UNDERSTANDING HOW USERS PREPARE FOR AND REACT TO SMARTPHONE THEFT

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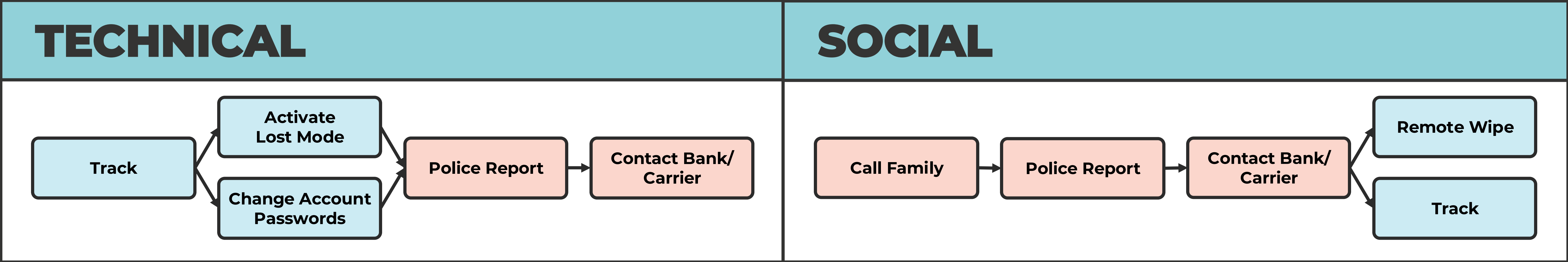
Interviewed
20 Phone Theft Victims

Recruitment
r/LostMyPhone,
r/iPhoneHelp, …

Thematic Analysis
Open Coding Principles

PRE-THEFT

- **Unprepared**: Optimism Bias
- **Fear**: Data Loss, Finances
- **Protection**: Lock Screen, Biometrics

People often panic, feel underprepared, and helpless.

THEFT

- **Response:** Tracking, Freezing Cards
- **Concerns:** Photos, Financial Apps
- **Advice**: Family, Friends, Forums

People use tracking features to restore control and agency.

POST-THEFT

- **Problems:** Service Access, Data Loss
- **Threats**: Phishing, Impersonation
- **Misconceptions**: 2FA, Remote Wipe

People adopt non-technical protection measures.

TECHNICAL

Track → Activate Lost Mode / Change Account Passwords → Police Report → Contact Bank/Carrier

SOCIAL

Call Family → Police Report → Contact Bank/Carrier → Remote Wipe / Track

RECOMMENDATIONS

Contextual Security

- Enforces **biometrics** for **third-party apps**, **photos**, and **services**.
- Triggered by **contextual cues** (wallet, location, calendar).

9:41

Lock Down Now?

Wallet Item, Calendar, and Location

Tighten security when you are in a crowded or risky place. Opening sensitive apps and accessing photos will require biometrics.

Social Recovery

- Allows **trusted contacts** to trigger **Lost Mode**.
- Drives **timely response**, improves recovery odds.

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Add Friend or Family?

3 Trusted Contacts

Let someone you know help secure your phone if it's lost. Choose a contact you trust and can reach without your device.

Informed Reassurance

- **Eases** hesitation to trigger locking or **remote wiping**.
- **Reduces panic**, promotes secure behavior.

9:41

Erase iPhone?

My iPhone

Last Successful Backup: Today at 01:16.

Your photos and apps are safe. You can use this backup to set up a new device. Erasing this phone will not delete your backup.

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Emergency Kit

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