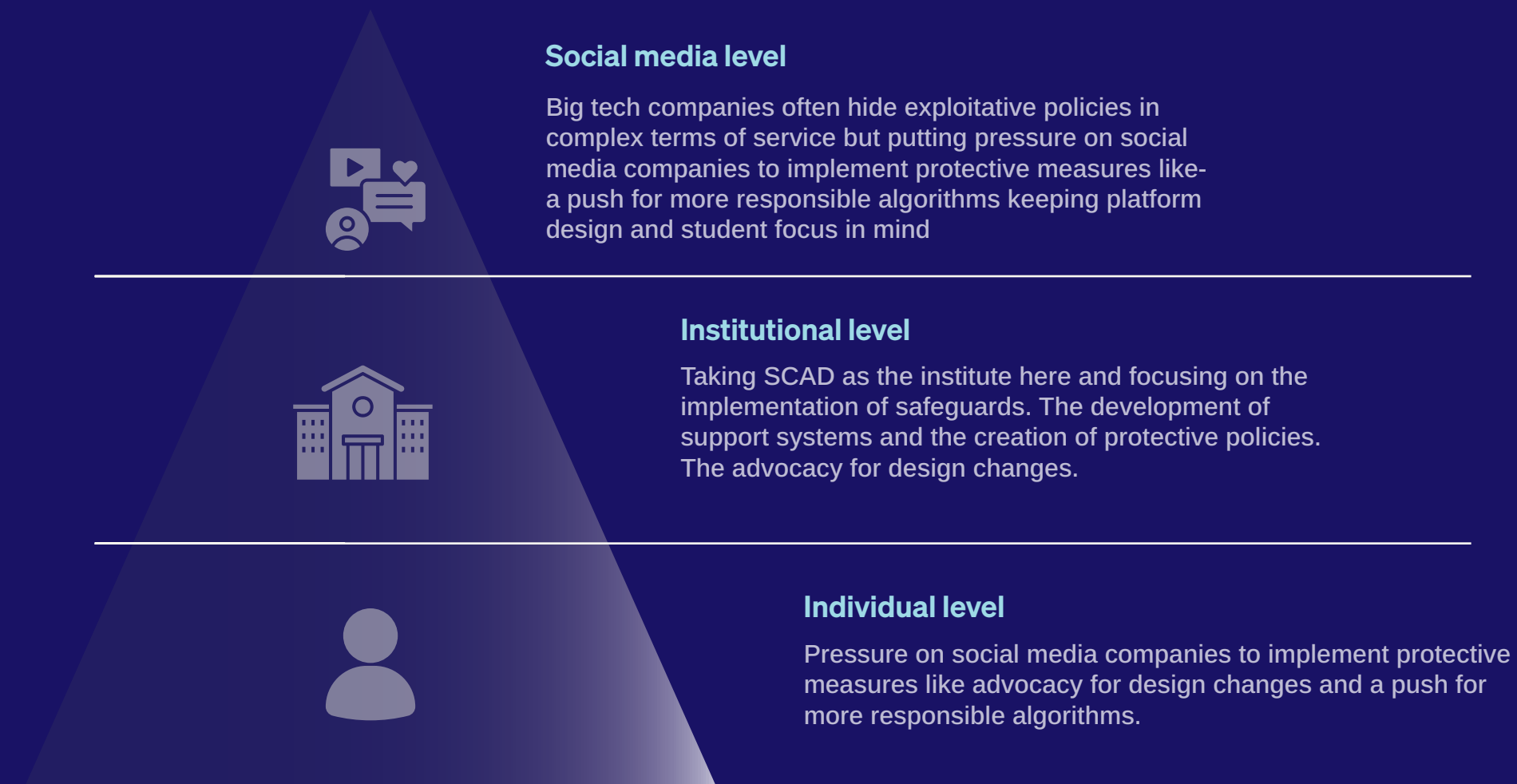
Research-backed impacts:
- Reduced focus
- Lower productivity
- Time management issues
- Difficulty maintaining concentration

Platform specific behavior

- Different behaviors are seen on different platforms
- Professional vs personal usage conflicts are tricky to navigate
- Platform-specific time sinks cause loss of productivity
- Cross-platform notification issues are distracting

Recommended Intervention Approach

They stated the importance of a 3-level intervention strategy to mitigate this problem- a multti-stakeholder approach for more impact.

Social media level

Big tech companies often hide exploitative policies in complex terms of service but putting pressure on social media companies to implement protective measures like- a push for more responsible algorithms keeping platform design and student focus in mind

Institutional level

Taking SCAD as the institute here and focusing on the implementation of safeguards. The development of support systems and the creation of protective policies. The advocacy for design changes.

Individual level

Pressure on social media companies to implement protective measures like advocacy for design changes and a push for more responsible algorithms.

HOW MIGHT WE...

1. Multi-Level Support

- *HMW implement effective interventions at individual, institutional, and policy levels?*

- *HMW create support systems that acknowledge all stakeholder needs?*

- *HMW integrate personal agency with institutional support?*

2. Educational Integration

- *HMW incorporate digital wellness into existing academic structures?*

- *HMW teach critical engagement with social media?*

- *HMW develop tools for critical thinking about platform use?*

3. Implementation Framework

- *HMW create protective policies that still allow necessary platform use?*

- *HMW develop safeguards that work within academic requirements?*

- *HMW build support systems that scale across departments?*

4.4 Thematic Analysis of Primary Research

Morning Routine Disruption

Study time interrupted by social media

"The first thing I do when I wake up is check my phone, particularly Instagram. It has become a reflex action, though I hate doing it."

"Since my phone is next to me when I sleep, the first thing I do when I wake up is open Instagram."

"I feel like I'm always on, waiting for messages... As long as I'm awake, I'm always on social media."

76% respondents report checking social media within 10 minutes of waking up

Extended Break Impact

Study time interrupted by social media

"If I use my phone during timed breaks, I open social media and exceed my total break time. I'm constantly just scrolling and scrolling curious to see new content."

"When I refresh it sometimes it tells me that I'm up to date... why am I still scrolling, scrolling, scrolling? There is nothing left for me to see which is new.."

"I was planning to do my portfolio at 8:30am and I start to chat with my friend or swiping on TikTok. When I finish, it's 11am. I really feel bad."

54% of students report over 25% of study time interrupted by social media

Expert Perspective: Counselor Insights

Compounding effect

"Sometimes it isn't a direct impact of social media on work, but some sort of compounding effect... if someone is feeling negative or a certain emotion that is not desirable, social media aggravates anxiety. And like any negativity, this has the power to impact academic performance."

Social media and academics

"Research shows it definitely correlates. The more exposed younger generations have been to social media and phone technology, the higher levels of anxiety and depression... The number of people seeking mental health support has increased alongside the development of these social media apps"

Expert Perspective: Warning Signs of Overload

Lost time awareness

Sleep disruption

Compulsive checking behavior

Choosing screens over in-person interaction

Loss of focus and productivity

The moderate user

Archetype 1: The Mindful Struggler

Usage profile

Platforms: Instagram, LinkedIn

Average Time: 3-4 hours daily

Primary Purpose: Professional networking, inspiration, keeping up with friends

"I delete Instagram regularly but can only last a few days. I'm conscious of how much time I waste but find it hard to maintain discipline."

Key behaviors

- Aware of usage issues
- Sets time boundaries that often fail
- Regular cycle of deletion and reinstallation
- Morning and evening usage peaks
- Primarily uses phone for social media

Pain points

- Extended break times
- Project quality concerns
- Sleep disruption
- Difficulty maintaining boundaries
- Guilt after usage

Goals

- Complete portfolio work on time
- Maintain connections without overuse
- Sleep better without late scrolling
- Find balance between inspiration and distraction

Frustrations

- Self-imposed limits don't stick
- Unclear what resources could help
- Support seems too formal for 'just' social media
- Temporary solutions keep failing

Coping strategies

- App deletion (temporary success)
- Notification management
- Time tracking attempts
- Morning routine adjustments

The heavy user

Archetype 2: The Immersed User

Usage profile

Platforms: TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Discord

Average Time: 6-8 hours daily

Primary Purpose: Entertainment, inspiration, peer connection, distraction

"Sometimes I'll plan to work at 8:30 AM but end up on social media until 11 AM. I feel very frustrated and suddenly I don't want to do anything."

Key behaviors

- Constant checking throughout day
- Multi-tasking with social media open
- Night owl with late scrolling
- Struggles to recognize extent of usage
- Uses multiple devices for access

Pain points

- Deadline crises
- Focus fragmentation
- Computer-based work blurs with social media
- Poor time awareness
- Project quality suffering

Goals

- Complete animation projects with quality
- Find inspiration without falling into consumption trap
- Develop better work routines
- Maintain peer connections

Frustrations

- Technical solutions fail due to work/social blend
- High pressure to maintain online presence
- Difficult to separate research from distraction
- Comparison anxiety impacts motivation

Coping strategies

- Forest app for focus (limited success)
- Failed attempts at time blocking
- Support from friends occasionally
- Technical limitations often bypassed

The managed user

Archetype 3: The Balanced Optimizer

Usage profile

Platforms: Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest

Average Time: 1-2 hours daily

Primary Purpose: Professional showcase, research, selective connection

"I don't spend long continuous periods on social media, but I check it frequently for about 30 seconds. Setting boundaries helps - working with someone else who keeps me in check."

Key behaviors

- Intentional, purpose-driven usage
- Brief, frequent checks
- Limited posting, more consumption
- Clear boundaries for academic work
- Leverages peer accountability

Pain points

- Pre-sleep scrolling habit
- Occasional comparison triggers
- Professional necessity creates tension
- Platform-specific distractions
- Break management challenges

Goals

- Maintain professional presence without overconsumption
- Balance inspiration and creation
- Develop sustainable usage patterns
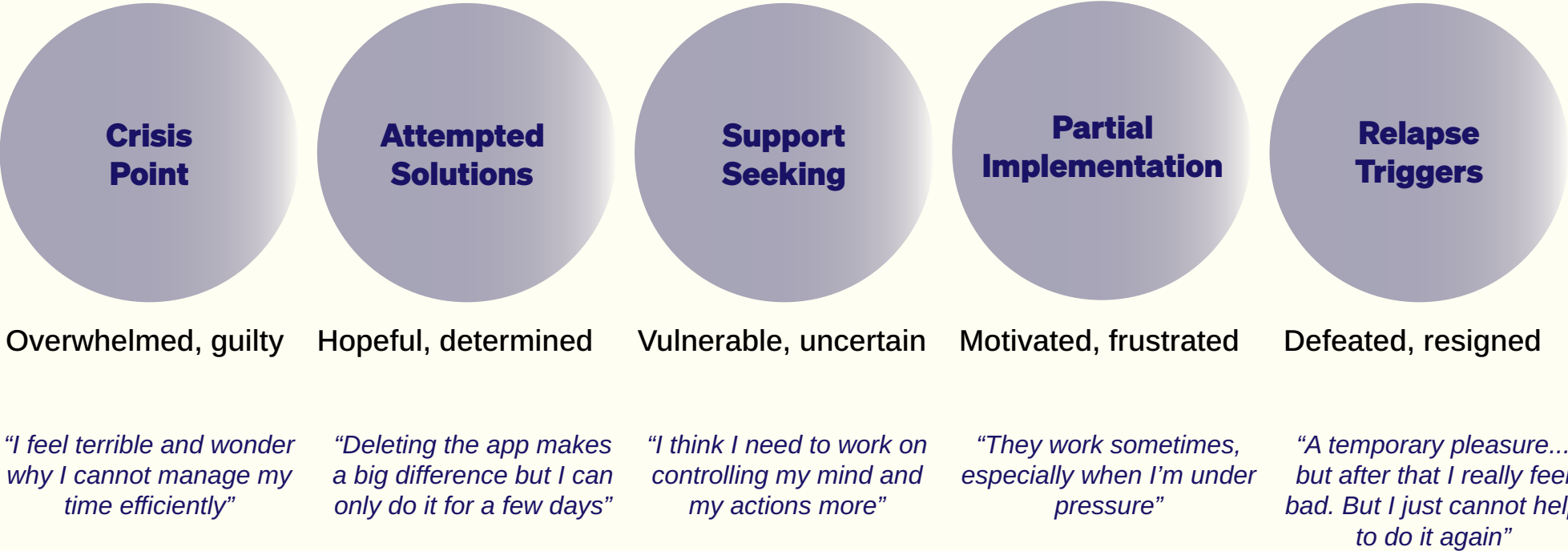- Leverage social media professionally

Frustrations

- Few resources address balanced usage
- Most solutions assume problematic usage
- Professional requirements conflict with wellbeing
- Maintaining consistency is challenging

Coping strategies

- Peer accountability (highly effective)
- Informal time boundaries
- Purpose-driven usage limits
- Sought professional support for anxiety management

Emotional Journey: The Cyclical Struggle

Crisis Point	Attempted Solutions	Support Seeking	Partial Implementation	Relapse Triggers
Overwhelmed, guilty	Hopeful, determined	Vulnerable, uncertain	Motivated, frustrated	Defeated, resigned
"I feel terrible and wonder why I cannot manage my time efficiently"	*"Deleting the app makes a big difference but I can only do it for a few days"*	*"I think I need to work on controlling my mind and my actions more"*	*"They work sometimes, especially when I'm under pressure"*	*"A temporary pleasure... but after that I really feel bad. But I just cannot help to do it again"*

Coping Strategy Effectiveness Analysis

| Strategy	Adoption Rate	Effectiveness	Experience
Notification Management	62.5%	Medium	*"I don't like to keep it on silent because I feel I might miss important calls... but other times I get completely distracted."*
App Deletion	50%	High but temporary	*"Deleting the app especially Instagram makes a big difference but I can only do it for a few days at a stretch."*
Screen Time Limits	50%	Low	*"I also feel like for things like loss of focus, it helps when I sit and study or work with someone else they keep me in check."*
Peer Accountability	33.3%	Very high	*"Deleting the app especially Instagram makes a big difference but I can only do it for a few days at a stretch."*

Potential Combined Success Effectiveness

Peer Accountability with Temporary App Removal

Group study environments combined with temporary app removal showed highest success rates

Mindfulness with Notification Management

Conscious notification control paired with mindfulness practices improved focus duration

Nascent Opportunity Areas
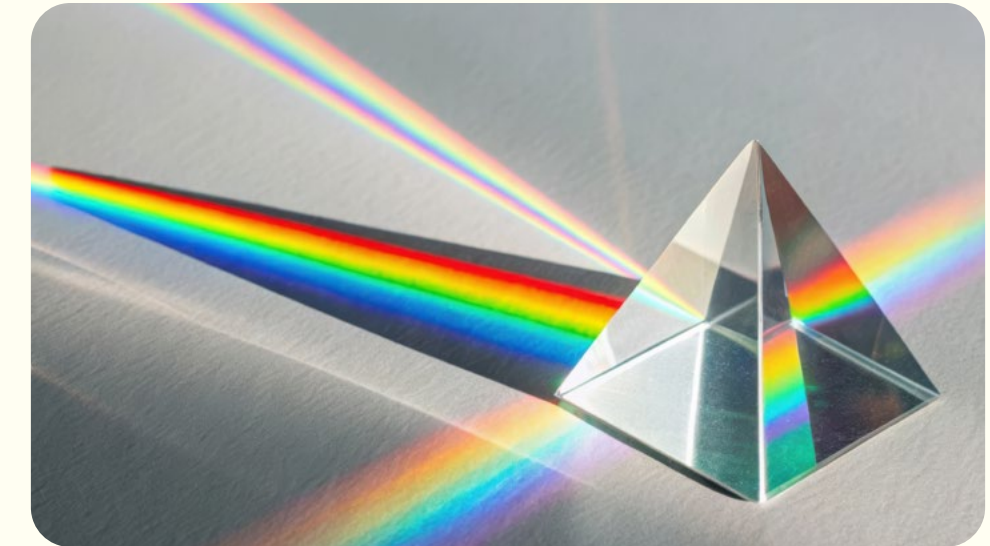
05

- HMWs
- Ideal Emotions
- Crazy 8s

Ideation

HMWs from Primary Research

HMW design **seamless transitions** between social and academic activities?

HMW design social media experiences that **enhance rather than disrupt** healthy routines?

HMW reframe students' digital engagement to **align with their values and goals**?

HMW integrate **mindful technology** use into SCAD students' creative practice?

HMW help students align their social media usage with their **academic priorities**?

HMW create an environment where students **naturally discover the right resources** at the right time?

HMW help students feel **confident and purposeful** in their social media interactions?

HMW create **synergy** between digital connectivity needs and academic productivity for students?

HMW go beyond quick fixes and give students **long term impact**?

HMW enable students to **feel confident** about the resources they choose to seek help from?

HMW make support resources feel like a **natural extension** of students' digital experience?

HMW create environments where students enter and **maintain states of deep focu**s?

HMWs helped tap into the ideal student emotions

| Purposeful | Confident | Efficient |
| Balanced | Empowered | In-control |

Designing for these ideal emotional states

Designing for Ideal Emotions

The HMWs from student interviews revealed several key emotional states that needed transformation:

From guilt to intentionality
From anxiety to confidence
From overwhelm to control
From scattered to focused

Through analysis of both expert interviews and student experiences, it became clear that designing for emotional states rather than just behavioral changes could create more sustainable solutions. This approach aligns with research showing that emotional engagement significantly impacts focus and productivity.

The process of identifying ideal emotional states included:

1. First mapped current emotional states from interviews
2. Analyzed HMWs to understand desired transformations
3. Identified target emotional states that would support better focus and productivity
4. Validated these states against expert insights about student success

This led to focusing design efforts on creating environments and systems that:

• Facilitate calm focus instead of anxious multitasking.

• Intentional engagement rather than compulsive checking.

• Confident creation versus comparison-driven work

• Structured flow instead of scattered attention.
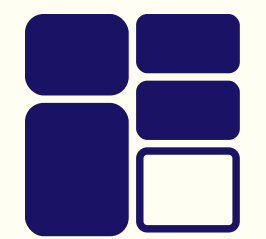
Crazy 8's Ideation

I used crazy 8's to generate ideas for how SCAD could help students combat social media's negative impact on focus and productivity. This method was chosen to rapidly explore multiple solution directions based on insights from student interviews, expert perspectives, and survey data. The process helped identify potential interventions at various touchpoints in the student journey, from morning routines through project work periods.

Each round of crazy 8's focused on different aspects from the research:
- Environmental design opportunities (focus-friendly spaces)
- Resource integration needs (making support accessible)
- Focus protection mechanisms (especially during project work)
- Break time structures (preventing social media extension)
- Support system access (reducing barriers to help)

The ideation was grounded in real student experiences, like morning routine disruption, extended break challenges, and project focus issues. Expert insights from both the SCAD counselors and RTYP Fund helped ensure ideas considered both immediate student needs and broader implementation requirements.
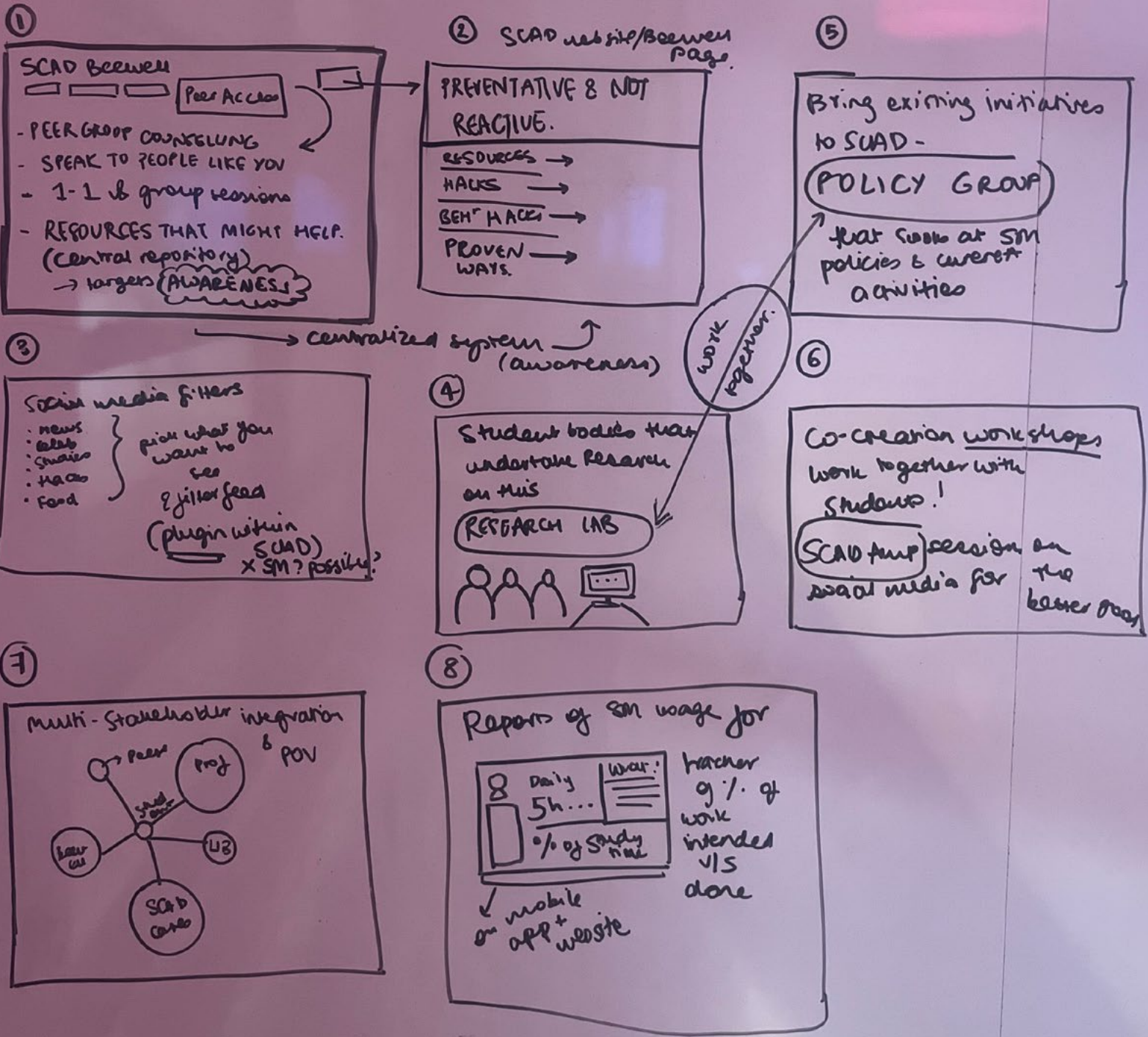
Brainstorming methods used

Crazy 8s

Dot voting

Crazy 8 Ideas

⭐ **voted ideas**

⭐ **Peer support and accountability**

⭐ **Design hacks and tricks to bypass social media's addictive design**

Student bodies that undertake research on the topic of social media overload

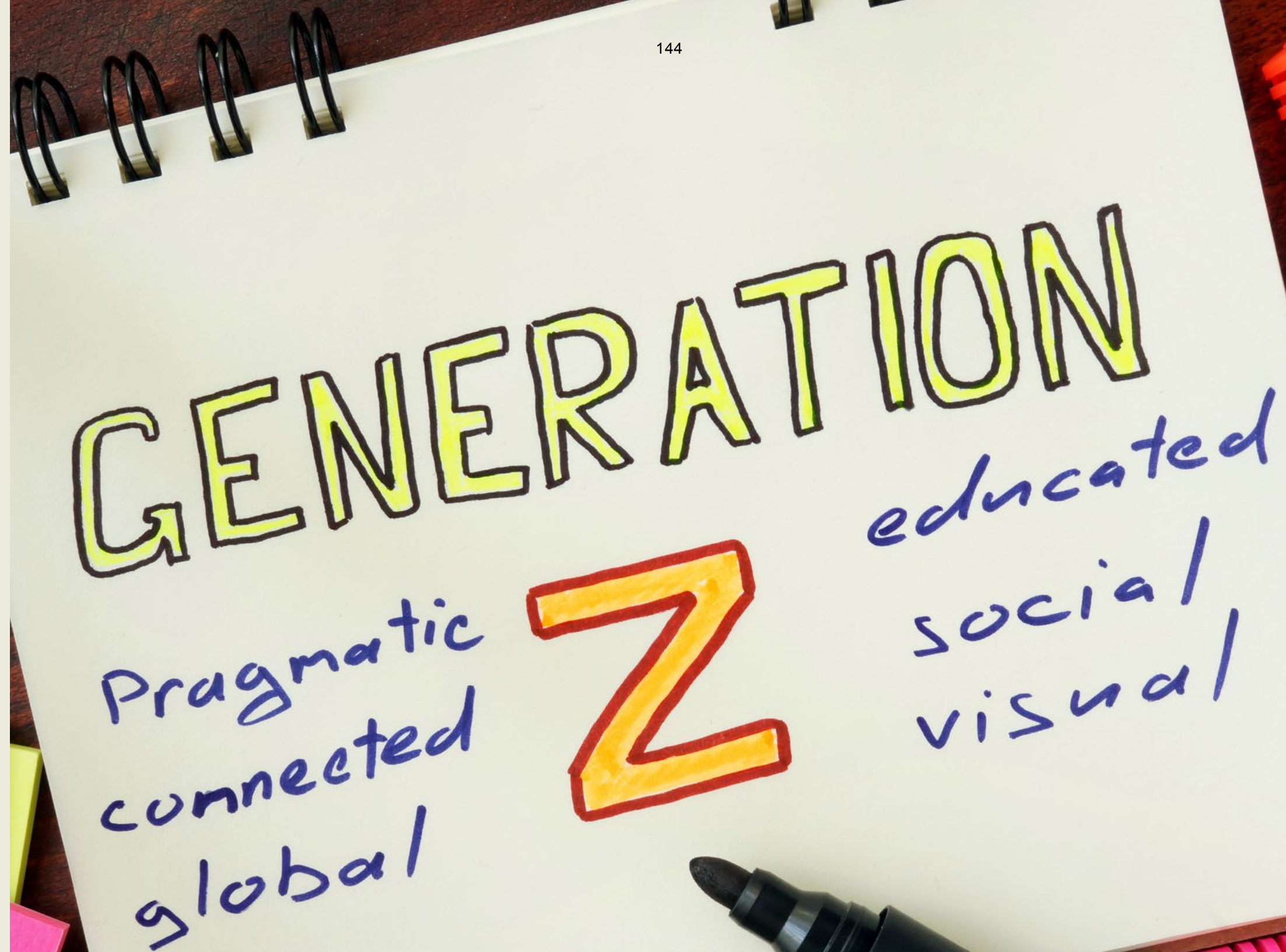⭐ **Co-creation workshops with students and social media experts**

Bring existing resources on this topic to SCAD

Social media filters to curate your own feed

⭐ **Weekly reports on social media usage habits**

A multi-stakeholder point of view

06

The
# Concept

- Concept
- Key Features

6. 1 The Concept

MindfulScroll@SCAD is an intelligent support system that provides both immediate intervention and long-term preventive strategies for students struggling with social media's impact on their academic focus and productivity. The platform transforms SCAD's fragmented resources into an integrated support ecosystem.

Core Functions:

1. Real-time Support: Students identify their current state (emotional/academic) and receive targeted resource recommendations

2. Resource Integration: Centralizes and streamlines access to existing SCAD services (BeWell, SCADamp) and new interventions (Focus Pods, productivity tracking)

3. Personalized Dashboard: Creates data-driven profiles tracking intervention history, usage patterns, and success metrics

4. Smart Recommendations: Learns from user behavior to suggest increasingly relevant resources and strategies

5. Continuous Improvement: Feedback loop system captures intervention effectiveness and user experience

The platform aims to transform how students interact with support services, making resource access intuitive while building sustainable digital wellness habits.
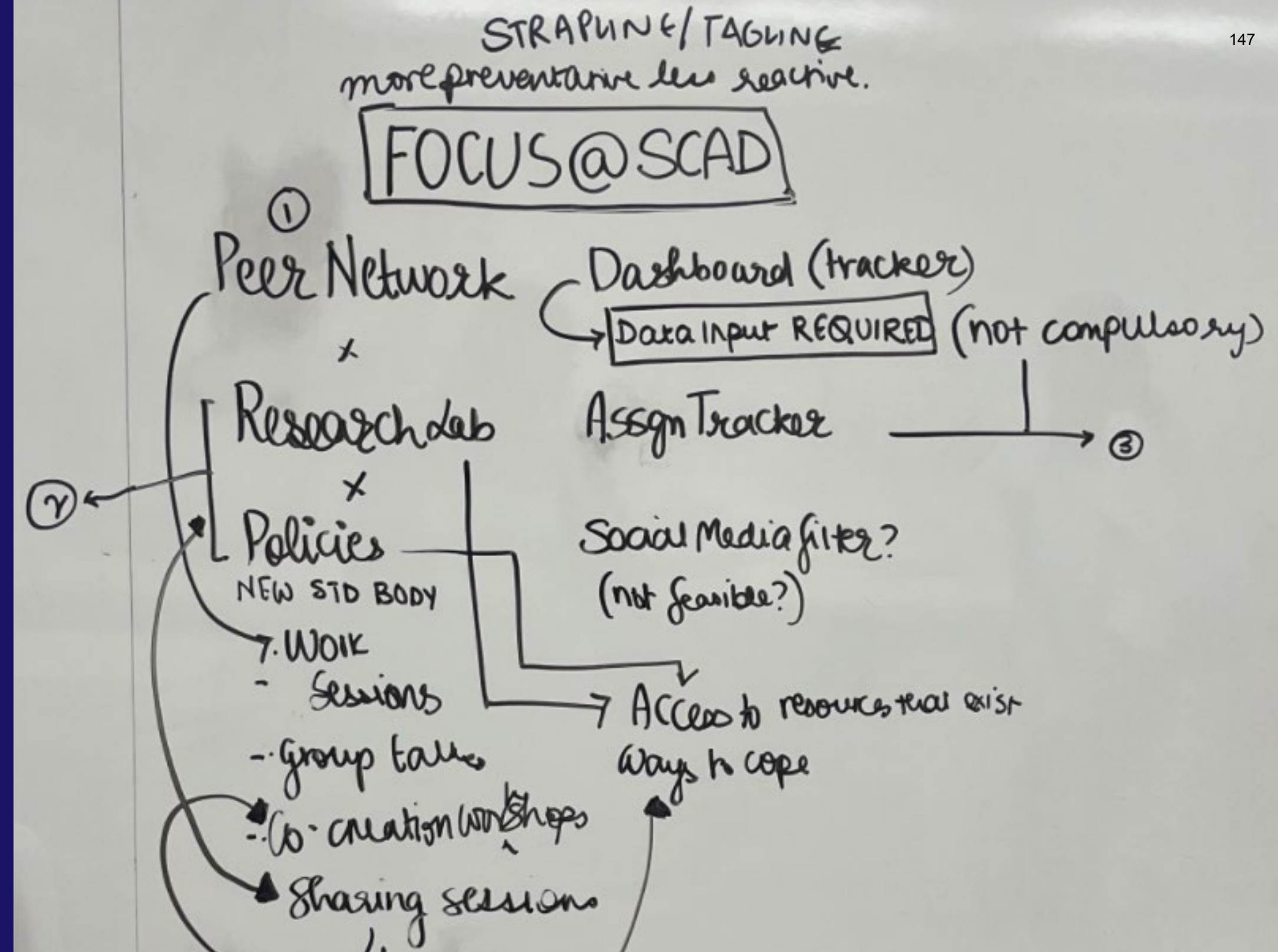
6.2 Key Features

01

Contextual Support

Emotional state tracking
Academic phase awareness
Time-sensitive interventions
Major-specific resources

02

Resource Navigation

Clear pathways to help
Service descriptions
Access instructions
Availability updates

03

Progress Monitoring

Intervention tracking
Success metrics
Pattern recognition
Goal setting

04

Community Integration

Peer success stories
Group interventions
Shared strategies
Support networks

05

Behavioral Reinforcement

Habit formation tools
Progress visualization
Achievement recognition
Strategy refinement

06

Rewarding Good Behavior

Reward habit loop
Rewarding good digital habits

07

Final
Solution

- What?

- Prototypes

- Model of Behavior Change

- Impact

7. 1 Mindful Scroll

What?

A **resource hub** that identifies and connects students with targeted support for social media boundary-setting.

It **combines existing SCAD resources** like BeeWell and SCADamp with new offerings like digital time-tracking, digital wellness workshops, etc
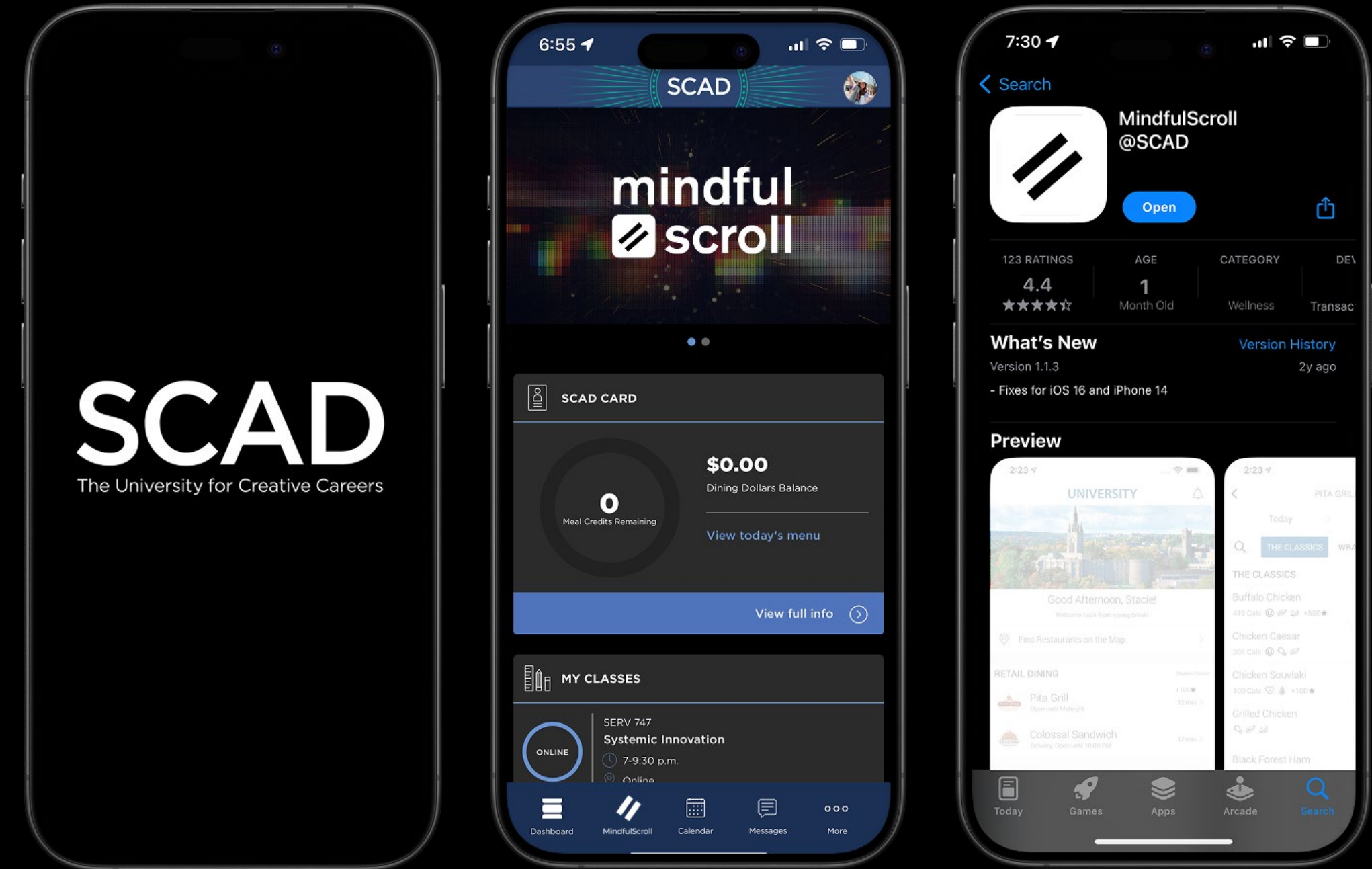
7. 2 The Prototypes | Mobile App

MindfulScroll@SCAD is a comprehensive digital wellness platform designed to help Gen Z university students at SCAD manage their social media usage and improve their focus and productivity. The platform addresses the growing concern of social media overload among young adults, with 90% of U.S. young adults aged 18-29 using social media and Gen Z spending an average of 2 hours and 43 minutes daily on these platforms.
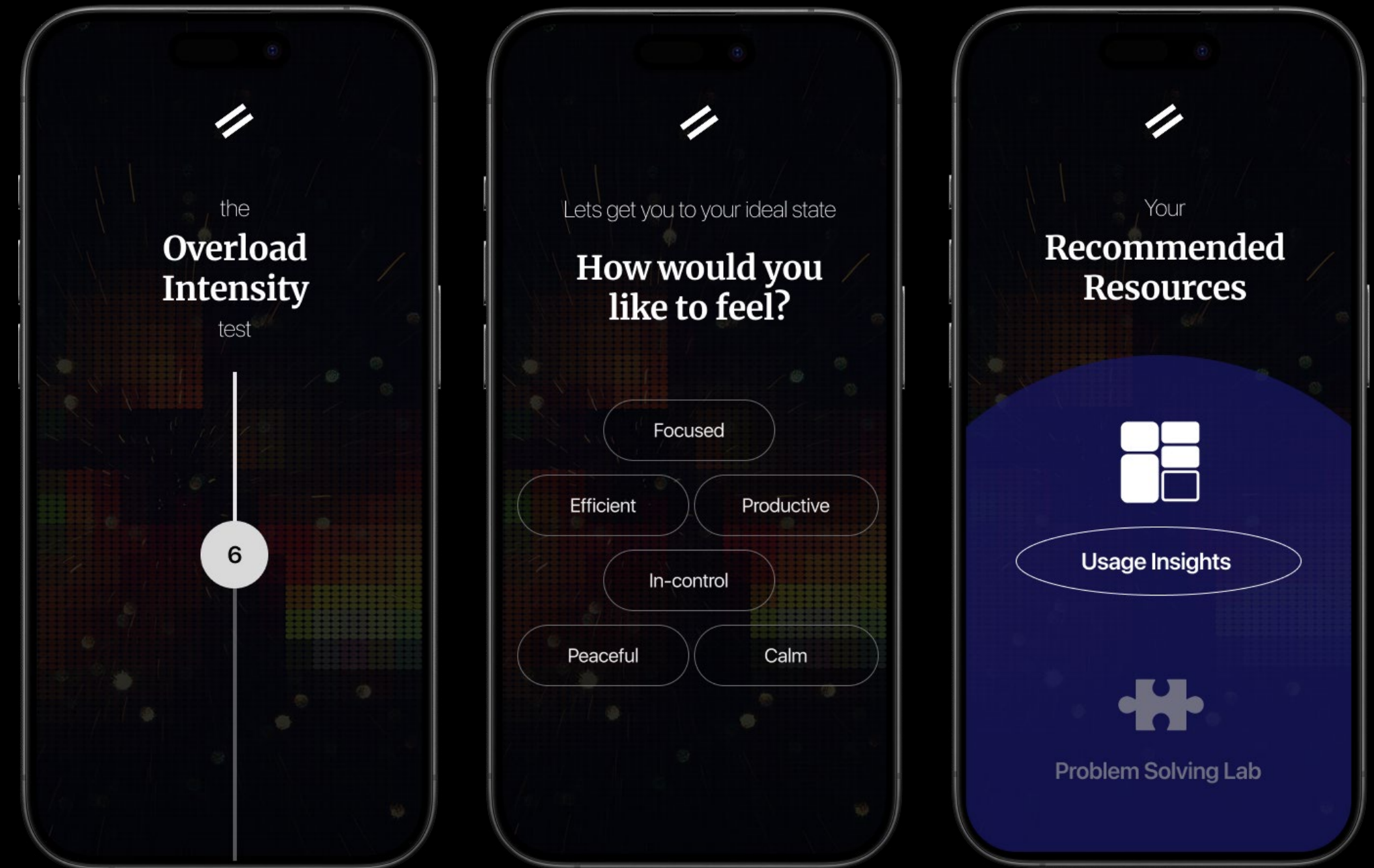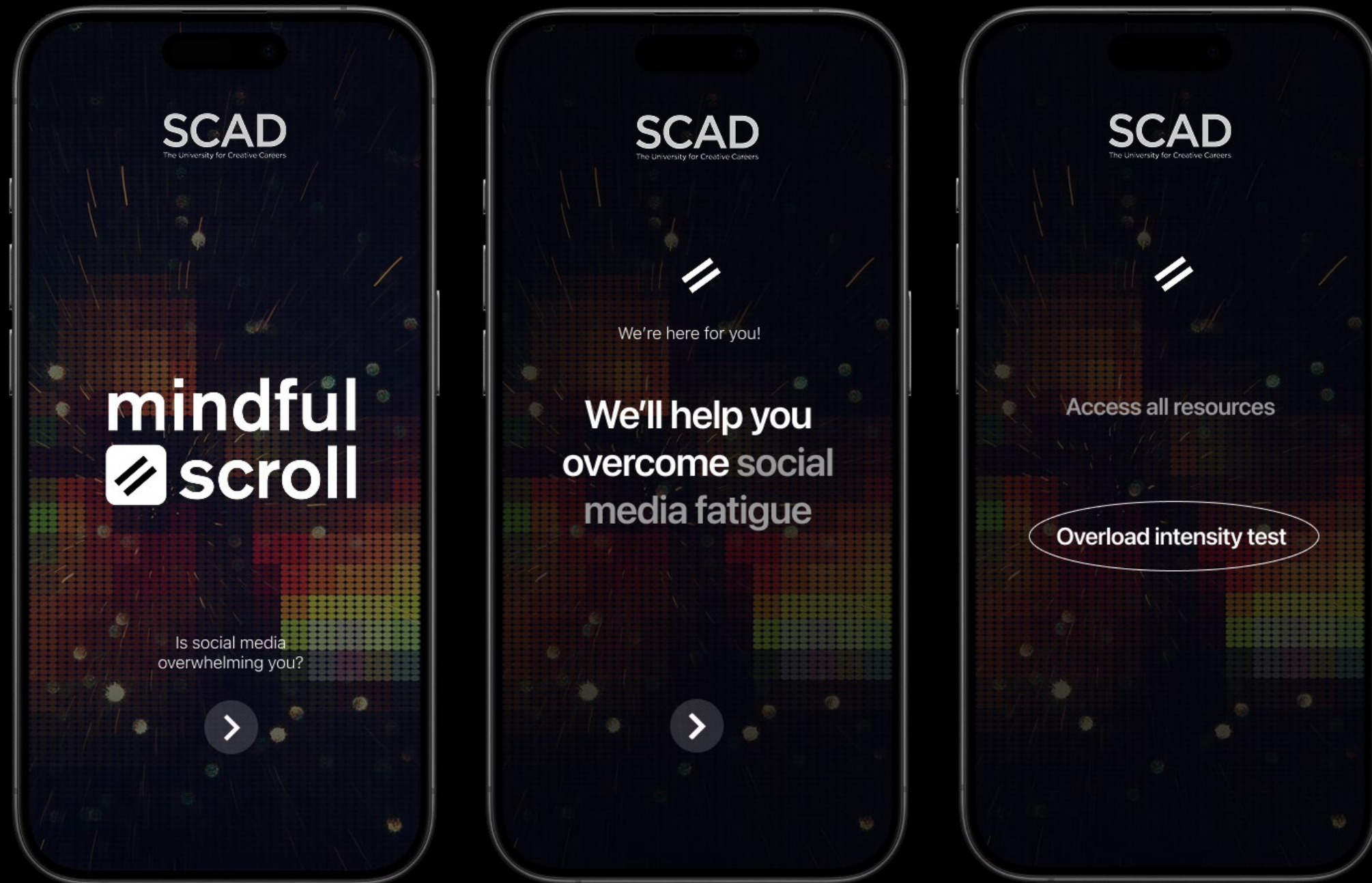
The solution combines existing SCAD resources like BeeWell and SCADamp with new offerings such as digital time-tracking and digital wellness workshops. It aims to create a resource hub that identifies and connects students with targeted support for social media boundary-setting.
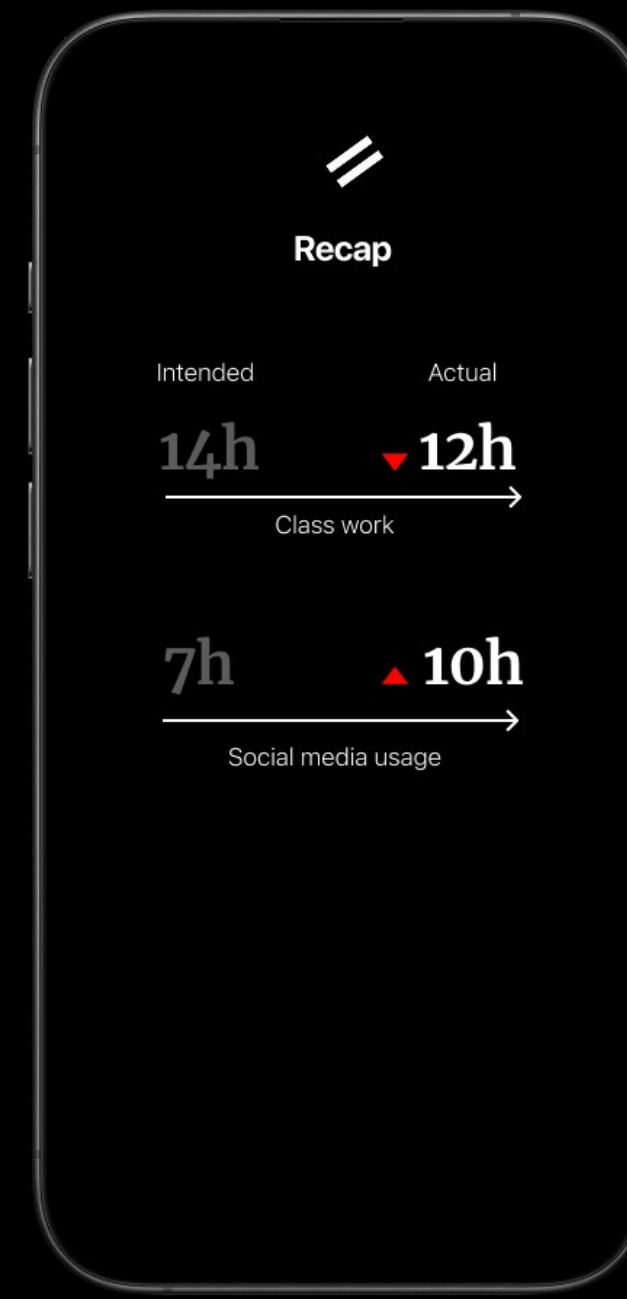
Key features of MindfulScroll@SCAD include:

1. Personalized onboarding
2. Overload intensity test
3. Usage insights dashboard
4. Task monitoring linked to SCAD Calendar
5. Weekly insights and progress tracking
6. Problem Solving Lab for digital wellness workshops
7. Feedback loop with rewards for consistent engagement

The platform is designed to be accessible, fulfilling, and routine--reinforcing, guiding students through various stages of behavior change based on the Transtheoretical Model. By providing real-time awareness, data-driven decision-making tools, and habit formation support, MindfulScroll@ SCAD empowers students to reclaim their focus and build healthier digital habits that they can carry into their careers and personal lives,

SCAD
The University for Creative Careers

mindful
scroll

Is social media
overwhelming you?

SCAD
The University for Creative Careers

We're here for you!

We'll help you
overcome social
media fatigue

SCAD
The University for Creative Careers

Access all resources

Overload intensity test

the
**Overload
Intensity**
test

6

Lets get you to your ideal state

How would you
like to feel?

Focused

Efficient   Productive

In-control

Peaceful   Calm

Your
**Recommended
Resources**

Usage Insights

Problem Solving Lab

Pick your background

Warm yellow

Focus flow

Calming blues

Ambient hues

Customize

Your
Usage Insights
Dashboard

Link to SCAD Calendar

Task Monitoring

Social Media Usage

Alex's
Dashboard

Intended Study Time

05
Hours

00
Minutes

Intended Media Usage

00
Hours

30
Minutes

Today's breakdown

30%
Class work

Social media
55%

Other

15%

Weekly breakdown

4h
3h
2h
1h
0

M T W T F S S

Weekly Insights

Productivity

60%
of your scheduled time was productive

1.5h/day
working

3h/day
on social media

TikTok

most used apps

Recap

Intended   Actual

14h   ▼ 12h

Class work

7h   ▲ 10h

Social media usage

Recap

Do these numbers align with your goals?

This works for me

7h   10h

I want to improve this

Continue tracking?

Task Monitoring

Social Media Usage

Your progress
Productivity

68%

▲

Up 8% from last week

Your progress
Productivity

-2h

▼

Reduction in social media usage

Great job Alex!

7 days

Keep your streak going

Turn on reminders

Weekly insights

Most productive days
Monday
Wednesday

Most active on social media
Tuesday
Thursday

Your best working streak
Monday for 3 hours

7. 3 The Prototypes | Problem Solving Labs

**Problem Solving Lab:
Digital wellness workshops
with SCADamp**

MindfulScroll also has a Problem Solving Lab which offers a series of digital wellness workshops with SCADamp, focusing on:

- **Understanding the problem at its roots:** Getting to the root cause of the social media overusage problem

- **Design your own interventions:** Designing personal interventions for students where they co-create their own solutions with social media experts. This would help them feel in control and empowered to solve the problem themselves.

- **Identifying your triggers**: What triggers overuse for them

- **Design hacks for intentional engagement:** Creating hacks to combat addictive social media design

The aim of this workshop series is to have conversations with social media experts that SCAD Amp could potentially bring in. They aim to empower students to take control of their digital habits by co-designing personalized strategies with experts.

By engaging with social media experts, students gain practical tools and strategies to regain focus and productivity; develop healthier screen time habits; strengthen creative work without falling into the consumption trap.

Why do these workshops matter?

Uncover hidden patterns: Students identify underlying behavioral triggers and emotional patterns that lead to excessive social media use.

Access to industry knowledge: On how platforms are designed to keep users hooked and how to counteract these mechanics.

Tailored guidance: Through feedback, students can co-design solutions that fit their unique work patterns, creative processes, and mental health needs.

Building digital literacy: Students better understand data-driven algorithms, and attention manipulation techniques, to make more conscious choices.

Design your own interventions

Understanding the problem at its roots

Design hacks for intentional usage

Identify your triggers

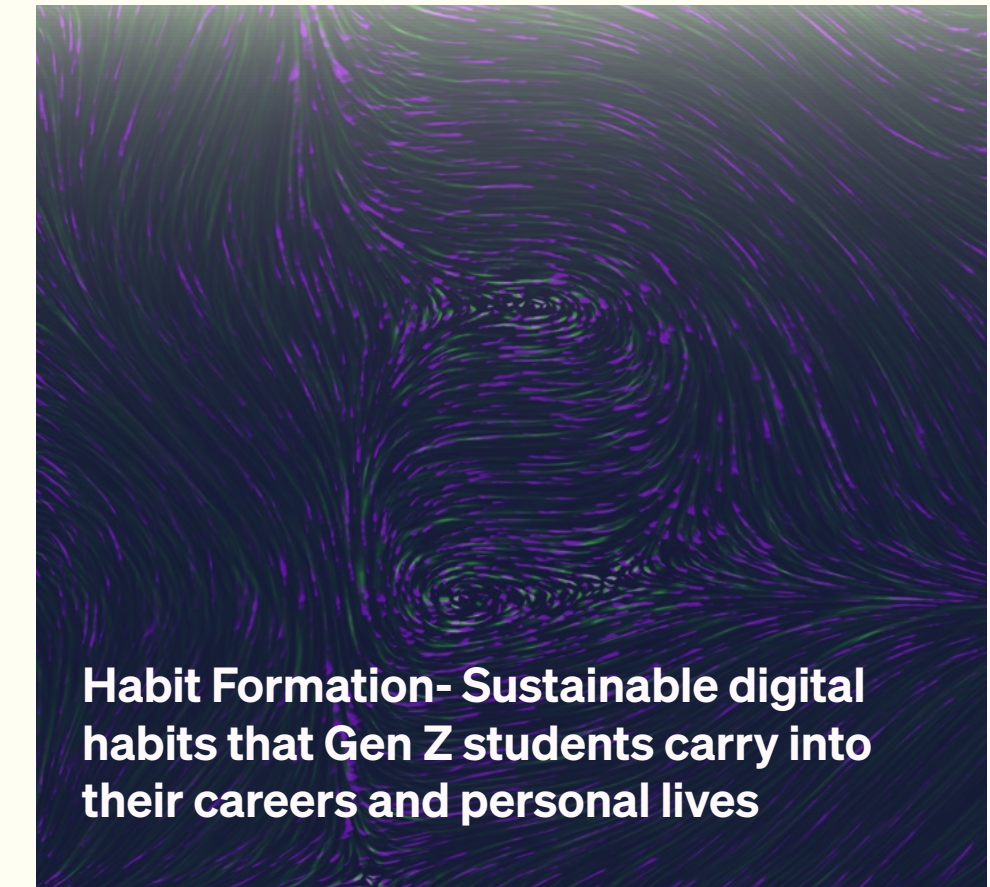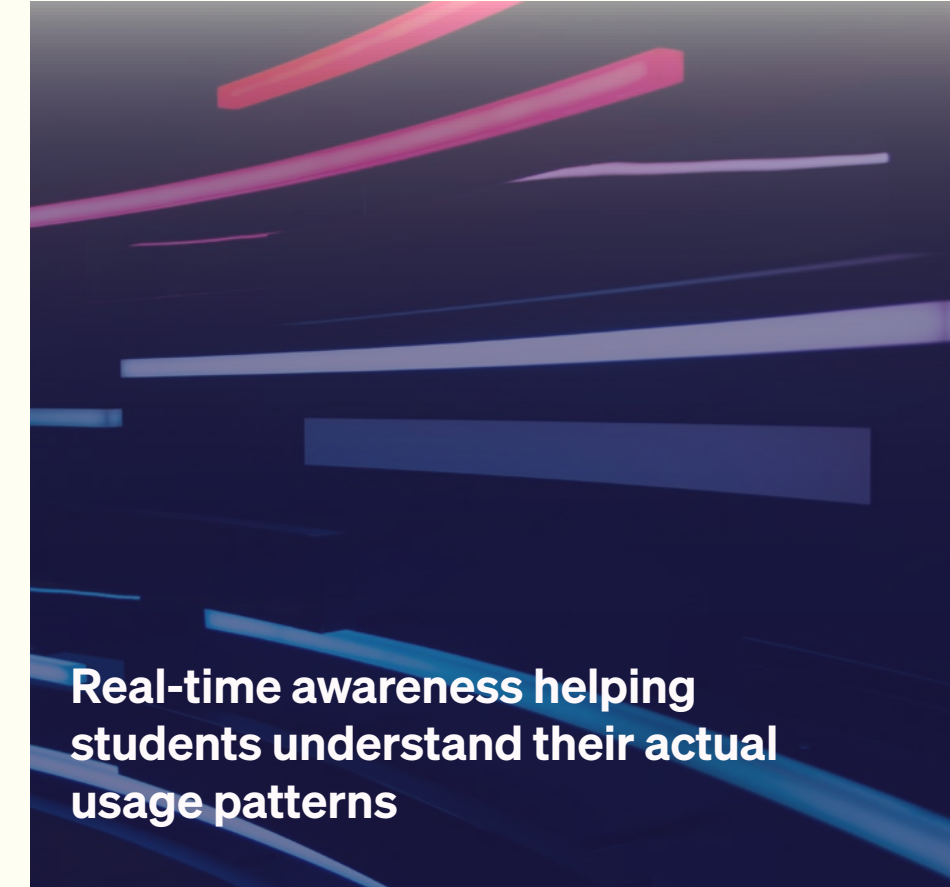# 7.4 The Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change

The Transtheoretical Model (TTM) or Stages of Change Model describes how people modify problematic behaviors or acquire positive ones. It suggests that behavior change is a process that unfolds over time through 5 stages:

- Precontemplation: Not yet acknowledging there's a behavior that needs to be changed
- Contemplation: Acknowledging the problem but not yet ready or sure of wanting to make a change
- Preparation: Getting ready to take action
- Action: Actively modifying behavior
- Maintenance: Maintaining the new behavior and preventing relapse

How is relates to my project

- **Precontemplation :** Being unaware or in denial about problematic social media use
- **Contemplation:** Beginning to consider change (recognizing social media might be causing problems)
- **Preparation:** Getting ready to take action (exploring resources in MindfulScroll
- **Action:** Actively changing behavior (using Dashboard tracking, Problem Lab workshops)
- **Maintenance:** Sustaining the new behavior (tracking progress, reinforcing habits)
- **Relapse Prevention:** By providing ongoing resource access and feedback loops s.

7. 5 The Impact

Preventative actions creating more informed and supportive environments

Data-driven decision making empowering students to make informed decisions

Real-time awareness helping students understand their actual usage patterns

Habit Formation- Sustainable digital habits that Gen Z students carry into their careers and personal lives

08

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Collaboration between technology companies, mental health professionals, educators, employers, policy makers, and the wider community is necessary to help create a more informed, supportive, and healthful environment for young minds

McKinsey Health Institute Gen Z mental health The impact of tech and social media 2023