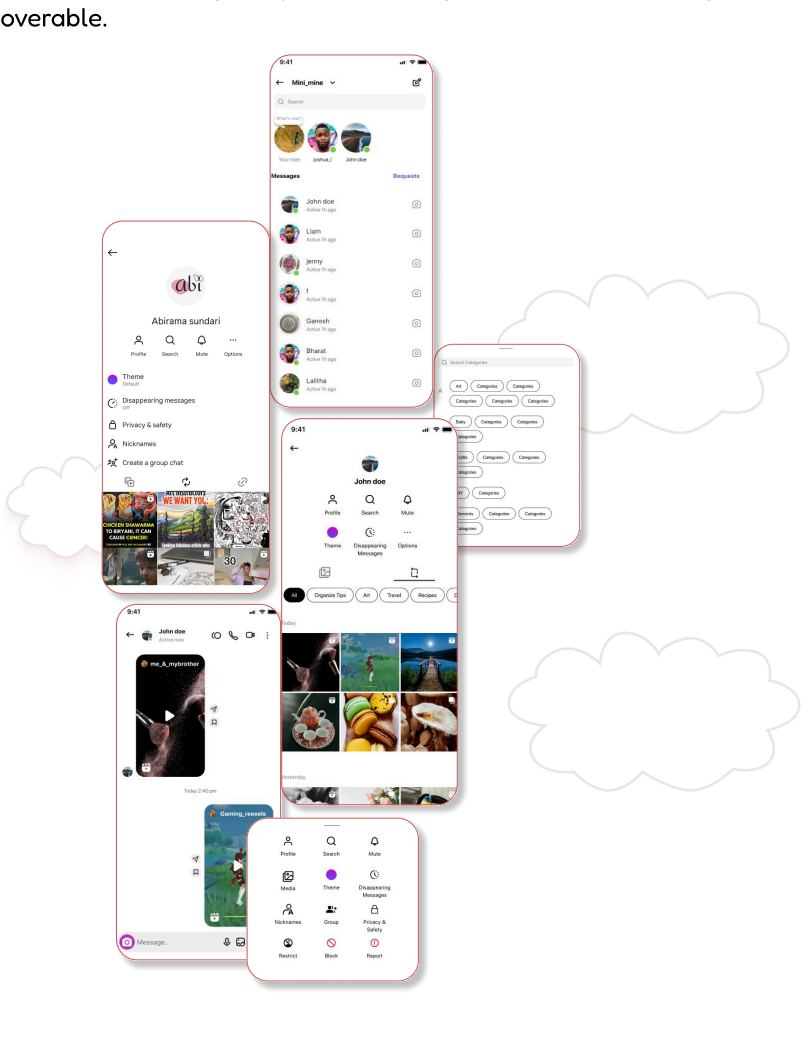
Hi,

Let me show you how I fixed the nightmare of finding shared reels on Instagram.

Instagram users share countless reels, photos, and videos in their conversations, from recipe tutorials and travel inspiration to DIY projects and restaurant recommendations. But when they want to find that specific cooking technique from last month or the home decor idea their friend shared weeks ago, they're stuck scrolling endlessly through chat history with no way to organize or filter shared content.

I redesigned Instagram's media page experience and chat options architecture to help users efficiently locate shared content through AI-powered categorization while making essential chat functions easily discoverable.

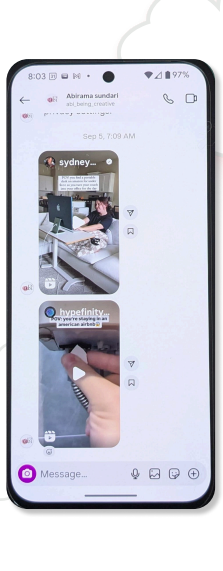


What you'll find:

- User research uncovering how people actually remember shared content
- Design decisions for dual-access navigation and AI-powered categorization
- Complete user journey from problem identification to final solution

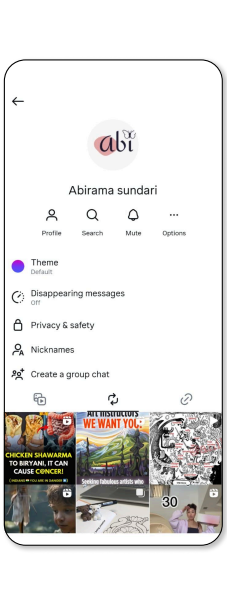
Watch How Users Find Shared Content in Seconds, Not Minutes

For Instagram users, finding specific shared content meant endless frustration



The Current Experience

Instagram users frequently share reels, photos, and videos in their conversations - from recipe tutorials and travel inspiration to DIY projects and restaurant recommendations. However, when users want to find specific shared content weeks or months later, they face a frustrating experience of endless scrolling through chat history with no organization, filtering, or efficient way to locate previously shared media content.



Where It Falls Apart

The existing media page had no categorization system and wasn't even organized by date for easy retrieval, making it nearly impossible to locate that specific recipe reel shared last month or the travel video from a few weeks back. Users remembered the content by what it was about (crafts, food, travel) rather than who posted it or when, but Instagram only offered basic chronological browsing without proper organization.

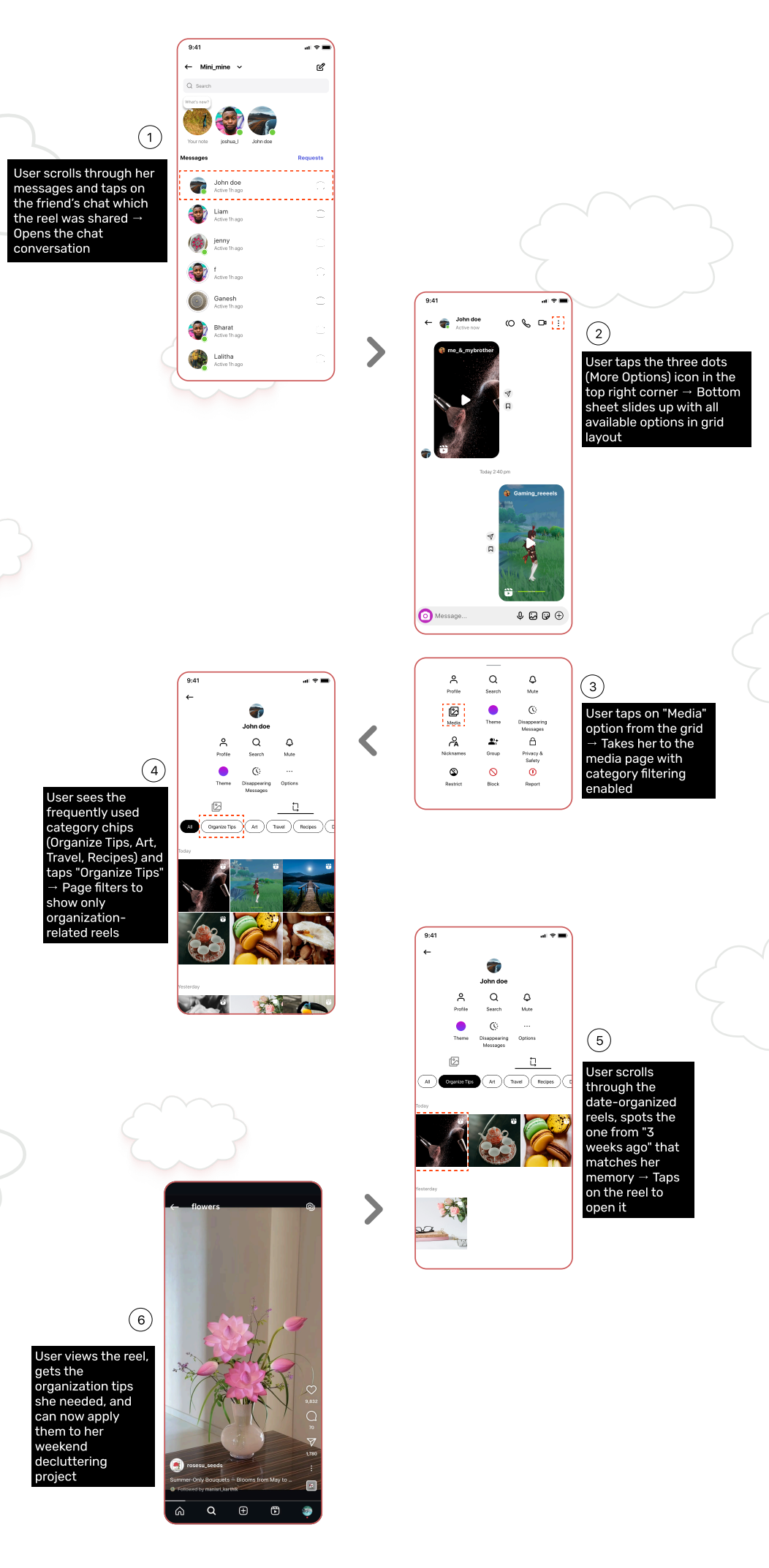
Additionally, essential chat options like privacy settings, mute controls, and profile management existed but weren't easily discoverable. Users didn't know these features were available or couldn't find them quickly when needed. This friction could impact user engagement and the value of Instagram's messaging feature.

The design challenge was to create an intuitive content organization system while making chat functionality easily accessible, allowing users to find shared content efficiently and manage their conversations without disruption.

From 'Where's That Reel?' to 'Found It!'

Journey Flow

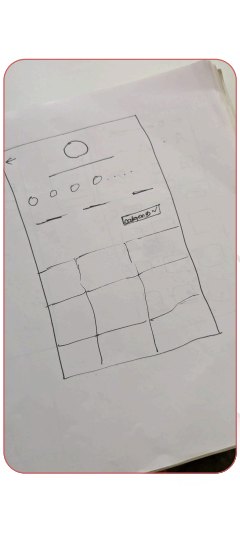
Messages Page → Select Chat → Chat Page → Tap Three Dots → Options Bottom Sheet → Tap Media →Media Page with Categories → Tap "Organize Tips" → Filtered Results → Find & Tap Reel → View Content



1. User scrolls through her messages and taps on the friend's chat which the reel was shared → Opens the chat conversation
2. User taps the three dots (More Options) icon in the top right corner → Bottom sheet slides up with all available options in grid layout
3. User taps on "Media" option from the grid → Takes her to the media page with category filtering enabled
4. User sees the frequently used category chips (Organize Tips, Art, Travel, Recipes) and taps "Organize Tips" → Page filters to show only organization-related reels
5. User scrolls through the date-organized reels, spots the one from "3 weeks ago" that matches her memory → Taps on the reel to open it
6. User views the reel, gets the organization tips she needed, and can now apply them to her weekend decluttering project

Here are the key decisions that shaped this Instagram redesign

How rough sketches brought clarity when I was stuck with hidden Instagram options

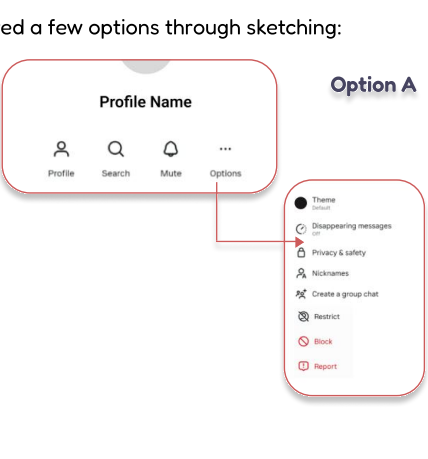


I realized something wasn't working when users kept saying "I didn't even know there was a media page... where are the options I need?" Even I felt confusion when I looked at my initial approach again. That's when I knew I had to rethink the entire options architecture.

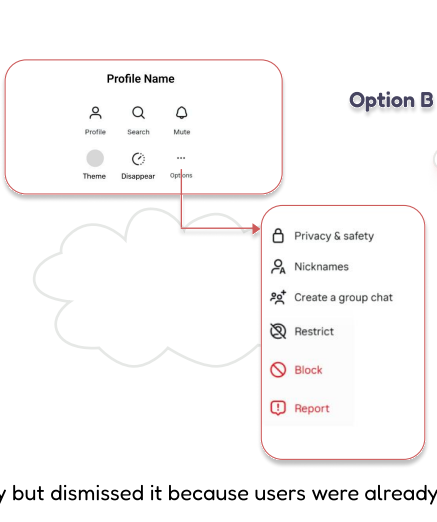
At this point in the project, I had already created a clean media page focused on maximizing space for reels viewing. I was working with the assumption that users wanted minimal interface clutter, and I expected it to create a better content consumption experience. But instead, users couldn't find basic functionality when they needed it.

It didn't feel natural or discoverable enough for the user.
So I decided to grab pen and paper and sketch out every possible way users might expect to access these options, so that users could find functionality where their mental models expected it.

I considered a few options through sketching:



Option A: Move all individual options (Theme, Disappearing messages, Privacy & safety, etc.) into a consolidated "More Options" menu, which could have worked because it reduced visual clutter — but it risked hiding important functionality behind an extra layer.



Option B: Move all options to a visible 3x2 grid on the media page, which felt safer and more discoverable, but missed the fact that users expected options available from the chat context too.

I even thought about moving all options to the chat page only but dismissed it because users were already practiced to see options in the media page from other apps.

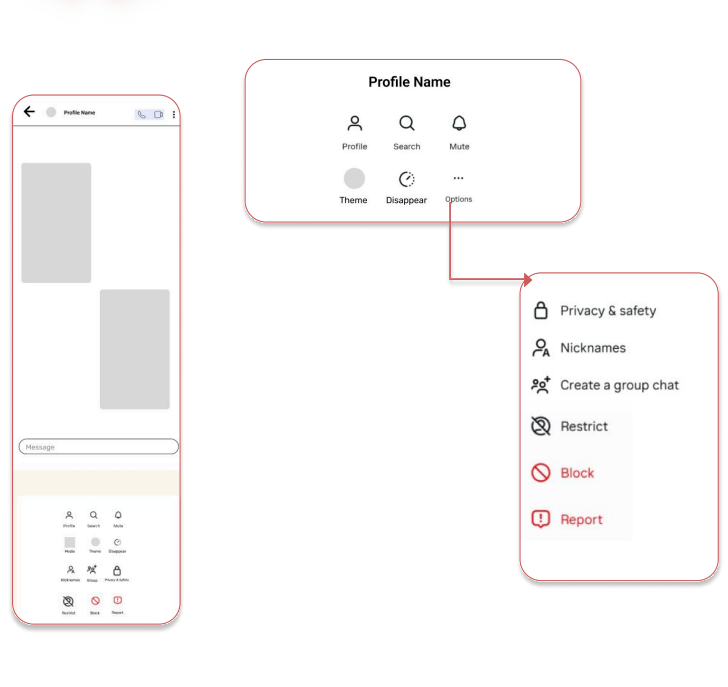
Eventually, I chose a dual-access approach, because it served both user mental models — options accessible from chat AND visible on the media page.

This decision happened when I was still figuring out how the option architecture should work. It wasn't the first thing I tried — I had already tested different approaches and received clear feedback about discoverability issues. At this point, I had conflicting user feedback about wanting both clean interfaces AND accessible functionality, and I needed to find a solution that didn't force users to choose.

What finally made me commit to this path was realizing through sketching that users don't think in either/or terms — they think in both/and terms based on learned behaviors from WhatsApp, Pinterest, and other apps. It reminded me of the original tension I saw earlier — users wanting clean reels viewing but also needing quick access to options. Now I could see it more clearly: the solution wasn't choosing one context over another, but supporting both contexts naturally.

After deciding, I:

- Sketched the dual-access system with options in both chat and media contexts
- Mapped out how users would flow between the two access points
- Tested the concept with users to confirm it matched their expectations
- Created wireframes that balanced clean interface with discoverable functionality



Now, this version lets users access options from whichever context feels natural to them — whether they're chatting or viewing media. It improved discoverability and usability without sacrificing the clean interface goal.

Looking back, I realize this wasn't just about finding the right layout, but about learning that sketching helps you explore user mental models, not just visual arrangements. If I face something similar in the future, I'd now start with sketching user expectations before jumping into any single solution, and I'd avoid forcing users to adapt to my logic instead of adapting my design to their existing behaviors.

How I chose content-based categorization even when profile names and hashtags seemed more obvious

When I was designing the media page search functionality, I found myself thinking about how I personally try to find a specific reel that someone shared with me weeks ago. I'd sit there scrolling endlessly, trying to remember "Was it from that food blogger? What was their username again?"

#hashtags
profile names

Then it hit me - I never remember who shared the reel or what hashtags they used. What I remember is the content itself: "That DIY wall decor made with ice cream sticks" or "The bakery video my friend wanted us to check out in our hometown."

That made me realize I was designing search around data that was easy for the system to organize, not around how people actually remember and think about content.

Content
Foods And restaurants
DIY/Crafts
Travel

At this point in the project, I had the media page structure figured out, but users were struggling to find specific reels among all their shared content. The obvious solution seemed to be search by profile name or hashtag filtering - that's how most platforms handle it.

What finally made me commit to content categorization was realizing that hashtags are often ignored by users, and profile names are quickly forgotten. But the actual content - whether it's a craft tutorial, a restaurant recommendation, or a travel destination - that's what sticks in people's memory.

By using AI to automatically categorize reels into content types like "DIY/Crafts," "Food & Restaurants," "Travel," users could find that ice cream stick wall decor under "Crafts" or that hometown bakery under "Food & Restaurants" with just a few swipes.

After deciding, I:

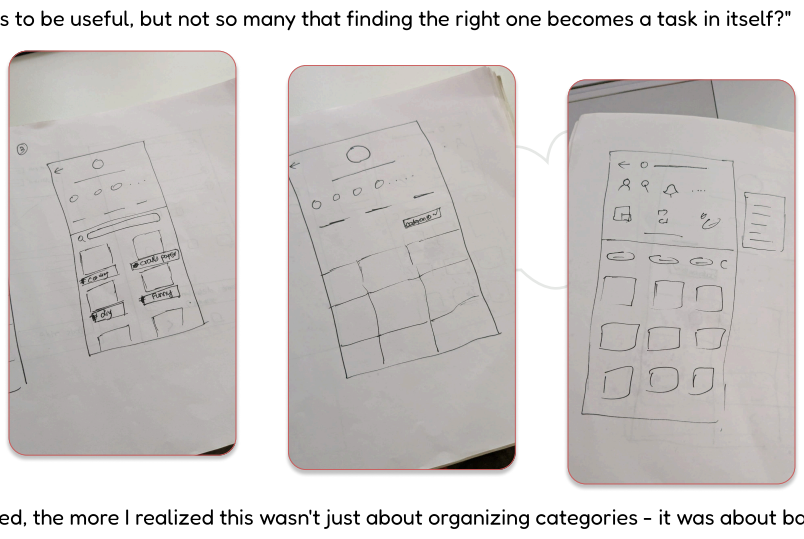
Researched common content categories that matched how people naturally think
Designed a filtering system that felt intuitive and visual
Ensured categories were broad enough to be useful but specific enough to narrow down results
Tested the categorization logic with real shared content

Now, users can find shared reels by remembering what the content was about rather than who shared it or what hashtags were used. Instead of thinking "Who posted that restaurant video?" they can think "Where's that bakery recommendation?" and navigate directly to the Food category to find it quickly.

Looking back, I realize this wasn't about building a more sophisticated search system, but about aligning the search method with how human memory actually works. If I face something similar in the future, I'd start by understanding how users naturally remember and categorize information, rather than defaulting to system-convenient organization methods.

How I chose category chips even when dropdown and folder layouts seemed more organized

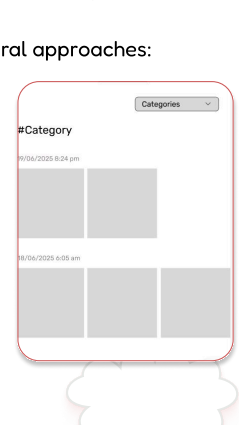
When I was designing how users would navigate through content categories to find their reels, I found myself sketching different ways to present 20+ categories without overwhelming the interface. I kept thinking: "How do I show enough categories to be useful, but not so many that finding the right one becomes a task in itself?"



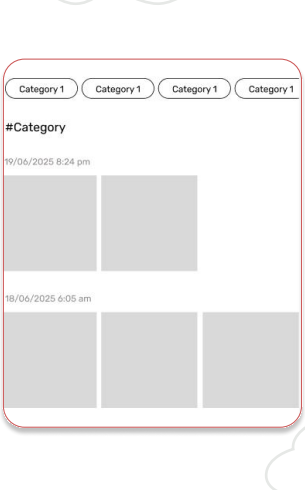
The more I sketched, the more I realized this wasn't just about organizing categories - it was about balancing immediate access with comprehensive options, and making the most common actions feel effortless.

That made me realize I needed to design for both the quick, frequent searches and the occasional deep dives into less common categories.
At this point in the project, I had already decided on AI-powered content categorization. Now I needed to figure out how users would actually navigate through these categories efficiently without getting lost in options.

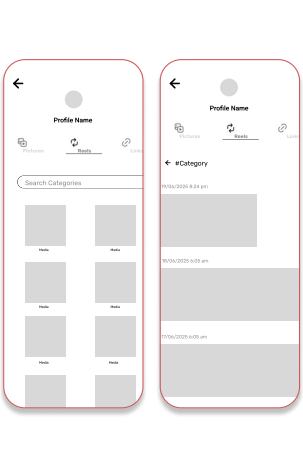
I explored several approaches:



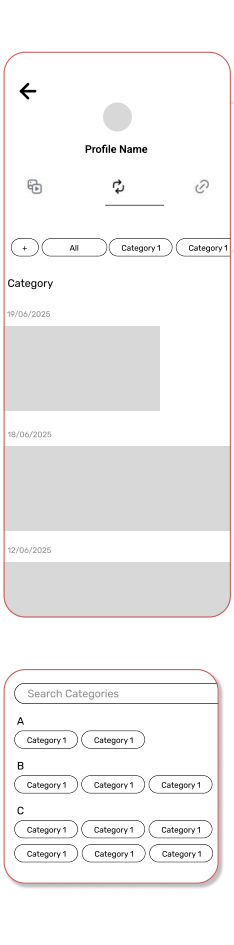
Idea 1: Dropdown categories - A single dropdown at the top where users could select from all available categories. This kept the interface clean, but if there were many categories, finding the right one in a long list would become difficult and make reel searching irritating rather than helpful.



Idea 2: Horizontal scrollable chips - All categories displayed as chips that users could scroll through horizontally and tap to filter. Here viewing category names was easier and more visual, but the horizontal scroll could become long and tedious with many categories.



Idea 3: Category folders - Categories displayed as a grid of folders with search functionality at the top. Users didn't find this much pleasing - the list was long, only two columns meant only a few were visible immediately, scrolling wasn't nice, and clicking folders took users to another page with reels, making it a two-step, deeper navigation.



After deciding, I:

Designed the recent categories to appear first for quick access
Made the "View More" bottom sheet searchable for easy category finding
Organized the full category list alphabetically in the bottom sheet
Ensured smooth transitions between the main view and expanded category view

Now, users can quickly access their most-used categories immediately, while still having full access to all categories when needed. The recent search functionality learns from user behavior and adapts the interface to their preferences.

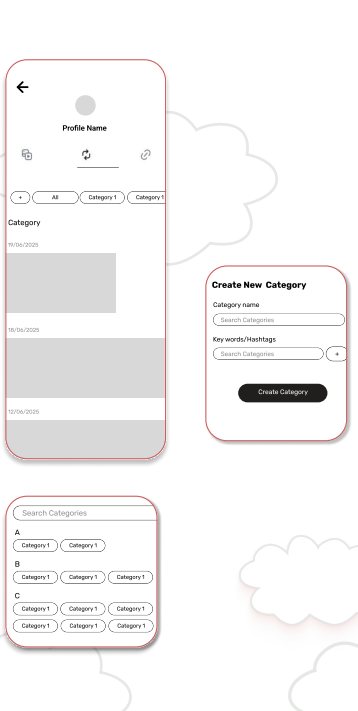
Looking back, I realize this wasn't about finding the perfect single layout, but about creating a system that adapts to different user needs - quick access for frequent categories and comprehensive search for everything else. If I face something similar in the future, I'd design for usage patterns rather than trying to display all options equally.

How I dropped customizable categories even when user research showed they liked the idea

During user research, while people liked the concept, the implementation questions revealed the complications:

How would users categorize reels? Based on hashtags they'd have to remember and type?
Would they need to manually select each reel and assign it to a category?
How would they manage and organize multiple custom categories?
What happens when they forget their own category names?

What finally made me drop this feature was recognizing that I was solving a problem that didn't really exist. Users were already finding their reels effectively with AI categorization and date organization. Adding custom categories would create more choices, more decisions, and more cognitive overhead without significantly improving the core experience.
The feature felt like it was adding complexity for the sake of completeness, not because users actually needed it.



When I was designing the category system, I found myself sketching an additional feature - letting users create their own custom categories within chats. It seemed like a logical next step: "If AI categorization works well, wouldn't personal categories work even better?"

I pitched this to users during research sessions, and their initial reaction was positive: "Oh, that would be cool! I could make my own categories for different things."

But as I dug deeper into how this would actually work, I started feeling uneasy about the complexity I was introducing.

That made me realize there's a difference between users liking an idea in theory and actually wanting to use it in their daily flow.

At this point in the project, I had a working AI categorization system that users were successfully using to find their reels. The core problem was solved - users could find content efficiently. Now I was considering adding a layer of customization on top.

After deciding to drop it, I:

Focused on refining the existing AI categorization to be more accurate
Improved the category search and navigation instead
Kept the interface clean and decision-light for users
Validated that the simpler approach was more effective in daily use

Now, users have a streamlined experience that solves their core need - finding reels quickly - without the burden of managing their own categorization system.

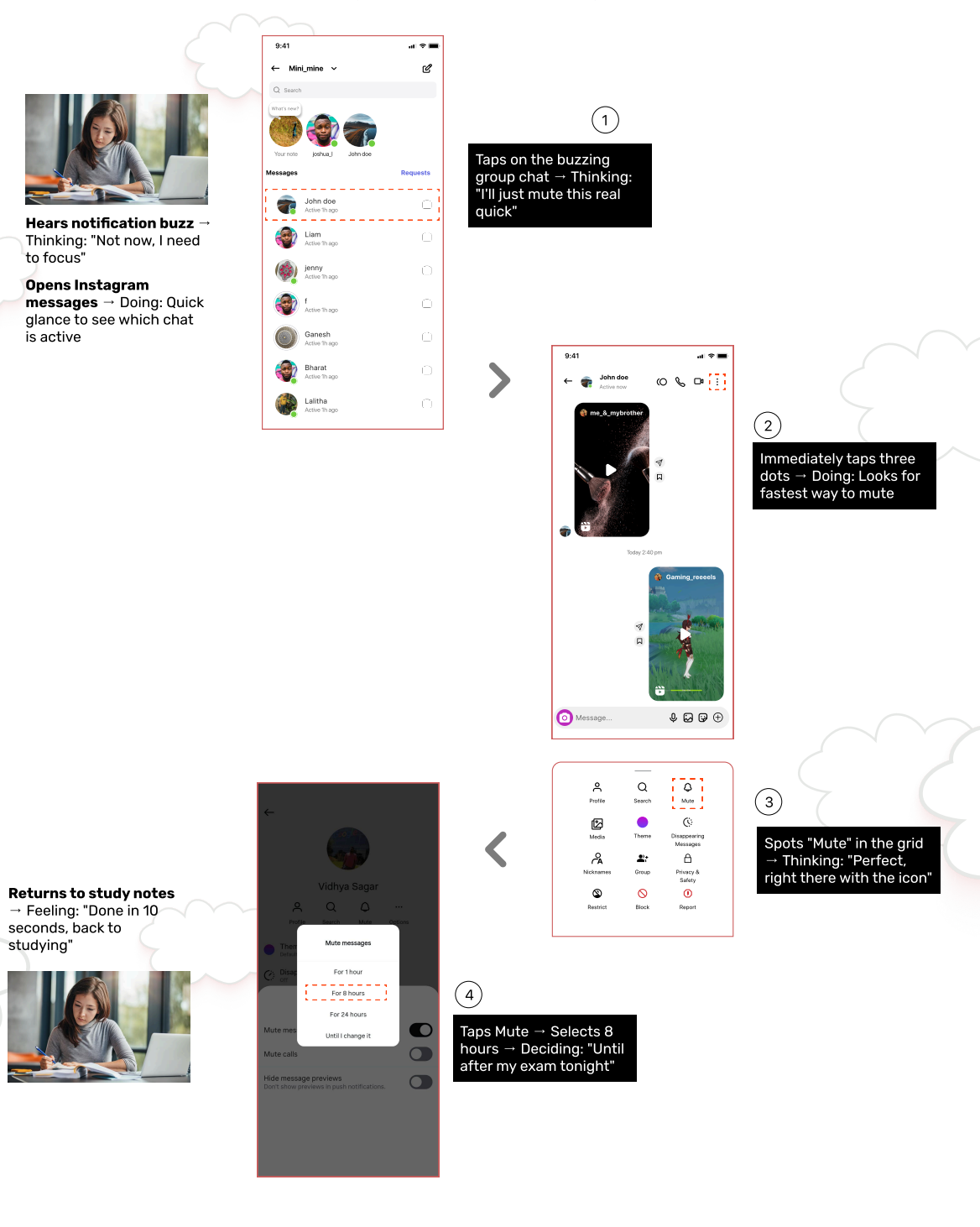
Looking back, I realize this wasn't about building fewer features, but about understanding when additional options create more problems than they solve. If I face something similar in the future, I'd ask not just "do users want this?" but "does this actually improve their experience, or just give them more work to do?"

When One Solution Meets Multiple User Goals

User wants to quickly mute a chat

College student needs to silence group chat notifications during exam without losing her place in conversation

Context: Emma is in the middle of reviewing her study notes when her friend group chat starts buzzing with weekend plans. She needs to mute it quickly without getting distracted by the conversation.



Hears notification buzz → Thinking: "Not now, I need to focus"
Opens Instagram messages → Doing: Quick glance to see which chat is active

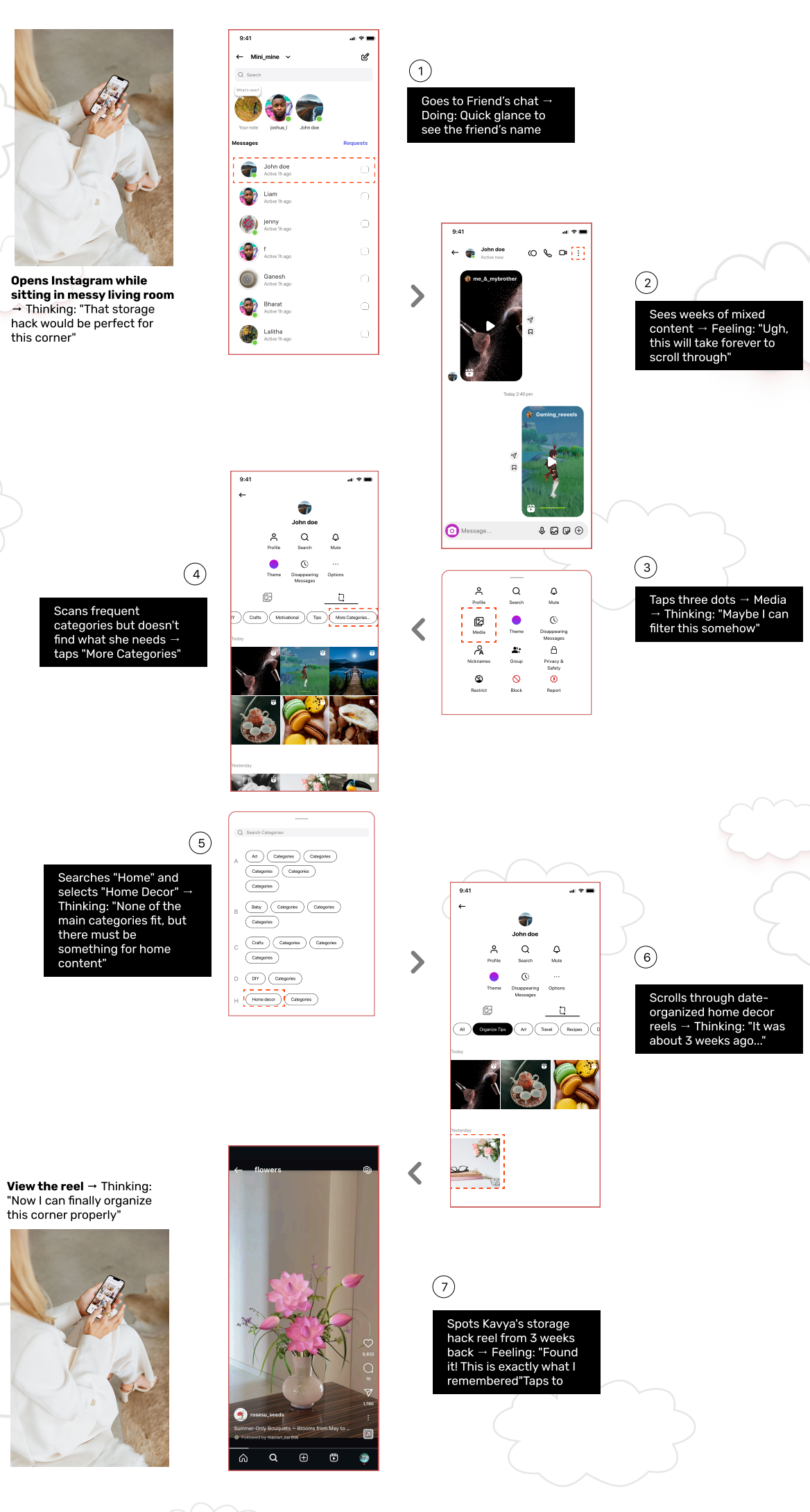
1. Taps on the buzzing group chat → Thinking: "I'll just mute this real quick"
2. Immediately taps three dots → Doing: Looks for fastest way to mute
3. Spots "Mute" in the grid → Thinking: "Perfect, right there with the icon"
4. Taps Mute → Selects 8 hours → Deciding: "Until after my exam tonight"

Returns to study notes → Feeling: "Done in 10 seconds, back to studying"

User wants to find the category to find the reel

Interior design enthusiast hunting for that specific home decor hack shared in a mixed-content group chat

Context: Priya is redecorating her living room this weekend. She distinctly remembers her friend Kavya sharing a brilliant storage hack reel in their general friend group chat about 3 weeks ago, but the chat has everything from memes to recipes to workout videos.



Opens Instagram while sitting in messy living room → Thinking: "That storage hack would be perfect for this corner"

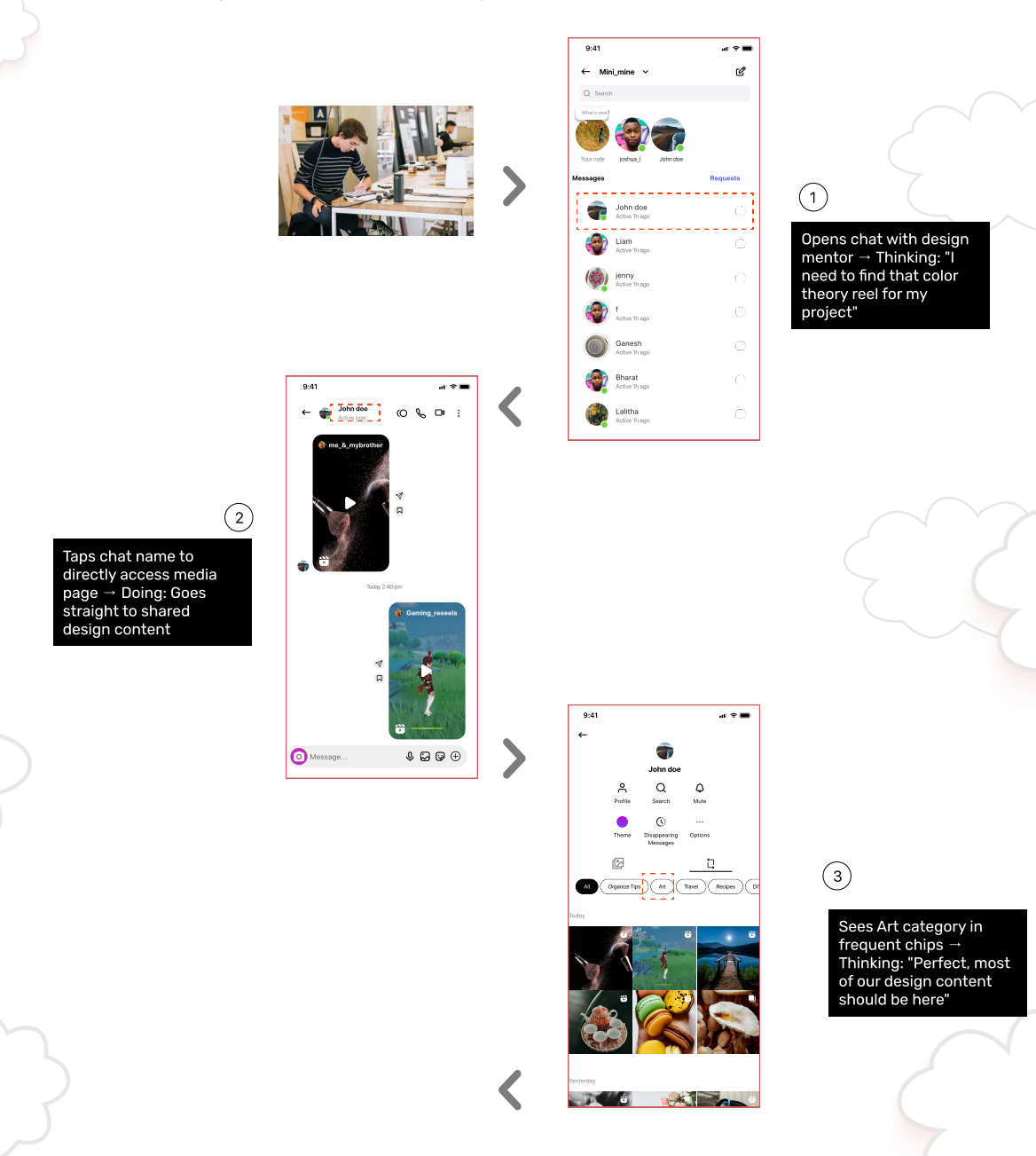
1. Goes to Friend's chat → Doing: Quick glance to see the friend's name
2. Sees weeks of mixed content → Feeling: "Ugh, this will take forever to scroll through"
3. Taps three dots → Media → Thinking: "Maybe I can filter this somehow"
4. Scans frequent categories but doesn't find what she needs → taps "More Categories"
5. Searches "Home" and selects "Home Decor" → Thinking: "None of the main categories fit, but there must be something for home content"
6. Scrolls through date-organized home decor reels → Thinking: "It was about 3 weeks ago..."
7. Spots Kavya's storage hack reel from 3 weeks back → Feeling: "Found it! This is exactly what I remembered"Taps to

View the reel → Thinking: "Now I can finally organize this corner properly"

User wants to personalizes chat experience

Art student personalizes chat experience while browsing for design inspiration without losing focus

Context: Arya is working on her portfolio project and browsing through design inspiration her mentor shared. While looking for a specific color palette reel, she realizes she wants to give her mentor a nickname and switch to dark theme for better viewing, but doesn't want to lose her place in the content.

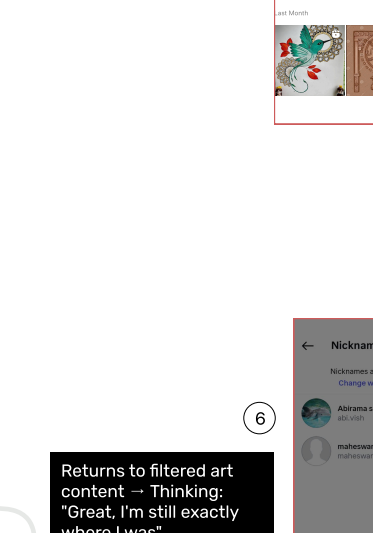


1. Opens chat with design mentor → Thinking: "I need to find that color theory reel for my project"
2. Taps chat name to directly access media page → Doing: Goes straight to shared design content
3. Sees Art category in frequent chips → Thinking: "Perfect, most of our design content should be here"
4. Realizes she wants to call mentor "Design Guru" → Thinking: "I should give her a nickname while I remember"
5. Selects "Nicknames" and sets name to "Design Guru" → Thinking: "I can personalize this without losing my place in the content"
6. Returns to filtered art content → Thinking: "Great, I'm still exactly where I was"
7. Notices plain background feels boring → taps "Theme" directly from the grid
8. Changes chat wallpaper to a design-inspired theme → Thinking: "Perfect, now the chat background matches our design conversations"
9. Continues browsing and spots the color theory reel she needed → Feeling: "Perfect! Found it and personalized everything without losing focus"

From Individual Screens to Systematic Components

Options Grid Layout

Clean 3x3 grid with icon-text pairing that prioritizes quick recognition and touch accessibility

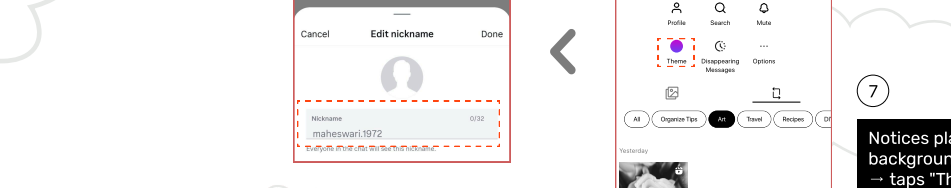


Visual Hierarchy & Touch Accessibility Applied consistent icon-text pairing with generous 48px touch targets in a 3-column grid. Used visual weight through iconography to enable quick scanning - users can spot "Block" or "Privacy" without reading full labels. Maintained breathing room with 16px internal padding and clear visual grouping.

Auto Layout & Component Variants Used auto layout for consistent spacing within each grid cell, ensuring uniform padding regardless of text length. Created component variants for different option states (normal, pressed, disabled) enabling quick state swapping while maintaining systematic spacing across all 12 options.

Category Chip System

Horizontal scrollable interface with clear selected/unselected states for content filtering



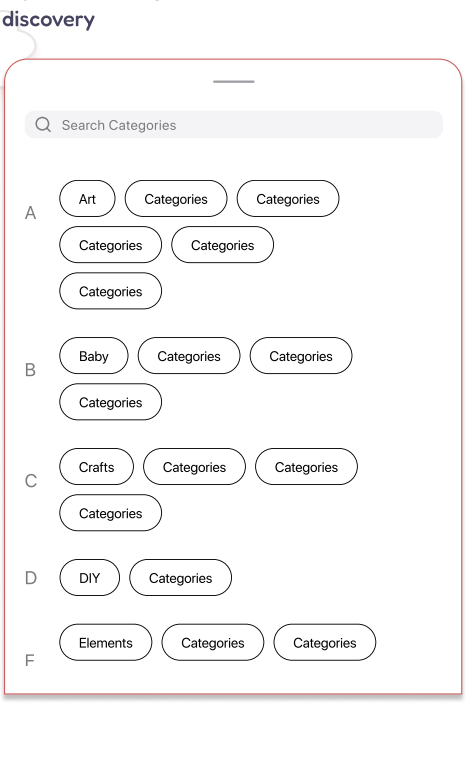
Category Chip System

Progressive Disclosure & Scannable Design Implemented horizontal scrollable chips for frequently used categories with clear visual distinction between selected (filled) and unselected (outlined) states. Used rounded corners and consistent typography to create a familiar, app-native feel that doesn't compete with content below.

Component Sets with Boolean Properties Built chip components with true/false properties for selected states, allowing instant state changes across all instances. Used text styles and color variables to ensure brand consistency - one color change updates all chips simultaneously across the entire system.

Expandable Category Search

Alphabetical organization with search functionality to handle scalable content discovery



Organized Information Architecture Designed alphabetical category organization with search functionality to handle scale. Applied clear visual hierarchy through typography sizing and used consistent horizontal spacing to create scannable columns that don't overwhelm users with too many choices at once.

Scrollable Frames & Constraints Implemented scrollable frames with proper constraints to handle dynamic content. Used auto layout for the search bar and category grid, ensuring responsive behavior when categories are added or removed. Applied consistent naming conventions for easy file navigation and team collaboration.

Beyond the Current Design

Refining Individual Option Flows
The current bottom sheet successfully provides access to all chat options, but each option currently leads to basic system interfaces. I would design dedicated flows for key actions like "Privacy & Safety" settings, "Block" confirmations with undo mechanisms, and "Restrict" controls with clear explanations of what gets restricted. This would create a seamless experience where users don't feel like they're leaving Instagram's ecosystem when managing their conversations, reducing drop-off rates and increasing feature adoption.

Smart Category Learning System
While the AI categorization works well for obvious content types, I would develop a learning mechanism where users can correct miscategorized content with a simple long-press gesture. The system would learn from these corrections to improve accuracy over time, and popular user-created categories could surface as suggestions for the broader community. This would solve the edge case problem of ambiguous content while giving users agency over their organization system, ultimately reducing search frustration and increasing content retrieval success rates.

Cross-Chat Content Discovery
User research revealed that people often forget which specific chat contained shared content they're looking for. I would design a unified search experience that scans across all conversations while respecting privacy boundaries - perhaps requiring explicit permission from chat participants. This feature would include smart filters like "shared by close friends only" or "from group chats" to help users narrow down results responsibly. The business impact would be significant: increased user engagement with shared content and reduced time spent searching, leading to more content sharing overall.

What I Learned Along the Way

This project taught me that making mistakes isn't just okay—it's essential. I used to hide my incomplete work, thinking everything had to be perfect before sharing. But this process showed me that something messy is always better than nothing polished. The biggest shift was learning not to be embarrassed by wrong assumptions or failed iterations. Each mistake became a stepping stone rather than a roadblock, and I gained confidence from embracing the messiness instead of fighting it.

User research completely opened my eyes to how wrong my assumptions could be. I thought I understood users, but interviews revealed gaps I never saw coming. The most valuable lesson was learning to document every decision as it happens. I used to rush from idea to idea without capturing why I made choices, but recording my journey taught me that the thinking process is just as important as the final design. Embracing messiness became my superpower. When I stopped trying to organize my thoughts perfectly, new design ideas started flowing naturally. UX principles stopped feeling like memorization and started feeling intuitive. Through practice and real application, concepts like progressive disclosure and mental models became second nature rather than textbook terms. Even now, looking at my designs, I see endless room for improvement—and that excites me instead of discouraging me.

What I'll carry forward is this hunger for iteration and the confidence to share imperfect work. I know I have a lot more to learn, but now I see the learning process as the reward itself. If I start a new design tomorrow, I'll begin by documenting my assumptions so I can watch them evolve, and I'll remember that the messiest sketches often lead to the clearest solutions.

Thank you for reading & I'd love your feedback

This project helped me understand that great design isn't about perfect solutions, it's about understanding how people actually think and behave. More than tools or process, I learned to start with user mental models rather than system logic, and to document my thinking as rigorously as I document my designs. What I carry forward from this experience is the confidence to share messy work early and the understanding that every design decision needs a story rooted in real user behavior.

I'd Love Your Feedback

1. Decision Stories: I've tried to document the thinking behind key design choices using narrative frameworks rather than just showing final screens. Could you let me know if these stories effectively communicate why each decision matters, or if they feel too detailed/not focused enough?
2. User Stories and Flows: I've mapped out different user scenarios to show how various people would interact with my dual-access system. Could you share whether these stories feel authentic and comprehensive, or if there are important use cases I might have missed?
3. Future Scope: I've outlined next steps and unresolved areas to show ongoing design thinking beyond the current solution. Could you tell me if this section demonstrates strategic thinking effectively, or if it reads more like a feature wishlist?