Designing for Brains Like Mine

A Wise App Redesign Case Study

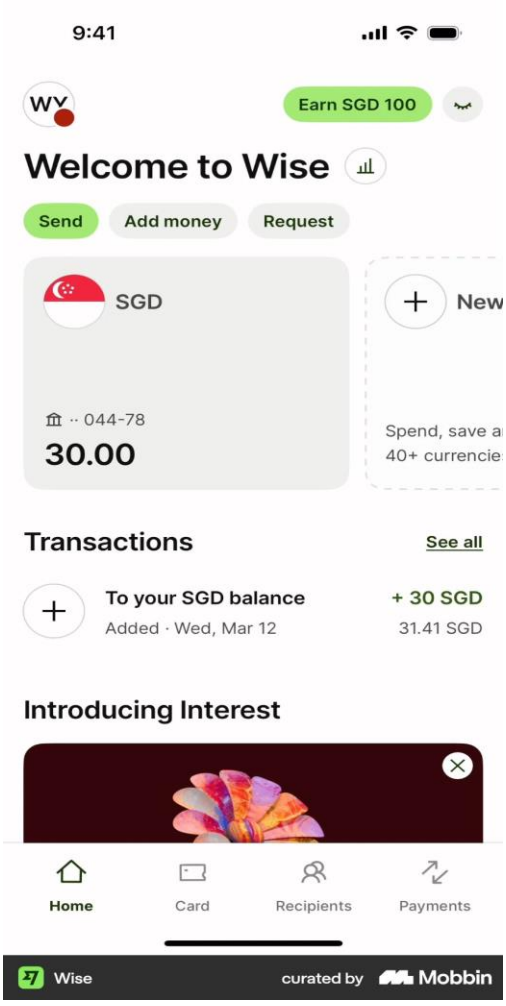
The Problem

I have ADHD, anxiety, and autism. When I use most apps, my brain does things that neurotypical designers never account for. I feel eye strain that makes me want to close the app. I get confused by jargon that seems obvious to everyone else. I experience what I call "brain heaviness" where the cognitive load becomes physically uncomfortable.

The Wise app made me feel all of these things. And I wanted to know why.

My Raw Reaction to the Original Design

I used a method I call the "brown noise audit." I put on brown noise to strip away my usual coping mechanisms and expose the raw emotional friction I feel when using an interface. Then I documented everything my brain felt. No filter.



The original Wise home screen

Looking at this screen, my brain felt foggy. My head started to hurt. I felt confused, my eyes were straining, and there was this heaviness in my brain. It felt overwhelming, almost scary.

There was too much going on. Clutter everywhere, nowhere to start.

I could not figure out what the SGD component even was. Is it a bank account? Card balance? I did not understand. The "Send" button and "Earn SGD 100" had the same visual weight, which confused me. The transactions section felt lost in the cluttered space. I did not know what the eye icon meant. The profile icon was red and I could not tell if it was a notification or just a design choice.

I just wish for once an app could actually label things properly so I can have quick identifiers.

Methodology

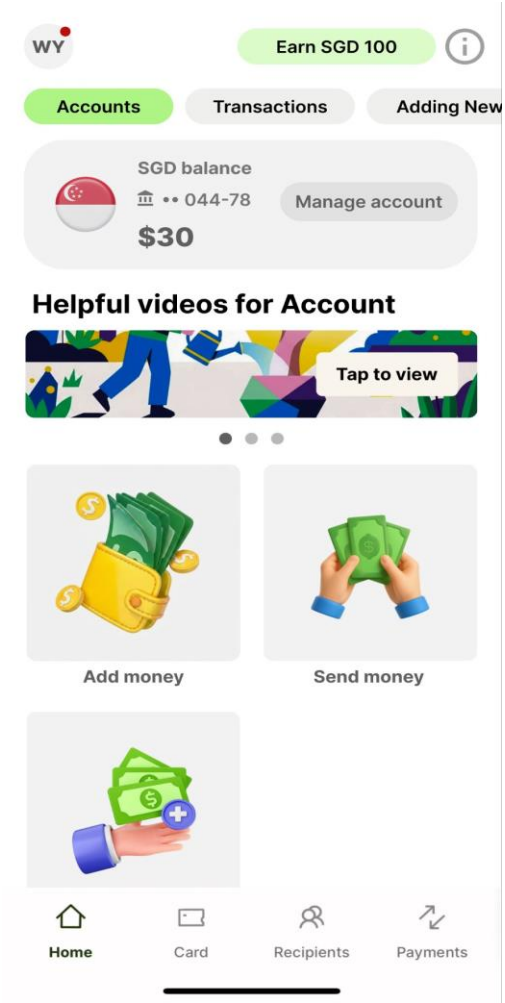
My process was simple:

- Brown noise audit to find emotional friction points
- Redesign to reduce that friction
- Test with real neurodivergent users on Prolific
- Iterate based on feedback

First Iteration: I Got It Wrong

My first redesign made several changes:

- Split components into tabs (Accounts / Transactions) so users have a clearer starting point
- Lowered the opacity on "Earn SGD 100" so it does not compete with main actions
- Made the SGD component smaller with a clear label
- Added videos to help with executive dysfunction
- Added 3D icons with labels for clearer identification



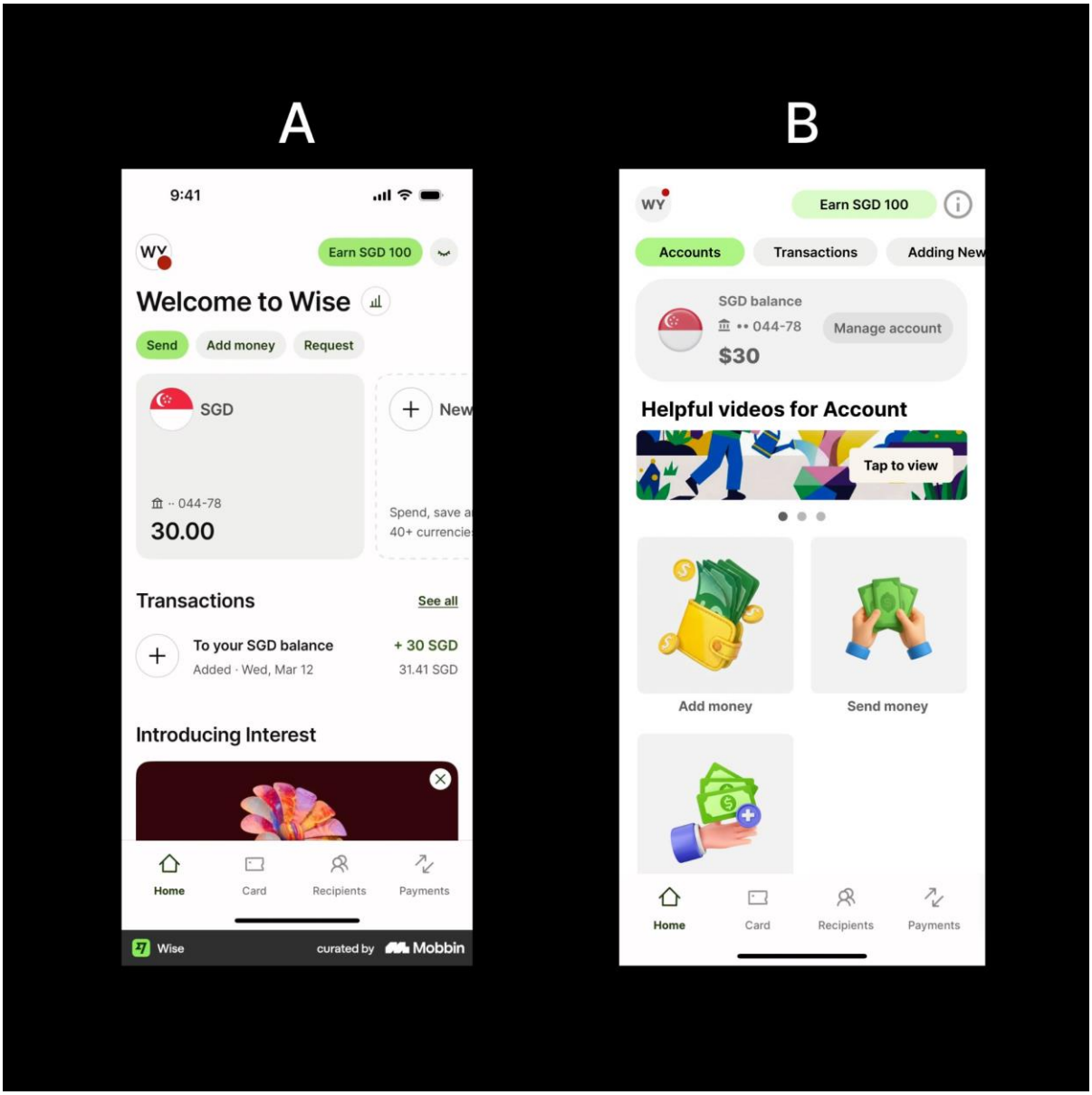
My first iteration with videos and 3D icons

I thought the videos were a good idea. Executive dysfunction is real. When you open an app and freeze because you do not know what to do first, a quick video could help. I made it top hierarchy so it would be the first thing users see.

I was wrong.

First Test Results

I tested with 30 neurodivergent users on Prolific. The results were not what I expected.



The A/B comparison shown to users: A (original) vs B (my first redesign)

Only 37% preferred my redesign over the original.

The feedback was brutal but honest:

"Neither was really better. I liked the clearer icons on B but not the videos."

"The generic icons on screen B are hideous and I want them to burn in a fire."

"Style B was just full of clutter and those video and the images shown for adding money and stuff just looks weird and does not look or feel like a Banking app instead it looks more of an Online Casino type of thing."

"The pictures threw me at first. I thought it was an ad for something."

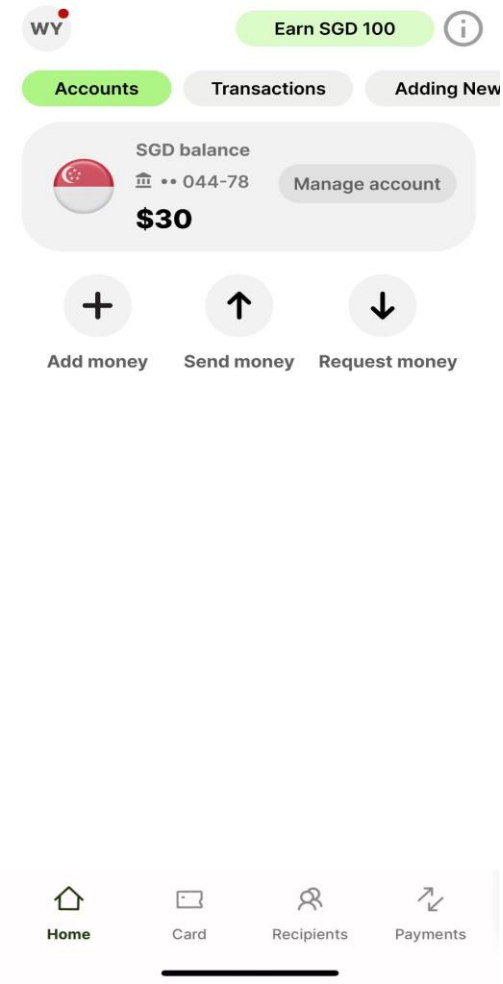
The videos I thought would help? 67% said they were just clutter. The 3D icons I added for clarity? People thought they made it look like an online casino.

This is the part most designers leave out of their case studies. But this failure taught me something important: what helps one neurodivergent person can overwhelm another. The solution is not adding things. It is removing them.

Second Iteration: Less is More

I stripped everything back:

- Removed the videos entirely (moved them to onboarding as an optional feature for the minority who wanted them)
- Made the balance the primary focus since that is what matters
- Replaced the 3D icons with simple icons that match the app's aesthetic
- Reduced the opacity on the information icon because it felt rough
- Put all action icons on one line with clear labels

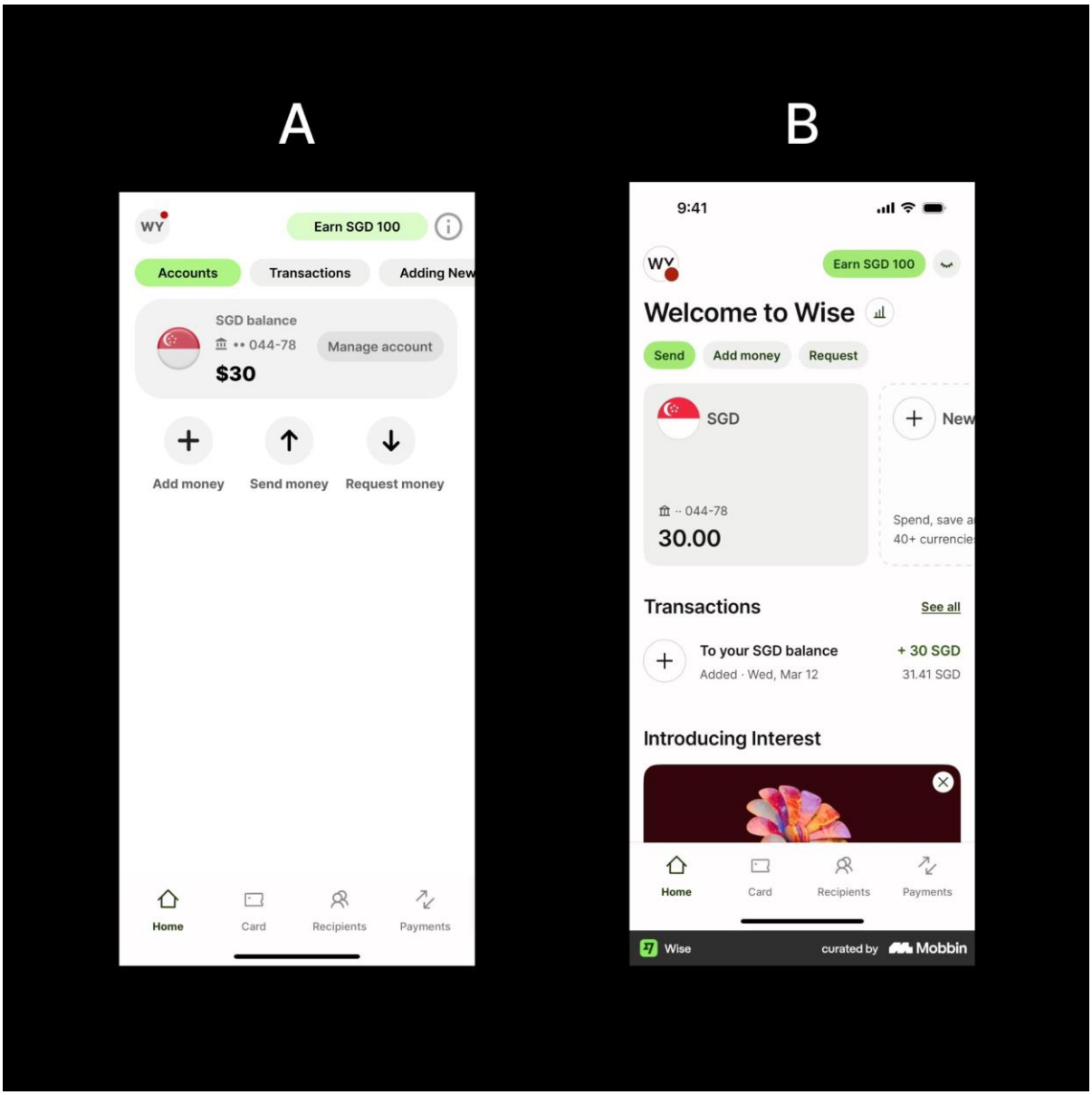


My final iteration: clean, minimal, focused

The result was a much quieter screen. Just your balance, three action buttons, and the tab structure to separate concerns.

Final Results

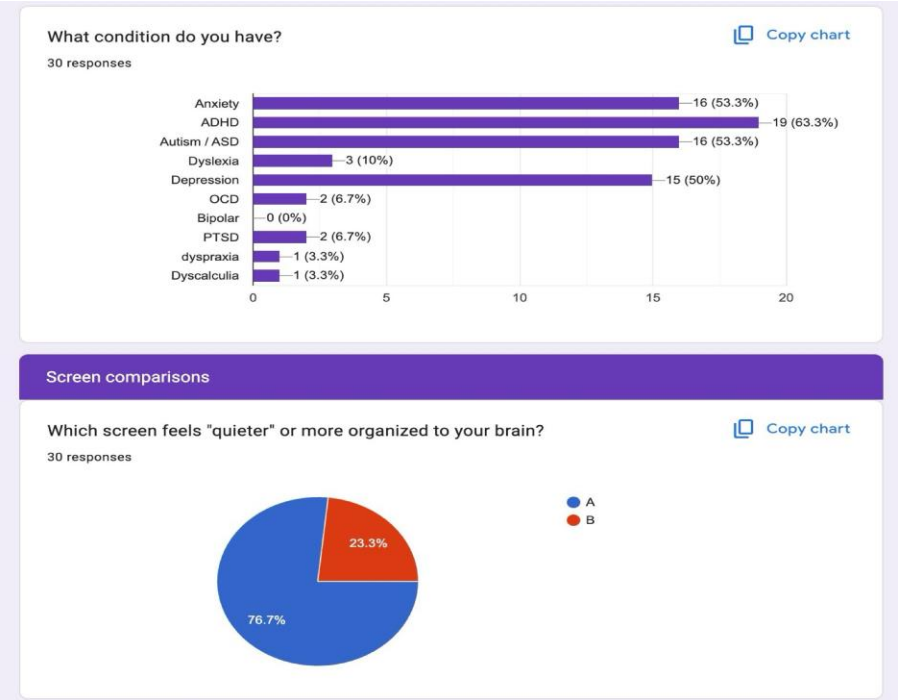
I tested again with 30 new neurodivergent users. The difference was dramatic.



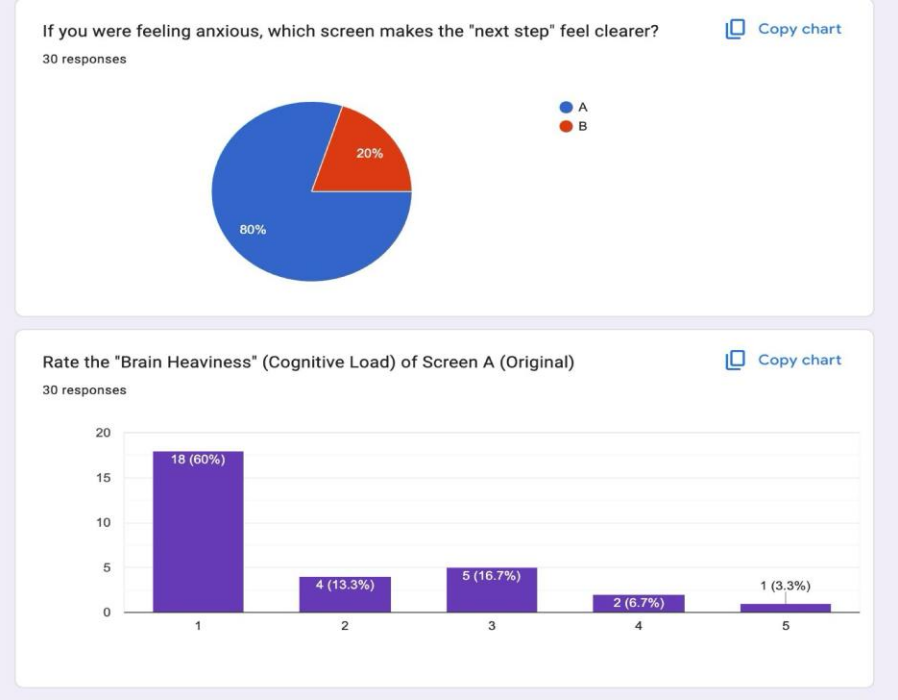
The final A/B comparison: A (my redesign) vs B (original Wise)

Metric	Result
Overall preference	**80% preferred my redesign**
"Quieter" or more organized	77% chose my redesign
Clearer "next step" when anxious	80% chose my redesign
Tab structure helps focus	80% said yes
Easier to find "Add Money"	60% found it easier in my redesign

Survey Data

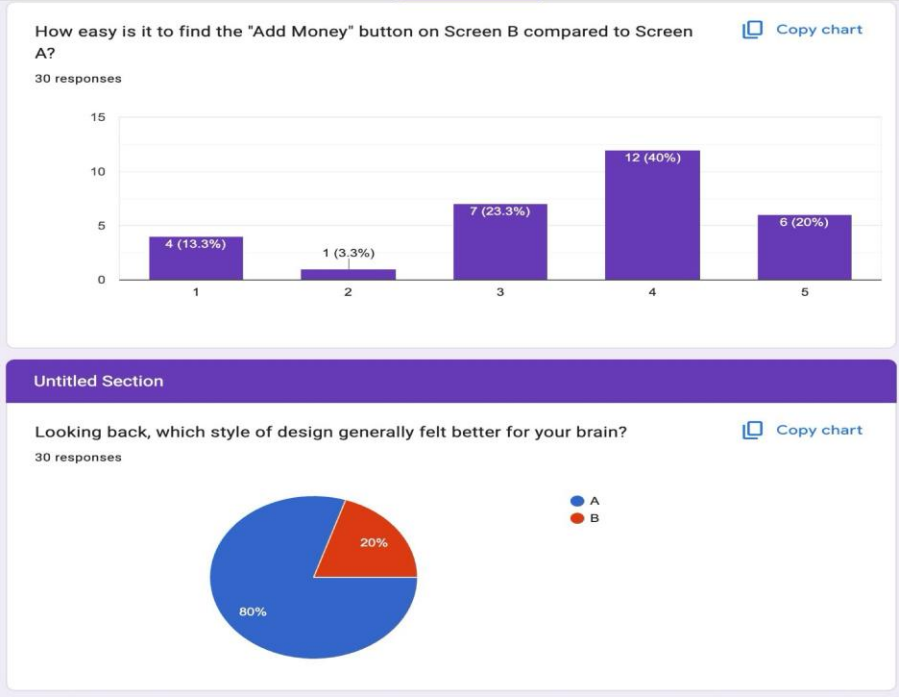


Participant conditions and "quieter screen" preference

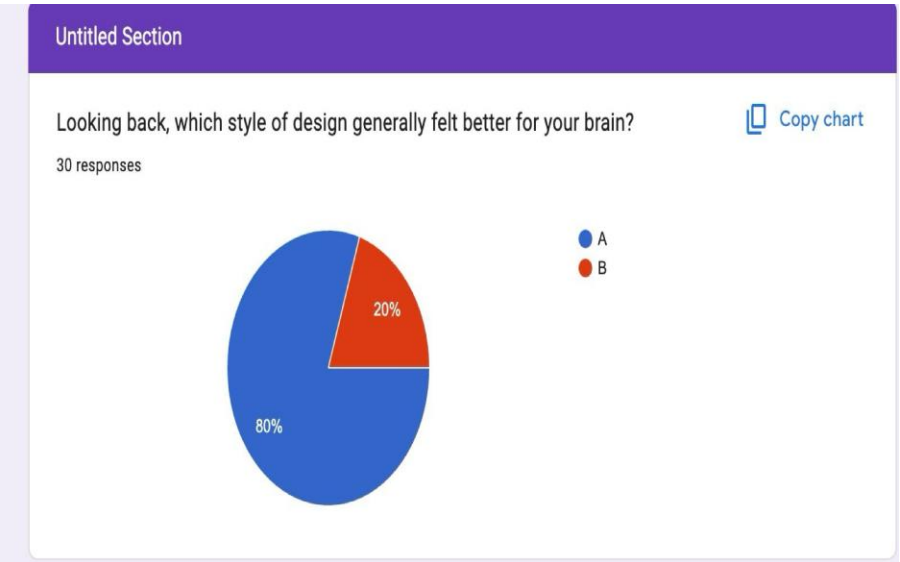


"Next step" clarity and cognitive load ratings

Cognitive load comparison and tab structure feedback



"Add Money" discoverability and overall preference



Final verdict: which design felt better for your brain?

Cognitive Load Comparison

I asked users to rate the "brain heaviness" of each screen on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means low cognitive load and 5 means high cognitive load.

My redesign: 60% of users rated it a 1 (lowest cognitive load). The tab structure and clean layout meant less mental effort to process what was on screen.

Original Wise screen: 63% rated it 4 or 5 (high cognitive load). Users described it as "busy," "cluttered," and "overwhelming." Everything competing for attention at once made their brains work harder.

This was the clearest validation of the approach. By separating concerns into tabs and removing visual noise, I reduced the cognitive load significantly. Users described my redesign as "clean," "organized," and "calm."

What Users Actually Said

The qualitative feedback in the second test was completely different:

"In the better one, my eyes did not have to work as hard. Text was clearer, spacing made sense, and I did not feel like everything was competing for attention. It felt less foggy, like my brain could instantly tell what mattered and what to do next."

"B made my eyes dart around, especially drawn to the image at the bottom of the screen. A helped me focus on the next step."

"Version B was very cluttered, it felt like it would if there were ads everywhere on a website. It was very overwhelming. Version A was just simple, not flashy or anything more than what it needed to be."

"It is clean and less busy, with less colour and distraction. On screen A I could find the most important bits easily, whilst on screen B I feel there is a likelihood I would avoid using the app unless necessary because I would need to make extra effort to focus."

"Less foggy, less scary, less heavy, and not overwhelming."

The Key Learning

My first version had videos because I thought they would help with executive dysfunction. I was solving my own problem without testing if it was everyone's problem.

67% said the videos were clutter. I removed them. Retested. Went from 37% approval to 80%.

The lesson: neurodivergent design is not about adding accessibility features. It is about removing friction. Every element on a screen has a cognitive cost. My job is to minimize that cost.

What Actually Worked

- **Tab structure:** 80% said splitting Accounts and Transactions helped them focus. Separating concerns means users only have to think about one thing at a time.
- **Visual hierarchy:** Making the balance the clear focus point means users immediately know what they are looking at.
- **Labeled actions:** Simple icons with text labels. No guessing what the plus sign means.
- **White space:** The empty space was not wasted space. It gave brains room to breathe.
- **Reduced opacity on secondary elements:** The "Earn SGD 100" banner still exists for business goals, but it does not scream at users.

My Value Proposition

I am a neurodivergent designer who understands what it feels like when an interface makes your brain hurt. I do not just guess at solutions. I test with real neurodivergent users and I am willing to be wrong.

I reduce emotional friction for neurodivergent users.

That means cleaner screens, clearer hierarchies, and designs that do not make people feel foggy, scared, or heavy. It means testing ideas, being honest when they fail, and iterating until the design actually works for the brains it is meant to serve.

15 to 20% of the population is neurodivergent. That is not a niche. That is a significant portion of your users who might be closing your app because it makes their head hurt.

I can help you reach them.