

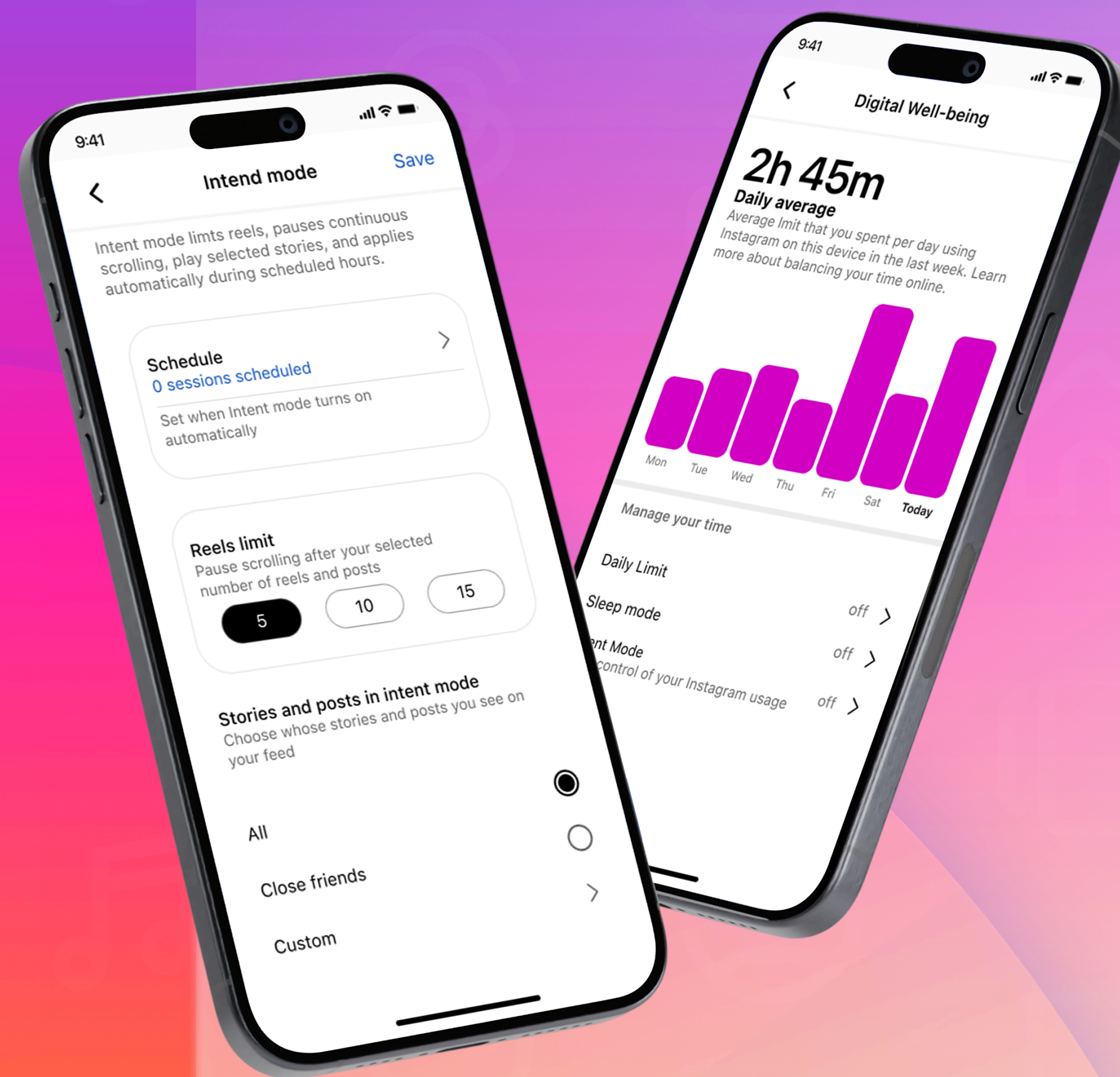


Intent Mode

Intent Mode

Intent Mode

Designing for intentional engagement on Instagram



Understanding the **impact** of Digital Engagement

[Secondary research Link](#)

Research Objective

To understand how Instagram's engagement design affects young adults' ability to maintain healthy digital boundaries, particularly during late-night and high-focus periods, and to evaluate why existing well-being tools fail to support intentional disengagement.

What scientific studies show (2018-2025)

Emotional & Psychological Impact

- Higher screen time is linked to anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms
- Problematic smartphone use is associated with a perceived lack of control
- Doomscrolling increases emotional distress and anxiety

Engagement Architecture

- Infinite scroll removes natural stopping cues
- Autoplay increases passive continuation
- Algorithmic feeds use variable rewards that encourage persistent seeking
- Push notifications trigger habitual checking

Doomscrolling & Time Distortion

- Infinite scroll sessions lead to loss of time awareness
- Users report "flow states" that reduce conscious stopping
- Doomscrolling is associated with increased stress and burnout

Sleep Impact

- Bedtime smartphone use delays sleep onset
- Night-time scrolling reduces sleep duration and quality
- Pre-sleep scrolling increases cognitive arousal

Why Digital Well-Being Tools Fail

- Screen-time dashboards increase awareness but rarely reduce usage
- Reminders are easy to dismiss
- Structural, feature-level changes are more effective than app-level limits

Social Reward & FOMO

- Social comparison and FOMO increase checking frequency
- Validation-seeking behavior reinforces repeated engagement
- Engagement metrics influence emotional state

How the System Encourages Continuation

Engagement features

Digital well-being features

01

Autoplay (Reels & Stories)

- Instant playback without effort
- No pause between videos
- Reduces decision-making moments
- Encourages passive binge viewing
- Makes exiting less likely

02

Infinite Scroll

- Instant playback without effort
- No pause between videos
- Reduces decision-making moments
- Encourages passive binge viewing
- Makes exiting less likely

01

Time Spent Dashboard

- Shows daily and weekly usage
- Raises awareness
- Does not limit usage
- Easy to ignore

02

Reminder Systems (Daily Limit / Take a Break)

- Shows daily and weekly usage
- Raises awareness
- Does not limit usage
- Easy to ignore

03

Notification System

- Red badges create urgency
- Real-time feedback triggers re-entry
- Encourages compulsive checking
- Increases frequency of short sessions
- Reinforces habitual app opening

Key takeaway

Engagement features are automatic and deeply integrated into the core experience, making continuation effortless and habitual.

03

Quiet Mode

- Silences notifications
- Requires manual setup
- Hidden in settings
- Reduces external triggers only
- Does not affect in-app scrolling

Key takeaway

Digital well-being tools depend on user willpower, making them weaker than built-in engagement systems.

How other platforms address digital well-being

[Competitor analysis Link](#)

Platform	Key Digital Well-Being Features	Primary focus	Limitation
Instagram	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Screen time dashboard · Daily time reminder (skippable) · Break reminders · Quiet mode · Hidden words & restricted accounts · Sensitive content control 	Focuses on managing interactions and content safety, helping users control what they see and who interacts with them	Focuses on managing interactions and content safety, helping users control what they see and who interacts with them
Tik-Tok	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Screen time dashboard · Daily time limit · Extra friction after limit (passcode) · Break reminders · Sleep hours feature · Emotional well-being hub · Well-being missions · Restricted mode & keyword filtering 	Focuses on time limits and emotional well-being support through reminders, friction, and guided tools	Infinite scroll remains unchanged; limits can be bypassed
Youtube	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Screen time dashboard · Break reminders · Bedtime reminders · Scheduled notification digest · Disable sounds at night · Autoplay toggle · Sleep timer (auto pause) · Repetitive content safeguards 	Focuses on reducing passive video watching through playback controls and night-time management tools	Most features require manual activation and ongoing user effort

Key Insights

Most rely on reminders and user self-control

01

Few introduce meaningful structural friction

02

Continuous consumption patterns largely remain unchanged

03

Digital well-being tools exist, but they do not rebalance engagement architecture.

04

What Users **Actually Experience**

[Primary research Link](#)

Online Survey Overview

- 42 participants
- Age group: 18-30
- Focus area: usage habits, night-time behaviour, focus, emotional impact, and digital well-being tools

Ket Insights

01

Instagram is opened automatically, not intentionally

02

Night time scrolling delays sleep

03

Users intend to spend few minutes but stay longer

04

Many reported trying to reduce the usage time or quitting the app but fails

05

A large number of participants know about features like time reminders and app limits.

06

While users are aware of their screen time, many report losing track of time and struggling to stop once engaged.

07

Digital well-being tools are often dismissed or skipped, and rarely lead to sustained behavior change.

Interview Overview

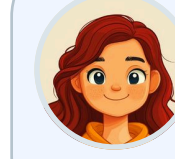
6 semi-structured interview (30-45mins) that focused on Instagram usage behavior, control, emotional impact and awareness and attitude towards digital well-being tools

Ket Insights

1. Reels Extend Sessions



"I open for updates... but reels make me stay longer than I planned." - Jithin

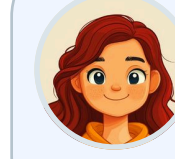


"Everytime I stay longer because of reels. I don't realize how much time has passed." - Jeeshma

2. Night-Time = Weakest Self-Control



"Just 10 minutes before sleep becomes one hour. I scroll till 2 AM." - Varsha

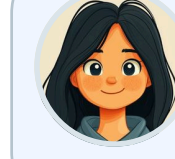


"At night I check the time and feel guilty... but I still continue." - Jeeshma

3. Awareness Does Not Equal Control



"I think I'm in control... unless I have too much free time." - Bharath



"I feel completely out of control when I start scrolling." - Varsha

4. Digital Well-Being Tools Are Easy to Ignore



"I use the reminders, but I always skip them." - Noora



"Time limits only work if I already want to stop." - Jeeshma

5. Control Varies by Personality



"If I set a limit, I usually stick to it." - rajasree

Meet Meera

Meera



Age	27
Occupation	Industrial Designer
Location	Kerala
Daily Usage	3-5 hours
Primary Usage	Reels,stories,Dm

Bio

Meera uses Instagram daily for relaxation and updates. She often opens it automatically and loses track of time in reels. She feels guilty after long sessions but struggles to stop. She wants structure, not control.

Goals

- Reduce late-night scrolling
- Improve focus during work hours
- Use Instagram intentionally
- Feel mentally clear instead of overstimulated

Motivation

- Wants better sleep quality
- Values productivity and discipline
- Seeks mental clarity
- Open to change if it feels autonomous




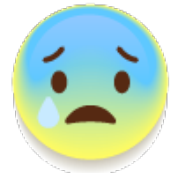
Frustration

- "Just 10 minutes" becomes 1 hour
- Loses track of time in reels
- Reminders are easy to dismiss
- Feels mentally drained after scrolling
- Blocking apps feel too extreme

Needs

- Gentle structure, not punishment
- A way to notice time passing earlier
- Support during night-time usage
- Tools that feel supportive, not controlling

A Typical Night Scroll

User steps	Trigger	Entry	Drift	Realization	Aftermath
User actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finishes dinner • Lies in bed • Picks up phone “just to check” • Opens Instagram automatically 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Starts scrolling reels • Watches 3–4 short videos • Algorithm quickly adapts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continues scrolling 30–60 mins <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignores time reminder • Skips “Take a break” popup 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checks time • Realizes it's late (12:30 AM) • Quickly exits app 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleeps late • Wakes tired • Repeats behavior next night
Goals & experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wants light relaxation • “Just 10 minutes before sleep” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passive entertainment • Fast dopamine reward 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Still believes she's in control <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “One more reel” loop 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stop damage • Go to sleep 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wants change • Feels cycle repeating
Feelings and thoughts	<p>“I deserve some me-time.” “Just checking reels quickly.”</p> 	<p>Amused Rapid emotional switching No awareness of time</p> 	<p>“Wait, how long has it been?” Slight guilt Ignores reminder</p> 	<p>“I wasted time again.” Frustrated Mentally overstimulated</p> 	<p>“I need to fix this.” “But I’ll try tomorrow.”</p> 
Pain points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opening is automatic, not intentional • No friction before entering reels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infinite scroll removes stopping cues • Autoplay reduces decision-making <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No natural pause 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reminders are dismissible • No emotional reinforcement • Self-control weak at night 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realization happens too late • Emotional discomfort doesn't change habit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleep already delayed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No long-term pattern awareness • Temporary motivation fades <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tools rely fully on self-discipline
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gentle intentional prompt before entering reels • Night mode activation suggestion • Micro-reflection before scrolling begins 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce soft stopping cues • Add visible session timer in reels • Gentle slowdown mechanism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Escalating friction after repeated ignores • Emotion-based reflection prompt <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptive break suggestion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-session reflection • Gentle accountability insight • Sleep-protection automation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pattern visualization over days • Small habit-building nudges • Gentle streak-based sleep reward • Behavioral design, not just reminders

Understanding the **problem**

The surface level

- Many users spend longer on Instagram than they intend to especially during night-time and work hours.

This leads to:

- Extended sessions beyond intention
- Delayed sleep
- Reduced focus
- Feelings of guilt after scrolling

The deeper level

- This does not happen because users lack awareness.

Research shows:

- Instagram is opened automatically, not intentionally
- Reels remove natural stopping points
- Infinite scroll makes continuation easy
- Time reminders are easy to dismiss
- Guilt does not change behavior
- Users resist strict blocking tool

The structural imbalance

- **Engagement features are:**

- Seamless
- Automatic
- Built into the core experience

Digital well-being features are

- Passive
- Optional
- Easy to ignore

Problem Statement

Instagram is structurally designed to make continuation effortless and automatic, while stopping requires conscious effort and self-control. To support healthy digital boundaries on Instagram, the experience must include structural stopping cues that guide intentional disengagement while preserving autonomy and enjoyment.

Exploring possible directions

01

Reminder to stop using reels

Core Idea

Introduce a time-based pop-up reminder within Instagram that notifies users after extended scrolling, encouraging them to take a break without interrupting the core experience.

Pros

- Easy to implement
- Familiar feature
- Low disruption

Cons

- Easy to ignore
- Relies fully on self-control
- Infinite scroll still exists
- Does not reduce session length directly

02

Following Only Feed

Modify the feed to display only posts from accounts the user follows, reducing algorithm-driven recommendations while keeping the scrolling structure unchanged.

- Reduces algorithmic recommendations
- Less novelty than "For You"
- Simple UI change

- Infinite scroll remains
- No session boundary
- Still easy to scroll endlessly
- Only changes content source, not structure

03

Intent Mode

Intent Mode is a built-in Instagram feature that replaces infinite scrolling with fixed content batches, allowing users to pre-select how much they want to consume so that each session ends with a natural stopping point.

- Removes infinite scroll
- Introduces session limits
- Adds natural stopping cues
- Time-bound activation
- Supports intentional use

- Requires setup
- Higher implementation effort
- Users can reopen app if they choose

Why Intent mode ?

What makes users spend too much time on Instagram?

- Infinite scroll
- Unpredictable content
- Infinite scroll
- Algorithmic escalation
- Autoplay

Intent mode : A structural redesign of scrolling inside Instagram

01 Fixed Reel Limit

What is it?

Users choose to see a fixed number of reels (for example 5, 10, or 15) in one session.

How it works?

The system loads only the selected number of reels. After that, the session ends with a clear stopping screen.

How does this influence behavior?

- Reintroduces natural stopping cues
- Prevent time distortion
- Creates visible session boundaries

02 Followed Accounts-Only Feed (reduced novelty mode)

What is it?

The feed only shows content primarily from accounts the user already follows.

How it works?

Normal Instagram algorithm: The system tracks usage behaviour, creates novelty escalation and pushes contents to hold user attention.

In Intent mode:

- Limited recommendation pool
- Viral amplification is reduced
- The system prioritizes existing connections
- It does not aggressively push trending escalation

How does this influence behavior?

High novelty → high dopamine → longer session
Reducing novelty makes disengagement easier

03 Scheduled Activation

What is it?

User can schedule when the intend is active

How it works?

Once scheduled, the system activates automatically during selected hours. Users don't need to remember to turn it on.

How does this influence behavior?

Self control is lowest at night. They get distracted during work time. Opening Instagram has become habitual for many.

Hence by activating automatically, the system supports the user during vulnerable moments.

04 Session Completion Screen

What is it?

When the selected batch ends, the system shows a clear end state.

How does this influence behavior?

- This creates a psychological reset.
- It interrupts automatic continuation and creates a "decision boundary."
- Users can restart — but restarting becomes intentional.
- This shifts behavior from autopilot to awareness.

Algorithm logic in Intent mode

Instagram's recommendation system is designed to maximize engagement.

The more engaging the content → The more the algorithm amplifies it.

This creates a feedback loop:
Engage → Learn → Push More Similar → Increase Engagement

What changes?

Normal mode amplifies engagement. Intent Mode limits amplification.

Instagram already controls what content is pushed. Intent Mode simply shifts what the system prioritizes.

Psychology behind Intend mode

01 Choice Architecture

When scrolling is endless, continuation becomes automatic. By adding stopping points, the default shifts from "keep going" to "pause and decide."

02 Pre-Commitment

People are more likely to follow limits they set in advance. Selecting a session size increases accountability without feeling restricted.

03 Variable Reward Moderation

Infinite scroll relies on unpredictable rewards. Reducing novelty escalation lowers compulsive continuation.

04 Ego Depletion

Self-control weakens at night and during fatigue. Scheduled activation supports users when willpower is low.

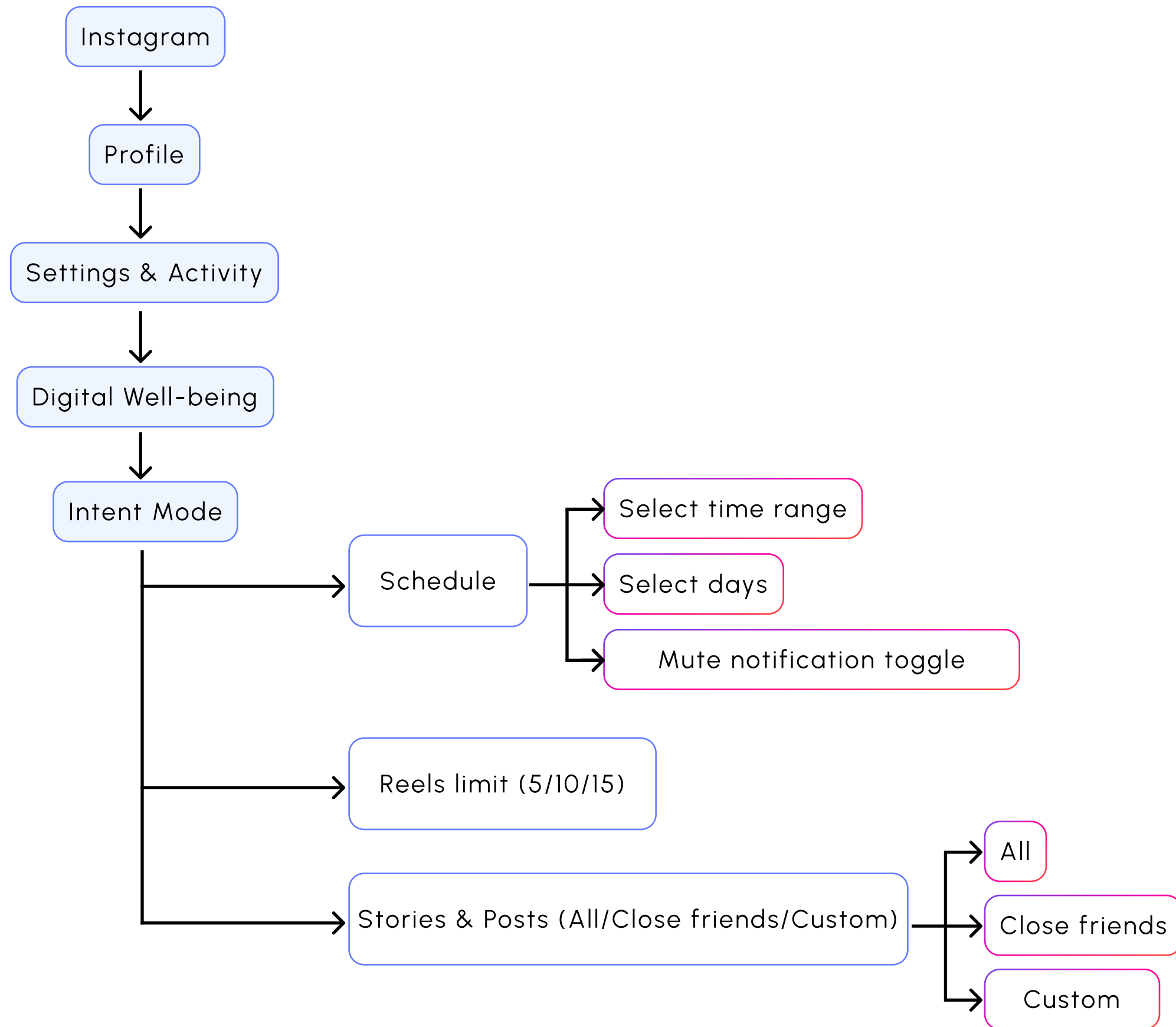
05 Habit Loop Interruption

Scrolling follows a cue → routine → reward cycle. Structured pauses break this loop before it escalates.

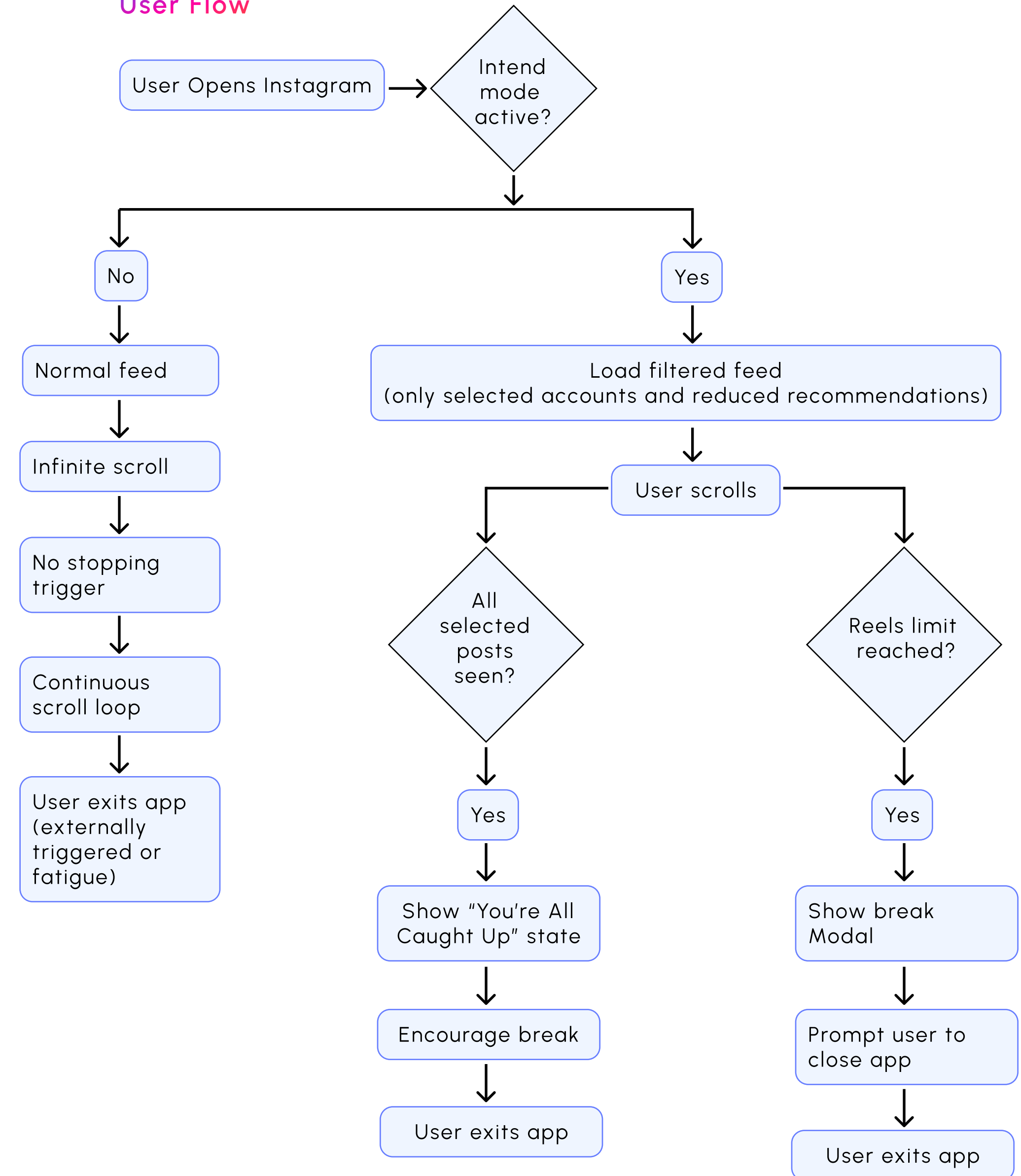
According to both primary and secondary research, many users attempt to quit Instagram when overuse becomes overwhelming. **Intent Mode does not aim to stop usage, it aims to break the loop of continuous scrolling** by introducing structural pauses and reducing escalation. It helps users take a break and continue using Instagram in a healthier, sustainable way rather than quitting altogether.

Restructuring the experience

Set up flow



User Flow

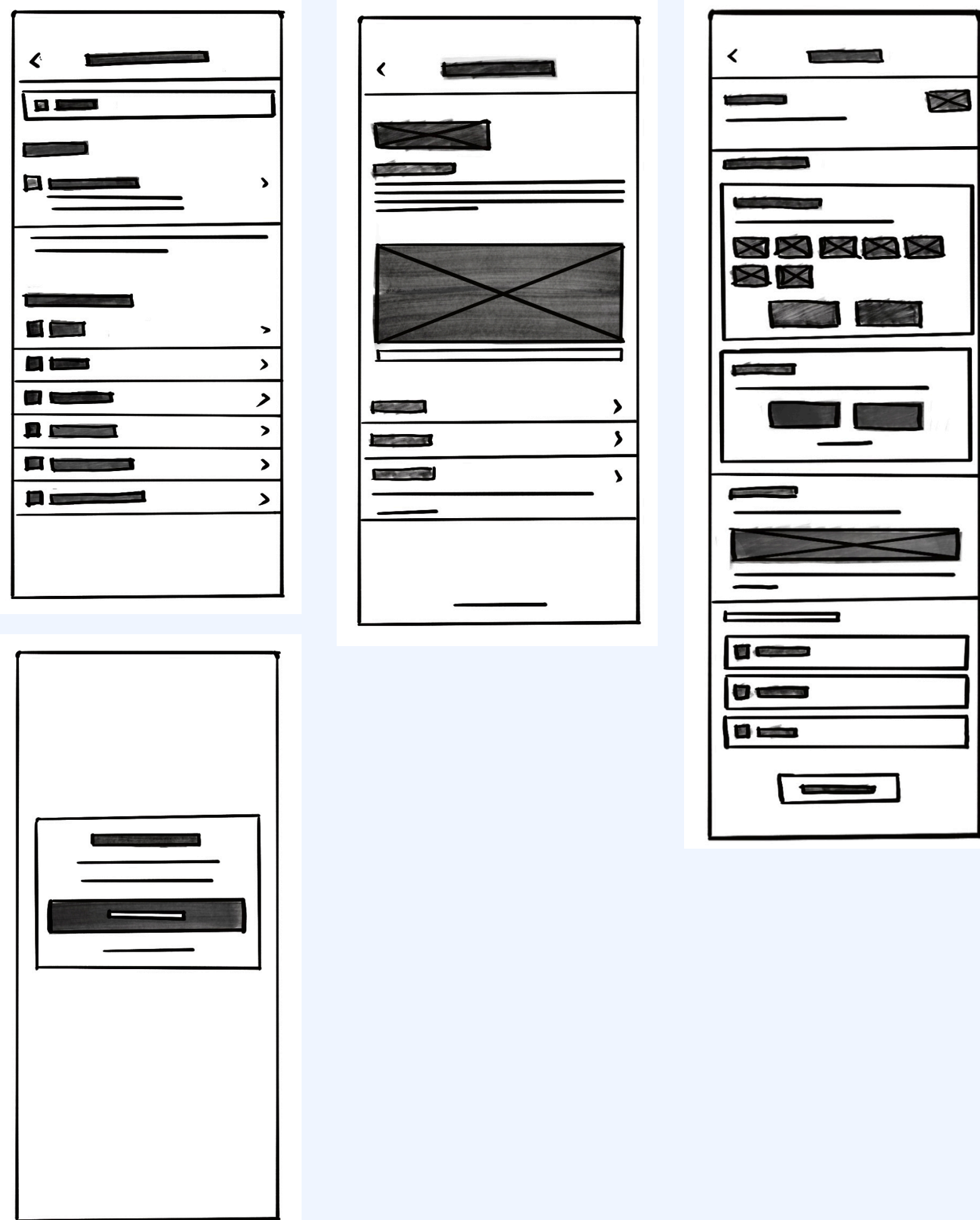


Designing the structure

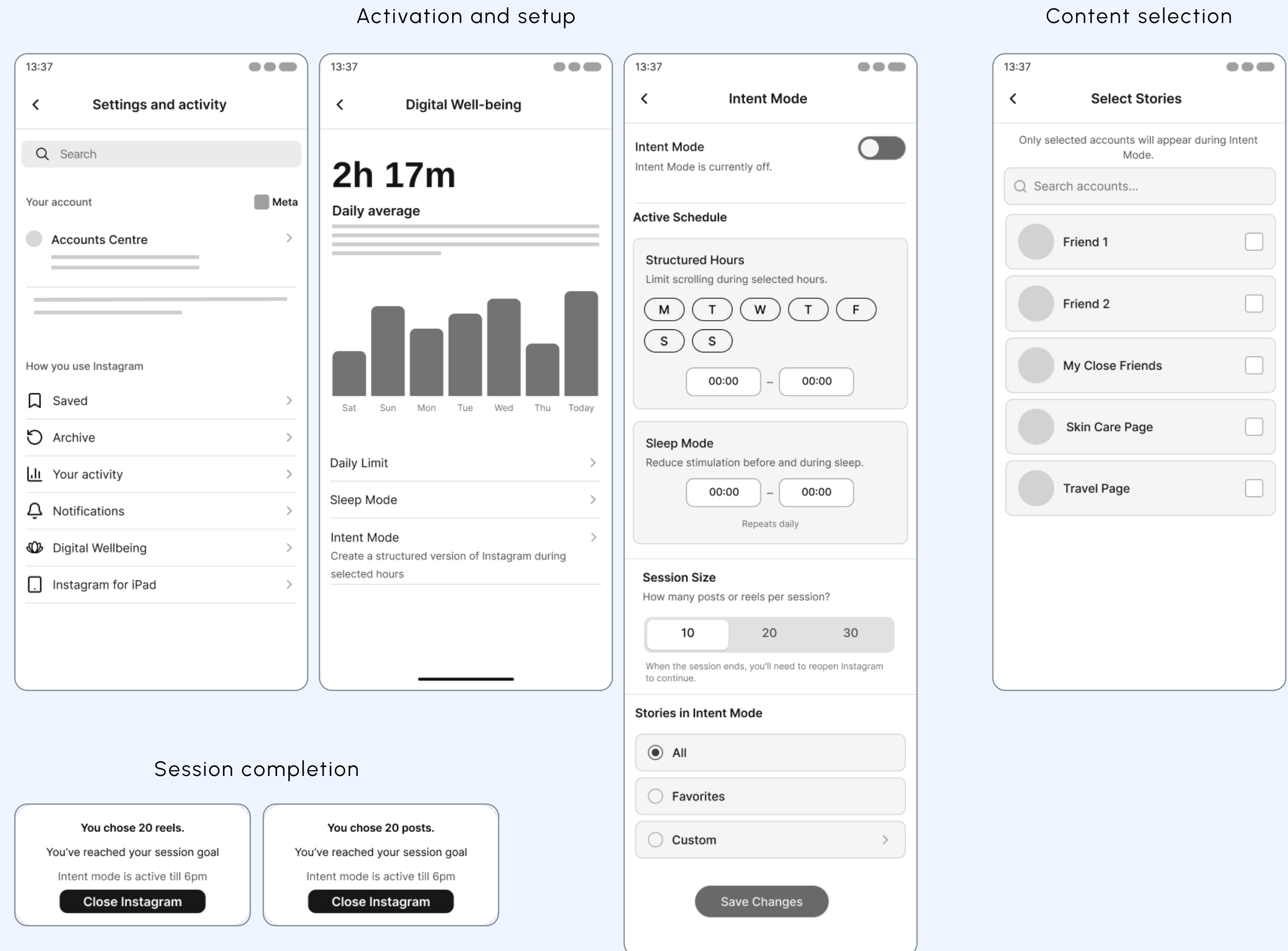
[Lo-fi Screens Figma file Link](#)

[Lo-fi Prototype Link](#)

Wireframes



Low-fidelity Screens



Testing and refinement

Method

To evaluate the clarity, flexibility, and overall understanding of Intent Mode, I conducted two exploratory usability sessions.

- 2 participants (22-27 years)
- Conducted remotely via zoom
- Shared a low-fidelity interactive prototype
- **Open ended exploration task** : "Navigate to Intent Mode from settings and explore how it works. Tell me what you understand and how it feels."
- **The goal** : To validate the mental model behind the feature before refining it visually.

Key Insights from testing

01 Navigation was clear

Both participants were able to:

- Locate Intent Mode within Digital Well-being without assistance
- Understand how to set session size
- Explore story filtering options confidently
- Adjust scheduling without confusion

There was no confusion while navigating. This showed that the structure and flow were easy to understand.

02 The Purpose of the Feature Was Not Immediately Clear

While users understood how to interact with individual controls, they struggled to understand:

- What Intent Mode actually changes in the feed
- How it affects scrolling behavior
- When exactly it activates
- What happens after a session ends

This revealed a gap between functionality and comprehension.

03 Scheduling Logic Felt Overly Prescriptive

Participants expressed confusion regarding:

- The separation of Sleep Mode from structured hours
- The default daily repetition
- When exactly it activates
- Limited flexibility in scheduling

This indicated that the structure felt rigid rather than user-driven.

Design refinements made

01 Strengthened Feature Clarity

To address conceptual confusion:

- Added descriptive text explaining what Intent Mode does overall
- Clarified that reels shift from infinite scroll to batch-based consumption
- Explained what happens at session completion
- Made activation timing more explicit

02 Simplified and Unified Scheduling

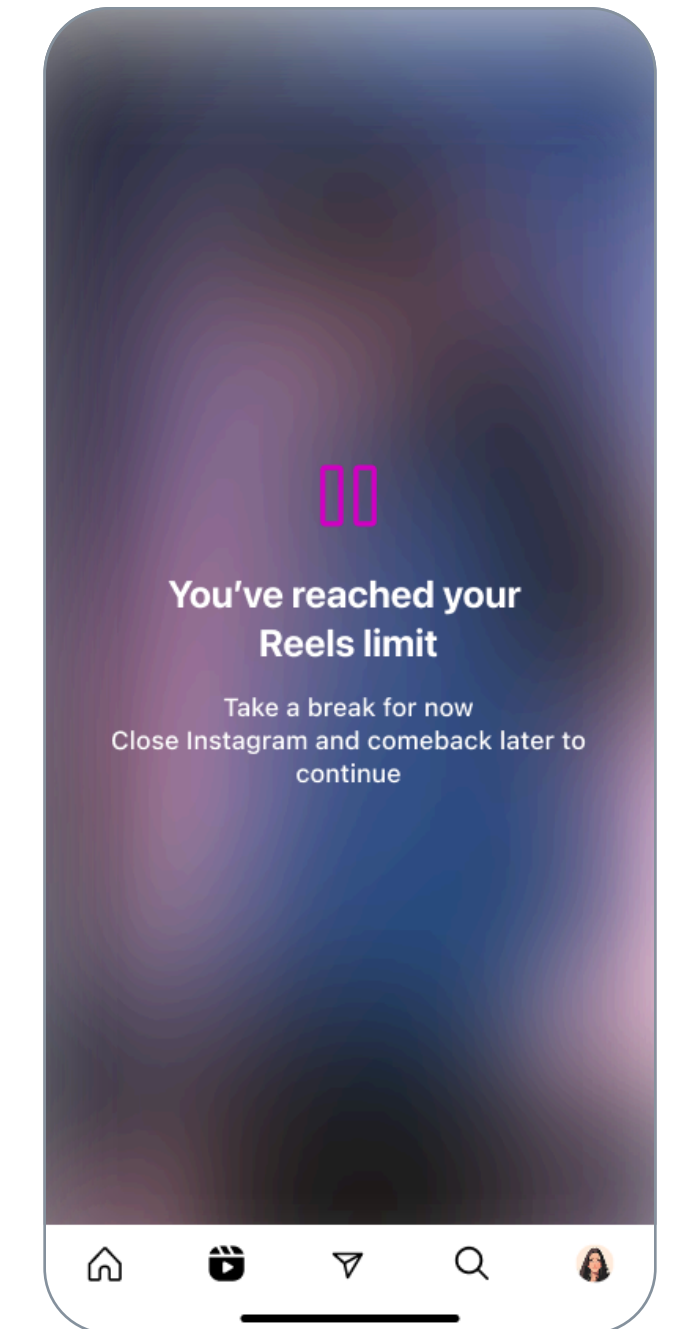
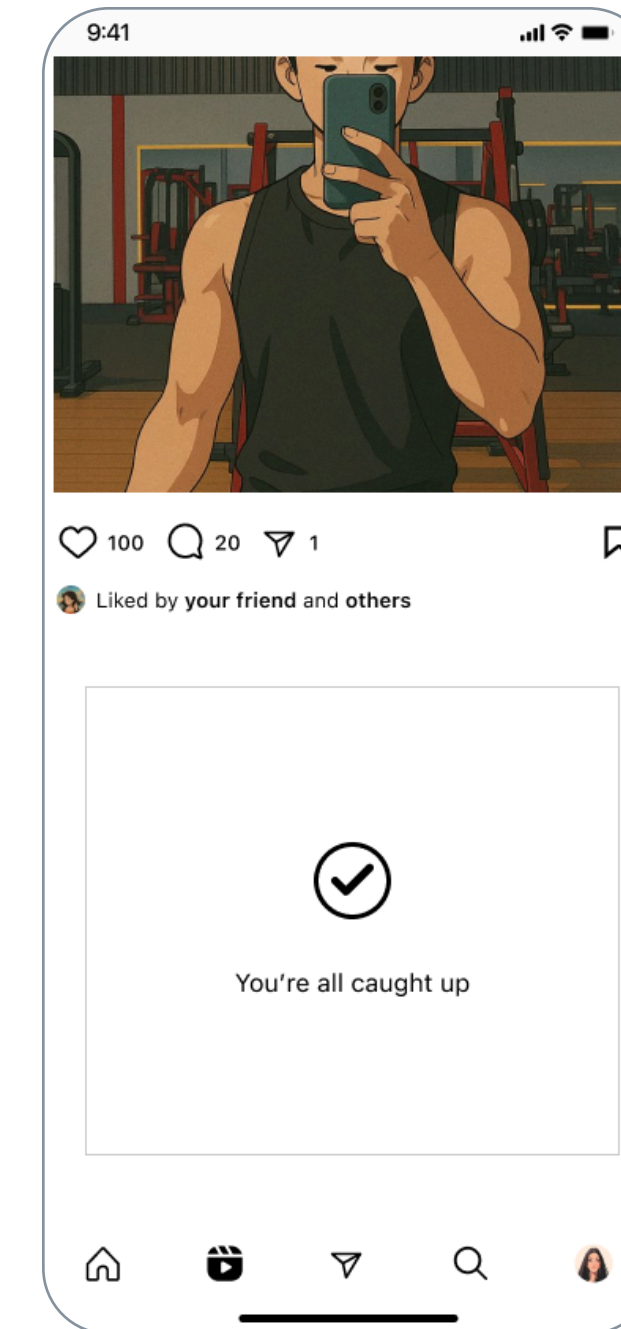
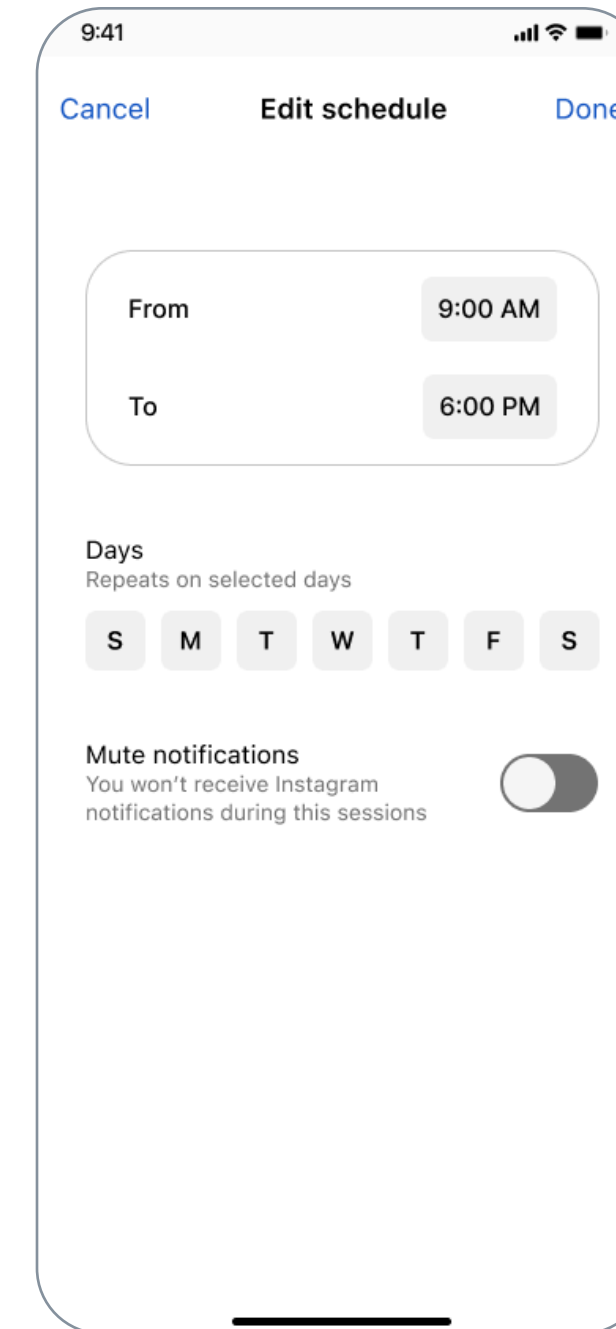
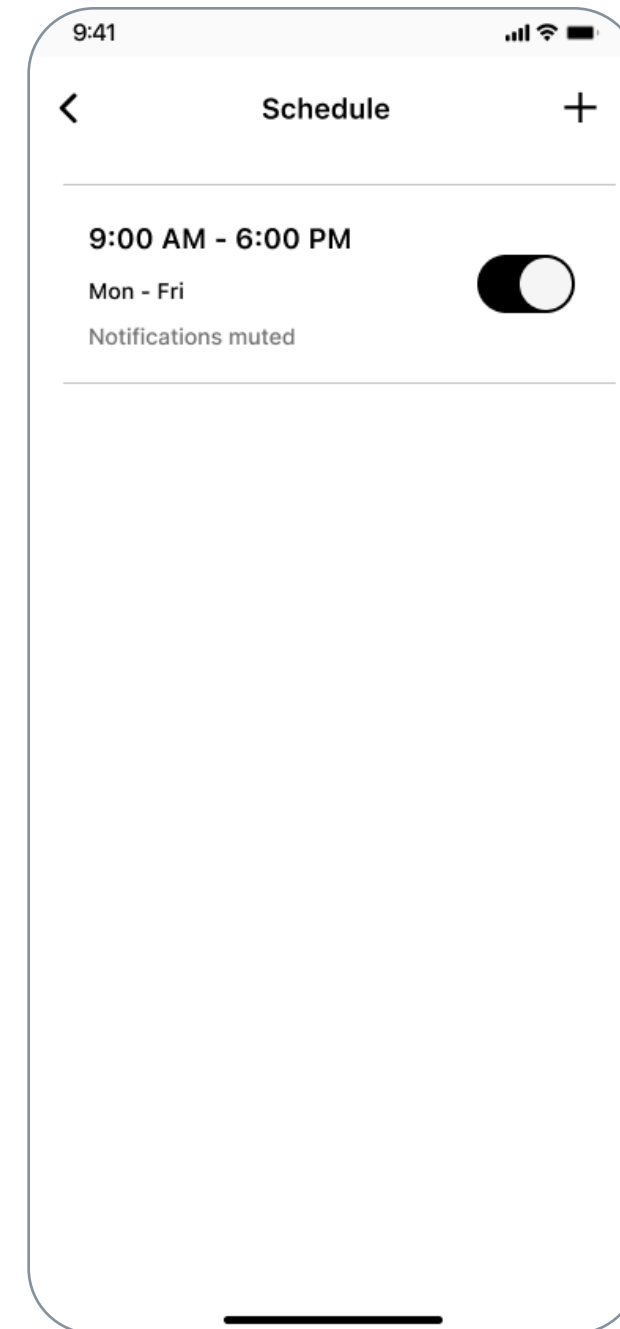
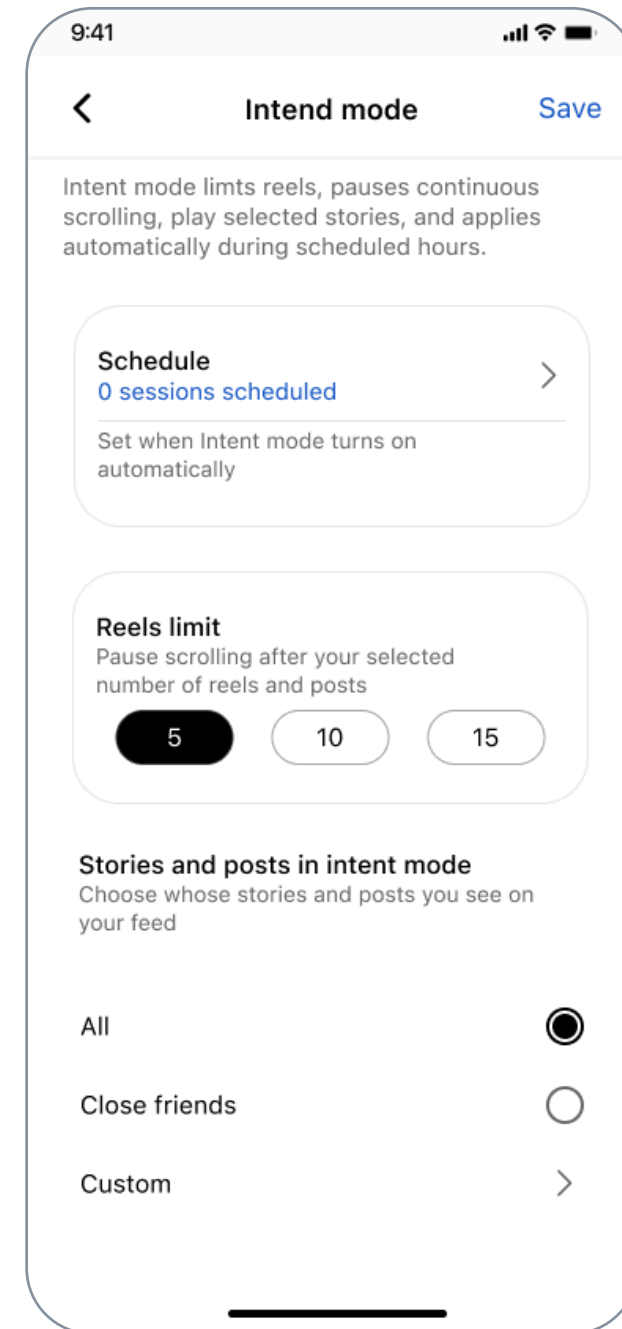
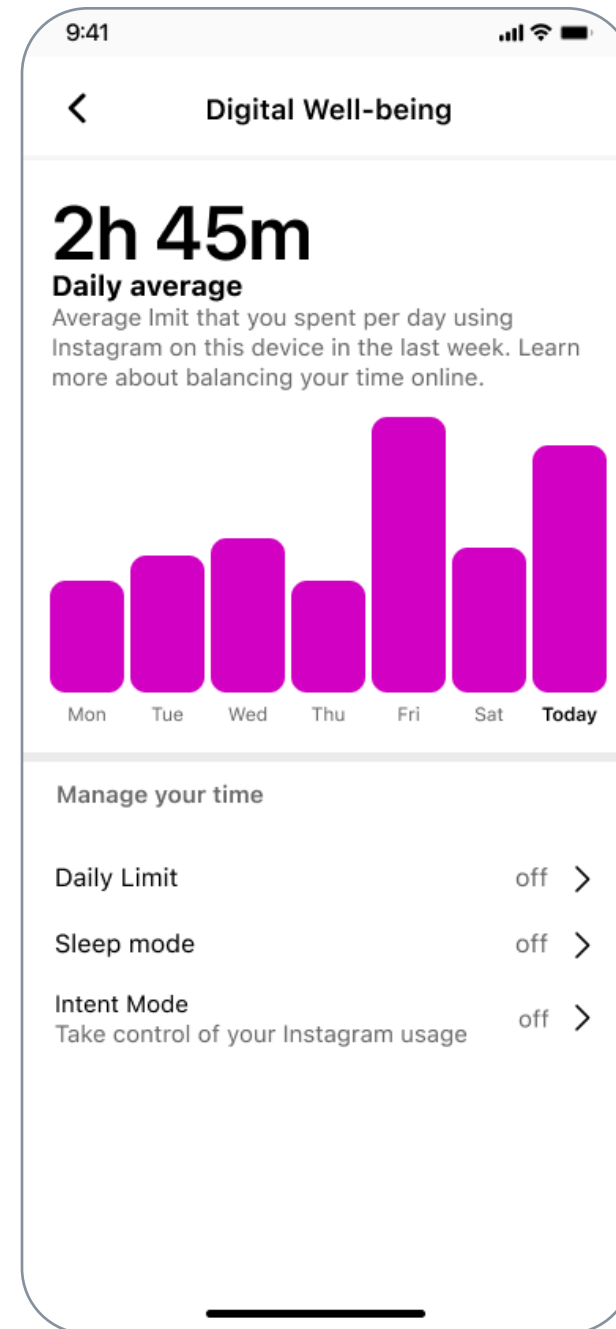
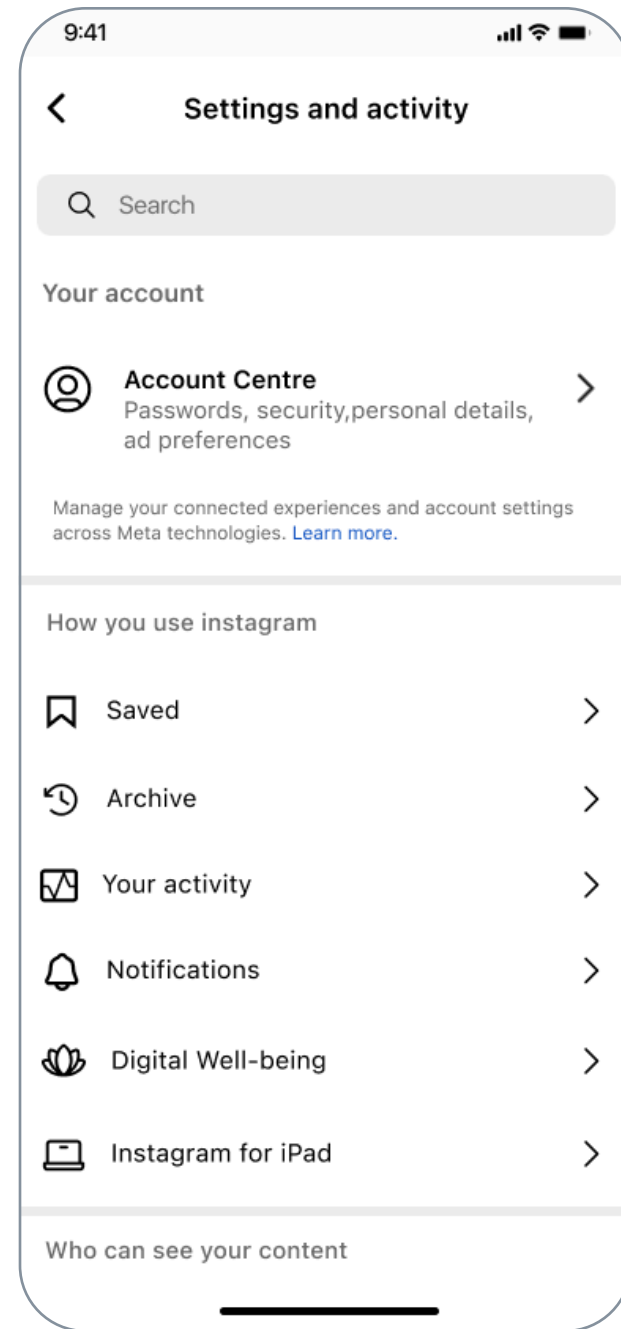
To reduce rigidity:

- Removed the separate Sleep Mode block
- Unified scheduling under one flexible control
- Enabled addition of multiple sessions
- Reduced prescriptive defaults

Final Experience

Hi-fi Screens figma file
Link

Hi-fi Prototype
Link



- **New digital well-being section added**
Creates a centralized space for engagement control.

- **Structured Engagement Layer**
Introduces tools focused on intentional usage.

- **Contextual Explanation Added**
Clarifies what changes when Intent Mode is active.

- **Multiple Scheduled Sessions**
Users can add and manage several Intent Mode sessions.

- **Flexible Scheduling**
Select specific days and time ranges.

- **Feed Completion State**
Shows when all selected posts have been viewed.

- **Session Limit Reached**
Triggered when the reel batch ends.

- **Pre-Commitment Session Size**
Users define reel limit before entering feed.

- **Quick Toggle Control**
Sessions can be easily enabled or disabled.

- **Reduced Distractions**
Notifications can be muted during active sessions.

- **Stopping Cue**
Prevents automatic loading of more content.

- **Break Reminder**
Encourages users to pause before continuing.

- **Stories & Posts Selection**
Allows users to control whose content appears during Intent Mode.

Reflection & future direction

Potential risks

- 01 Voluntary adoption**
Intent Mode depends on users choosing to activate it. If users do not already have the intention to reduce their screen time, they may ignore the feature.
- 02 Feature understanding**
If the purpose of Intent Mode is not clearly explained, users may not fully understand how it changes their scrolling experience.
- 03 Short-term engagement reduction**
Since Intent Mode limits continuous scrolling, it may reduce time spent during individual sessions. However, the goal is to support healthier long-term engagement and prevent users from abandoning the platform due to overuse or burnout.

Mitigation Strategies

- 01 Clear explanation and onboarding**
Simple descriptions and contextual guidance can help users understand what Intent Mode does and how it affects their experience.
- 02 Maintain user autonomy**
Allow users to customize limits, schedules, and content preferences so the feature feels supportive rather than restrictive.
- 03 Gentle stopping cues**
Using soft prompts and session completion states encourages breaks without forcing users to stop using the app.

Future Direction

- 01 Larger-scale user studies**
Testing the feature with a broader and more diverse group of users could reveal deeper behavioral patterns and long-term adoption trends.
- 02 AI-assisted personalization**
Insights from user behavior could enable the system to adapt session limits, scheduling, or content filtering dynamically to support individual well-being goals.
- 03 Gentle stopping cues**
Using soft prompts and session completion states encourages breaks without forcing users to stop using the app.

Key learnings

- This project helped me realize that excessive scrolling is not just a user behavior problem, but largely influenced by how platforms are designed.
- Features like infinite scroll and viral contents make continuation effortless, while stopping requires conscious effort from the user.
- Designing for digital well-being therefore cannot rely only on reminders or self control. Instead, small structural changes such as introducing session boundaries and natural stopping cues can support healthier usage without taking away user autonomy.
- It also made me understand that well-being features only work when they respect user choice. The goal is not to stop people from using the platform, but to help them use it more intentionally so they do not feel the need to quit altogether.