

SCROLL/ TERNATIVES



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Preface

First and foremost, we would like to sincerely thank all participants and prototype testers for their invaluable contributions to this first edition of Scrollternatives.

It has become increasingly evident that many of the design choices embedded in today's social media platforms do not primarily serve the interests of users. These practices are described using terms such as dark patterns and addictive design. While there is growing recognition of the need for stronger regulation—and the SpaceTeen project strongly supports these efforts—we also believe that regulation alone is not enough. Equally important is the development of concrete, evidence-informed guidance on what responsible and user-centred digital design should look like.

What alternative design choices can better support users' well-being? What do meaningful bright patterns look like in practice?

We hope this report contributes to answering these questions and serves as a starting point for further research, design, and collaboration.

Together with our partners and all readers of this report, we look forward to shaping digital environments that help young people, and ultimately all of us, regain control over our time, attention, and digital lives.

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Young people are remarkably capable of identifying what is going wrong in today's social media landscape and of generating thoughtful design ideas that offer constructive alternatives.

Their voices are not only valuable; they are essential to creating digital environments that are fairer, healthier, and better aligned with young people's needs.

01

Coming together for healthier, happier social media

This first edition of the *SpaceTeen ScrollReport-Shorts* presents the experiences and insights from a four-day design sprint in which young people (aged 17–21) explored a central question: **How can social media remain fun, inspiring, and social without becoming something you unintentionally lose yourself in?** Under the working title *Scrollternatives x PAUZE*, TodayTomorrow and Young Media collaborated with students from Grafisch Lyceum Utrecht to develop alternative design concepts for today's social media platforms, many of which are intentionally designed to maximise engagement.

Throughout the sprint, one central tension emerged repeatedly: social media is experienced as both indispensable and problematic. Young people described laughing at videos and memes, discovering new music, learning through tutorials, and staying connected with friends. At the same time, they characterised much of their use as *doomscrolling*—a "waste of time" that leaves them feeling "dead" afterwards. Participants recognised that these experiences are not accidental but stem from design choices that intentionally encourage users to stay engaged for as long as possible.

How can this tension be addressed? The answer, according to the participants, is not through paternalistic restrictions or by limiting young people's freedom. Instead, they envision platforms that support more intentional and meaningful use: helping users shift from superficial screen time to **quality time**—time spent on social media that feels purposeful, rewarding, and worth having. The ideas presented in this report are the result of their collective exploration of what such an alternative future could look like.

02

Four sessions, one vision

The design sprint consisted of 4 sessions, each building on the previous one.

The **first session** focused on understanding young people's online lives. Through an accessible introduction, exercises such as identifying their “social media spirit animal,” and conversations about their daily social media use, participants reflected on the platforms they use, what they do there, and why. Interactive statements about screen time, mood, privacy, and control deepened the discussion, followed by an introduction to the concept of dark patterns: design choices that subtly encourage users to spend more time on platforms, click more often, or share more personal data.

The **second session** shifted the focus from identifying problems to imagining alternatives. After an introduction to the concept of **bright patterns**—design choices that promote healthier and more intentional digital experiences—participants generated ideas using the Crazy 8s method. Working around three “How might we...?” questions, they explored how social media could remain enjoyable without endless scrolling, foster meaningful connection without relying on likes and views, and use algorithms to support well-being rather than maximise engagement. Participants then selected the ideas that best reflected their shared vision.

During the **third session**, the most promising ideas were translated into concrete concepts. Participants developed storyboards, created low-fidelity prototypes, including interactive prototypes in Figma, and formulated test questions to identify which aspects of their designs required further validation.

The **fourth and final session** centred on testing and reflection. In a setting resembling a small design fair, participants invited peers to explore their prototypes and provide structured feedback. The sprint concluded with a plenary reflection in which recurring insights were identified and translated into a set of emerging design principles for healthier social media.

03

The magical, messy, and manipulative

In line with previous research, the conversations during the first design sprint revealed that growing up with social media is characterised by a clear duality.

Magical

Social media can feel almost magical. It is woven into everyday life as a place for fun, relaxation, and social connection. It is where young people watch funny videos and memes, discover music, find creative inspiration, learn through tutorials and news, and stay in touch with friends – even when they live far away. It is also a place to express themselves and share their interests.

Messy

At the same time, the design sprints showed that the online world can also feel messy. Personalised feeds do not always feel right. Young people are unexpectedly confronted with disturbing content, internet drama, rage bait, and fake images that contribute to insecurity about appearance and life. Privacy is a recurring concern, but for many it remains abstract and hidden behind complex settings. There is also frustration about interface changes that seem to benefit the platform rather than the user.

Manipulative

Perhaps the strongest message to emerge was that social media is experienced as manipulative. What starts as “just scrolling” can easily turn into a long session of doomscrolling, often leaving the feeling that valuable time has been lost. Platforms are repeatedly described as “addictive,” with many questioning whether this can really be a coincidence. Although the term dark patterns was unfamiliar before the session, the phenomenon itself was recognised immediately. As one young person concluded: **“I don't think it is so addictive by accident.”**

This ambivalence resurfaced throughout the conversations. On the one hand, young people emphasised that using social media is ultimately their own choice ("Ultimately, it is your own choice"). On the other hand, they also recognised that they "grew up with it" and "don't know any better." This raises an important question: what would a platform look like that no longer fills these moments automatically, but instead helps young people make more conscious choices about how they spend their time?



It could be a bit less overwhelming*.

Dutch original quote: Het mag wel wat minder prikkelbaar

04

A Wishlist for Better Social Media

Five clear wishes emerged from the future visions and collages created during the design sprint.

- 1. More awareness of time.** Young people want platforms to make the passage of time more visible. Instead of hiding screen-time information in settings, they would like reminders to be built into the experience itself. A message such as “You've been here for quite a while now” is not seen as patronising, as long as it feels supportive rather than punitive—a gentle reminder that helps prevent endless scrolling.
- 2. More safety.** There is a strong desire for platforms that better protect users from harmful experiences. This includes limiting exposure to disturbing or inappropriate content and taking cyberbullying more seriously.
- 3. A calmer experience.** Many imagine platforms with fewer stimuli: less visual clutter, fewer notifications, and fewer elements competing for attention. In short, a calmer design that makes social media feel less overwhelming.
- 4. More authenticity.** There is growing fatigue with heavily filtered images, perfectly curated feeds, and AI-generated content that presents an unrealistic picture of life. Instead, young people value platforms that leave room for genuine, unfiltered moments and place less emphasis on appearance and more on how people really feel.
- 5. More control.** Finally, young people want greater control over what they see and more transparency about how recommendations are made. They would like more options to shape their feeds, for example by choosing which topics or hashtags they do or do not want to see, filtering by region, blocking creators, and reducing advertising. The algorithm itself is not seen as the problem; it is appreciated for helping people discover interesting content. The wish is for an algorithm that works for users, rather than one that constantly pulls at their attention.

05

From idea to "pauze"

During the ideation and prototyping sessions, three clear design directions emerged that together outline what a platform like PAUZE could look like.

Where Does the Time Go?

One recurring theme was helping people become more aware of how they spend their time online. Rather than scrolling without noticing, young people imagined features that encourage conscious use from the moment the app is opened. Before entering the platform, users could choose how long they want to stay online. Once that time is up, no new content would appear, while chatting with friends would remain available. This distinction was deliberate: endless scrolling was seen as the problem, not staying connected with others.

Different ideas were explored to make time more visible throughout the experience, including:

- a timer that remains visible on screen;
- visual cues for different parts of the day (morning, afternoon, evening); and
- scheduled content drops at fixed times instead of an endless stream of new content.

Taking Control

A second design direction focused on giving users much more control over their experience. Young people imagined simple ways to indicate what they want to see more of, less of, or not at all, as well as options to block specific creators or content categories. They also envisioned feeds without "rabbit holes" that constantly pull users into other parts of the platform.

Greater control also meant making social media feel more relevant. Local content—from the city, region, or country—was seen as a way to strengthen the connection between online and offline life. Finally, ideas emerged for redesigning chats, for example by prioritising people you have not spoken to for a long time rather than those who interacted most recently.

A Calmer Design

Personalisation was not only about **what** appears in the feed, but also **how** the platform feels. Young people wanted greater control over the look and feel of their digital environment, imagining interfaces that are calmer, more organised, and less overwhelming. In their vision, personalisation means not only choosing the content you see, but also shaping the way you experience it.

Ideas included:

- softer and more limited colour palettes;
- fewer or no sound effects; and
- simpler, more minimalist layouts with fewer visual distractions.



06

Prototype TakeAways

From the many ideas generated during the design sprint, each team selected one concept to develop further. With guidance from Lisa and Tim, these ideas were translated into clickable prototypes and tested with peers. The prototype tests revealed an interesting tension between what young people recognise as healthy in theory and what they would actually choose to use in practice.

Timers and time limits, for example, were generally seen as a good idea. In principle, they were expected to help people become more aware of their screen time and manage it better over the long term. Yet when discussing how they would use such features themselves, many admitted they would simply use the full amount of available time, extend the timer once it expired, or switch to another app. As one insight put it, time gained on one platform is easily replaced by “something else fun on the phone.” Limiting screen time on a single platform therefore does not automatically reduce overall screen time.

The discussions also highlighted that the effectiveness of time limits depends heavily on context. During school or work, a timer can provide a helpful boundary because an external structure is already in place. In the evening, in bed, or when feeling bored, however, the motivation to stop is much lower and the temptation to continue scrolling—or move to another app—is much greater.

-

Design Lessons from the Prototype Tests. Although the prototype tests highlighted the limitations of timers, they also generated valuable design feedback. Rather than rejecting the concept altogether, young people identified several design features that could increase their effectiveness and acceptance

First, a subtle timer tucked away in the corner of the screen simply goes unnoticed. If awareness of time is important, time cues need to be more visible and presented in a way that feels meaningful rather than easy to ignore.

Second, users want the freedom to decide for themselves how long a session should last. Fixed time intervals were experienced as unnecessarily restrictive and therefore reduced acceptance of the feature.

Finally, time limits should apply to specific parts of an app rather than the platform as a whole. For example, the idea of closing the endless feed while keeping chat available was received positively, as it supports social connection without encouraging continued scrolling.



Recap: Towards better social media **with young people at the helm**

The key insight emerging from the design sprint is that the conversation is not about reducing screen time, but about improving the quality of that time. This shifts the design challenge from imposing restrictions to creating digital experiences that are intrinsically more meaningful.

Young people rarely judge a session by its duration alone. Instead, they evaluate whether it felt worthwhile. Long periods of use are not necessarily experienced negatively when the content is inspiring, educational, or socially meaningful. What they regret is spending time that ultimately feels empty. Moreover, young people clearly distinguish between endlessly consuming content and genuinely connecting with others. This provides valuable opportunities to rebalance content consumption and communication within future platform design.

The next step is to translate these insights into explicit design principles. Four guiding principles emerged as a starting point:

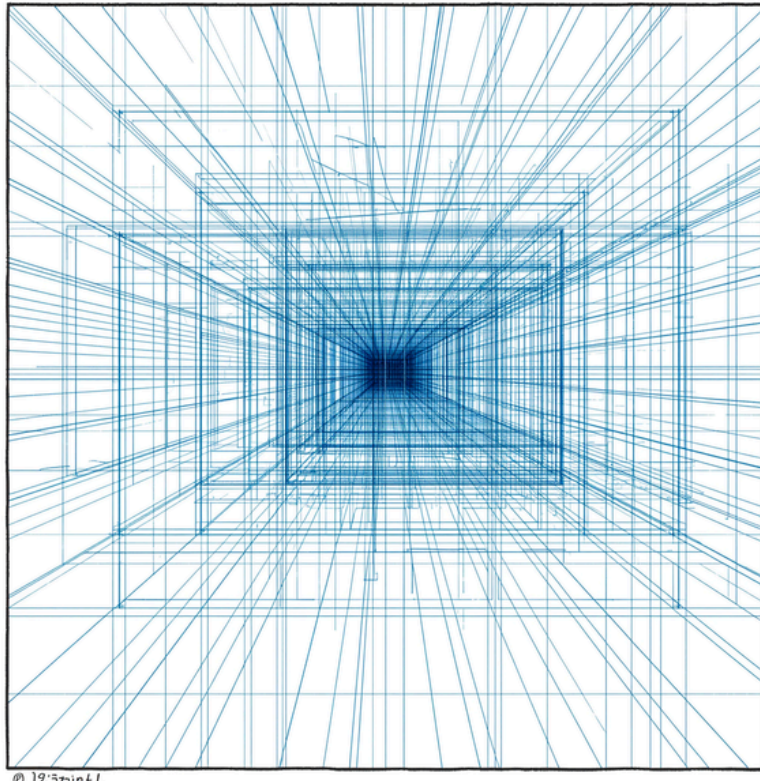
- Design for reflection, using timers and visualisations as mirrors rather than punishments.
- Build natural stopping points into the feed, combined with subtle transitions that make endless scrolling feel less automatic.
- Design for context, with different features or boundaries during school or work than during leisure time.
- Give young people genuine control over personalisation, including algorithms, feeds, and interface design, so they understand—and can influence—why they see what they see.

The Next Design Challenge: From Better Features to Better Platforms

An important question emerging from the design sprint is how a new social media platform for young people could meaningfully position itself alongside existing platforms. Most of the concepts developed during the sprint still resembled today's familiar feed-based platforms, enhanced with features that support reflection, time awareness, and user control. This raises a broader design challenge: is the future of social media simply a healthier version of TikTok – one where time online feels more meaningful and less overwhelming – or can we take a bigger design step towards platforms that are fundamentally different, with their own social logic and new ways of fostering connection?

The design sprint does not answer this question, but it does point in an important direction. Rather than asking how young people can spend less time online, it encourages us to ask how digital spaces can make the time they do spend online feel more valuable, more intentional, and more connected to what matters to them. That shift in perspective may prove just as important as any individual design solution.

The next generation of social media should not compete for more attention—it should compete to create more meaningful time online.



Methodology

Dates: 24 February, 3 March, 10 March, and 17 March 2026

Location: Grafisch Lyceum Utrecht,

Participants: 14, 8, 8, and 8 participants aged 16–18

Designers: Lisa van de Merwe and Tim van Cappellen

Project number: FMG-15505 (ethical consent)

Stip op de horizon.

A north star

SpaceTeen Partners: Stichting Koninklijke
Nederlandse Kinderpostzegels, KPN, YoungMedia,
NEMO Science, Universiteit van Amsterdam,
Erasmus Universiteit

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TodayTomorrow

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