

Initial Research Presentation

Redhawk Design Collective



IMS 415

Spring 2026

Main Research Goals

- Understand how target users currently manage time, focus, and routines in their daily lives.
- Identify the main usability barriers users face when first encountering and using the app.
- Explore what users value in timer-based tools and what motivates continued use or upgrade interest.

Secondary Research



Secondary Research Resources

Onboarding

- <https://vwo.com/blog/mobile-app-onboarding-guide/>
- <https://www.userflow.com/blog/the-ultimate-guide-to-in-app-onboarding-boost-user-retention-and-engagement>
- <https://www.politesi.polimi.it/handle/10589/175204>

Widgets

- <https://medium.com/@gauravharkhani01/mastering-live-activities-in-ios-the-complete-developers-guide-5357eb35d520>
- <https://www.pushwoosh.com/blog/ios-live-activities/>
- <https://medium.com/@darrenthiores/widget-and-live-activity-to-extend-your-application-to-the-fullest-6a922dfc878c>
- <https://developer.android.com/develop/ui/views/notifications/live-update>

Live Activity

- <https://developer.apple.com/design/human-interface-guidelines/widgets/>
- <https://developers.figma.com/docs/widgets/best-practices/>
- <https://cygnis.co/blog/widget-development-in-mobile-apps/>

Secondary Research

Onboarding

- **Show value early** → focus on core features before advanced functionality
- **Keep it concise and interactive** → using tooltips, walkthroughs, and hands-on tutorials rather than static text
- **Personalize the experience** → collecting preferences upfront and tailoring guidance to user needs
- **Allow skipping** → request permissions only when relevant

Widgets

- **Provide glanceable, timely information** → show small, relevant bits of content
- **Focus on simple, focused interactions** → widgets are entry points, not mini-apps
- **Optimize performance** → avoid heavy visual effects and only load necessary data
- **Keep interactions precise** → don't make the entire widget tappable

Live Activity

- **Persistent Info** → real time updates on Lock Screen for ongoing events.
- **Universal Principles** → user-initiated, show only relevant data, update sparingly to avoid overwhelming users.

Key Takeaways for Time Timer

Secondary research reveals that successful timer apps combine **concise, personalized onboarding** that demonstrates value quickly, **glanceable widgets** that support habit building without demanding attention, and ambient **live activities** that allow **real time monitoring** of active sessions without opening the app—all while keeping experiences simple, accessible, and non-intrusive.

Competitive Analysis

	Competitor	Onboarding Strategy	Time Interaction Model	Alerts and Feedback	Customization and Accessibility	Cognitive Load	Premium Strategy	Pricing Model	Focus Optimization Features
1	Time Timer	Minimal (2 screen tours, no education on visual timers, users can start in 30th seconds, Analytics pop up only on desktop)	Icons: red disk that decreases over time (highly recognizable). Drag to set (countdown/timer), immediate at 100 timer, no context required, no edit or live activities, seamless sync	No audio alerts (critical pop) on live activity. Visual-only countdown (premium)	Dark mode (System / Light / Dark), Dark-only toggle, Additional tones (premium), Color customization, Awake Mode	Dark-only mode removes numbers, Single interaction method, Minimal interface, Strong focus optimization	Cosmetic-based upgrades, Reactive (premium), Value clarity (OV), Enterprise pricing hidden	\$9.95 annually for premium, \$29.99 one time for enterprise, no trial	Awake Mode, Minimal UI, Strong physical brand trust
2	Time	Comprehensive (5+ minutes), Email sign-up required, personalization questions (needs, neurodivergence), calendar import, routine setup required, educational framing around structured time, high personalization	Timer embedded in the daily visual timeline, must create routine first, not standalone, live activity and widget capabilities	No audio alerts (critical pop) on live activity. Visual-only countdown	Dark + high contrast, Color-coded categories, icon-based system, Custom notifications, Neurodivergent-focused design	Timeline view shows full day, Structured but visually dense, Less once learned, medium initial	Functional premium (AI, Investment, Co-Planner), Executive function support, Value clarity (HGA), 7-day trial	\$54/year, \$12/month, Subscription-only, Highest cost	Structured daily flow, Executive function support
3	Ultimate Focus - Visual Timer	Progressive disclosure (6 screens, ~400 sec), capability focused onboarding, interactive tutorial, no personalization questions, prevents overwhelm while teaching features	Circular countdown, drag, clockwise to set, animated circular motion, task file visible, progressive tutorial, teaches interactions, flexible session management	Audio alert status unclear (research pop), Visual state change (red active / gray paused) modes	Color-coded states (red/green), Themes (premium), Dark mode unclear, No info on accessibility modes	Minimal screen during timing, Grayed tutorial background, Task + timer + single control	Functional premium (app blocking, unlimited sessions, sync), Clear benefit explanation, 7-day trial, Lifetime option	\$2.99/month, \$17.99/year, \$29.99 lifetime, Flexible	Grayed tutorial background, App blocking, Minimal UI during session
4	Focus Friend	Short and low-friction, Minimal required setup before first session, No heavy personalization questions upfront, Emotional framing around "help your character focus", Focuses on habit-building motivation rather than education about time perception	Gamified focus session instead of a shaming disk, Character "winks" while timer runs, Session lengths selectable (Pomodoro-style), Break detection effects character progress, Offer includes a stricter "focus mode" option (limits phone interaction), Not primarily a visual time-perception tool — more behavior reinforcement	Standard end-of-session alert, Visual reward animations, Progress feedback tied to character growth, Emotional reinforcement (audio/visual feedback) May include streak tracking, Feedback is positive reinforcement-driven, Less customizable than Time Timer, More engaging than clinical alerts	Character themes/custom skins (premium), Session length flexibility, Limited evidence of deep accessibility tools (contrast modes, dyslexia fonts etc.), Less customizable than Time Timer for neurodivergent structure needs, More aesthetic customization than Time Timer	Animated character increases motivation, Reward visual aid engagement, More visually busy than Time Timer, Less information density than Time Timer, Best for: Users needing dopamine reinforcement, ADHD users struggling with task initiation, Less ideal for: Users needing minimal sensory input, Overstimulation-sensitive users	Gamification-based upgrades, Custom themes/character enhancements, Faster progression, Privately advanced statistics, Premium tied to emotional reward loop	Premium, Subscription unlocks advanced features + cosmetics, No known lifetime option (subscription-focused model), Typically positioned as affordable monthly subscription	Focus mode (limits app switching), Session locking, Streak tracking, Habit-building reinforcement, Encourages repeated use through reward psychology
5	Forest	Quick start: no lengthy setup required, users learn a focus session immediately, Minimal explanation on theory, system learn by doing (tree grows while focused), A gentle hook around building a "forest" indicates repeated use	Focus sessions start with a single tree (choose session length), A visual tree grows during the session, If user leaves the app, the tree dies, Visual progress tied to environmental growth provides feedback beyond core function	No complex alert customization — you get a simple session start and end, Feedback is visual and symbolic (tree growth and forest progress), Encouragement comes from seeing long-term progress (forest)	Choose different tree/terrain types, Session lengths adjustable, Less focused on accessibility settings like contrast, dyslexia fonts, or neurodivergent-specific options	Visual design is engaging but not overwhelming, Gamified elements aid positive engagement (positive reinforcement), Best for: users who need motivation via progress, reward loops, or simple visual cues	Premium: basic features free, premium unlocks additional tree assets and growth categories, Premium tied to more variety and expanded reward systems	Free for available (with ads) on some platforms, Premium typically a one-time purchase or subscription depending on platform, Pricing is generally accessible compared to subscription-heavy apps	Visual anchor: tree growth provides continuous, positive feedback, Encourages day-on task behavior for long-term success in habit building, Long-term streak and forest progress tracking as habit reinforcement

Competitive Analysis

Our competitive analysis compared Time Timer to other visual timers to understand how each product onboards users and supports timer use.

1. We started by identifying competitors based on Time Timer's target audience and core functionality
 - a. Tiimo, Ultimate Focus, Forest, Focus Friend
2. Our focus areas and evaluation strategy
 - a. Onboarding strategy
 - b. Time interaction model
 - c. Alerts and feedback
 - d. Customization and accessibility
 - e. Cognitive load
 - f. Premium strategy
 - g. Pricing model
 - h. Focus optimization features

Competitive Analysis Findings #1

Growth Focus

1. Competitors like Tiimo, Forest, and Focus Friend build engagement by embedding focus tools into daily routines and motivation systems.
2. The focus-productivity market is shifting from simple timers toward behavior change and focus support.
3. Improving onboarding and adding Live Activity could evolve Time Timer from a single-use tool into an always-present time awareness system without increasing cognitive load.

Onboarding Goals

1. The current onboarding explains how to set a timer, but not why visual time is valuable.
2. Leading competitors introduce behavior change and focus habits early in onboarding.
3. Time Timer onboarding should highlight the benefits of visual time perception while guiding users to clear use cases like work, study, and routines.

Competitive Analysis Findings #2

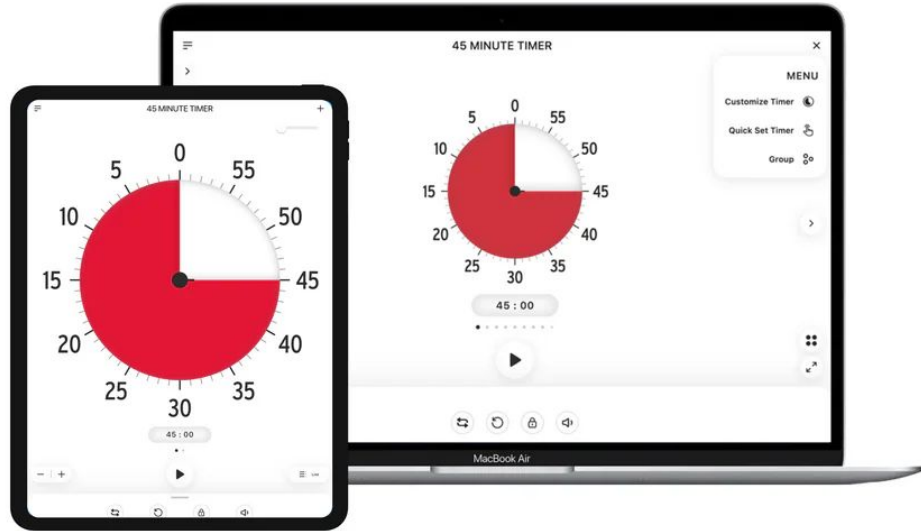
Live Activity Goals

1. Live Activity extends Time Timer's low-stimulation philosophy by keeping visual time awareness visible outside the app.
2. Competitors use persistent visibility differently: Tiimo for structured schedules, Forest for gamified progress and motivation
3. Time Timer can differentiate by placing the iconic red disk on the lock screen and Dynamic Island as a calm, peripheral time anchor.

Strategic Impact

1. Improving onboarding and Live Activity can increase retention, support habit formation, and reinforce premium value.
2. Competitors drive engagement through structure, rewards, and accountability systems.
3. Time Timer's advantage is ambient visual time perception, positioning it as a calm alternative to stimulating productivity apps.

Usability Testing



Usability Testing Process

Usability testing examines how easily people complete key tasks in Time Timer, so we can find where timers, and onboarding are confusing and improve the experience.

- Defined usability testing goals for the project.
- Developed a usability testing guide to structure sessions.
- Recruited participants who had never used the Time Timer app.
- Conducted moderated sessions with recorded screen and audio.
- Documented successes and problem areas from recordings and transcripts.
- Analyzed patterns in behavior to develop findings through Testing Tally.

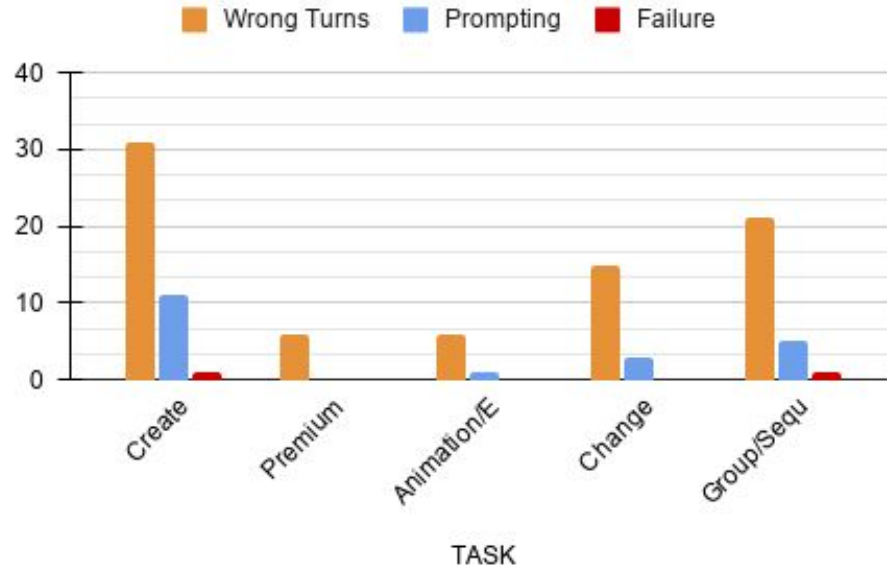
Usability Testing Scenarios

Tasks

1. **Create** 60-second timer with name/color/tone, **edit** to 15 seconds, run and **delete** Timer.
2. **Convert** account to premium.
3. **Create** new timer with name/tone. Add animation and success message. **Remove** numbers on clock.
4. **Create** a group of three timers with different names/times. Make timers **sequential**.
5. **Test** what navigation buttons do.

Usability Testing Data

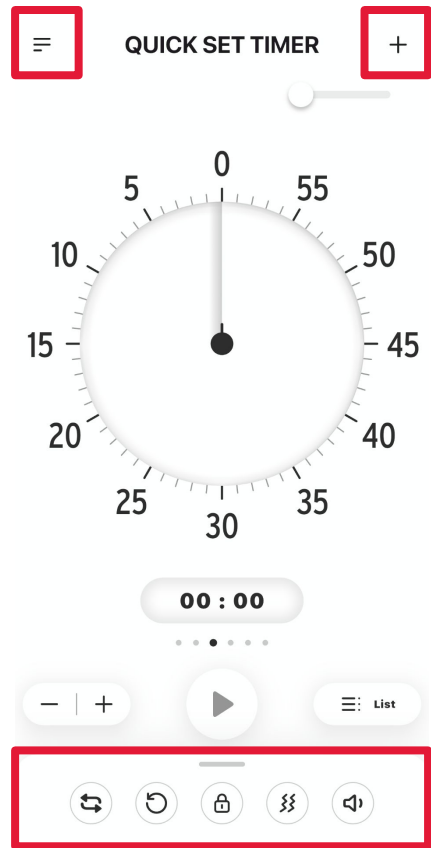
Wrong Turns, Prompting and Failure



Navigation Problems

Through our usability testing we discovered a wide range of navigation issues:

1. All participants **overlooked** the drawer used to modify timers and instead **searched for these options in the top navigation elements (i.e. menu and plus button)**.
2. 3 users **struggled to upgrade to premium**. 2 were misled by the plus sign, and all 3 tried to upgrade through the menu but didn't recognize the right button.
3. 4 users **struggled to locate the correct menu** for adding timers to a group and frequently searched through multiple buttons before finding that feature.
4. 4 users **could not find a clear way to edit** an existing timer, causing them to delete timers or create entirely new ones instead.
5. 5 participants **had difficulty interpreting** all bottom navigation icons, **except the lock icon**.



Interviews



Interview Process

The aim of these IDIs is to find out how users feel about the use of timers, live activities, and onboarding processes. Participants were initially recruited through a convenience sample of college students, followed by a second round of interviews with working professionals to broaden perspectives and deepen insights. Across both groups, participants regularly manage studying, work responsibilities, and personal tasks, making time-management tools relevant to their daily routines.

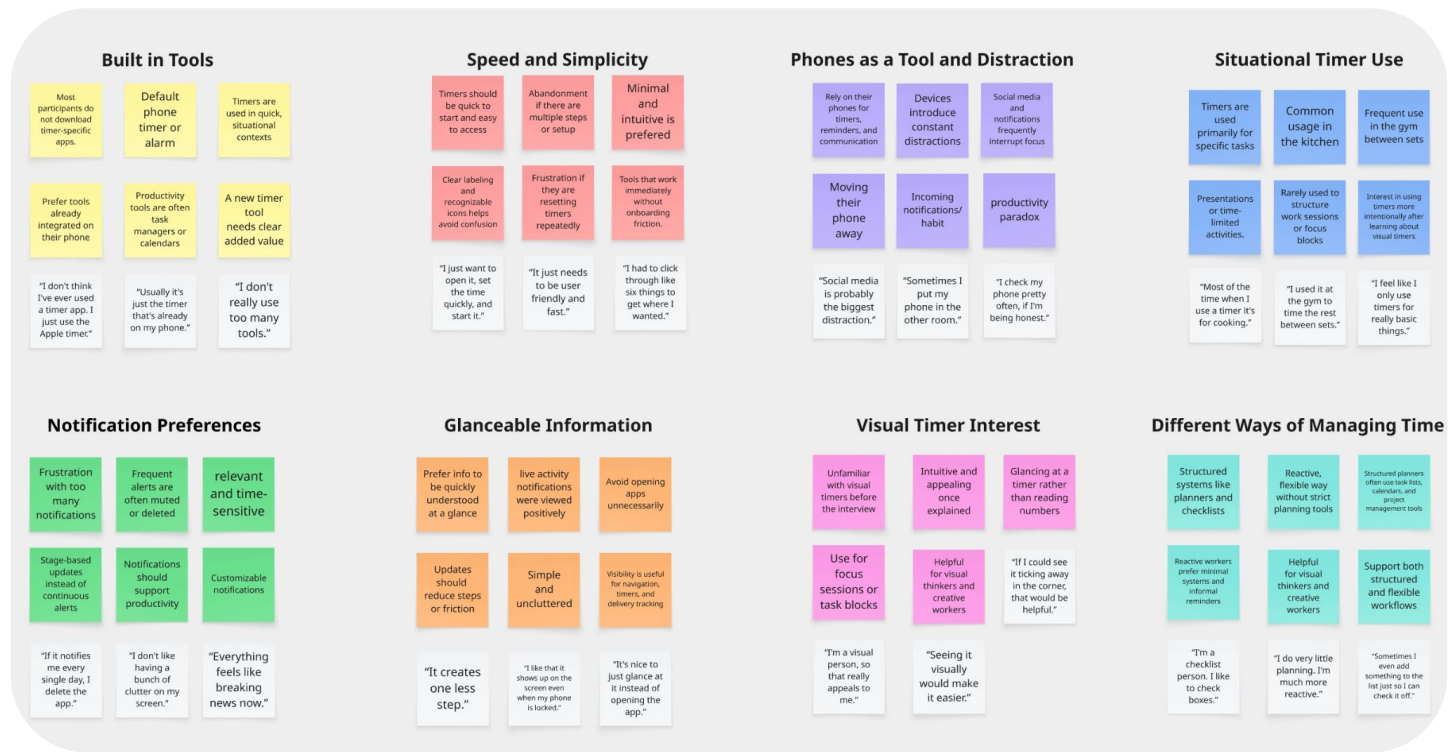
10-30 minute interviews

- a. Ice breaker questions learning about their daily schedules and previous timer usage.
- b. Detail-oriented questions focused on timers, onboarding, and live activity and notifications
- c. Insight based questions focused on visual timers specifically

Valuable Questions

1. What are your biggest challenges when it comes to managing your time or staying focused?
 - a. Behavioral barriers, emotional conflict, real distractions
2. Can you walk me through the last time you used a timer?
 - a. Real use cases, timers rarely used for studying, awareness of timer affects behavior
3. Does the idea of a visual timer appeal to you? Why or why not?
 - a. Core product concept, psychological value
4. What would your ideal timer app be?
 - a. Prioritization, what the user values, simplicity over features

Interview Findings + Affinity Map

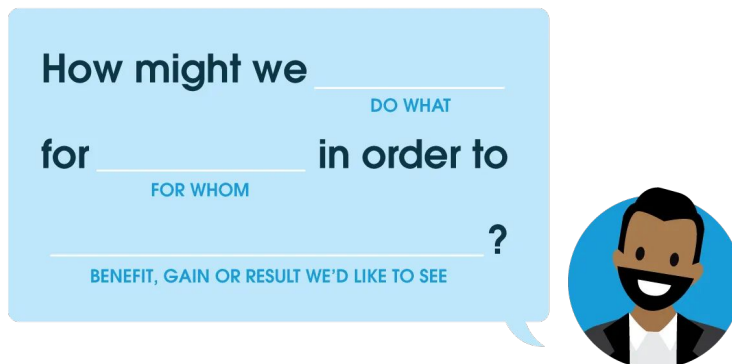


Next Steps



Next Steps

Moving forward, we will focus on turning our research findings into clear How Might We (HMW) statements so we can uncover specific, actionable design opportunities for improving timers, live activities, and onboarding in Time Timer.



Thank You!

Any Questions