

# Designing a Service for Communication Within Neighbourhoods

Проектирование сервиса для общения внутри соседских сообществ



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# introduction

## Background:

- many **offline communities** have begun to **appear online**, connecting people from all over the world and breaking barriers in communication, including communities of neighbours
- US & Europe: Nextdoor and Facebook\* Neighbourhoods
- In Russia, neighbours often communicate using chats in Telegram or groups in VKontakte but current solutions **still lack some functionality** and usually **do not have an intuitive and main entry point**

**Objective:** Create a prototype of an application for communication within neighbourhoods as a part of VK ecosystem in order to improve and enhance the existing user experience on the platform

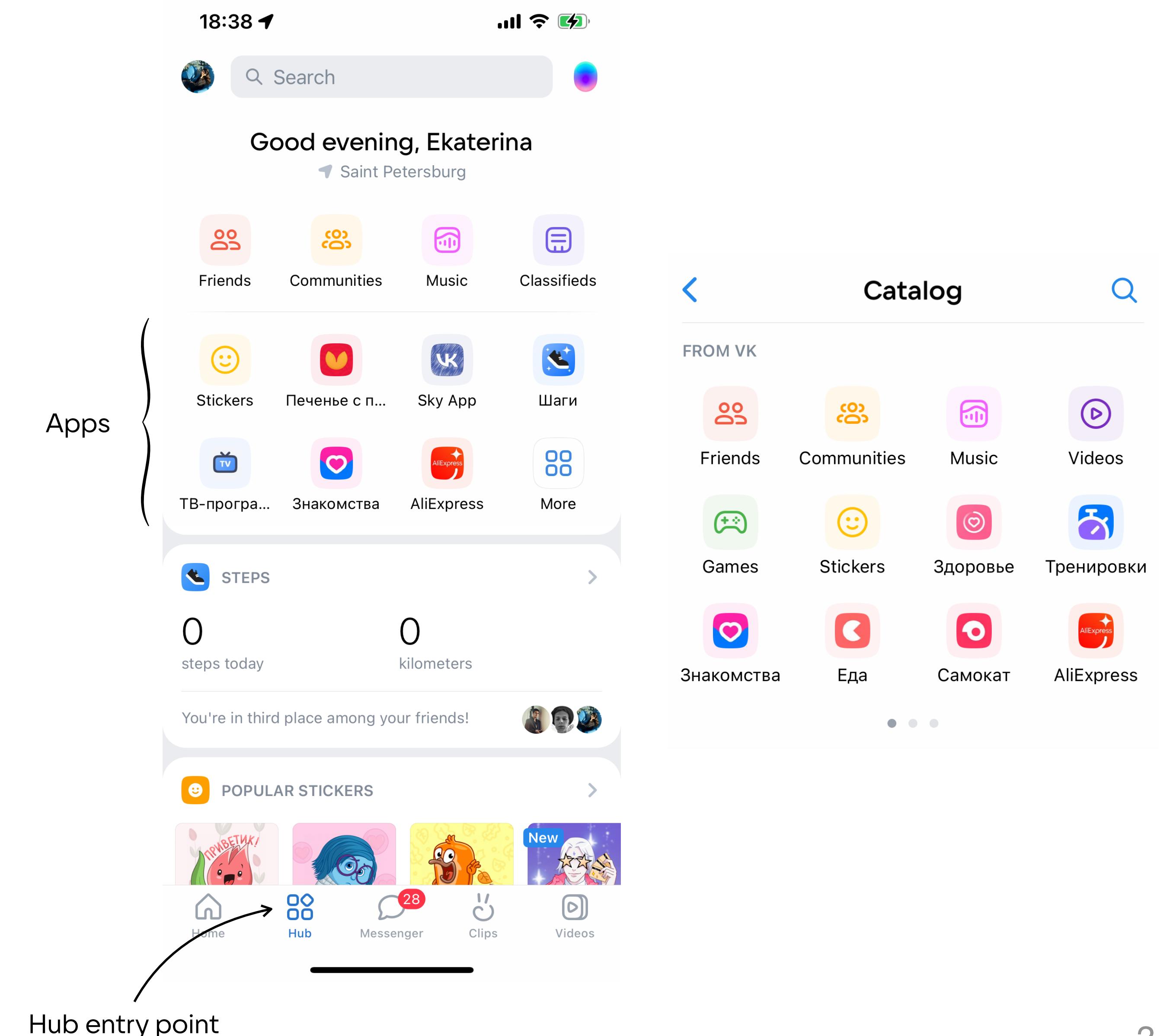
\* Belongs to Meta, an organisation whose activity is prohibited on the territory of the Russian Federation.

# about VK.com

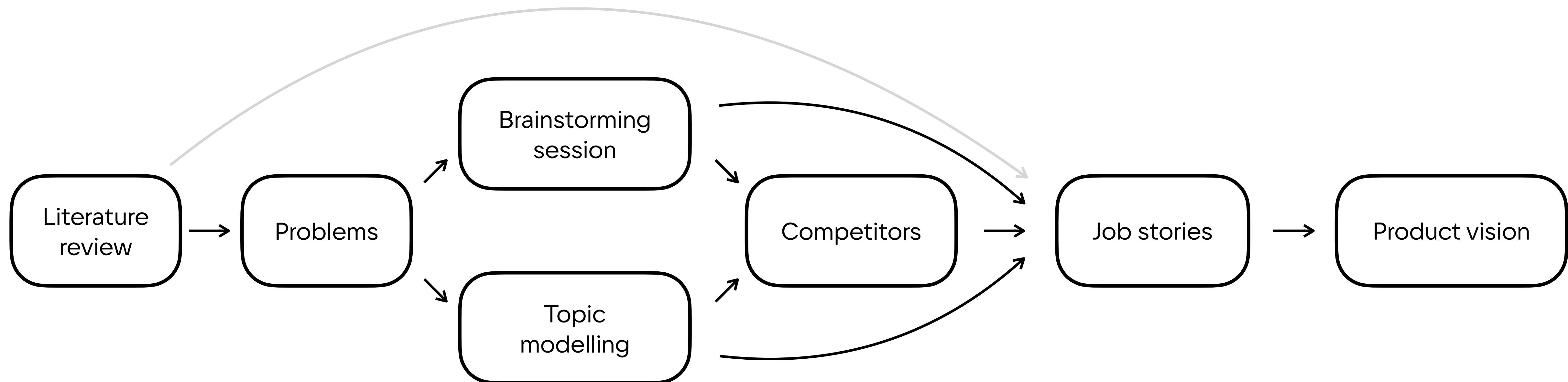
**VKontakte:** largest social networking site in Russia

**VK Mini Apps:** a platform on VK with mini apps, which can be used without needing installation or authentication

- **MAU:** 41.8M
- **cross-platform:** can launch from a computer and any smartphone
- **no additional registration**
- advertising to an interested audience
- **entry point:** hub or apps catalog



# research process

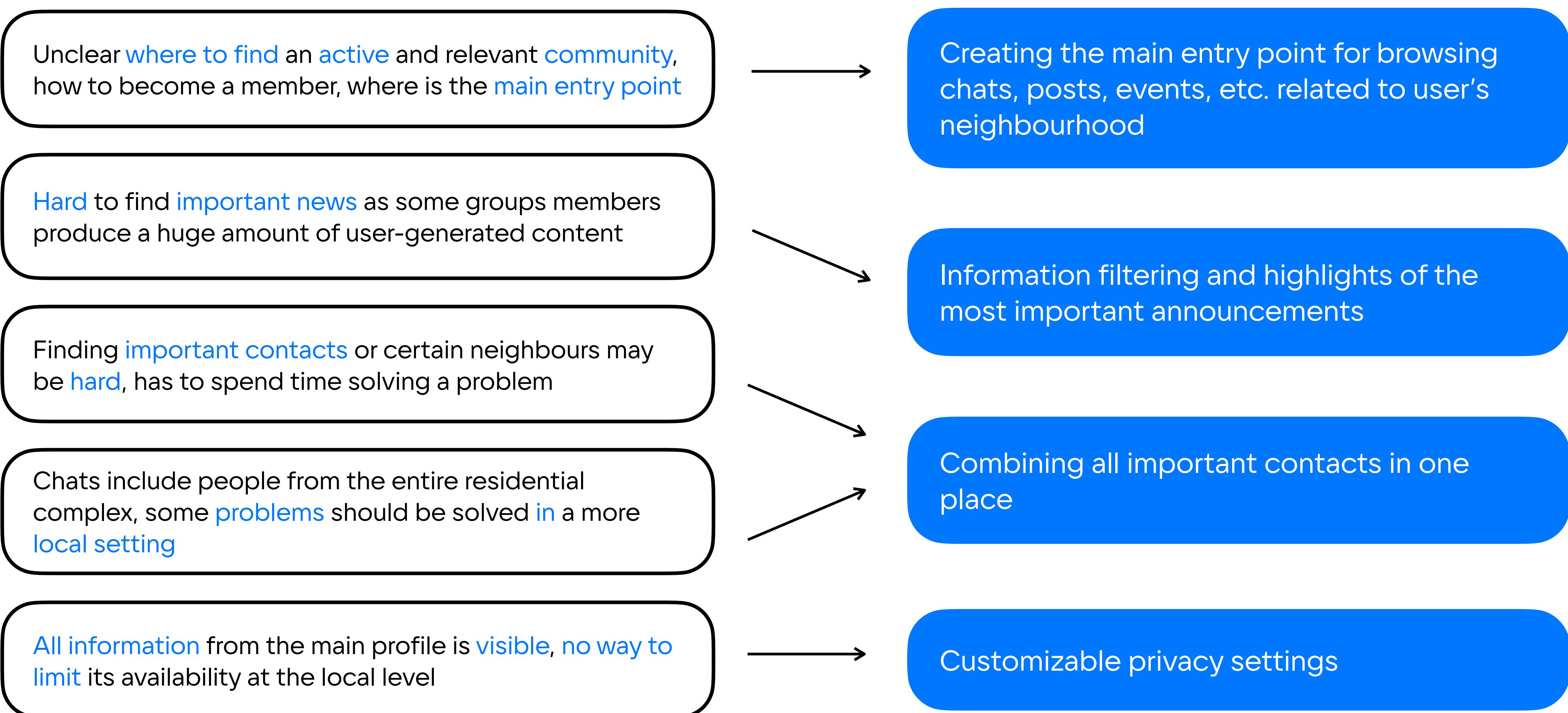


# related work / online communities

## Key takeaways:

- Research on FB Groups, Nextdoor, online forums, VKontakte (active discussion of problems, simplifies communication, create a sense of community)
- Focus on **credibility** of the group (moderation), **remove bad content**, community **rules**, no bots or strangers (**members verification**) → safe space, **trust**, sense of community
- Platform may benefit from the creation of a **local-level market** or **recommendations of businesses** by neighbours → **sense of community**, social capital, exchange
- Should engage neighbours by posting **news** from community management, stimulating users to **exchange** within the community, creating **local libraries**, **marketplace**, etc
- Neighbours should be able to **share information**, offer and receive **help**, service can be integrated with other platforms, and the **system** itself should be **trustful** and be used by all stakeholders

# problems & planned solutions



# brainstorming session

## Goal:

- understand user needs
- collect possible feature requests

Total: 11 members

Where: Miro + Zoom

## Structure:

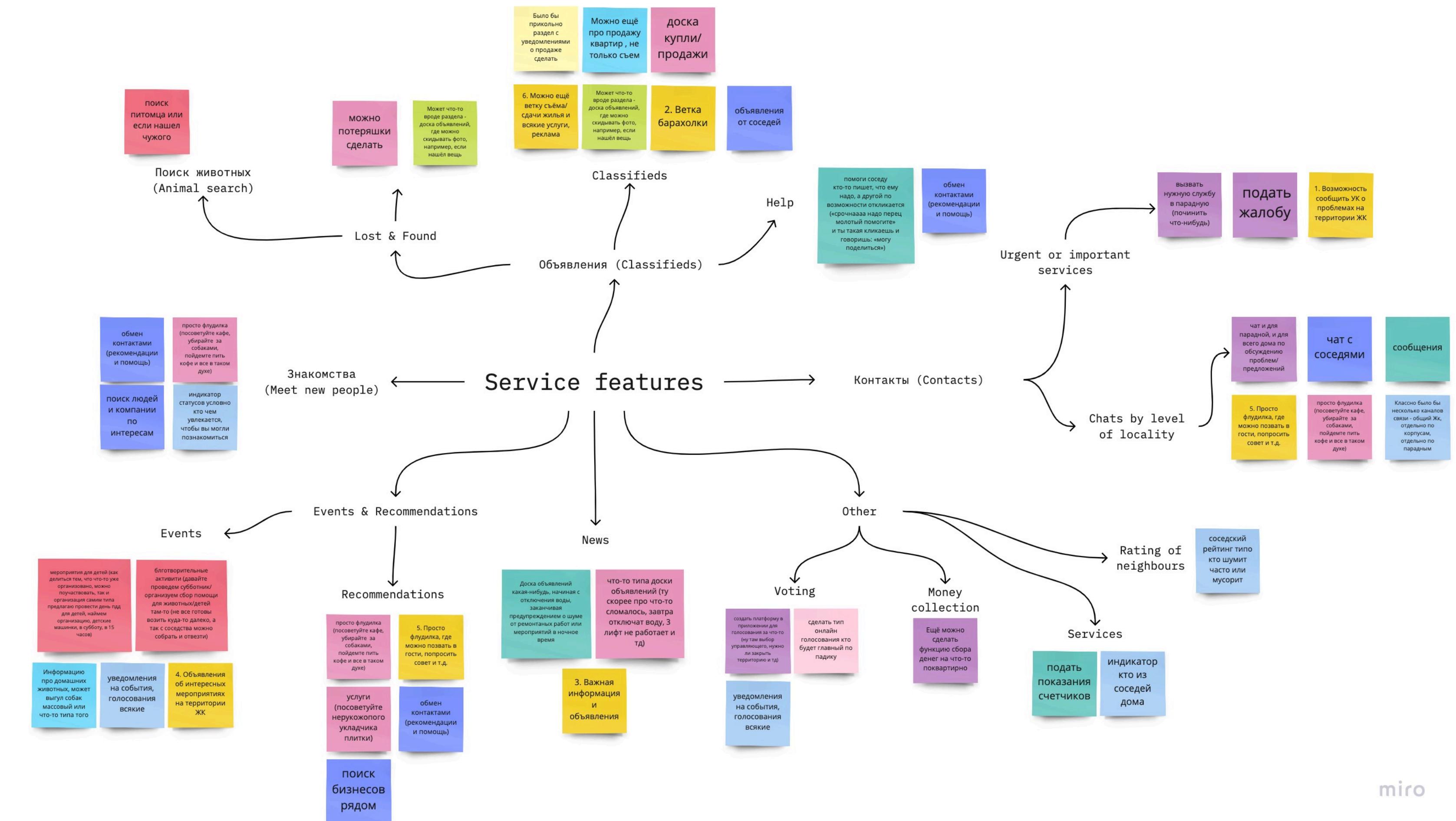
- introduction
- writing down the ideas
- discussion & grouping by similarity



# brainstorming session // final result

**Result:** 6 main clusters

- Contacts
- Meeting new people
- Events & recommendations
- Important news
- Classifieds
- Other

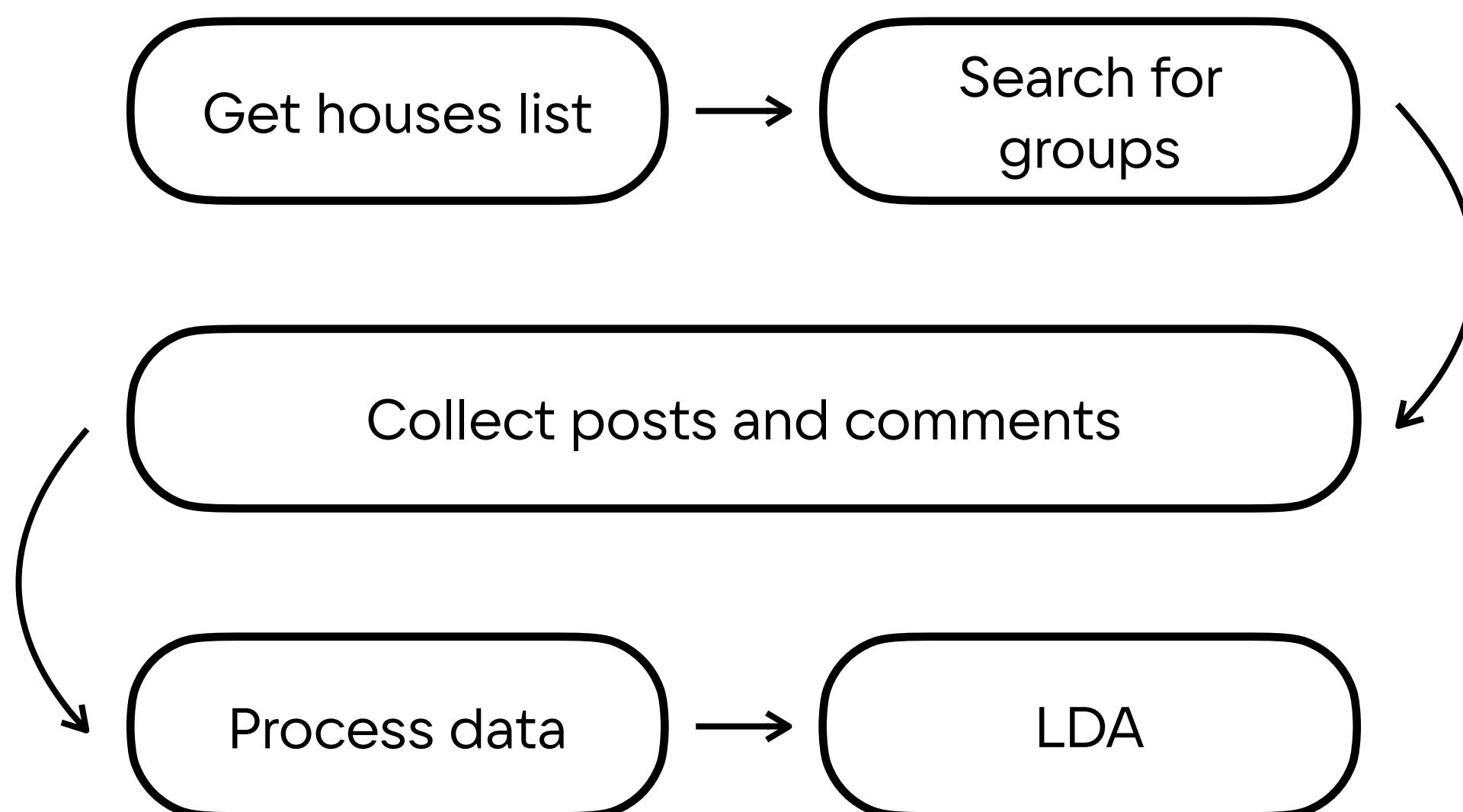


# topic modelling

## Goal:

- understand main topics of discussions
- identify possible use cases
- detect tags for news filtering

## Process:



Tag	Description
development	information about the development stage
news	information about residential complex
services	repair works and services
bad behavior	discussion of bad neighbours
contacts	links to chats
classified	classifieds
kids	discussions about kids
animals	walking with animals, lost & found
cars	cars, parking
other	other topics related to daily life (e.g. upcoming holidays or events)

# competitors

Criteria	Facebook Neighborhoods	Nextdoor	WhatsApp	Telegram	Current prototype
Development stage	In the <a href="#">development</a> stage, currently being tested in some areas of Canada and of the US.	<a href="#">Launched</a> in several countries.	Both messengers are <a href="#">available</a> and used worldwide.	–	
Core features	Posting, newsfeed, attach existing FB groups to the neighbourhood community, notifications	A <a href="#">huge number of features</a> related to neighbourhoods: posting, newsfeed, events planning, notifications, estate, lost and found, virtual gifts (similar to reactions to posts in VK), etc.	<a href="#">Limited to features of messengers</a> : communication in chats, publications in channels, attachment of polls (Telegram only).	Newsfeed, most important news, events and businesses, contacts, and communication on different levels of locality, privacy, classifieds.	
Audience	Service is used only in some parts of <a href="#">two countries</a> . Not available in Russia.	Works in <a href="#">11 countries</a> (US, UK, Canada, several European countries). Does not work in Russia.	Used <a href="#">worldwide</a> .	Based on the <a href="#">largest social networking site in Russia</a> , which already has a big audience and communities of neighbours (VKontakte).	
Onboarding	Yes	Yes (FAQ, videos).	No	Yes	
Support	Yes, manual, and official from the SNs	Yes, contact form for questions.	Partly, regulated mostly by chat members.	Yes, manual, and official from the SNs	
Moderation					

Table summarizes information about the main competitors

# job stories

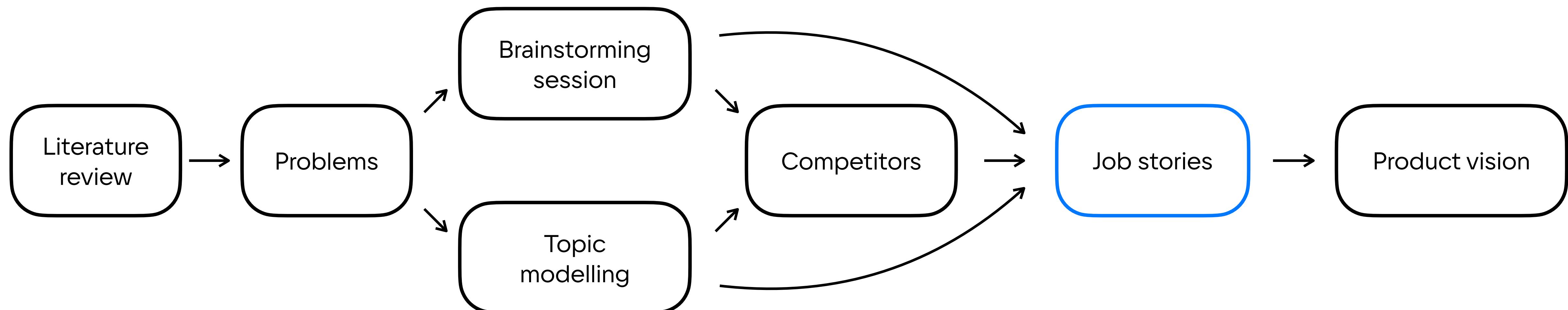
## Based on:

- Brainstorming workshop results
- Discussions in neighbourhood groups in VKontakte
- Literature review

## Goal:

- better understand user motivation
- select relevant features and directions

Total: 9



# job stories

#	Situation	Motivation	Outcome
(1) Reading news	When I want to know how things are and what happened in the neighbourhood	I want to quickly find the most important information	So that I can stay informed and not miss anything important
(3) Privacy	When I see s post or message, find it interesting and want to react	I want to prevent other people from seeing my last name and profile photo	So that other people will not use it in discussions, spying or writing in private messages
(4) Messaging on The Right Level of Locality	When there is something worth sharing with neighbours but I do not want to discuss it with the entire community	I want to write to the chat at the proper level of locality	So that only relevant people will participate in the discussion and there will be less irrelevant comments
(8) Lost and Found Animals	When I lost my cat somewhere in the neighbourhood	I want to post a missing cat notice	So that neighbors are aware and can message me if they find it
(9) Finding or Sharing a Classified	When I do not need a recently purchased closet	I want to sell it to my neighbours	So that I would save time and put in good hands

# product vision

FOR  
WHO  
THE  
THAT  
UNLIKE  
  
OUR  
PRODUCT

users of VKontakte  
communicate with neighbours in chats or communities, discuss problems on different levels of locality  
service within VKontakte  
in which users will have an **entry point** to both discuss issues, find the most **important information**, **communicate** with neighbours with a selected level of anonymity at different stages  
usual chats and communities  
– will highlight the most **important information**  
– users will be able to **filter** posts by topics  
– **chats** will be organized, and split based on their **locality** and goal  
– **main contacts** will be at hand  
– **privacy**: there will be no need to mix personal and neighbourhood life (i.e., user will be able to choose whether neighbours can see their profile and full last name, unlike in the main VK profile)

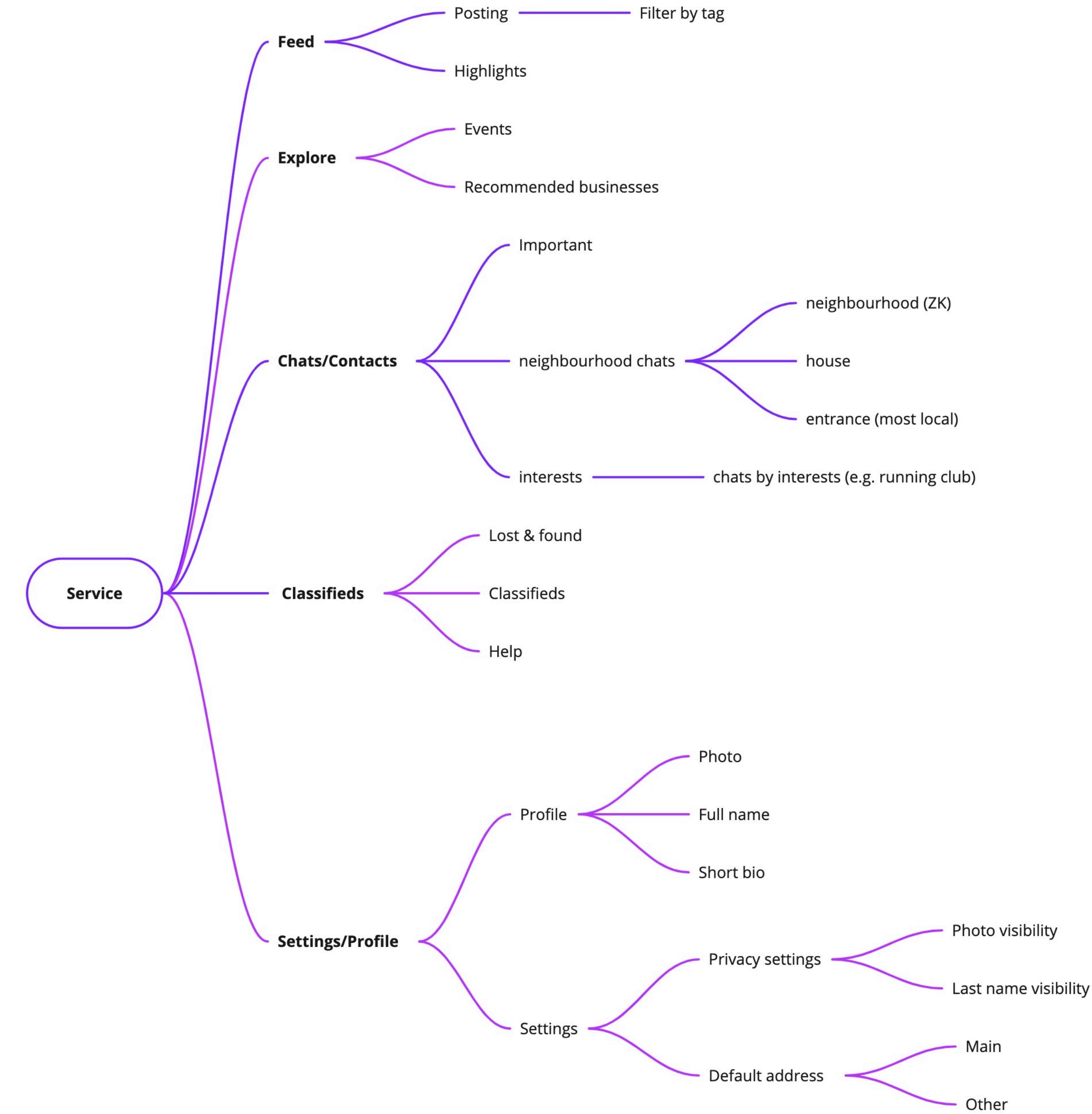
For this service, **neighbourhood** is defined as an area either around a residential complex or street, because chats and communities of neighbours are usually formed around them

# **prototype design**

# mind mapping

## Goal:

- (1) brainstorming on what features may be added, what content each section may contain
- (2) feature prioritization → organize for design

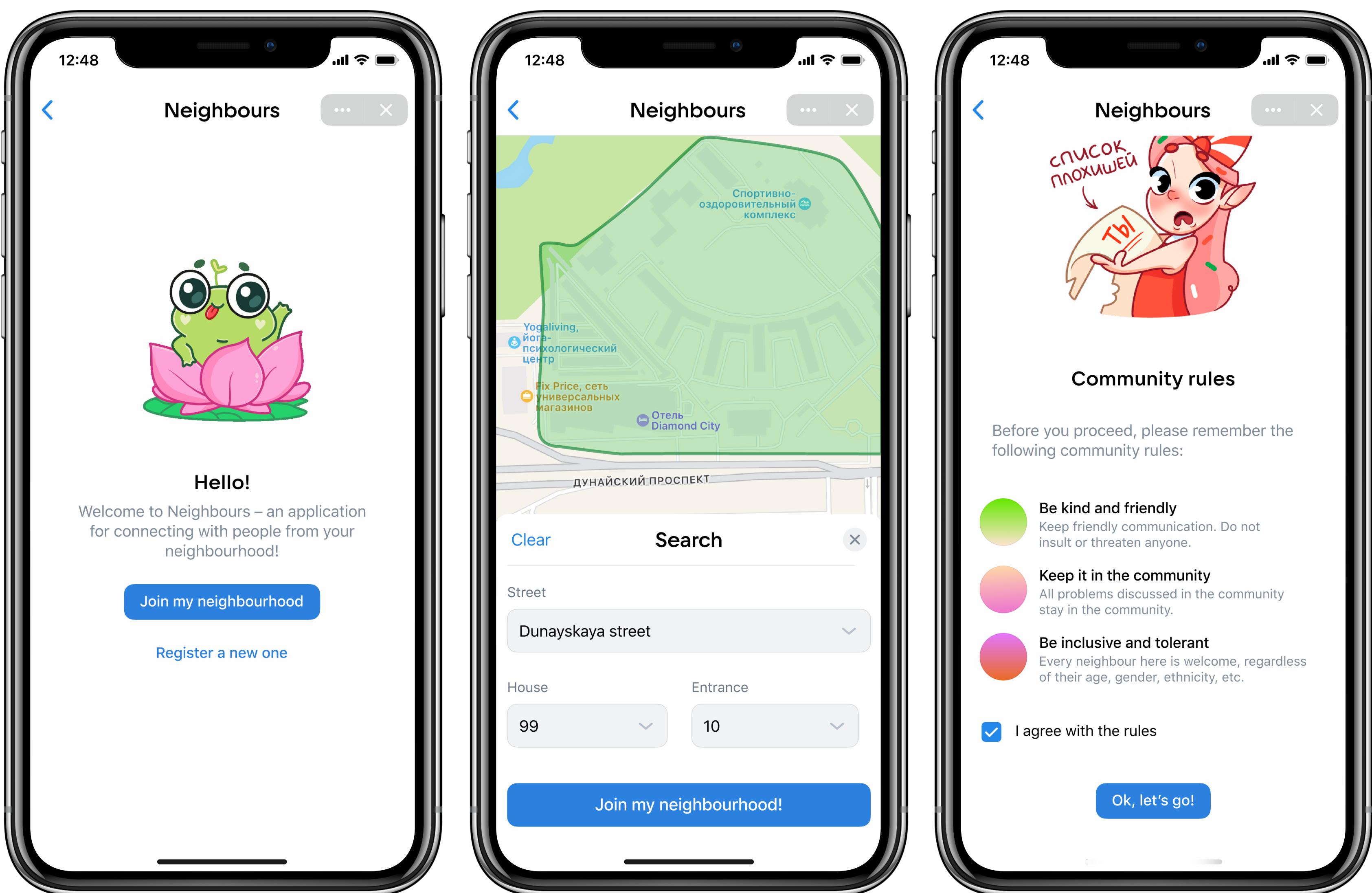


# onboarding

**Goal:** inform user what is this and what is going to happen next

## Main steps:

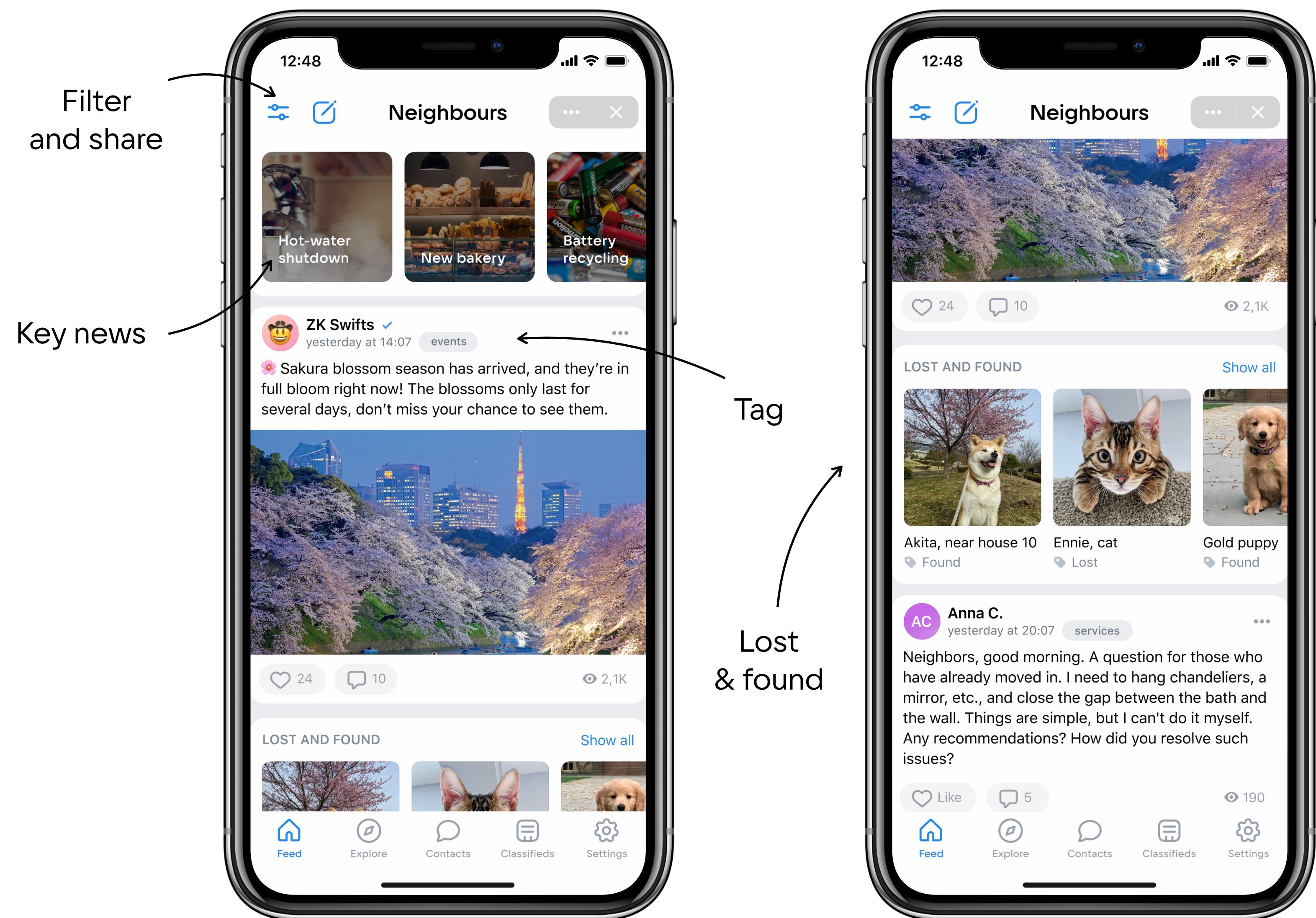
1. Welcome screen
2. Location selection
3. Community rules
4. Profile information from VK ID



# feed

## Purpose:

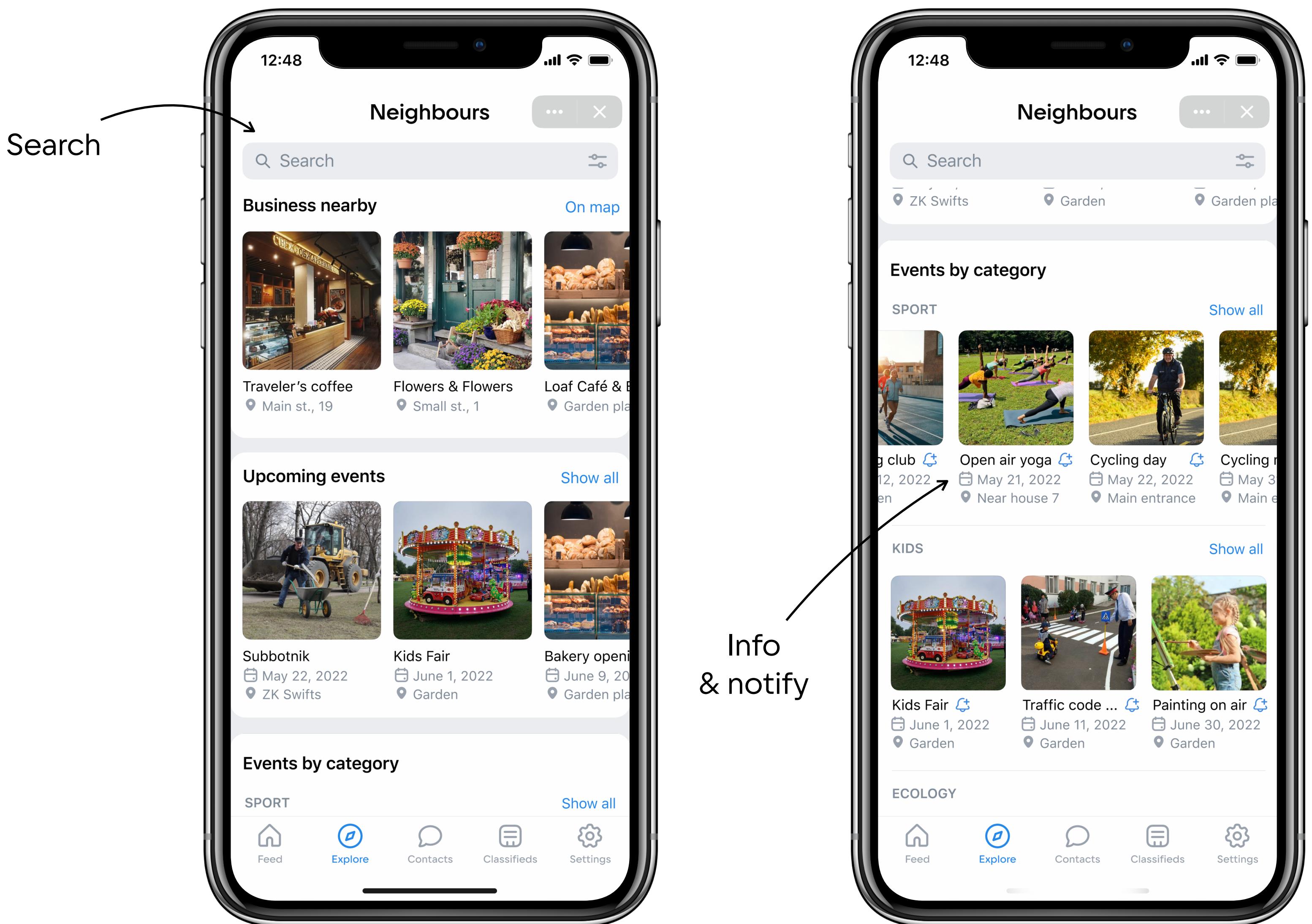
- Job stories related to reading and sharing information
- Filtering information by tags (from topic modeling section)
- Lost & found section to increase possible reach



# explore

## Purpose:

- Job stories 6 & 7: find local businesses, e.g. bakeries, flower stores, hair salons, on a map
- Job story 5: find upcoming events
- Events by category & notification buttons



# contacts

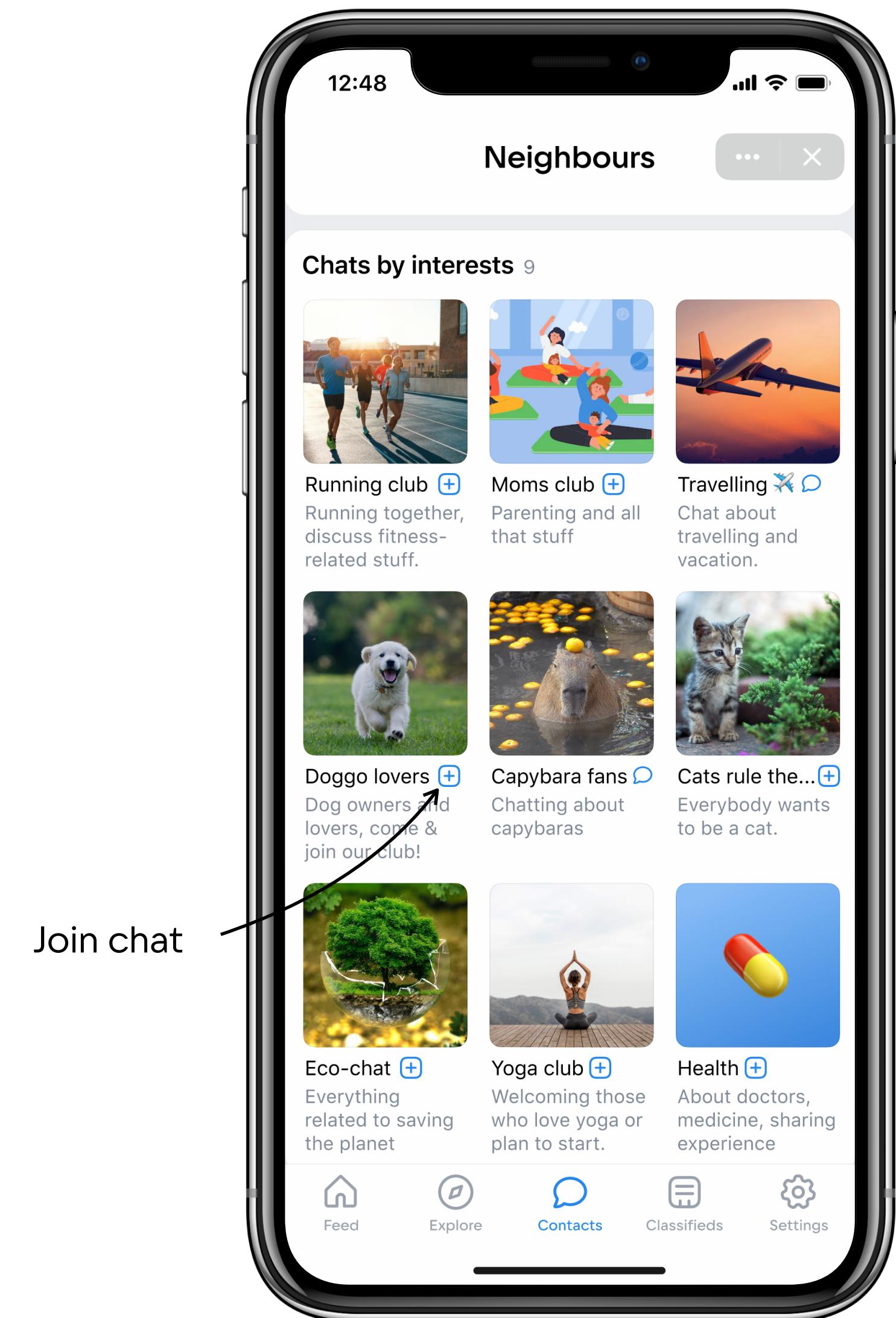
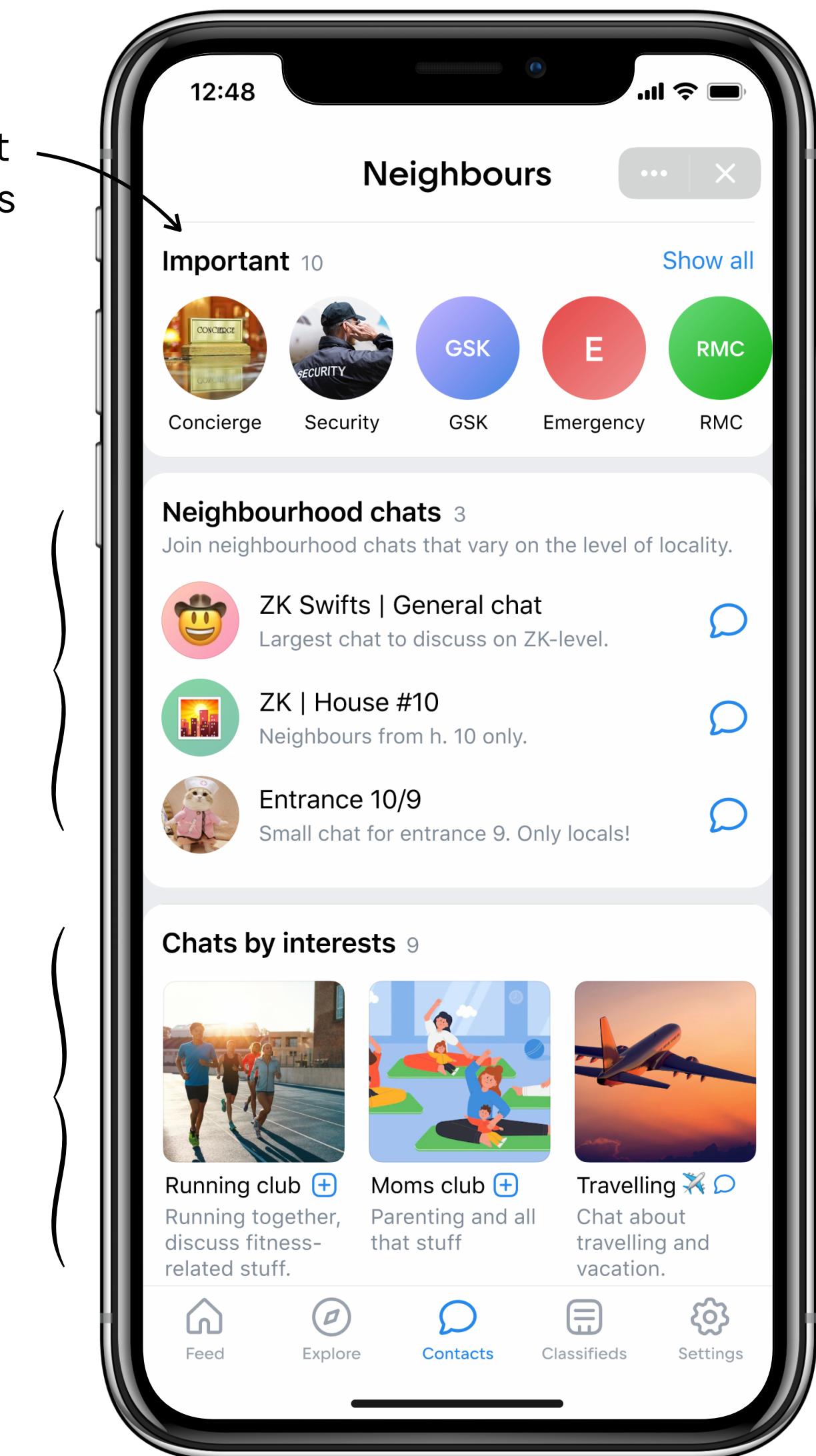
## Purpose:

- Job Story 4: Messaging on the right level of locality
- Can easily find important contacts
- Can join group chats by interests and find new connections

Most important official contacts

Chats based on locality level

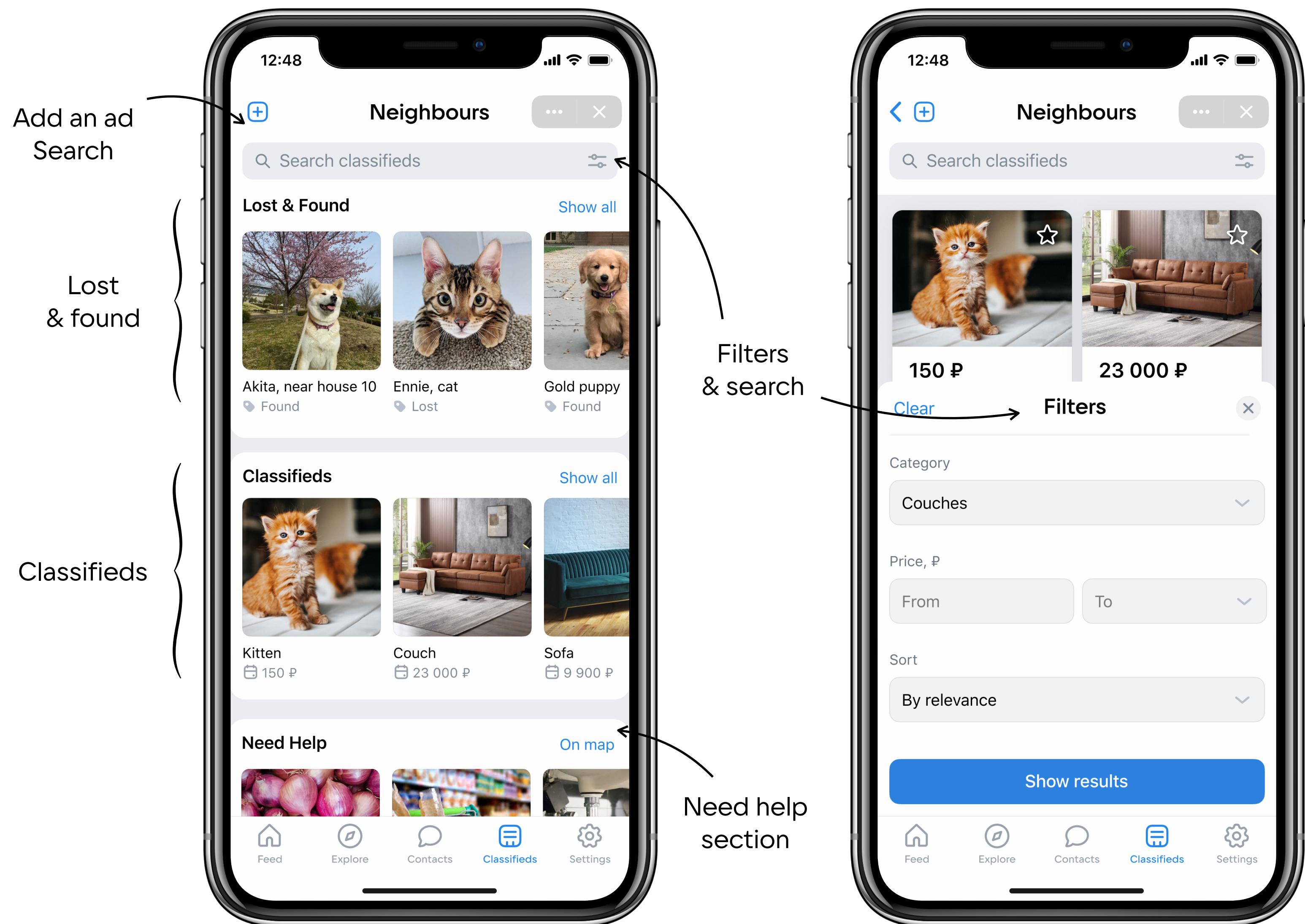
Chats based on interests



# classifieds

## Purpose:

- Job story 8: Lost and found animals to simplify lost pets search
- Job story 9: classifieds, selling things to neighbours (→ exchange, trust, sense of community)



# settings

## Purpose:

- Job story 3 (Privacy)
- User has control over who can see their profile photo or/and full name



# **UX evaluation**

# UX testing // methods

**Goal:** evaluate the prototype

**How:**

- 5 semi-structured interviews (Zoom, avg. 30-40 minutes)
- Required to share screen and think aloud
- Provided with 8 tasks
- No hints

**Main sections:**

1. Research goals & Welcome questions
2. Tasks 1-8
3. General impression

Task	Question example	What is trying to be understood or measured
T2: Open the application, check out the main news in the neighbourhood	Whether managed to find news  In which section did you try to find the information first?  If you visited several sections, then in what sequence, why did you make this or that choice?	Participant managed to find the entry point  Where users go first, whether the entry point is located correctly  Where else try to find information and news, what sections may also contain something relevant
	Was everything comfortable/intuitive?  Were there any problems?	What was good and what was bad, how the process can be improved

# results // task 1: onboarding

**Task 1:** “Представьте, что вы живете в новом ЖК. ВКонтакте запустила сервис для общения с соседями. Вы решили его попробовать и присоединиться к своему соседству. Задача – выполнить это действие.”

**Difficulty of the process:** “Very easy”

**Key findings:**

- “I liked that the screens contain basic information, its (description) is short, up to two buttons to choose from, intuitive flow”.
- most participants did not read the rules (“honestly, I never read the rules, just click accept”).
- “it’s cool that there are some rules, I didn’t finish reading them, but I got a feeling of security”

12:48  
Neighbors ... X

Community rules

Before you proceed, please remember the following community rules:

- Be kind and friendly**  
Keep friendly communication. Do not insult or threaten anyone.
- Keep it in the community**  
All problems discussed in the community stay in the community.
- Be inclusive and tolerant**  
Every neighbour here is welcome, regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, etc.

Ok, let's go!

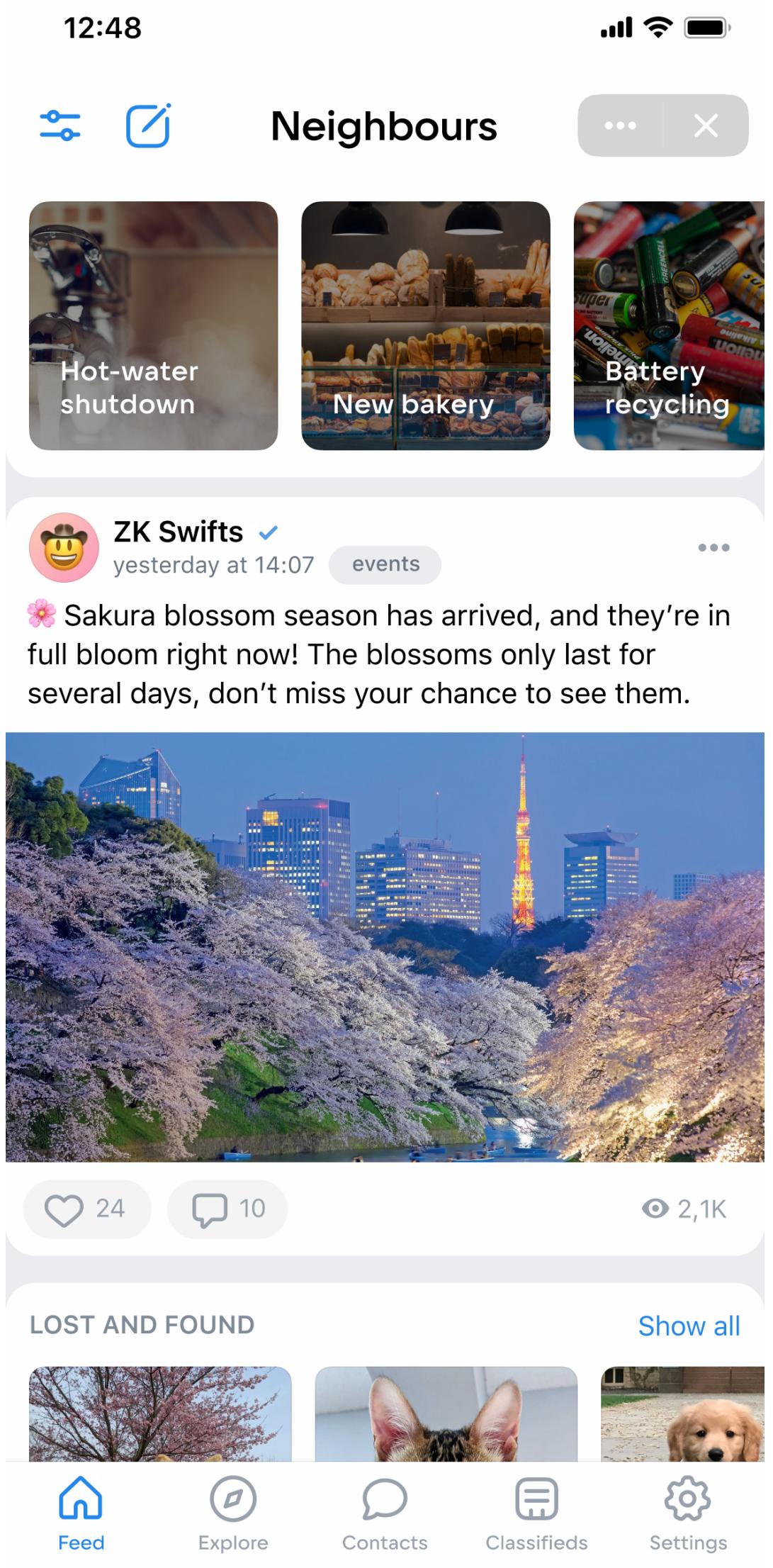
# results // task 2: feed

**Task 2:** “Зайдите в приложение, ознакомьтесь с главными новостями в соседстве за день.”

**Difficulty of the process:** “Very easy”

## Key findings:

- Do not notice stories-like block: “*I didn't notice the first block at all. I thought that these are stories and decided not to watch them. But if I used the app more often, I would probably realize that these were not stories, but something more useful*”  
→ add title
- Unclear who posts stories and whether they are credible  
→ highlight during other onboarding
- “*Usually news is in the feed, there is feed, so news should be here. Navigation follows the regular pattern of use and does not raise any questions*”



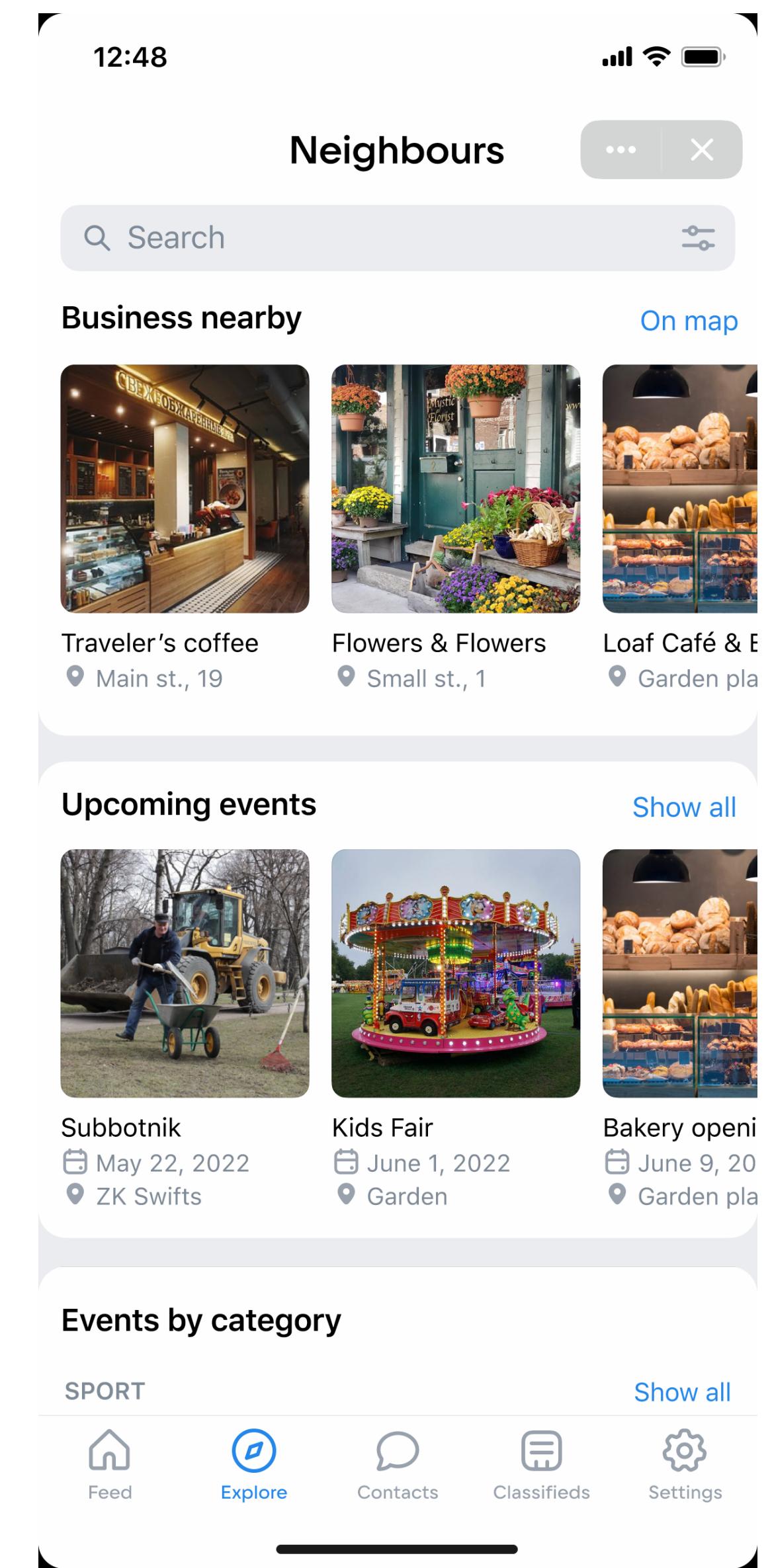
# results // task 3: events

**Task 3:** “Задача – проверить, какие события состоятся в вашем ЖК в ближайшее время”

**Difficulty of the process:** “Easy”

**Key findings:**

- “... it is not clear what exactly is being explored here, probably I would have **expected something like recommended posts** like in the main app”
- “maybe the **first section** should be called not businesses nearby but rather **places**, as **business sounds more formal** while **places are more simplistic** and can be different in the form of cafes, shops, language schools, etc.” → rename
- Did not always notice “upcoming”
- Also checked in stories-like block or searched in feed



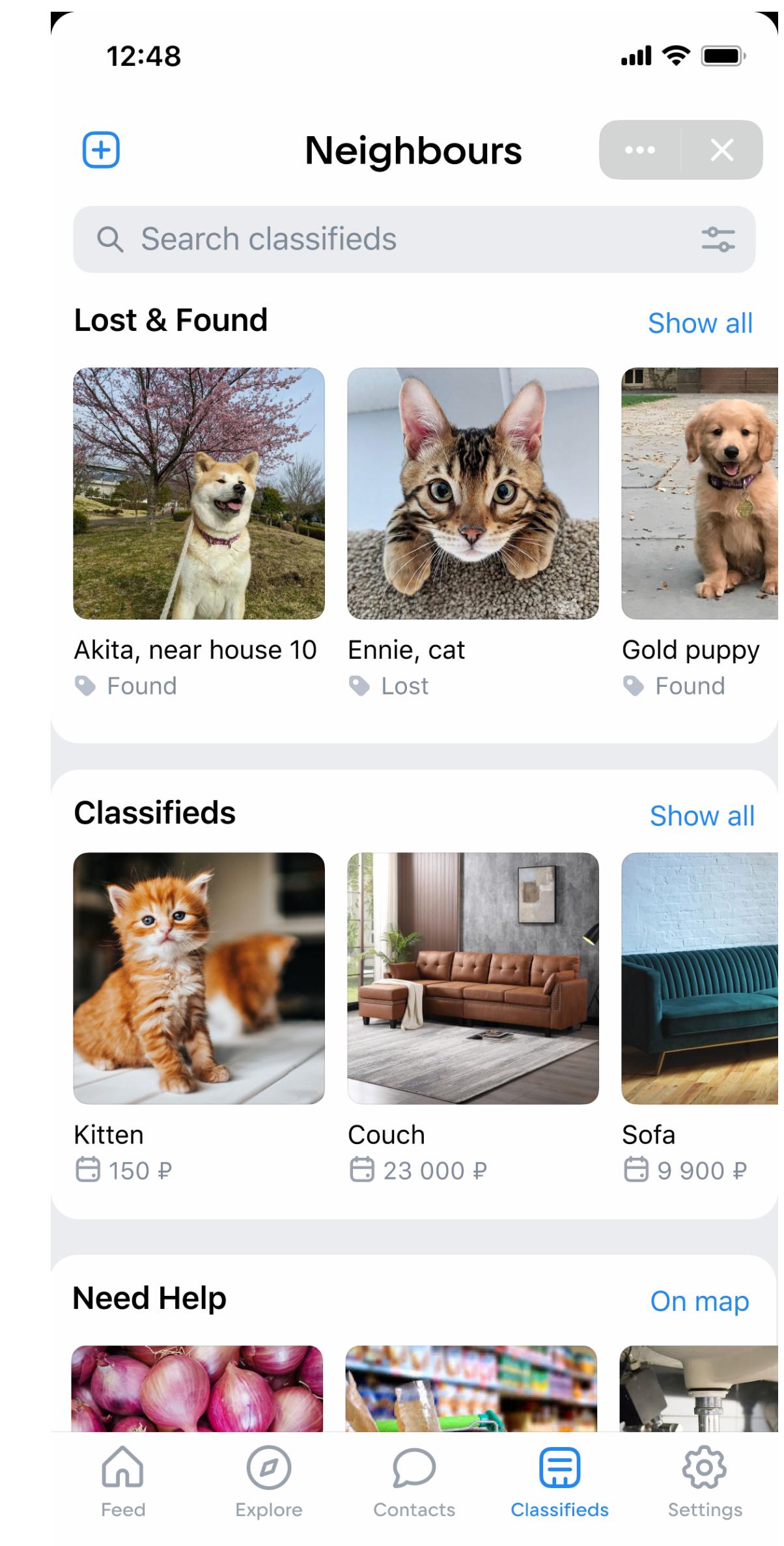
# results // task 7: classifieds

**Task 7:** “Вам понадобился новый диван, а соседи точно предлагают какие-то варианты. Найдите каталог диванов в приложении”

**Difficulty of the process:** “Very easy”

**Key findings:**

- “*Very cool, logical split with cats and dogs. I really like the tab and I would use it myself, because it will allow to find an electrician who will fix it, instead of calling the phone from an advertisement in the elevator. And the market is cool, I would like to sell a table that I don't need to someone from the neighbourhood*”
- did not notice the plus button on top of the screen at all  
→ highlight during onboarding or move somewhere else



# results // summary

- Provided mostly **positive feedback** and several suggestions
- Highlighted **intuitive flow** and **familiar patterns of use**
- 3 chats, **chats by interests**, **classifieds**, **news filtering**
- Most unclear part: "Explore" (title + upcoming)

"В целом, **очень классная и полезная** штука. Потому что собрано очень **много** всего **полезного в одном месте**. Так приходится искать какую-нибудь группу, например, в том же вк, а здесь сразу по местоположению все **находится за тебя** + ты сразу **видишь все**, начиная от объявлений, заканчивая интересными событиями + важные контакты + просто чатики. И **все это распределено по разделам**, а не как **в какой-нибудь**, опять же, **группе**, в которой просто флуд и **трудно найти то, что тебе нужно**, а еще и может быть потенциально интересно, и когда оно одним **полотном** просто в виде записей на стене (состоящих из жалоб, вопросов, флуда и объявлений), есть вероятность, что ты просто не долистаешь до нужного и **интересного**"

"Прототип крутой, особенно понравились **разделы с объявлениями** и **чатам по интересам**"

Task	Problem / suggestion	Solution
T2	Ignore stories-like block	Add "Important news" title, highlight during the next onboarding
T2	Highlight found pets in the feed, as found is a more rare case	Leave only found pets in the feed, keep both lost and found in classifieds
T3	<i>"Not businesses but places"</i>	Rename " <i>Business nearby</i> " to " <i>Places nearby</i> "
T6	<i>"No chats search"</i>	Add search for group chats (if there are many)
T7	Do not see "add classified" button	Either highlight during onboarding or move it

Table with main problems & suggestions and solutions.

# limitations

1. Covers experience of general users, not community managers
2. UX testing: aged only from 23 to 27 → cannot say that it's age-friendly

# further work

1. Research on community managers
2. Research on wider audience to improve usability
3. Design & research for web version

# conclusion

**Main result:** designed a prototype of an application for communication within neighbourhoods, which aims to simplify communication and interaction between neighbors within the VK.com ecosystem and improve the existing user experience.

## Highlights:

- Analysed existing research, identified best practices and recommendations on ux in neighbourhood apps
- Conducted brainstorming workshop, formulated push & pull factors, topic modeling, analysed competitors → formulated job stories and product vision
- Designed an interactive prototype in Figma
- Performed UX evaluation by conducting 5 interviews
- Overall evaluation was very good: users highlighted the intuitive flow, easily solved the tasks, provided useful feedback and suggestions

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