VSCO: A UX Analysis
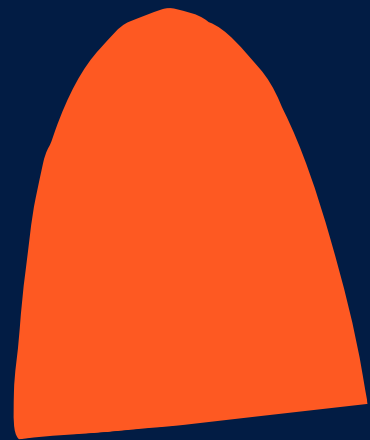
Using Heuristic Evaluation

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Contents

In this report:

# Introduction

What is VSCO?

One of the simplest modern social media apps, VSCO first and foremost aims to satisfy user's aesthetic desires. An easy-to-navigate hybrid of a photo editor and social media platform, this app contains all the necessary elements to guarantee an easy photo-enjoying experience.

What is it?

"VSCO is [a] popular image editing and sharing app for mobile devices. Like other image sharing apps such as Instagram, VSCO provides editing features and filters, and allows users to share their pictures with other members on the platform." [1]
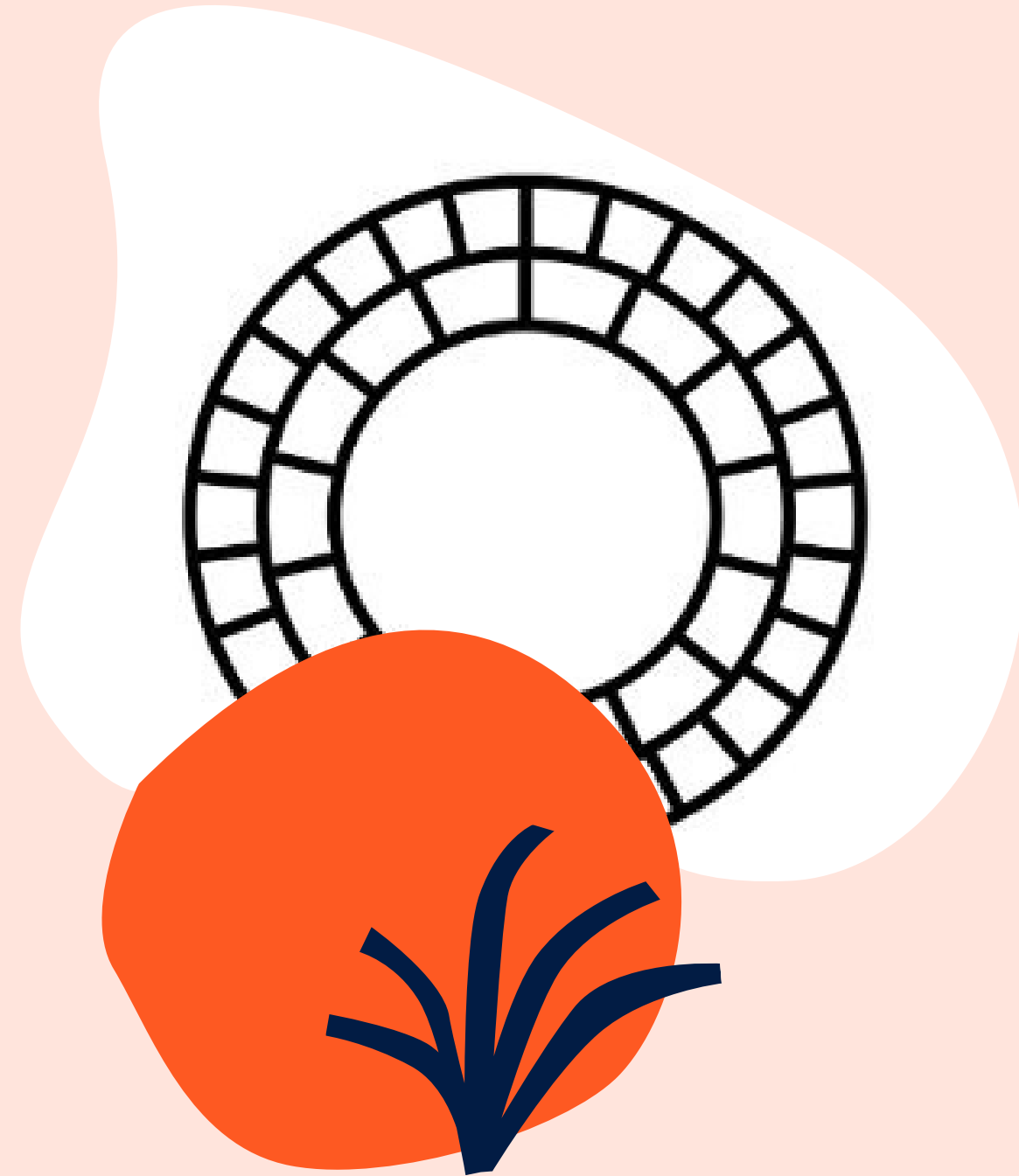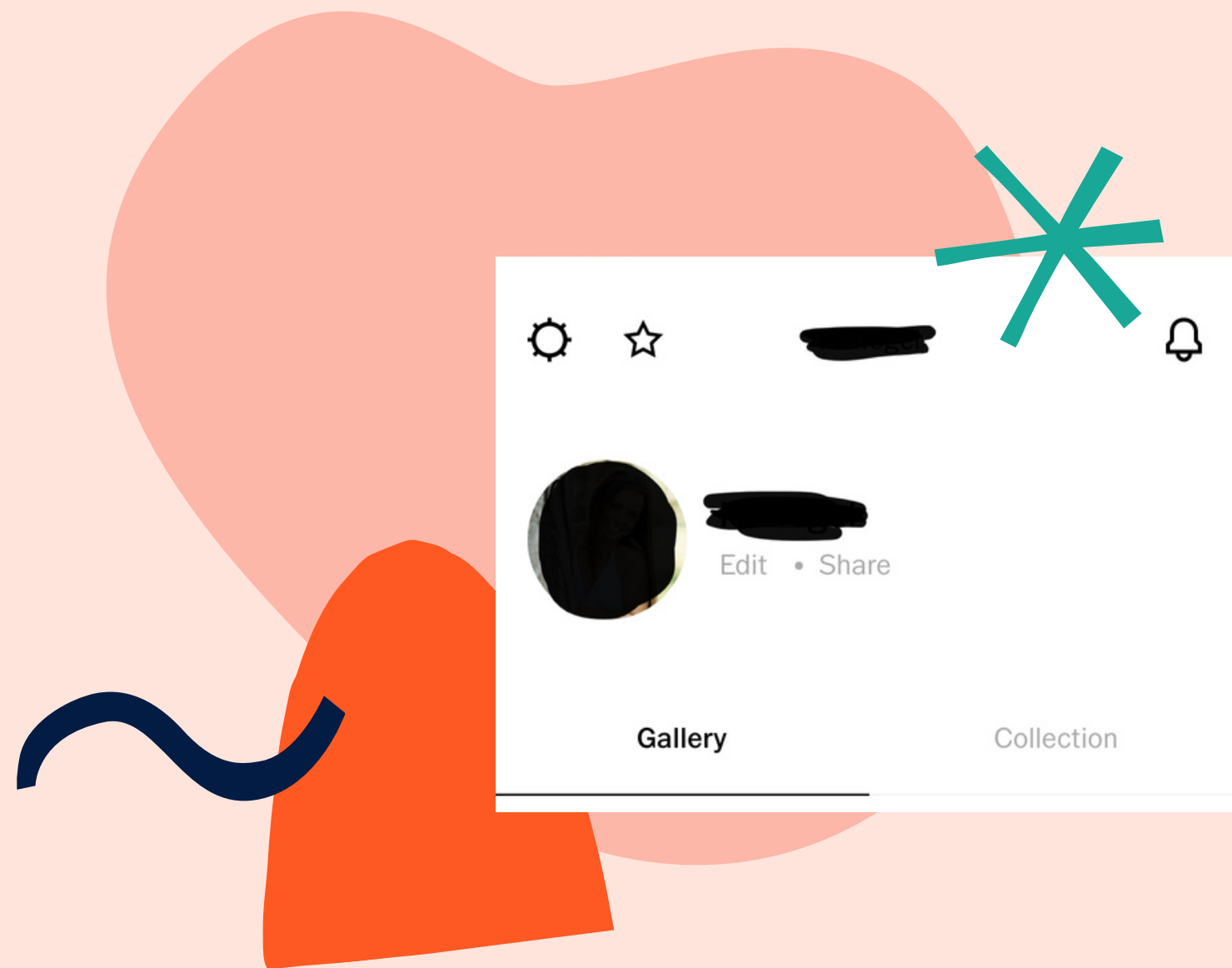
Why is it unique?

"The origins of the "VSCO girl" name trace back to a photo-editing app that launched back in 2011. VSCO — with a pronunciation that rhymes with Cisco — is known for its preset filters with cult-like followings used by photographers and Instagrammers alike to produce artsy, aesthetic-focused pictures. It's also a platform devoid of likes and follower metrics, which social networks like Instagram have been built on." [4]

Edit • Share

Gallery   Collection

A Quick Navigation Guide

How do I utilize this platform? [2]
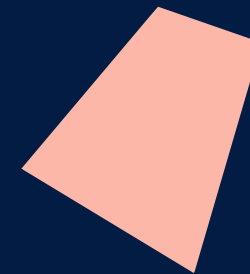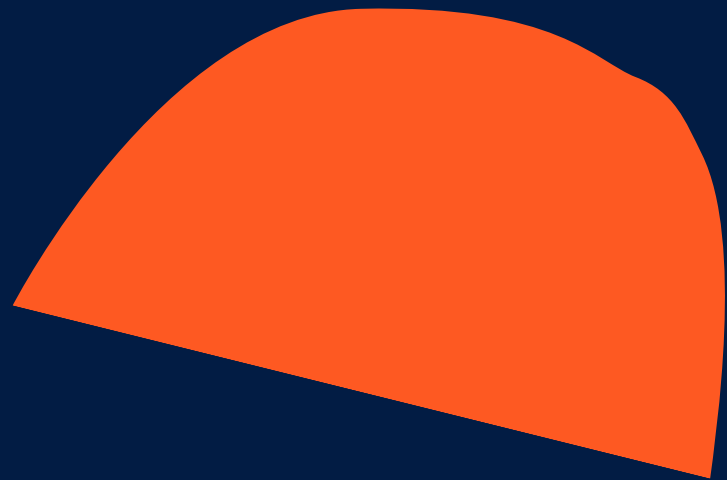
The Feed tab

When we open up the app, the platform logo appears briefly while the feed screen loads. Soon, we get to the main page, technically known as the Feed tab. Here, we can scroll through the posts and reposts of people we follow, occasionally coming across swipe screens of suggested users to follow every so often. [8]

In the top left there is a small logo that appears to be a stack of smiley faces. If we click this button, it turns grey while processing; many of the other buttons alter in similar ways, such as changing from normal to bold text, to indicate to the user that the system is processing the action. The smiley stack logo brings us to the People page, where we can scroll through tabs of suggested users, contacts, and then our followers and following lists for reference. The main action on the Feed page, however, occurs when we scroll down the main screen. This is a standard feature of most modern social media sites, making it a thoughtless step to take when opening this app for many users.
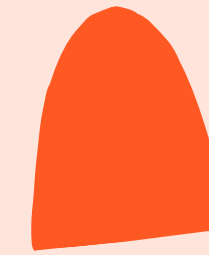
Along the bottom of the Feed tab, as well as most of the others, we see the five main tabs available for user interaction. These tabs are colored slightly darker than the rest, indicating to users that they are more permanent fixtures on the screen. The first tab is where we currently are, Feed, which is represented by a small house logo indicating that it is the home page. Second we see Discover, indicated by a magnifying glass, which I have chosen not to consider in this report. Third is Studio, represented by two overlaying squares; here we can swipe between Camera Roll and Drafts tabs to view different groups of images, as well as performing a few additional actions. Fourth we see Profile, represented by a simple smiley face. Finally, the last tab is Membership, which I have also opted not to consider in my analysis (sorry, I only have the free version!).

The Studio tab

The next tab we will consider is the Studio tab, the central hub for photo editing within the VSCO app. This tab is actually characterized by a dark theme, a sharp contrast to the standard white layout of the other pages. At the top, "Studio" spans the screen in bold letters, and over to the right we see a small camera logo for taking photos within the VSCO application. As mentioned previously, this screen also has two main tabs within itself indicating the storage location of the image; on the left is Camera Roll, while on the right we see Drafts. Under each of these headings are one or two sub-options, Recents and Filters, which serve as useful shortcuts for people entering the Studio already with a certain image in mind to do so quickly. [8]

Finally, under these functions, we see a grid of photos. Notably, the Camera Roll photos are displayed in box format to reflect the way they are actually displayed within Apple Photos. Contrastingly, the Drafts photos are displayed in an uneven grid to preserve the altered dimensions of edited images.

The Profile tab

The last tab I will discuss is the Profile tab. This is the home base for a user to interact with their own profile, and besides representing what other users see when they go to your page, it also includes a few unique actions relevant only to the individual whose account is being used. The main spotlight of the Profile tab is the user's profile picture, name, bio, and any additional information they might have chosen to include. This information is edited in separated, titled boxes to ensure constancy across profiles. Under the username, we also see the Edit and Share shortcuts, which assist familiar users in achieving specific goals more efficiently. Next we can swipe between this page's sub-tabs, Gallery and Collection, which respectively represent a user's own posts and their reposts from others. On the top of this screen, we see the standard Settings gear and the Favorites heart on the left, as well as the Notifications bell over to the right.

Heuristic Analysis

Applying Nielsen's 10 Heuristics for Interface Design[7, 9]

Rating guide[6]

Poor

Fails to meet expectations
Difficult to use

Average

Acceptable, but not efficient
Navigation requires moderate effort

Good

Efficient, but not best
Some effort is required
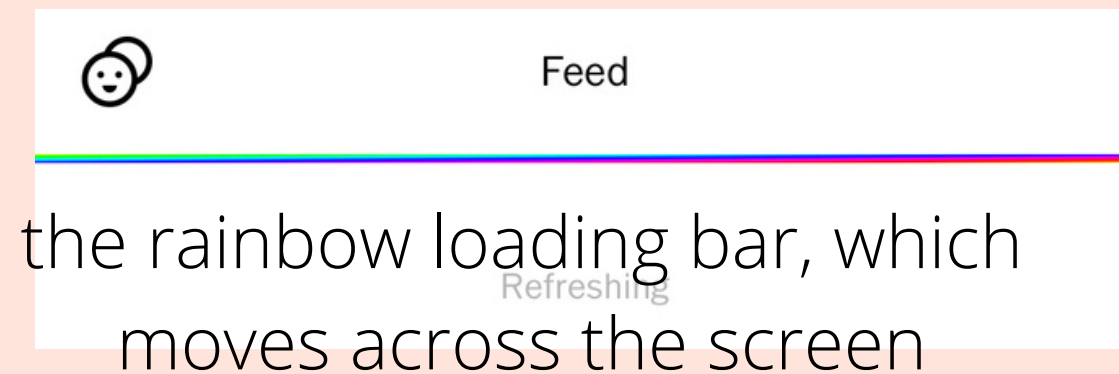
Excellent

Most efficient, very few issues
Use of the application is nearly natural

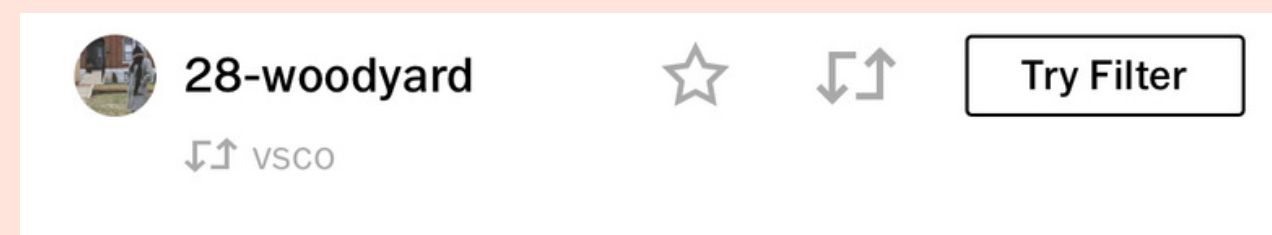# Heuristic 1: Visibility _Rating:_ Excellent

The Feed tab

In assessing the visibility of VSCO's Feed tab, it seems fitting to first address the loading screen we see each time we enter the app. Here, we are flashed with VSCO's simple logo, which quickly fades away as the home page comes into focus. On other occasions where the application is loading, we tend to see a moving rainbow bar along the relevant area of the screen, or, sometimes, we see the screen fading into white altogether. On the page itself, there are a few important features to notice. First, if an image is reposted, it lists both the original poster and the relevant reposter's usernames, marking the latter with the relevant symbol. Another feature is that when you hold down an image from feed, the star and repost buttons appear in circles, displaying easily the possible interactions with the given post. Consequently, if you choose to favorite or repost the image, the relevant button symbol will burst under your finger. Additionally, while scrolling through Feed, if a picture has a filter on it, it will have a Try Filter button next to it to indicate such.
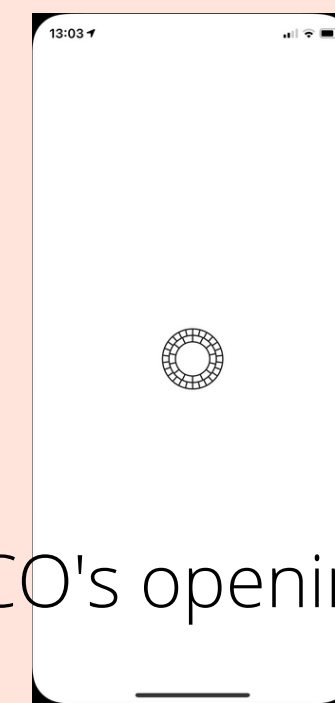
VSCO's opening screen

shortcuts for "favorite" and "repost" preserve the feed as the background, allowing users to remember where they were while scrolling

"Try Filter" allows users to see if a filter is used and to try it on one of their own photos

the rainbow loading bar, which moves across the screen

Heuristic 1: Visibility

The Studio tab

One important Studio tab function that help improve the app's visibility is the pre-posting finalization screen. This page, which gives the option of writing a caption and allows users to second guess whether or not they want to post their content, reminds content creators of the power that comes with posting on the platform. Also in this tab, there is a Filter drop-down which allows for users to view their drafts according to a number of different criteria, which can be useful when looking for something specific.
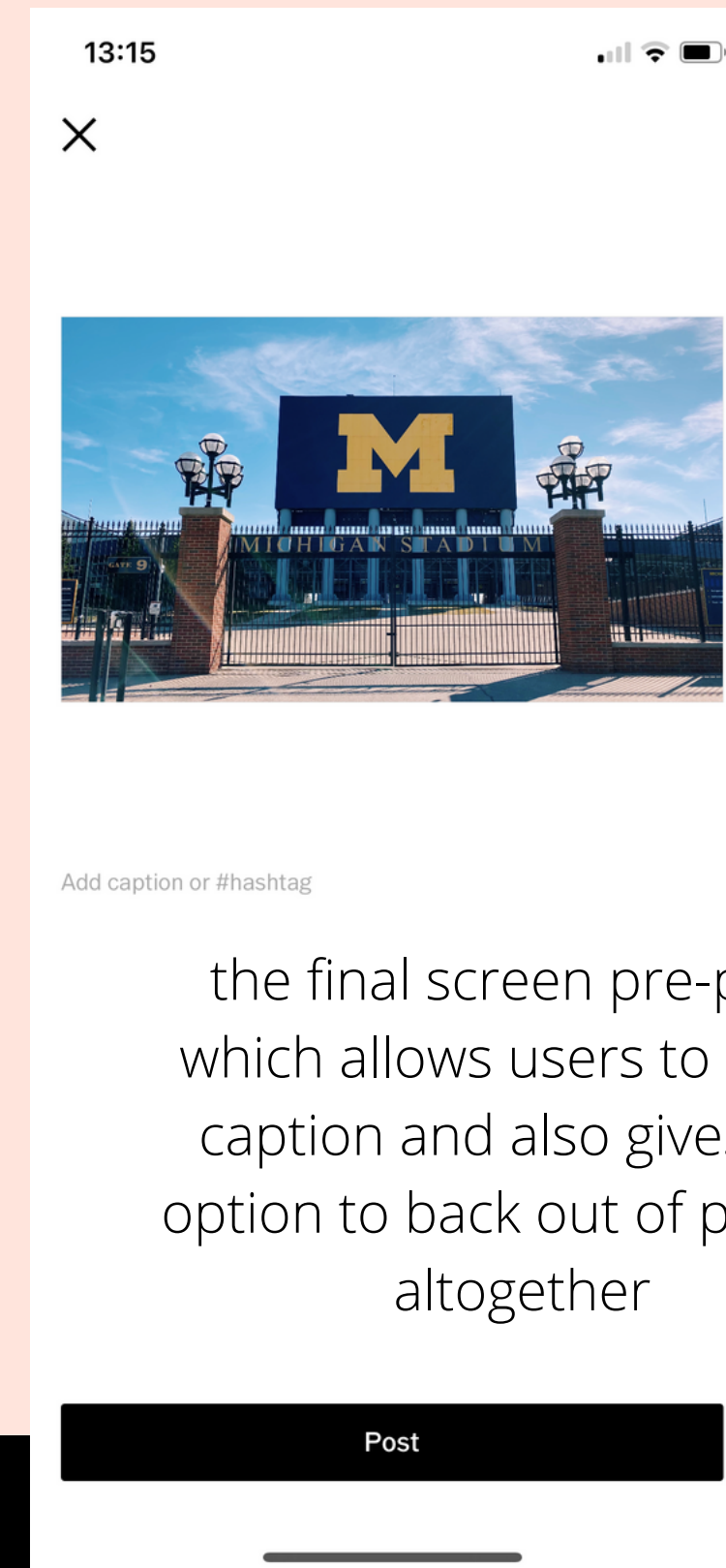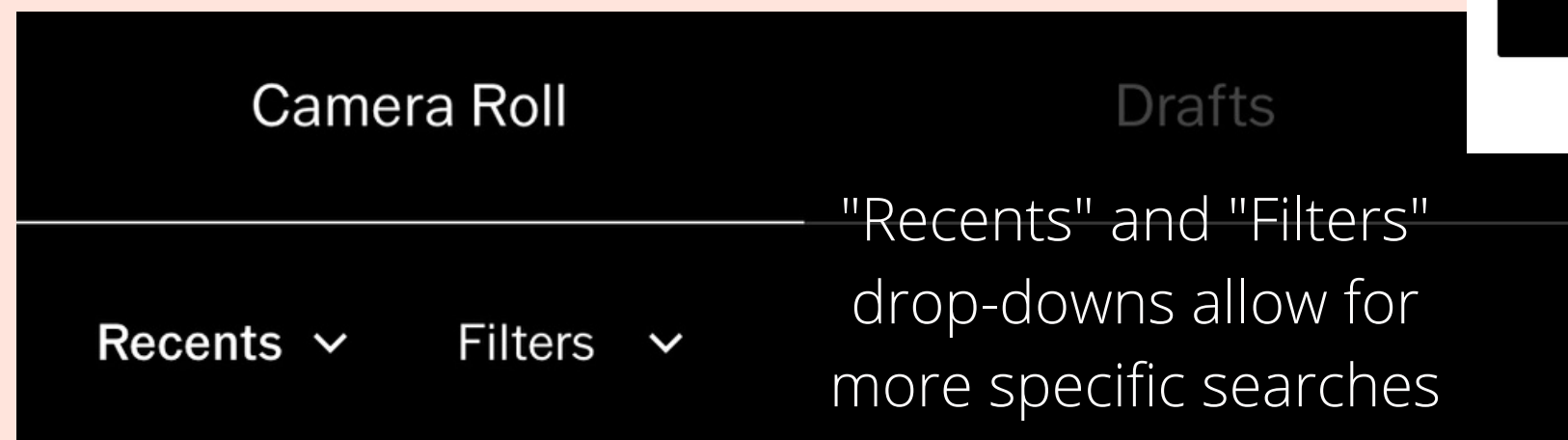
the final screen pre-post, which allows users to add a caption and also gives the option to back out of posting altogether

"Recents" and "Filters" drop-downs allow for more specific searches
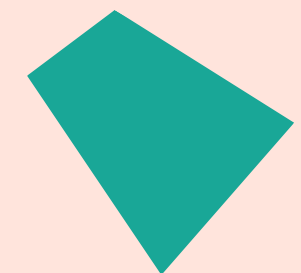
Heuristic 2: Match between system and real world

The Feed tab

VSCO is an easy system to pick up from scratch because it is based upon a set of universal symbols as well as the same standard organization utilized by most other social media sites. For example, one of the two main actions is Favorite, represented by a star; the other is Repost (the group of reposted images is known as Collection), which is represented by a box formed by two end-to-end arrows. Both of these are very straightforward and easy to comprehend given a real world context.

some standard VSCO symbols
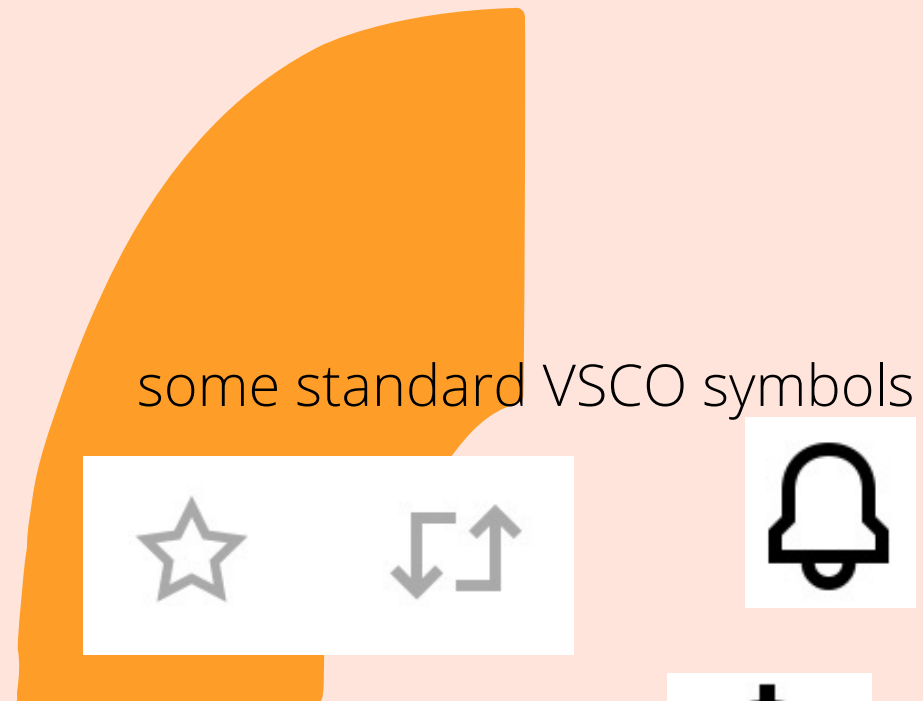
The Profile tab

Some symbols on the Profile tab that are accurate reflections of their functionality are the bell for the notifications page and the gear for the settings page; both of these symbols are also common in the realm of online accounts.

The Studio tab

Rating: Excellent

VSCO does a great job matching the real world in a number of different respects. One of these is the actual language it uses, such as the names of different functions and tools. In Studio, the works-in-progress page is naturally called Drafts, and, again, the tab itself is the Studio! Another way we see this real world correlation is through the symbols, such as the camera icon for taking in-app photos. Additionally, VSCO uses a number of standardized functions; for example, exposure, contrast, and saturation are seen in most editing applications.
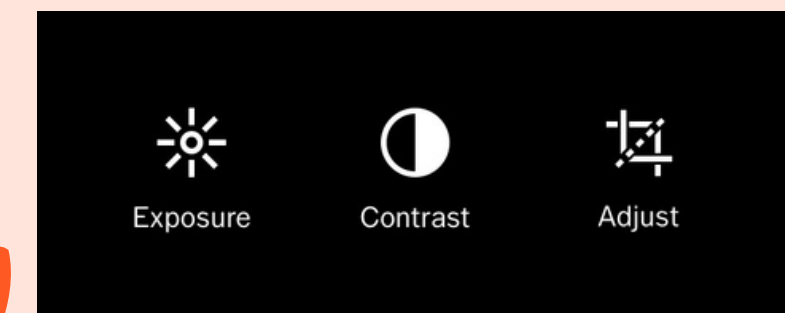
some VSCO editing tools, many of which are also common on other editing software

Heuristic 3: User control and freedom *Rating:* Good

The Feed tab

One point that I would like to highlight in this area is that VSCO makes it a bit too easy to accidentally favorite or repost somebody else's image. Holding down on a picture brings up the action buttons, so it is easy to press them by accident. However, sliding your finger while still holding down does makes them go away, and if you do repost or like an image, you can re-press the star or arrows and undo it quickly. I would recommend that a better method is found for the shortcut which will not allow for such easy mistakes to be made.

Heuristic 3: User control and freedom
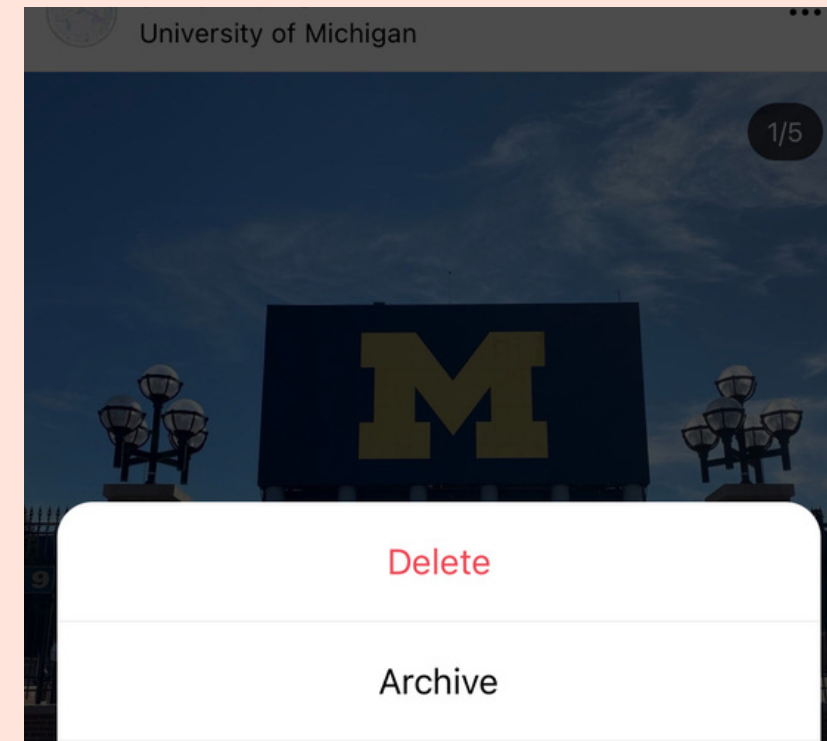
The Studio tab

In terms of editing, VSCO provides users with just enough freedom to make easy choices without overwhelming them in the process. For unpaid users like myself, there are 10 free filers available at our disposal. The intensity of these filters can be altered along a sliding scale, and a filter can easily be removed by clicking on the top, plain option. The studio also allows users to change the layout by number of images and display shape so that the editing experience can feel most comfortable.
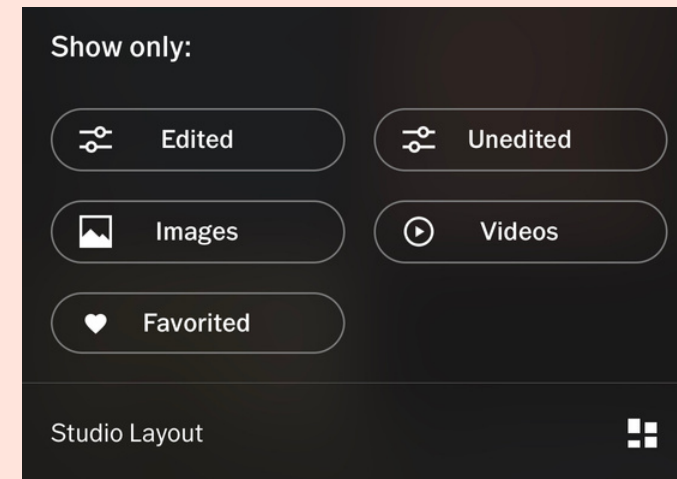
limited quantities of free filters and layout options give users a personalized albeit simple experience

Instagram's archive tool, which allows past posts to be temporarily (or permanately!) hidden [3]

The Profile tab

Within a profile, there are some standard freedoms that the user always has: these include the ability to delete a post or edit its caption at any time. I do believe that user freedom within one's own profile could be a big more nuanced; for example, I would suggest that VSCO create some sort of archive tool (like Instagram has) so users can hide past posts temporarily but still maintain the option to restore them later on.

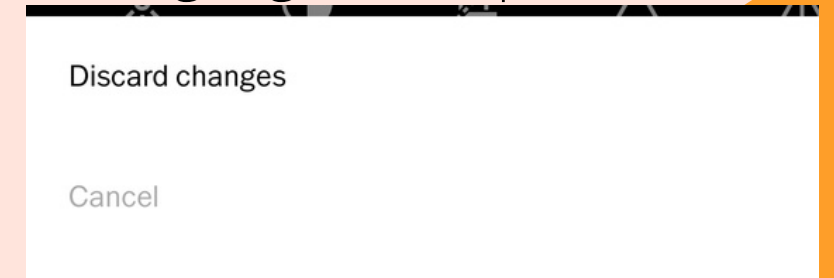# Heuristic 4: Consistency and standards

The Feed tab

As I explained prior, VSCO uses a very basic set of symbols to indicate its few actions. Some examples of these include the star for favoriting images and the arrow-loop symbol for reposts. Additionally, it consistently displays the bottom tab bar throughout most screens on each of the five pages; this is also consistent with the norm among other social media platforms.

The Studio tab

In terms of consistency, VSCO's editing tools nearly all use a sliding intensity scale for simplicity. Also, the application maintains transparency and communicates with users with clear language such as "discard changes", which makes for little to no ambiguity regarding the meaning of certain functions.

Rating: Excellent

some standard VSCO symbols

clear language for important changes

the sliding intensity scale, used for many elements of a photo
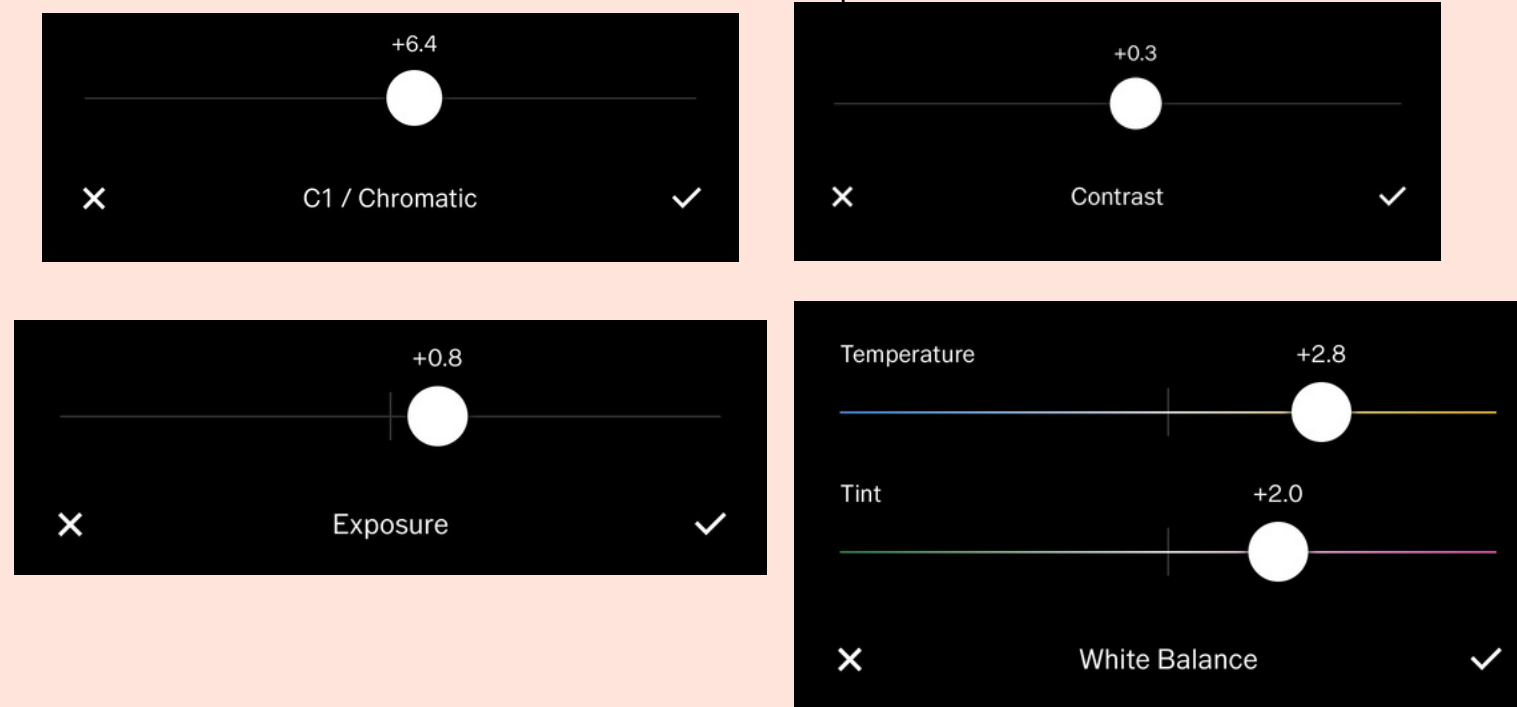
Heuristic 5: Error prevention

Rating: Good

The Feed tab

Since VSCO is so simple, it is usually not difficult to execute the action you intended to. However, the Feed page does have one significant error in this area: when you hold down an image to expand it, as I explained, the favorite and repost options also pop up. I believe that rather than swiping to hide these tools, we should swipe to reveal them to avoid accidentally pressing them as a result. Another possible solution could be to ask for verification that the user wants to complete the action, but this would probably be best if only applied to reposts as otherwise it might become irritating.
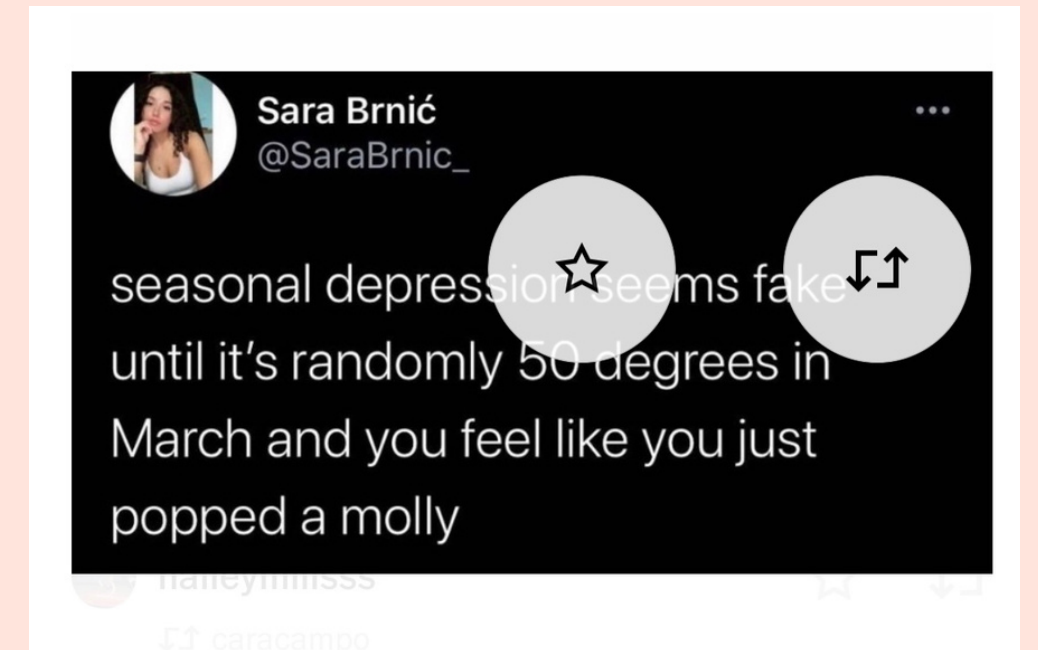
this picture again! these buttons are way too easy to click by mistake, should be altered

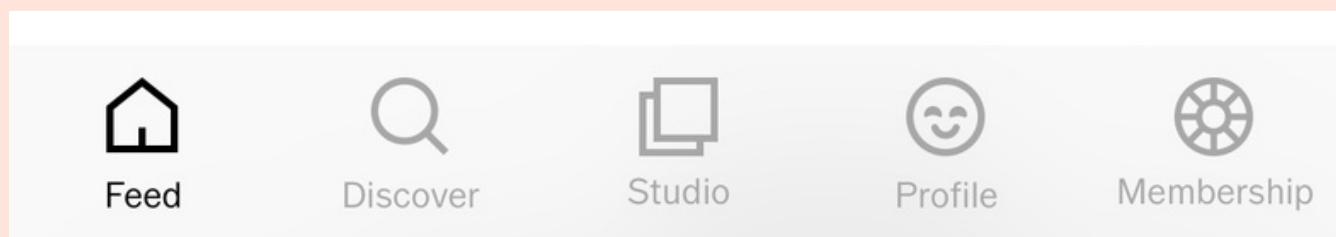# Heuristic 6: Recognition rather than recall

Rating: Good

The Feed tab

VSCO is a very simple platform, so it tends to give enough detail about the limited interactions it offers for users to be able to comprehend all of the relevant information. For example, all of the tabs on the bottom include the page name underneath the symbol to emphasize the purpose of that tab.
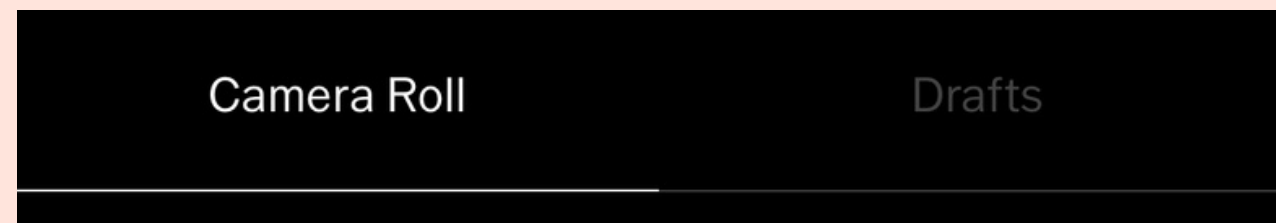
The Studio tab

As I have explicated previously, VSCO is a very simple app with few action options, most of which are clearly/explicitly marked. Some examples of functions that users might recognize within the application are Studio, because it makes sense that the editing hub would be titled after an artist's workplace, and Drafts, which clearly indicates that it deals with current works in progress. Also within the Studio, the Edit symbol appears over the corner of edited photos so you know they have been altered. Similarly, when a user clicks on a filter, its name and number are displayed below the sliding scale as a reminder.

the two main studio tabs are labelled, and the user's current location is presented in white and underlined

The Profile tab

VSCO does a very good job at helping users remember what action has been taken to engage with their posts. For each photo on one's profile, there is a "View Activity" button to access that photo's history.
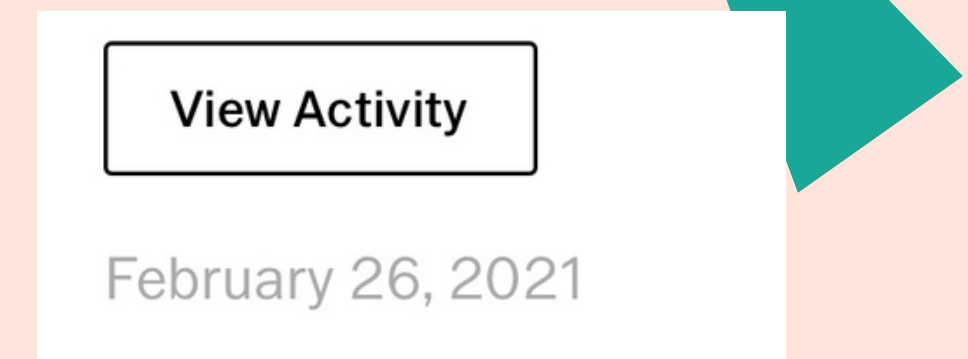
the view activity button for a post, as well as a posting date for future reference and location if applicable

each main tab also has a cooresponding title underneath

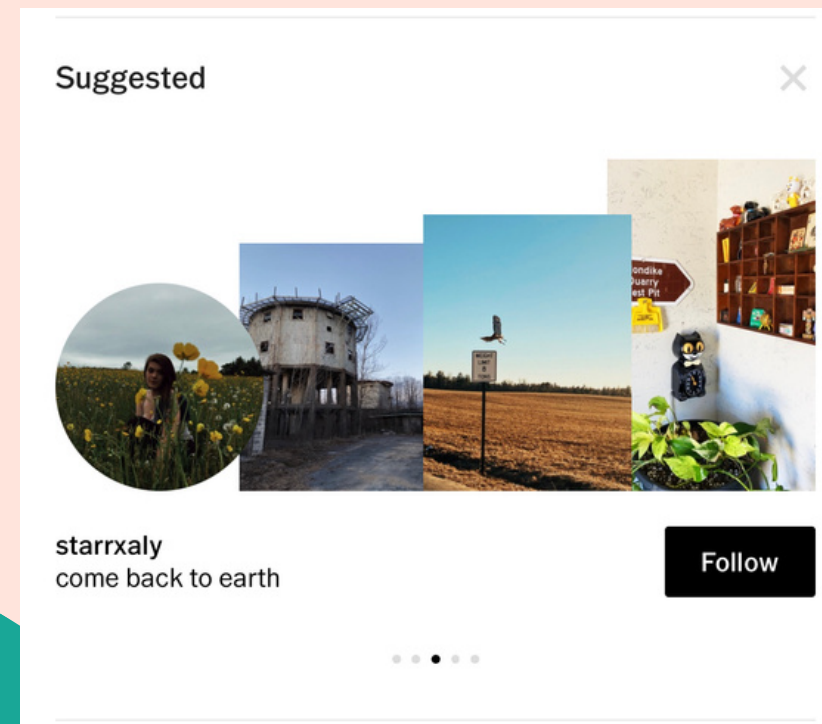# Heuristic 7: Flexibility and efficiency of use

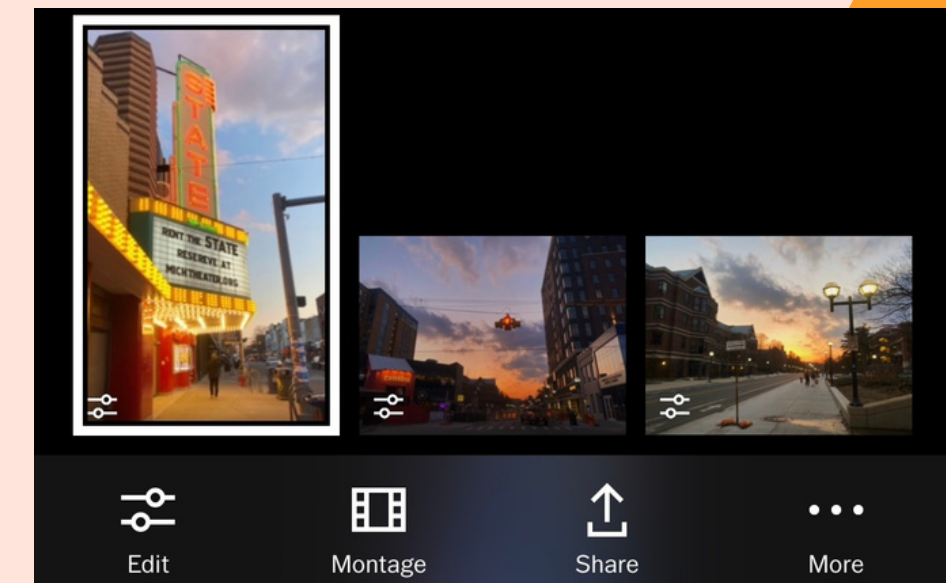## The Feed tab

Rating: Good

VSCO is renowned for its simplicity, but as a consequence of this, it might also feel frustrating for users that are used to sites with more active engagement. However, the limited features that VSCO has are actually much more complex than they appear. One example of a shortcut that allows for efficient use of this application is, as I have discussed in other contexts, the toggle favorite and repost buttons appearing when you hold down an image in Feed. Another is the Try Filter function, which appears next to photos in Feed that have been edited with VSCO filters. Also, there is the swipe to refresh shortcut, which allows users to easily reload the page without closing out of the app. Finally, there are the scrolls of suggested users to follow, which make it significantly easier to expand your network within the platform.

The Studio tab

The "recents" and "filters" options in the camera roll tab of studio—and just the latter in the drafts tab—allow for users to efficiently sort through their draft library in order to better find specific images. Also, users can skip right to "share" from studio without editing if they have already edited their content or are choosing not to edit it at all.

the share-from-drafts shortcut

the suggested users shortcut

"Recents" and "Filters" drop-downs allow for more specific searches
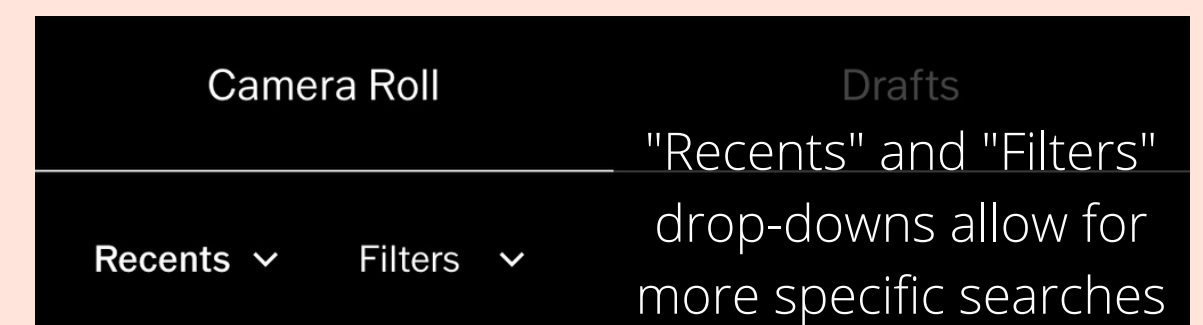
# Heuristic 8: Aesthetic and minimalist design

The Feed tab

In my opinion, the aesthetic criteria is where VSCO succeeds the most. First, it has a simple black and white color scheme—one which draws minimal attention and instead allows readers to focus on the content. It also keeps it simple by enlarging the photos enough that the feed usually only displays one picture at a time. The platform's logo is also basic, a big shape divided with many lines. Functionality-wise, VSCO maintains its minimalist theme by, for example, limiting unpaid users to 10 filters (which kind of sucks but does make sense) and utilizing the same selection tool, a sliding scale, for just about each different editing function within the app.
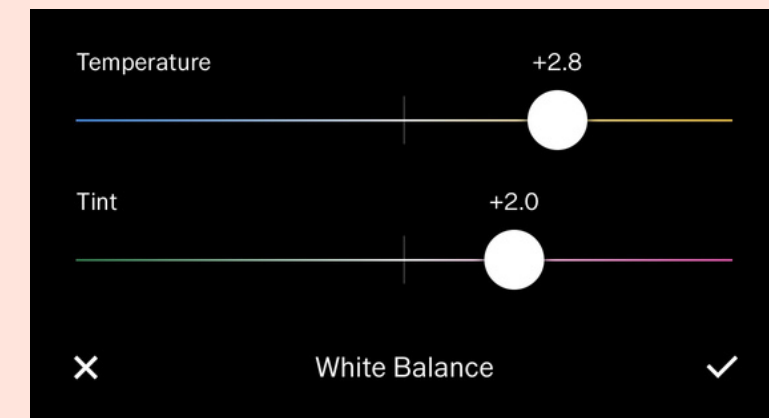
The Studio tab

As I have discussed before, the limited quantity of free filters and constant tool control across all filters allows for an easy, effortless user experience.

Rating: Excellent
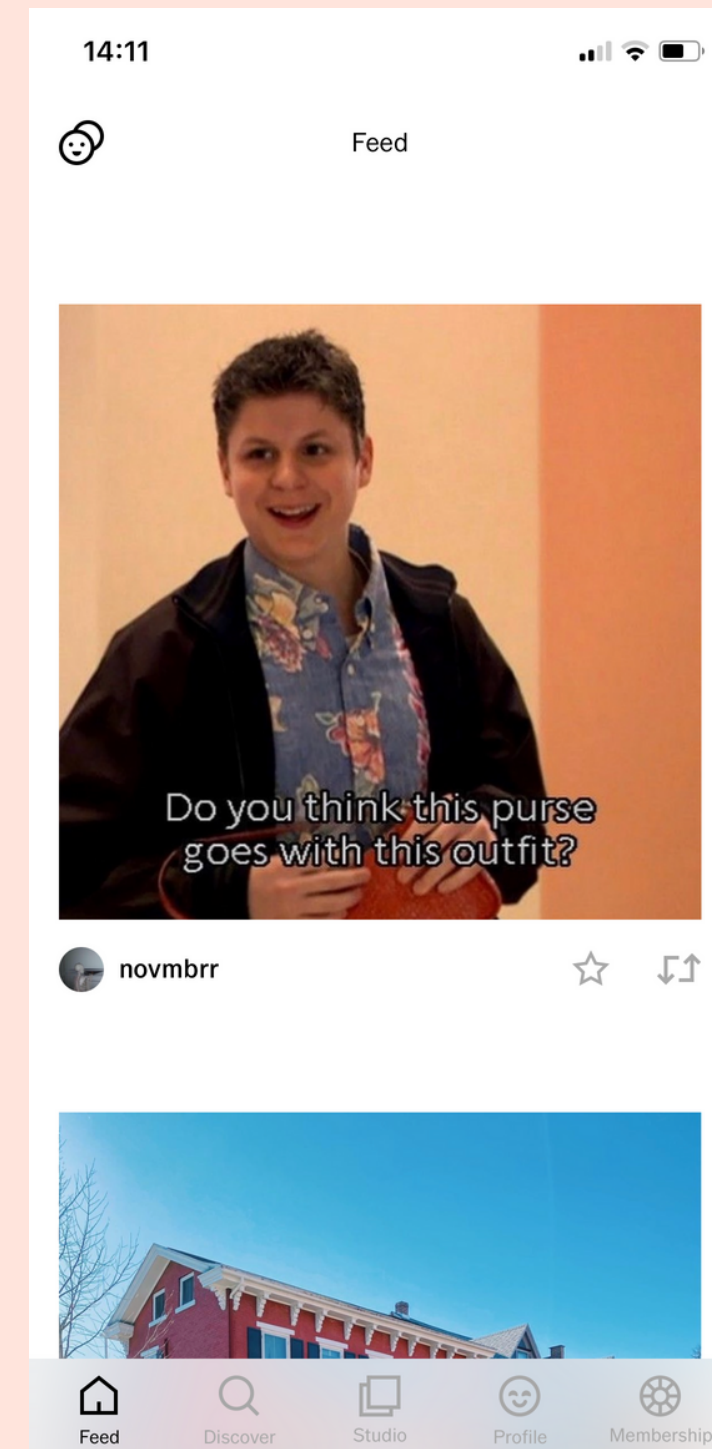
an example of the sliding intensity scale

the 10 free VSCO filters

a standard home feed, which only displays a maximum of 2 or maybe 3 pictures at once
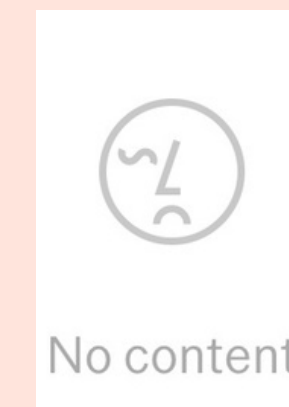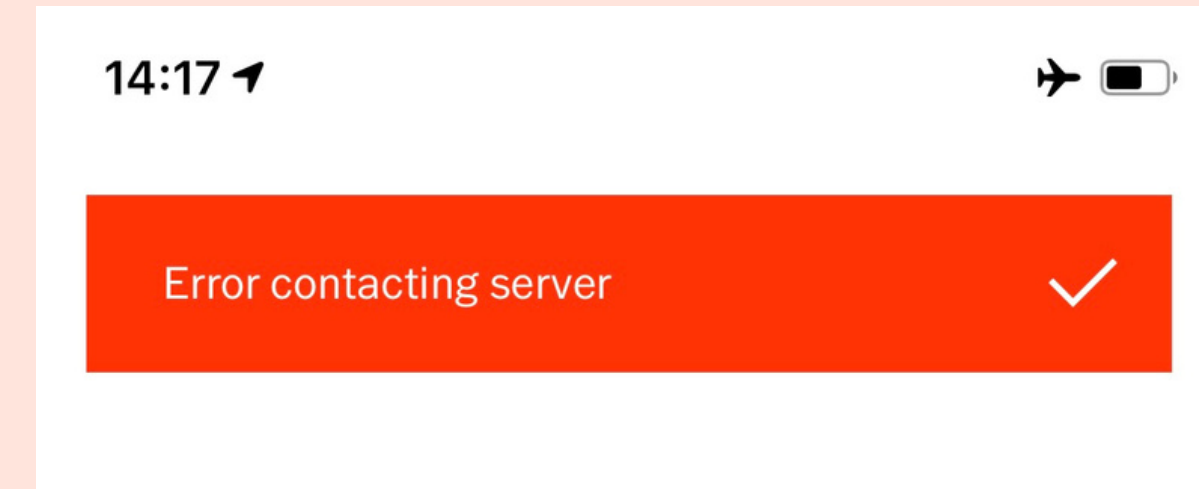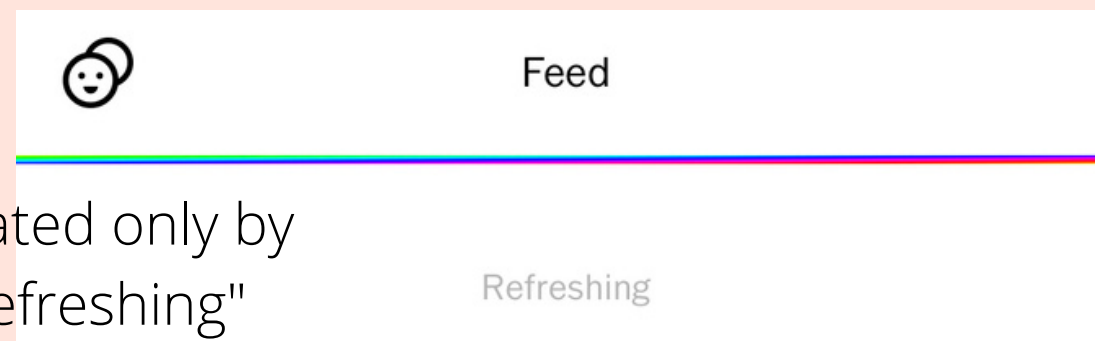
Heuristic 9: Recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors

Rating: Average

The Feed tab

In my opinion, this is one of VSCO's weaker areas as an information system. In terms of recognition, VSCO's main indicators that the app is processing are the moving rainbow loading bar, in addition to or sometimes in completely separate cases as the grey box with a central ovular logo that substitutes for a loading photo. I also believe that VSCO doesn't really offer any information regarding the diagnosis of a problem. In my trial experience, I just once received a message telling me the problem. The message that was displayed was "Error Contacting Server" when I attempted to refresh in airplane mode, which although does definitely communicate the problem, does so in a way that might be hard to understand without background in the area. A recommendation I would make is that VSCO incorporate a message system—like how it says "Refreshing" when you manually reload the page—which gives users feedback about the loading status of pages so users know if they should refresh or close the app.

VSCO's main error indicators

the loading bar's status is indicated only by the prescence of the word "Refreshing"
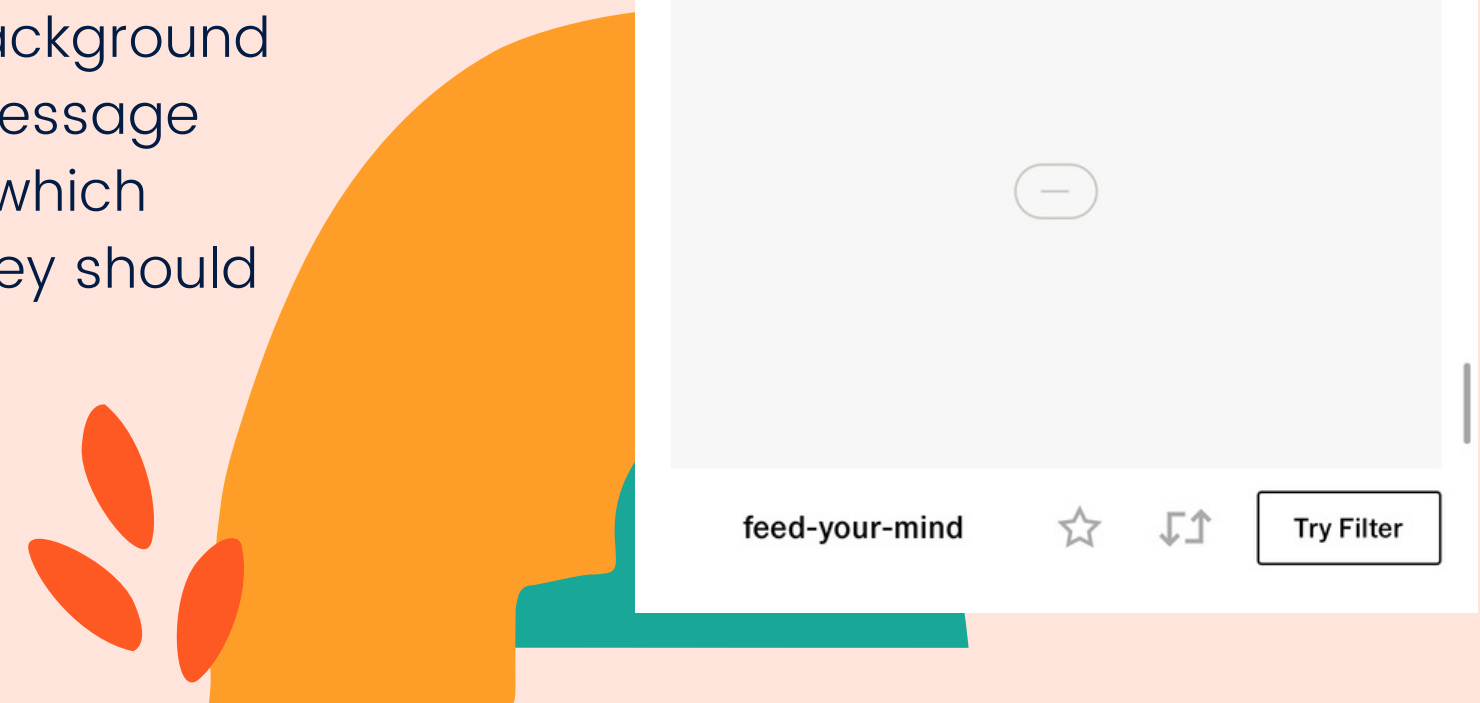
# Heuristic 10: Help and documentation *Rating: Good*

The Feed tab

VSCO frequently keeps the functions on a screen simple enough that for, say, a user who is new to VSCO specifically but has utilized other social media platforms, most desirable operations would essentially occur thoughtlessly. However, for the things that do not feel quite so natural, VSCO also does a good job communicating to users what their functions are. For example, the five main tabs along the bottom of the screen all have captions beneath the representative logo; this can be helpful for some of the more ambiguous symbols.

The Studio tab

VSCO uses standardized editing tools, so it consequently does not include a written description of each variable criteria. I would recommend that VSCO add a shortcut to a quick manual that might include a plain language description of each of the editing tools for users who may be unfamiliar.

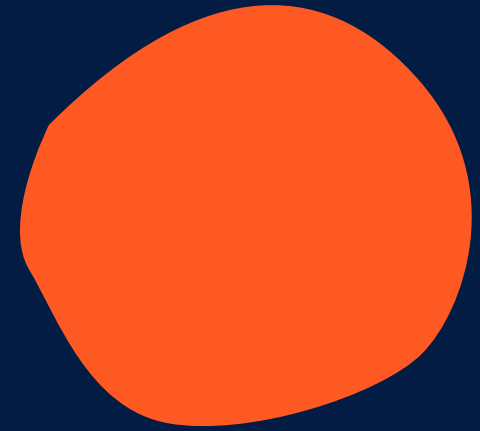the five main tabs, all labelled
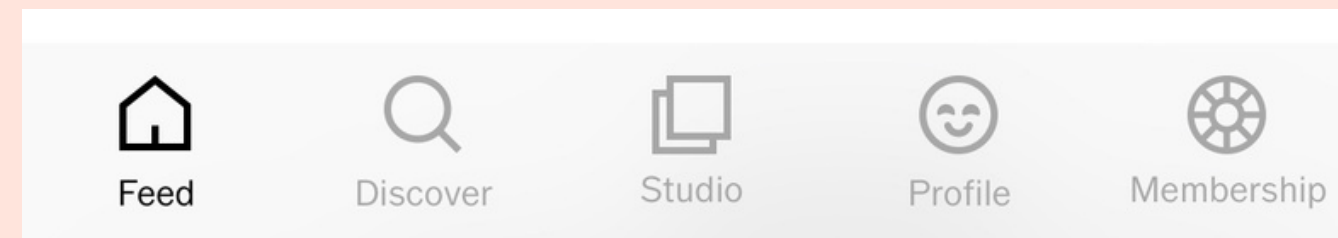
the edit tools: before and after clicking
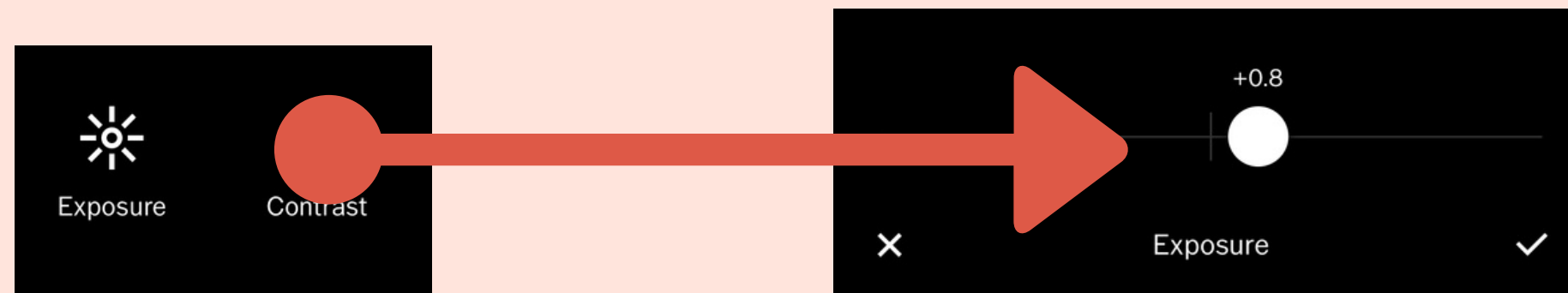
recommendation: add a verbal description of these tools!

Summary
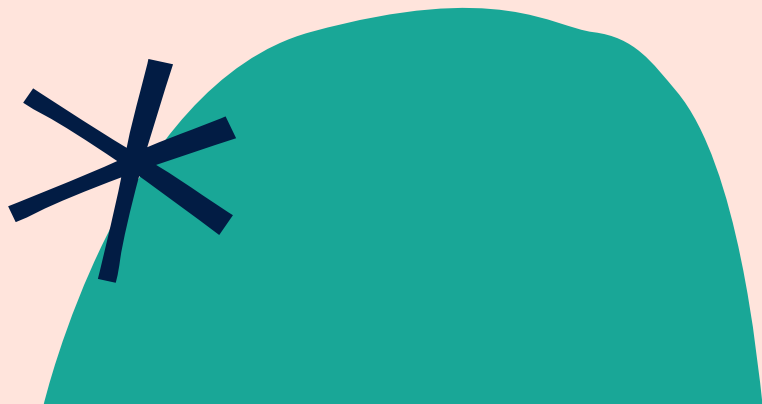
What do we do with this information? [5]

Results

Average

Recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors

Good

User control and freedom

Error prevention

Recognition rather than recall

Flexibility and efficiency of use

Help and documentation

Excellent

Visibility

Match between system and real world
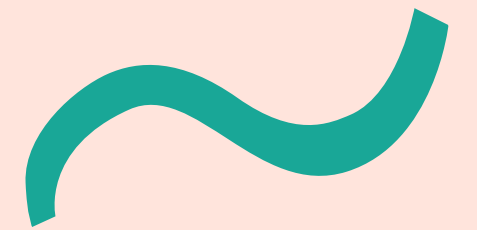
Consistency and standards

Aesthetic and minimalist design

Conclusion

How can we use this feedback to improve the VSCO application in the future?

In my opinion, the VSCO application is an excellent example of user-focused social media. The simplicity of this platforms allows users to perform enough basic functions that they feel content with their action options without being overwhelmed with a flood of choices. Despite the applications overall success, however, I do have some specific recommendations that I would implement in order to make VSCO as enjoyable for users as possible.

Recommendations

Suggestion 1

Add an indicator of loading status
- Showing users how long they will be waiting will decrease frustration, and give them feedback as to whether they should wait, refresh, or reload the application[1]

Suggestion 2

Create an archive tool, like Instagram's[3]
- Posts cannot be hidden temporarily, only deleted

Suggestion 3

Alter the "favorite" and "repost" shortcuts
- Currently, it is too easy to accidentally engage with a post from the user's feed
- Make this action less direct by adding another step to avoid mistaken interaction[10]

Suggestion 4

Describe VSCO-specific editing tools
- Adding a plain language description of each of the editing tools may be helpful for users who are otherwise unfamiliar

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