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User research on choice screens in search

Research report for the Competition and Markets Authority

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Executive Summary

In 2025, the CMA designated Google as having Strategic Market Status (SMS) in general search services. As a result of this, the CMA are investigating potential interventions to support effective competition in general search. One of the priority areas identified is the improvement of choice screens which allow users to choose and switch easily between different search services. The CMA commissioned the behavioural team at Thinks Insight & Strategy to carry out user tests to explore consumer needs and requirements in relation to choice screens displaying options between services they use for search, potentially including generative AI-based services. Thinks Insight & Strategy carried out self-guided user tests with 40 members of the public, followed by guided user tests with another 40 users, split by digital confidence and use of traditional versus generative-AI search services. These tests allowed users to explore a number of simulated choice screen user journeys to understand reactions to information and prompts, as well as how well the screens meet user needs. The user journeys tested included the introduction of preparation screens before a choice screen, confirmation screens exposed after a choice has been made, journeys with generative AI-based services, a trial (or 'test drive') option where a user has the choice try out a service, and a choice screen prompt in Chrome.

Key findings

- *Users expect to complete this task swiftly, but often miss key information:* Decisions on the choice screens were rushed by many users. Users were trying to finish the task quickly and only skim reading information presented to them. Often, much of the information on the choice screens was missed.
- *Users expect the task to be easy, and need help to choose between unfamiliar search services:* The number of search services available on the choice screens was surprising and overwhelming for many users. Partly due to this, many users picked search services that they recognised and currently used, and were reluctant to consider other options. In discussion, some users shared that they felt they lacked the information and ability to compare different search services.
- *Users need tangible information to help them make a more informed choice:* The presence of a preparation screen helped users take their time on this decision and engage more with the choice, signalling to some that this decision was important. While some users were still likely to skim through this screen, or quickly skip it, the additional step meant they were more likely to slow down on the choice screen that followed and consider their decision in more detail.
- *Users need clarity on what the choice means for them, and reassurance that it is reversible:* The confirmation screen was well received by nearly all users. Users felt reassured about what their decision meant for their devices and that the choice was reversible. While the majority of users wanted to complete the journey as quickly as possible, and the confirmation screen added a step, the reassurance of the confirmation outweighed the added time to the process. This was something that was both observed and voiced by participants.
- *Users need further support and reassurance when engaging with unfamiliar services:* The option to trial a search service helped engage many users further with the choice at hand. The novelty of this option made some users pause on the choice screen and consider their

choices more carefully. Users also reflected on the benefits of reversibility and a trial being a lower commitment than confirming a service provider. While not all users took up this option to trial, the presence of the option alone encouraged some users to engage with the decision more deeply, and gave them an opportunity to consider other services without doing research which might require considerable effort.

- *Users need further information and reassurance around the potential to choose generative AI-based search services:* Including generative AI-based search services on the choice screen grabbed the attention of many users. The novelty of generative AI-based search services and the unfamiliarity of the services at hand made users pause on the choice screen, but also raised questions around the accuracy of search (both for generative AI-based and traditional services). Upon probing, users often reflected that they needed more information about generative AI-based search services in order to make an informed choice on what service is the right option for them.
- *Users need clear context and information about why they are being asked to make a choice when prompted:* Users were shown a prompt about their choice of search service in the Chrome browser. When shown without sufficient context (e.g. a preparation screen), this journey risked causing confusion for many users, but particularly those with lower digital confidence. In cases, this led to misinterpretation of the screen by users, or participants disengaging and rushing the decision.

Optimisation of screens to meet user needs and expectations

This research generated evidence to inform effective choice screen design, based on user needs and expectations. It captured what kinds of designs could be expected to satisfy user needs based on this sample and provided examples of design features that achieved that. It does not specify one single “correct” design solution.

Some optimisations include:

- **Positioning key information before, not above, the choice list:** Explanatory text placed at the top of the choice screen was commonly missed once users focused on the list. A short preparation step increased the likelihood that users paused and engaged with the subsequent choice.
- **Supporting comprehension for the option to trial:** Where an option to trial is included, users may require earlier explanation of what a trial changes in practice, before being asked to choose. A preparation step appeared important for comprehension across different levels of digital confidence and could be used to set up a trial.
- **Contextualising generative AI-based services:** Many users viewed generative AI-based tools as different from traditional search services, although many also reported that they are increasingly using them for search. If included, users may need better information on what the experience will be, how search results and outputs are accessed, and what accuracy or reliability caveats apply. The ability to trial a generative AI-based search service may provide users with the experience they require to make an informed choice more effectively than text-based descriptions alone can.

Introduction

Background and objectives

In October 2025, the CMA designated Google as having Strategic Market Status (SMS) in the provision of general search services, as part of powers afforded to the CMA under the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024 (DMCCA). As a result of this designation, the CMA is conducting research identifying and investigating potential interventions to support effective competition in general search, including a consultation setting out proposals for 'conduct requirements' applying to Google's general search services.¹

The CMA has developed a roadmap² of possible measures to ensure consumers and businesses are treated fairly and encourage competition and innovation in the search market. This roadmap identified four initial areas for priority action. These are: publisher controls, fair ranking of results, data portability, and user choice, including choice screens improvements. Choice screens are a form of choice architecture that allow users to easily choose and switch between different services. These screens now face the possibility of becoming a legal requirement in the UK, as is the case in the EU, where the 2022 Digital Markets Act (DMA) requires Google to present users with choice screens to select their default search service.

As a result, the CMA wished to explore users' needs and expectations around the design of search service choice screens. Thinks Insight & Strategy were commissioned to carry out qualitative user tests with consumers, to explore consumer needs and requirements in relation to choice screens displaying options between services they use for search, potentially including generative AI-based services.

The overarching objective was to test existing ideas for choice screens and generate evidence to inform subsequent design of choice screens.

Within these objectives, the research aimed to explore the following research questions

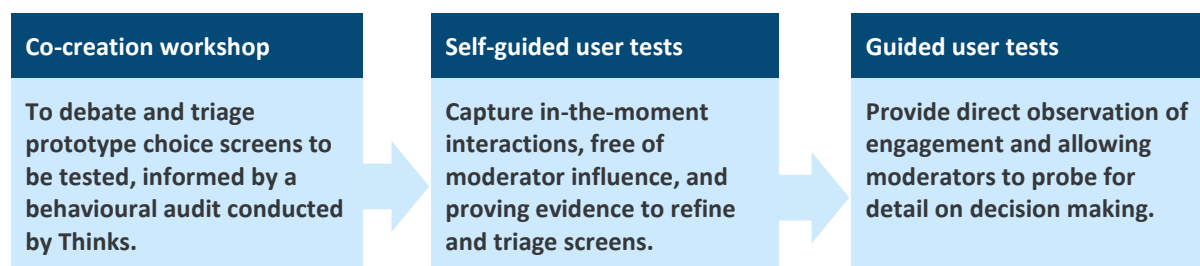
1. What are consumers' **needs when choosing between** search services?
2. What information is helpful to users **before making a choice** and **while considering** their options?
3. How can the design of choice screens be optimised to meet user needs and expectations, including when **generative AI-based services are included** alongside traditional search services?
4. How can the design of screens be optimised to meet user needs and expectations when **users are given an option to trial**?

¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6979d0f35da1fd4ddea98c75/_User_choice_conduct_requirement_v2.pdf

² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6859810eaa6f6419fade671/Roadmap_.pdf

Approach

Research phases



Co-creation of screens:

Ahead of fieldwork, Thinks and the CMA took part in an extended co-creation workshop to debate and triage prototype choice screens to be used for testing. The options considered included both existing designs (such as the DMA search choice screen in the EU which is shown to users on Chrome desktop and iOS, introduced in 2024³) and new concepts such as the inclusion of generative AI-based services and the option to trial a search service. It was decided that a focus on prototypes for mobile devices would be most relevant.

This was guided by a behavioural audit conducted by Thinks, which mapped the experience of initial exposure to the choice screens, through setting, trialling, and potentially changing the default, and identified barriers within this journey. Each potential choice screen design was assessed for effectiveness (i.e. the extent to which user engagement and informed choice is maximised), acceptability, and side effects. This process resulted in six prototype journeys being taken forward to self-guided user tests.

Self-guided user tests:

Thinks conducted 40 self-guided, unmoderated online user tests of these initial six prototype journeys. In these tests, users independently worked through each journey while recording their screen (and themselves), vocalising reflections in real time without a moderator present. This captured in-the-moment interactions and reactions with reduced moderator influence and provided evidence to refine and triage screens ahead of the guided user tests.

Guided user tests:

Overview of guided sessions:

We conducted 40 moderator-guided online user tests on four updated choice screen journeys, amended to address key feedback raised by users in the self-guided test, with the least effective journeys removed to enable greater consideration of the most optimal journeys. These online tests lasted approximately 45 minutes each and were conducted via Zoom, with users navigating the prototypes through Figma while sharing their screen live with researchers, vocalising reflections as they worked through.

³ <https://www.android.com/choicescreen/dma/>

These guided sessions provided direct observation of behaviours and comprehension in a private setting (avoiding group influence), allowed for real-time support for users with lower levels of digital confidence, and enabled experienced moderators to prompt users to provide further detail on their decision-making. As such, findings from the guided tests provide the bulk of the data informing this report.

Pre-task ahead of guided sessions:

20 users completed a pre-task ahead of these sessions, in which they viewed an interactive choice screen and changed their default search, and were then instructed to use that service for 1-2 weeks prior to the session. The rationale behind this was that we wanted to capture the experience of some users being exposed to the choice and going through a trial prior to the guided session and others being exposed to the option to trial screens for the first time in the session itself.

What was tested

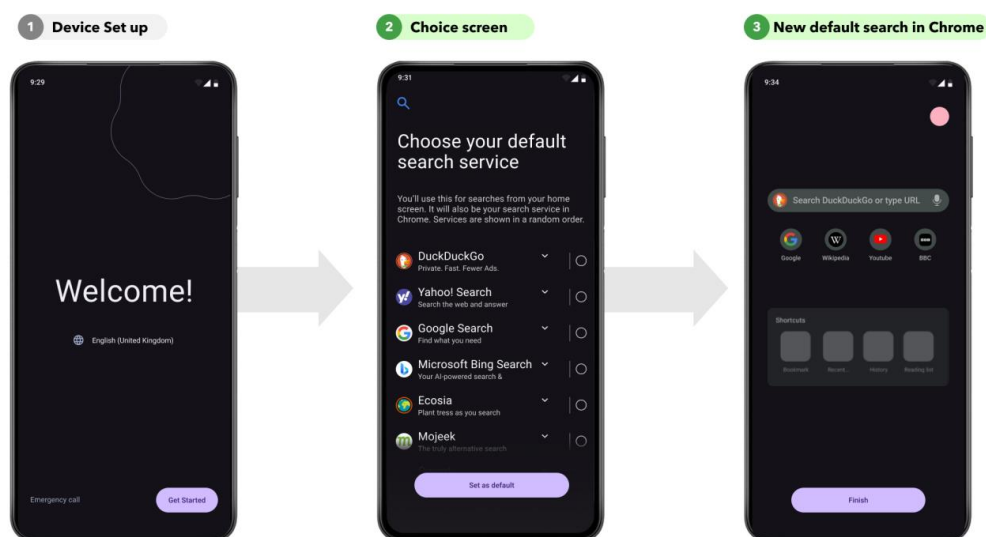
We tested six prototype journeys in the first phase of self-guided user tests. These were then refined based on key feedback from these sessions, and four prototype journeys were brought forward to the second stage of guided user tests.

Self-guided tests (six prototype journeys):

Journey	What it tested
1. Baseline with choice screen	Intro text on choice screen, list of providers, select and confirm a default.
2. Preparation screen – storyboard style	Preparation screen, simple explanations, animations, then choice screen.
3. Preparation with take your time	Preparation screen, animations, explanation of differences, message to take time, AI/data notes, then choice screen.
4. Gen AI-based plus traditional services	Choice screen with generative AI-based and traditional search services together.
5. Trial option	Option to try a service for two weeks before confirming.
6. Prompt in Chrome	Prompt appears when opening Chrome and must be completed to continue.

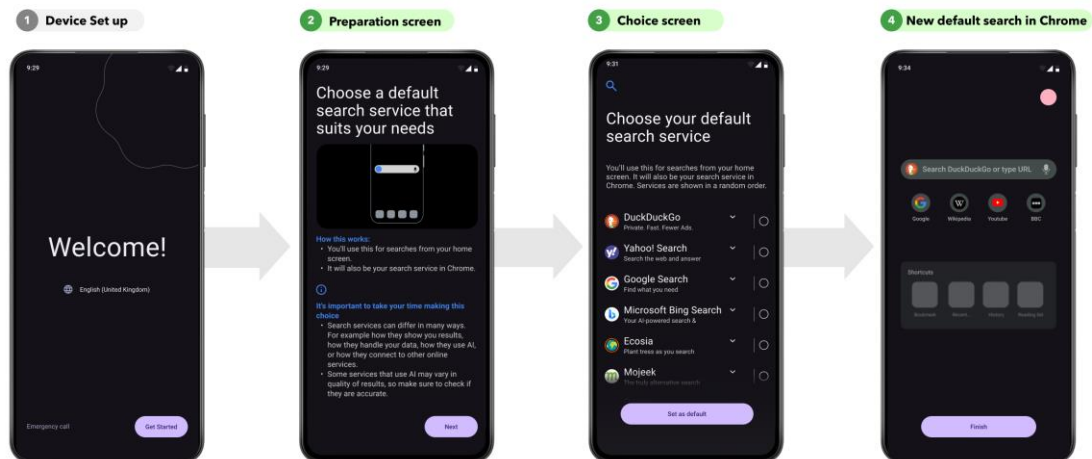
1) Baseline journey with choice screen

Users moved through a low-friction choice journey inspired by current choice screens: a brief introduction explaining what they will use this service for, followed by a choice screen (2) of search services (logos, brand names, taglines and a further description available after clicking a drop down). The user could select one provider and confirm, then returned to using their device with their selected search service set as default (3). This journey was inspired by the existing Android choice screen in the UK.



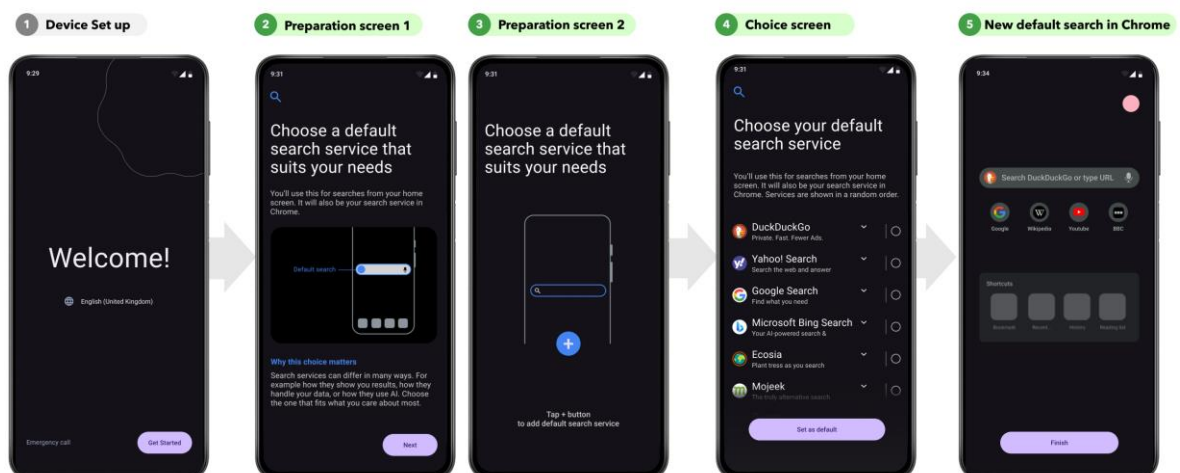
2) Journey with preparation screen in storyboard style

Before seeing the list of options on a choice screen, users were taken through a short, storyboard-like sequence that set context for the decision (2 and 3). The header was adapted to say choose a service “that suits your needs”. This journey broke information into bite-sized panels with a simple animated illustration showing: what will change on the device once a default is chosen, what the choice affects day-to-day (e.g. search in the browser/ home screen), and a note on “why this choice matters”, explaining that search services differ in many ways. A further animation showed how selecting a search service would change their home screen. Users then went on to see a choice screen (4) and make a choice.



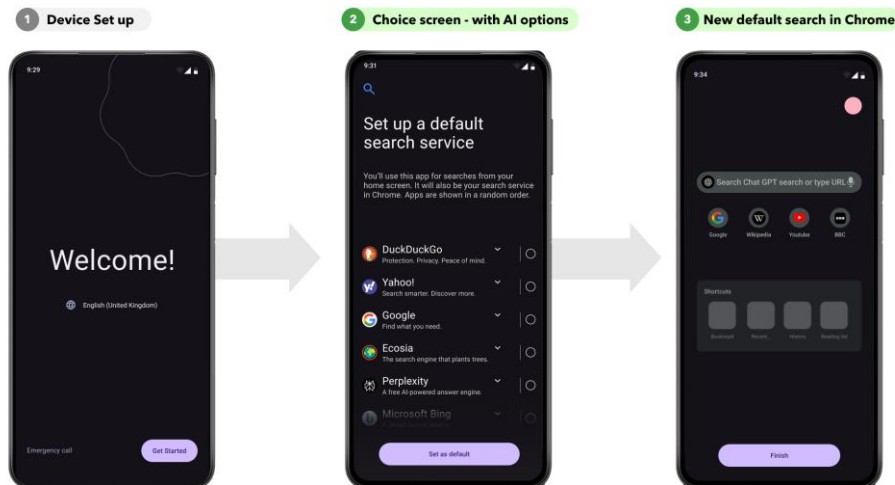
3) Journey with preparation screen and emphasis on the importance of taking time

This journey was similar to journey 2 in that it used animations to show how a choice of default search service would change their home screen. The preparation screen (2) included a section named “how this works” describing the use of the service on their home screen and in their browser. This preparation screen also came with a note that “it’s important to take your time making this choice” which mentioned that services can vary in how they show results, handle data, and use AI. A further note that “services that use AI may vary in the quality of results” was added. Users then went on to see a choice screen (3) and make a choice.



4) Journey with choice screen – generative AI-based with traditional search services

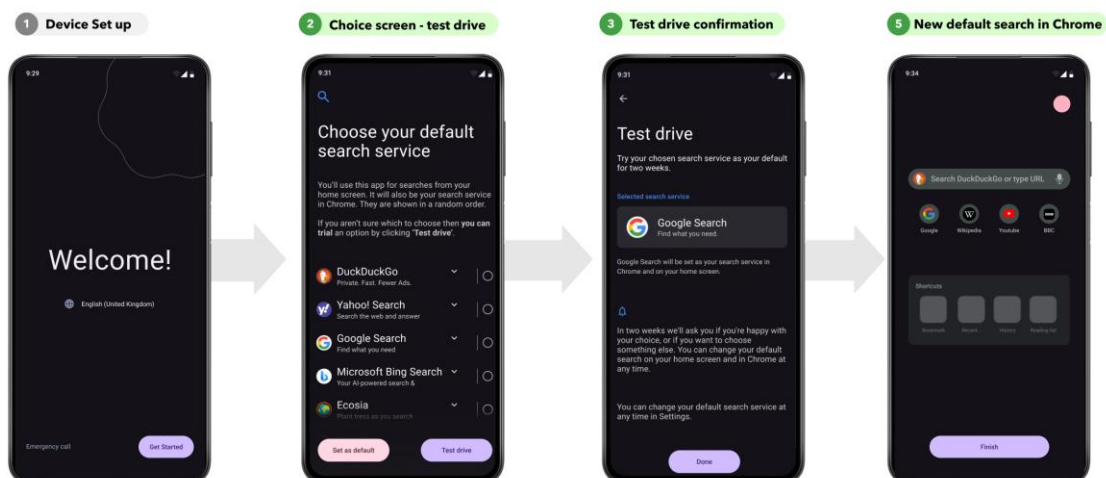
Users encountered a choice screen (2) where generative AI-based services appeared alongside traditional search services. The generative AI-based services included were Perplexity, Google Gemini, ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, and Claude. These services were chosen for their likely familiarity for users, not as a reflection of what services, if any, might be included in any final version.



5) Journey with option to trial ('test drive')

In this journey, rather than requiring an immediate selection of a default service, the interface offered a way to trial the service for two weeks. Text was inserted at the top of the choice screen (2) stating "if you aren't sure... you can trial an option", with an additional button added next to 'Set as Default' offering users the option to 'Test Drive'. After choosing, users were shown a confirmation screen (3) with further information on the trial period and what it meant before clicking confirm. They had the opportunity to go back and change their choice at this point.

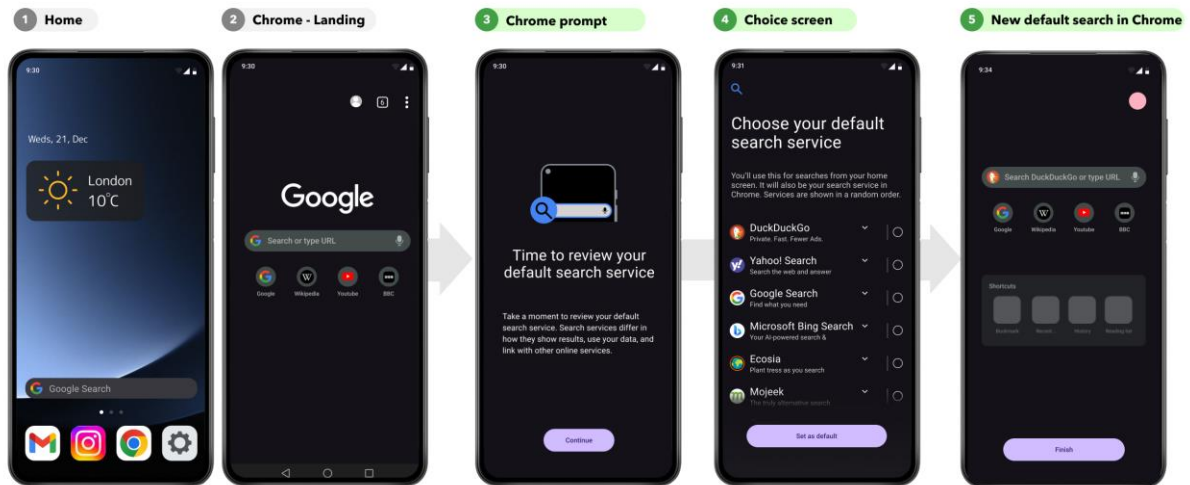
To note, we only captured users' engagement with this journey, and not a follow-up prompt that they may see two weeks later.



6) Prompt when opening Chrome browser Journey

This prompt (3) was shown when the user opened the Chrome browser within the simulated interface, where the choice moment “resurfaced” on the Chrome browser landing page. The journey required the user to make a default search choice on the choice screen (4) before continuing. Once selected, the user returned to Chrome (5) and could proceed with their original goal, now using the chosen service.

This journey was inspired by the DMA search choice screen in the EU which is shown to Chrome users on desktop and iOS devices.



Guided tests (four prototype journeys):

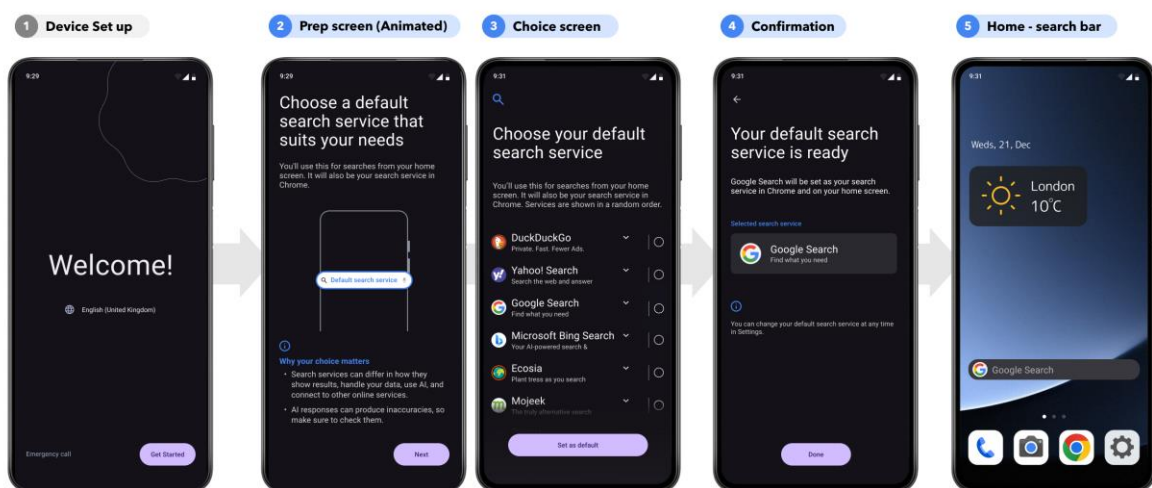
Following feedback on users needs and requirements in the self-guided user journey sessions, the journeys were refined. This included combining the two preparation screens.

Journey	What it tested
1. Preparation and confirmation screen	Whether adding context before the choice and reassurance after it supports understanding and confidence.
2. Gen AI-based plus traditional search services	Response to generative AI-based services appearing alongside traditional search services.
3. Option to trial	Whether a two-week trial helps users engage when unsure.
4. Prompt in Chrome	Response to the choice appearing later in the browser journey rather than during set-up.

1) Journey with preparation and confirmation screen

Users first saw a preparation screen (2) that frames the task as choosing a default search service “that suits your needs,” and states the practical impact of the decision. The preparation content then explained why the choice matters, highlighting that search services can differ in how they show results, how they handle data, how they use AI, and how they connect to other online services, plus a light caution that AI responses can be inaccurate and should be checked. Users tapped continue to see a choice screen (3).

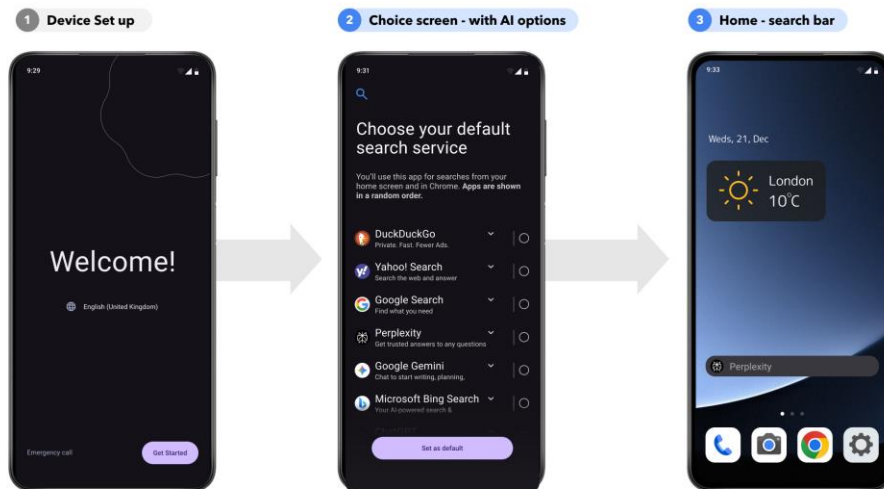
After making a choice, users landed on a confirmation screen (4) stating “your default search service is ready”, that confirmed which service had been set. It also provided reassurance and reversibility by stating that users can change their default search service at any time in Settings.



2) Journey with choice screen – generative AI-based services with traditional search services

Users encountered a choice screen (2) where generative AI-based services appeared alongside traditional search services. The generative AI-based services included were Perplexity, Google

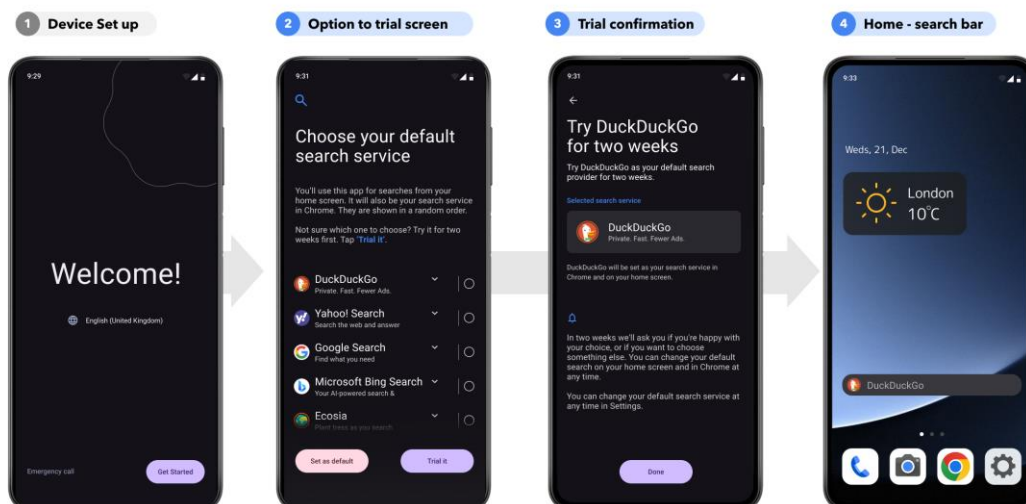
Gemini, ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, and Claude. “Apps are shown in random order” was made bold and prominent relative to the design in the self-guided sessions.



3) Journey with option to trial ('test-drive')

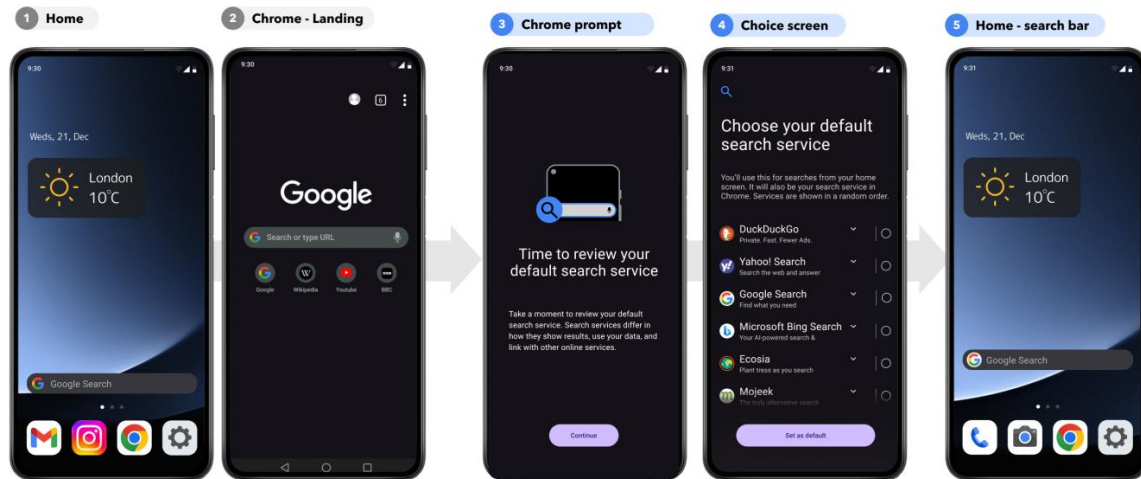
This journey was largely the same as the option to trial journey used in the self-guided user tests, in which the interface offered a way to trial the service for two weeks. Instead of using the 'Test drive' language as in the self-guided user flow, the term 'Trial it' was used, following feedback from users that the term was too confusing. After choosing, users were shown a confirmation screen (3) with further information on the trial period and what this means before clicking confirm. They had the opportunity to go back and change their choice at this point.

To note, we only captured users' engagement with this journey, and not a follow-up that they may see two weeks later.



4) Prompt when opening Chrome browser journey

This was the same as the equivalent journey used in self-guided sessions. However, instead of being embedded within device set-up, the choice moment “resurfaced” later when the user opened Chrome or attempted to search. This journey was inspired by the DMA search choice screen in the EU which is shown to Chrome users on desktop and iOS.



Sample

Participants in both the guided and the self-guided user tests were recruited to ensure a spread of demographic characteristics including age, gender and ethnicity. Participants in the guided tests were also recruited to ensure a spread of self-reported engagement with generative AI-based services, as well as their confidence to carry out digital tasks (e.g. paying bills, booking appointments, updating device software, etc.). This was not replicated in the self-guided tests as users on the platform skewed towards higher digital confidence. Participants were grouped into three categories on this basis:

- **Traditionalists:** Those who have lower confidence carrying out digital tasks, as well as primarily using traditional search, with very little to no use of generative AI-based services.
- **Occasional user:** Those of mid-level confidence carrying out digital tasks. They were also sampled to be mixed users of search, using a combination of traditional search services and generative AI-based services.
- **Early adopter:** Users with higher confidence carrying out digital tasks, who are also generative AI-based search-forward users, who frequently use generative AI for search-like tasks. This group evenly split between those who use generative AI-based services on a daily and a weekly basis.

Further information on the sample of the guided and self-guided tests can be found in the appendix.

The sample included 40 self-guided tests and 40 guided tests which represented a large enough sample to draw meaningful conclusions⁴. For example, the research did not recruit explicitly for all possible needs (e.g. sensory impairments). Further experimental testing would be required to assess performance at scale and compare how different touchpoints work across audiences with different levels of digital confidence and different search behaviours.

Reading this report

Note on interpretation of the term ‘users’

In this report, ‘users’ refers to the participants who took part in the research sample (the self-guided and guided user tests). Findings should be interpreted as evidence from this sample, rather than population-level prevalence.

Interpretation of findings

This qualitative user testing research is illustrative, detailed and exploratory. It provides deep insight into the behaviours, perceptions and feelings of a relatively small number of people. The value of qualitative research is that it helps explain the “how” and “why” behind people’s experiences, rather than answering “how many” or “how much.”

When reporting qualitative findings, we have used terms like “a few,” “some,” or “many” to indicate how common a view was within the sample. We may also describe themes as “rare,” “common,” or

⁴ As a qualitative research sample, inferences should not be considered representative of all UK adults. See gov.uk for further user research guidance: <https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/user-research/plan-user-research-for-your-service>

“typical” to convey how frequently something appeared. We also use language to reflect the strength of feeling behind a view – such as describing something as “a strongly held view.” However, qualitative research has important limitations; as we have a small, non-random sample, quantifiable conclusions cannot be drawn from it.

Observational and reflective evidence (and weighting)

Both self-guided and guided sessions consisted of observational and reflective sections. Users often struggle to accurately describe their own technology use, so direct observation was crucial to this research. This report therefore leans more heavily on observational findings. Reflective findings were treated as secondary and exploratory and were used to help interpret observed behaviour and surface user needs.

Observational (key findings):

- Natural behaviours observed in real time (e.g. choices, skipping content, hesitation, attention, reading in detail).
- In-the-moment reactions expressed during tasks (e.g. confusion/frustration, moments of realisation).

Example insight: users missed the information saying services were in random order and then wondered why some services were at the top of the list.

Reflective (other exploratory points):

- Detailed interpretations of specific screens by users after probing (guided sessions only).
- Gaps in understanding, expectations, and needs revealed by follow up probing (self-guided and guided sessions).

Example insight - Other exploratory points

Users explicitly mentioned the copy on the preparation screen as effective at raising the importance of the choice – “Why your choice matters is really helpful. Services might be free but they’re collecting data from you.”

Detailed findings

User needs and existing mental models around search services

Q. What are consumers' needs/mental models around search services?

Needs around search services

Summary of findings

- Consumers describe their primary **needs from an online search service** as being centred on **speed and convenience**.
- They also express the need to feel confident results are **relevant and reliable**, and service providers make **data privacy and transparency** a priority.
- Consumer's **observed choice of search service often contradicts their stated needs**, with the choice often driven more by their familiarity with a particular service.

Stated needs

In the guided sessions, users were asked about their needs for search after the user testing tasks, to avoid overly prompting participants in advance of observational tasks. This was not asked in self-guided user tests.

All users reported making online searches very frequently, on a wide variety of topics. As such, the needs that they described to be most important when selecting and using online search services were generally centred around quick access of results that feel trustworthy and relevant. Users pointed to 5 key areas (ordered in terms of frequency within our sample):

1. **Speed and convenience** when accessing results. Given the frequency with which they were making searches, the ability to get to results quickly and with minimal friction was very important to users.
2. **Accuracy and reliability** of results. Users considered it important that the results that they were presented with felt like they can be trusted, without them having to expend additional effort in assessing them and verifying their reliability.
3. **Clarity on data privacy** settings used by the service. Users wished to have information on how, if at all, their data is being tracked by search services, how any data tracked is being used, and what options they have to opt out from any data collection. As with reliability, users did not want to have to expend additional effort to get this information.
4. **Easily accessible results**. Once a search had been made and results provided, users wanted to easily be able to access the most relevant results, without having to work through the 'clutter' of results that feel less relevant, with ads and other promoted results most commonly pointed to as examples of this.
5. **Transparency** around how results are sourced. For those who were using generative AI-based services, there was a desire for transparency regarding the sources that the responses provided are being drawn from. This need is driven by concern around the accuracy and

reliability of results provided by these generative AI-based services, with even those who searched from these services regularly often sharing these concerns.

Contradictions between stated needs and actual behaviours

In practice, however, when users described the search service that they use and the basis on which they select it, in many cases this contradicted the needs that they stated to be most important in making this choice. This disconnect is one that appeared regularly in users' descriptions of their needs and behaviours. For example, users stated they wished for a service to present them with **easily accessible results**, meaning they are able to access the most relevant results without having to scroll through extensive promoted links. In many cases users criticised Google for what they perceived to be an increasing engagement in this practice, yet continued to use the service despite these stated frustrations. Similarly, users often stressed the importance of **clarity on data privacy** when describing what they need from a search service, but far less frequently cited this as a factor in a real-world choice of service that they had made. Users' justifications for the search service choices they had made in the real world were often more rooted in familiarity and previous experience, rather than the list of needs they described themselves to have.

Mental models around search and service choice

Summary of findings

- Mental models are **sets of assumptions** that individuals use **to interpret their surroundings** and **inform decision making**.
- We heard that many users **used generative AI-based services to search alongside traditional search services** but tended to view the two as having **different functions**.
- We saw, and heard, that users had a **limited understanding of what a search service is**, which **undermined their engagement** with the choice.
- We saw that the prevalence **of Google means participants automatically associate search with this provider**. This allows it to act as a **mental model for search** in itself, leaving **little appetite to change** service among users.

Mental models are simplified, internal representations of reality that help individuals understand, navigate, and predict the world. In the context of this research, these mental models shaped how users understood “search”, how they approached decisions about search services, and as such how they behaved when asked to choose or change a default. They can also help us give a deeper understanding of their needs.

Search was an established part of daily life, with ingrained routines

Online search was a regular occurrence for all users in this sample and was deeply ingrained into day-to-day routines. Users described searching both to support specific tasks (such as shopping or travel planning) and to satisfy curiosity or explore interests.

“I’ll use it on the commute browsing for news, or around Christmas or birthdays searching for gift ideas, things to buy online and comparing.” – Occasional user

“I’m online quite a lot, I like to find things out, research things. I’ll be watching a film with my son and think ‘oh, who’s that actor?’ oh that’s Paul Mescal, then I’ll be looking it up reading his whole life story. That’s what the internet’s for really isn’t, knowledge, information.” - Traditionalist

All users reported using search services in their search routines in one form or another and generally doing so on their devices from within browser apps. Few reported searching directly from the device home screen, even those who also had a search widget on their device home screen. This suggested that, for many users, the habitual “entry point” to search was opening a browser first.

“There’s a Google search thing at the bottom of the Android screen [homepage] but I’ve never really used that, I do my searching from the browser itself.” – Occasional user

"I never tend to use default search, I'd just go into Google and search straight from the website. For that reason, I'll probably pick Google." –

Occasional user

Many users used generative AI-based services alongside traditional search services, but saw different roles

While all users tended to use traditional search services in some form in their search habits, many also reported using generative AI-based services alongside these.

Users broadly spoke of these two options serving different roles. They saw traditional search services generally for broader or less-defined queries where users expected to review a list of results, choose among sources, and navigate through to websites. By contrast, generative AI-based services were more often used for targeted questions where users wanted a specific answer. The conversational interface of generative-AI based services shaped these expectations: users tended to feel they needed to ask questions more precisely, and they were less likely to expect a list of links or to click through to websites.

Many users felt the distinction between generative AI-based services and traditional services was becoming increasingly blurred, with many pointing to AI search summaries provided by traditional search services. In line with previous Thinks research on the topic⁵, users' views of the usefulness of these summaries were mixed, with some stating they provide convenient and time-saving overviews of topics, while others expressed scepticism of the accuracy and relevancy of the information these summaries provide.

"I've used AI a bit more for small things like locating discount codes, it's a lot quicker at pulling things like that, saves you time rather than doing a Google search and looking at 10 or 15 different sites to find that stuff." –

Early adopter

"My understanding is that if you used Chrome, it would use AI in the search anyway, so don't know why you'd be able select one over the other, as it would be part of it." – Early adopter

"I've noticed as well now, with AI being on the rise, you're researching something on the internet, and it normally comes up with an AI Overview as well, and won't reference where that information's come from." –

Occasional user

The concept of a "default search service" was not distinct for many users

Users' knowledge of the topic was limited, and the idea of a "default search service" was not distinct in many users' minds. Many were unsure what a search service was and what choosing between services would change on their device.

Users (including those with higher digital confidence) often struggled to distinguish between search services and search engines/browsers, and even when they appeared to understand the difference,

⁵ Thinks Insight & Strategy (2025) Exploring consumers' search behaviours.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68597f3deaa6f6419fade66e/Qualitative_research_1.pdf

they often mixed the terms. This confusion seemed to shape what users focused on; with some prioritising aesthetic and design features they associated with a service rather than the factors they said were important (such as reliability, data privacy, and transparency).

Users were also more familiar with the idea of setting a default browser than setting a default search service, and they often used the browser concept as a reference point to make sense of the search-service choice, further blurring the distinction.

Limited awareness of alternative services reduced conscious thought about search choices

For many users, a limited knowledge of the variety of services available appeared to contribute to a lack of conscious thought about search service choice. Many users put little thought into why they used a particular search service, with default options and familiarity playing a strong role.

A common justification was that a service was used because it was what users had always used.

“Because I’m used to it, it’s a learned behaviour that you’ve always gone to Google rather than any other.” – Occasional user

This pattern had consequences. Users sometimes continued using services that contradicted their stated needs, because switching felt effortful. The ability to make quick searches was embedded into routines, and some users were resistant to any change that might introduce friction – even temporarily.

“I’ve got a lot of stuff saved into bookmarks and all that... It feels so difficult to try and transfer them from one [service] to another.” – Early adopter

“It’s not set up with the same shortcuts as Google... I like the idea of my data not getting saved every time, but it’s not worth the actual inconvenience of it.” – Early adopter

Google’s prevalence meant it was the mental model of search for many users

For many users, Google effectively functioned as the mental model of “search” itself. Users referenced Google’s cultural dominance (including “just Google it”) and described selecting Google out of familiarity rather than through an active evaluation of alternatives. Even when users acknowledged that other services existed, they often assumed those services were unpopular and therefore less credible or lower quality.

“It’s impossible to me that a small search engine that not many people use could be better than a big one that lots of people are using.” – Occasional user

“I couldn’t even tell you why Google’s the immediate one... It’s just the standard one that you’re most familiar with... It was just always the standard search engine that we’d use.” – Traditionalist

Google was the most widely used service in this sample and there was limited appetite to switch

Not only was Google the most widely used search service across this sample, but there was also very limited appetite among users to change away from it. This appeared to be driven mainly by previous

habits, with Google already set as the default service for many users. Resistance to switching was strengthened by several additional factors.

First, Google's popularity set an expectation of quality. Some users also assumed that more technologically able people used Google, and the "Google" verb reinforced its dominance.

"I know there are others competing with Google, but no one uses them.

'Just Google it' is the well-known expression after all." – Early adopter

Second, some users (particularly those with lower digital confidence) did not feel confident changing their search service themselves and therefore continued with the default option.

"It is often difficult to find things in settings, and I often end up having to go to

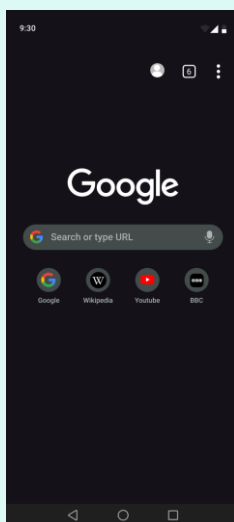
YouTube to find out where [it is]." – Occasional user

Third, many users were integrated into the wider Google ecosystem (for example, using Gmail or Chrome) and expected switching could create knock-on challenges or added effort.

"Chrome normally, I'm already signed in, and my business emails are through

Gmail, so it's just easier." – Occasional user

Case study 1



Daniel - Occasional user

Daniel makes regular searches on his phone throughout the day, often looking to find more information about something he has heard on the news. He searches on Google to do this, though is increasingly frustrated with the number of sponsored links that it gives him. He has considered switching the service he uses, but is reluctant to move away from what he is used to.

"Definitely ease of use and speed. Google is quite good at that, but I am getting fed up with the sponsored links coming through."

User needs around a choice screen

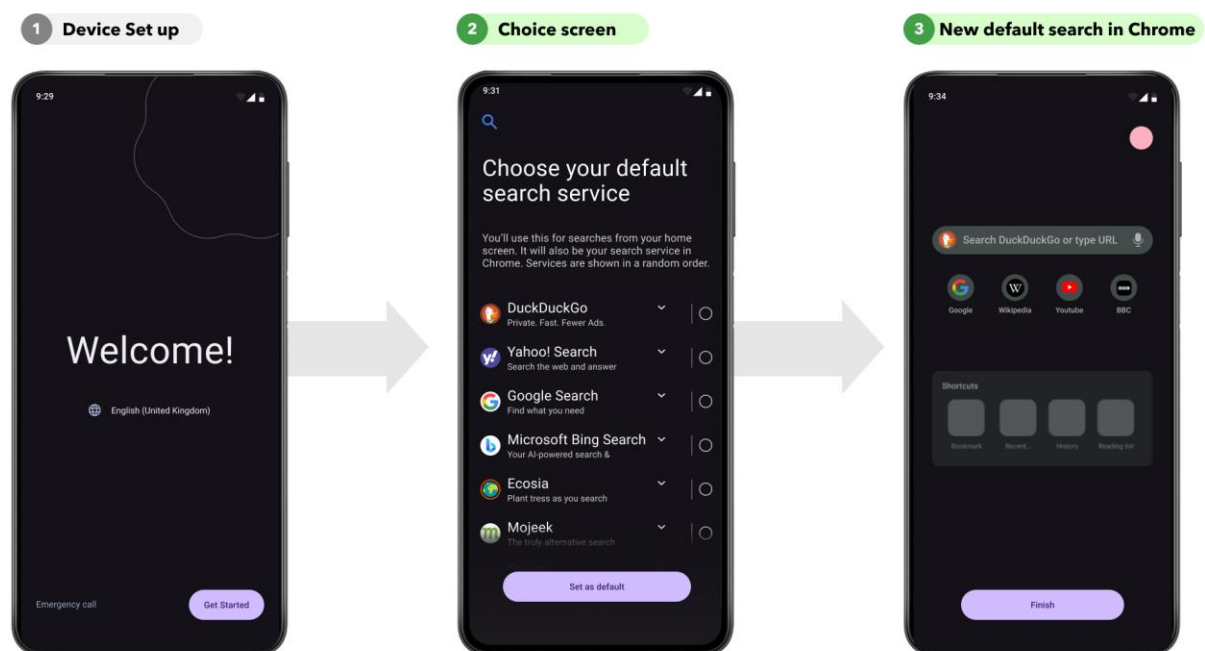
Summary of findings

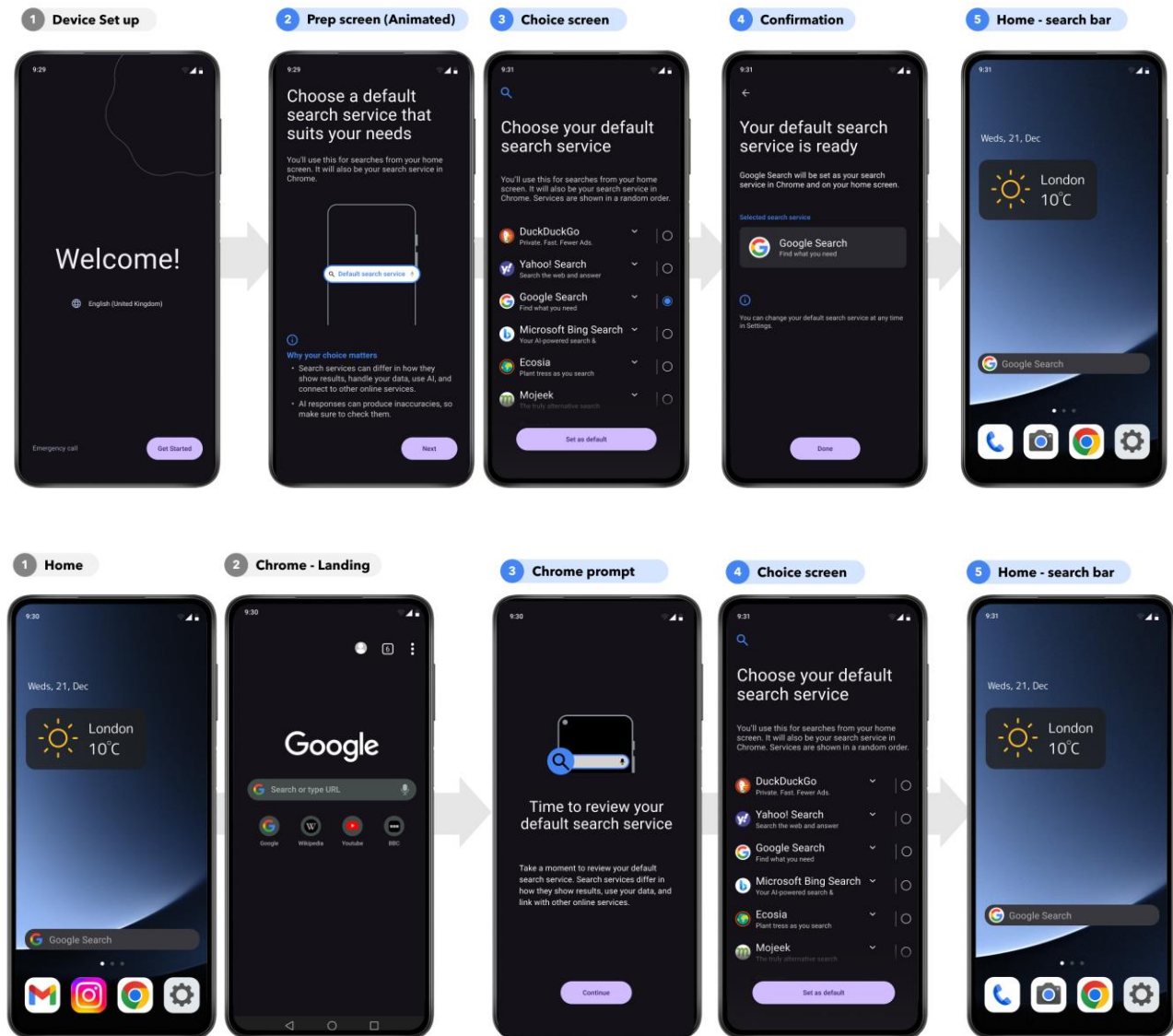
- We saw that information presented above the choice list was often skimmed or missed, as users' **attention was typically drawn to logos** and familiar brand names; this contributed to key information being overlooked.
- We heard users describe a need for clearer **labelling, categorisation, or comparison information** to support decision-making.
- We heard that users expected **taglines to provide concise, decision-relevant cues** (e.g. features, popularity, or user experience).

What we tested

The choice screen was tested in a number of different journeys:

- **In isolation as a baseline:** with participants from the self-guided user tests.
- **Three screens in sequence:** the preparation screen, choice screen then confirmation screen.
- As part of a **prompt when opening Chrome browser screen**.





Key findings

On the choice screen, many users' attention moved quickly to logos and service names, particularly those they recognised. More visually salient logos were more likely to draw attention (e.g. DuckDuckGo).

In many cases, this meant that text at the top of the screen was ignored or skimmed. Among those who read it, key details were frequently missed, and the "random order" information was rarely noticed.

"The first thing is I'd expect to see Google at the top, 98% of people are going to use Google. But it doesn't really matter, it's a short enough list and everyone knows the Google icon." – Occasional user

Taglines were consistently not given attention on first view. Some users noticed them later, but relatively few expanded the additional descriptions unless they were already engaged and curious.

Users were often surprised by the number of services available. Many were familiar with only two or three options and did not immediately recognise that the list extended further down the page. As a result, scrolling to review additional services was not consistently observed.

“There are a lot of choices on the second screen. It’s good to have a wide choice, not just Google” – Traditionalist

For users who were curious, unfamiliar options sometimes increased attention to the screen. For others, the volume of unfamiliar options contributed to feelings of being overwhelmed. In these cases, users commonly selected a familiar service, including when they expressed interest in “trying something new.”

“I like the fact I’m getting a choice, but I don’t really know the difference. I’m picking based on names and brand” – Traditionalist

Other exploratory points

After the test, users reflected further on the choice screen.

Users generally described aiming to complete this step quickly and assumed that the most popular choices (which will likely include their preferred choice) would be available at the top of the page. As many missed the information about the random ordering of services, they questioned whether the ordering indicated quality or recommendation.

“You are drawn to the first couple on the list, instinctively, your brains thinking ‘is it a top 10 list’ or something.” – Occasional user

Often, users felt that the search services could be displayed more clearly, through an immediately understandable structure, with headers such as ‘most popular’ or ‘recommended for you’.

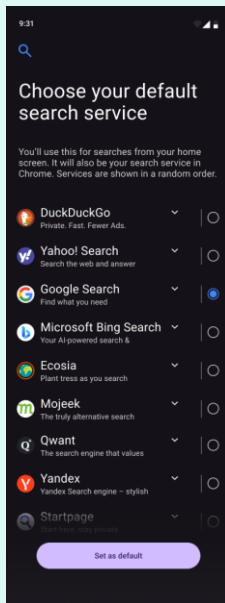
Some users suggested that the options could be easier to process with clearer structure (e.g. grouping by type, popularity, or trust). They described potential guidance such as “most popular” or “recommended for you”. Users described this as a way to reduce the effort of comparing many unfamiliar options.

“I’m not sure the random order is helpful. I guess people will think the order has significance but I wouldn’t think that. Alphabetical could be more straightforward.” – Occasional user

Users also expressed interest in unbiased comparison information (e.g. pros/cons, popularity, or practical differences). However, some users also indicated that too much information could make the decision harder, and there is a risk of information and/or choice overload if additional content is not carefully designed.

When probed, users often described current taglines as marketing-oriented and not sufficiently informative for decision-making. Some suggested that taglines could be more useful if they summarised key differences in simple terms.

Case study 2



Dana - Traditionalist

When looking at this screen, Dana felt overwhelmed by choices shown to her, which were nearly all unfamiliar to her. She also did not understand why the search services were shown in this specific order, as she missed the information about this at the top. She ended up picking Google as it is most familiar to her. However, she did feel that the taglines would be helpful to explain what some of the other services could offer her.

"I wouldn't know the difference between [search services]. I would click the one that I know... Going with the wee bit of story [taglines] does influence me."

Optimising choice screens to meet user needs and expectations

Observationally, users were unsure how search services differed from each other and wanted better information to help them make the right choice:

- Taglines could be optimised to address users' questions and needs around information when selecting a default service (e.g. what makes this different; key features such as privacy/no ads/family-safe; whether an option is AI-enabled; potential trust signals). These cues would need to remain brief to avoid increasing cognitive load.
- Building in positive friction on this screen could also help users spend more time reading or skimming the information available at the top of the screen, or in the taglines for each search service.

Observationally, users wanted to complete the task quickly, and were often relying on familiarity and cues to help them do this:

- Reducing the visual dominance of branding (e.g. de-emphasising logo colour) could be explored as a way to encourage broader consideration, though further testing would help to better understand effects on usability, comprehension, and confidence in the decision.

Reflectively, users wanted guidance and support to reduce the overwhelm felt when seeing a long list of options:

- Users' responses suggested that grouping or ordering options may reduce perceived effort and support more deliberate comparison, particularly for those who felt overwhelmed by

unfamiliar choices. Any structural change would benefit from testing to assess impacts on perceived fairness and trust.

- Several users did not realise additional services were available below the fold. More salient cues to scroll (e.g. visible scroll indicators or mandatory scrolling) may support fuller review.

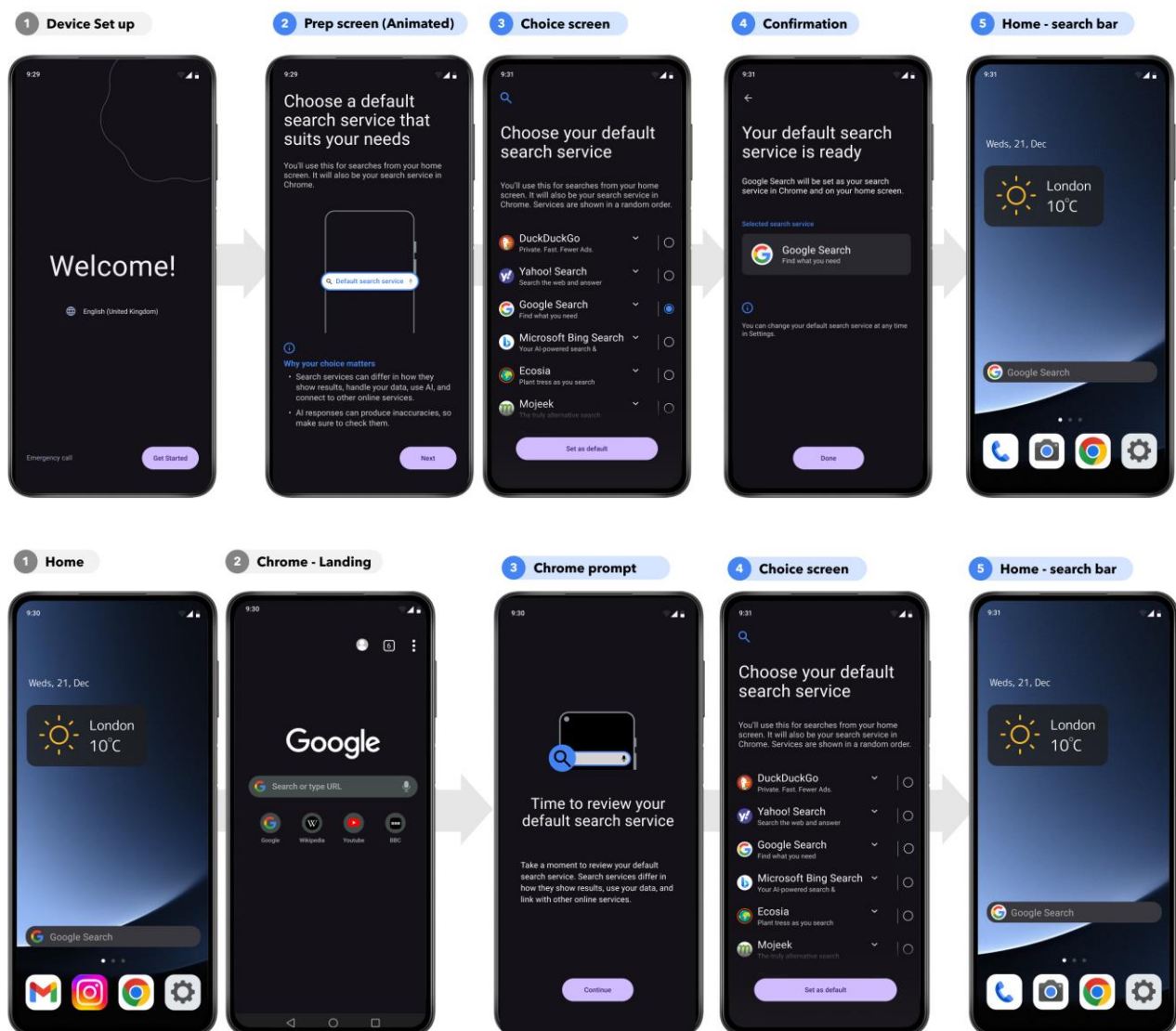
Information needs before and while making a choice

*Q. What information is helpful to users **before making a choice** and **while considering their options**?*

What we tested

We tested a series of prototype user journeys:

- **Three screens in sequence:** the preparation screen, choice screen then confirmation screen. The choice screen was also tested in isolation (i.e. without a preparation or confirmation screen).
- **Prompt when opening Chrome browser screen,** followed by the choice screen.



User needs around a preparation screen

Summary of findings

- We saw that much of the information on the preparation screen was **skimmed** by users across the sample.
- However, even where it was skimmed, we saw that the preparation screen was associated with slower progression into the choice step and **more engagement with the subsequent list of options**, regardless of whether the information felt new.
- We heard from users that the preparation screen broadly provided an **appropriate amount of information** to support decision-making, and several highlighted the “why your choice matters” content as relevant.

Key findings

During testing, users often skimmed or skipped the preparation screen, jumping through to the choice screen very quickly. A smaller number of users engaged more fully with the content on this screen. Note that this behaviour may have been influenced by being in a research setting. Those who skim read the screen said they saw little risk in doing so, as they saw the task of choosing a default search service as relatively safe and straightforward.

This skimming behaviour was common, with limited observed variation by demographic characteristics or self-reported levels of digital confidence.

Whether users skimmed or engaged more deeply with the preparation screen, two key elements spontaneously stood out to them:

- “Why your choice matters” tended to stand out as a header and due to its visual treatment relative to surrounding copy.
- “AI responses can produce inaccuracies, so make sure to check them” was often noticed because it sat close to the “next” button and because “AI” attracted attention. This pattern appeared across the sample, including users with different levels of AI usage.

“Why it matters is helpful, you wouldn’t really think of that” - Occasional user

However, the presence of the preparation screen typically led users to spend longer and appear more focused on the choice screen that follows it than when they did not see a preparation screen first. While it is challenging to measure engagement with this screen through observation alone, users were more likely to spend more time on this screen, reviewing a greater number of options, reading taglines or selecting between different options. This pattern suggested that adding the extra step signalled that the decision required attention and may have introduced “positive friction” that slowed completion of the task. We observed this behaviour across nearly all users, with an even spread across demographics and levels of digital confidence. This behaviour occurred even when users were already aware of the information included on screen.

"I do prefer this flash screen even though it's slowing me down... it like slows you down and explains" – Early adopter

Two versions of the preparation screen were tested in the self-guided phase. These were combined before the guided phase, as one version was associated with more user engagement. The combined version included clearer headings, bullet points and simple visuals. When users skimmed this version, they were more likely to notice and comment on specific elements, indicating greater engagement with the content overall.

Users also spontaneously reported noticing the absence of a preparation screen when it was not included in other journeys (for example, in the option to trial journey), and some indicated that similar context-setting would be useful in those routes.

Other exploratory points

After the test, users reflected further on the preparation screen.

Users typically reported that the preparation screen covered relevant high-level information. Some requested additional explanation of what a search service is, and users with higher digital confidence were more likely to want clearer separation between the concepts of search services and browsers.

Users' reflections also focused on particular elements:

- Users' reflective views on the diagram tested varied – with some saying it added little value, and others finding it a helpful visual cue for how this change might impact their device. Those with lower digital confidence (Traditionalists and to some extent Occasional users) were more likely to say they thought the diagram was a helpful addition.
- The information on generative AI-based services on the preparation screen attracted attention, but users were often unsure about how to action it without interrupting the journey (i.e. they felt they couldn't leave the journey to research AI before returning to their choice). This also felt unexpected to some users, as they were unsure how generative AI-based services would work in terms of search services (e.g. questioning how they would look in a browser and how they would work in a practical sense).
- Some users said that more detail about generative AI-based services could be useful, particularly if it reduced the need to do further research elsewhere. They suggested reassurance and/or optional detail about how AI responses are generated, what sources are used, and how accuracy is managed.

"I like 'why your choice matters'... It talks about AI and some of the things I was saying about AI." – Early adopter

"I'm not sure why it says AI responses produce inaccuracies... Not sure what that's got to do with choosing a default search engine." – Early adopter

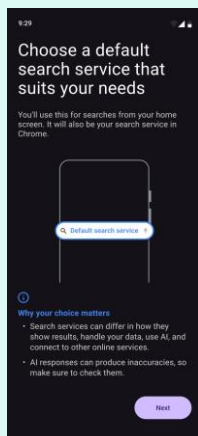
Users often called for reassurance about the reversibility of the choice they were about to make – particularly when looking at the screen as part of the preparation flow. Some wanted to know that they could change their default search service later on (in their settings) and wanted detailed information on where they would be able to find this screen again. This was something that users with lower digital confidence (Traditionalists) were more likely to ask for than those with higher digital confidence (Early adopters).

Some users said they wanted further information on the preparation screen – in particular, some detail about what a search service is and what setting a new ‘default’ service might change. However, this group also emphasised that this information should be written in plain English and be clear and easy to understand for all potential users.

“It brings into your mind how you use the internet and how this experience could change depending on which you use.” – Traditionalist

It is important to note that many of these calls for “more information” should be seen alongside the ‘skim reading’ observational findings. Even though some ask for the details, users may not necessarily engage with more information based on the evidence of observing participant interactions in this research.

Case study 3



Aisha, Occasional user

When testing this journey, Aisha immediately skipped the preparation screen without reading any of the information. She then skimmed her options very quickly on the choice screen, choosing the service she usually uses.

She said she found the information on the preparation screen clear and accurate. However, she did not think she would ever read it in detail in ‘in real life’.

Optimising preparation screens to meet user needs and expectations

Observationally, users benefitted from information that better prepared them for the choice they were being asked to make:

- Preparation screens often helped meet user needs around information, and slowed down the journey, which often increased engagement by creating positive friction for users. The version tested in this journey often generated a pause on the choice screen, and the information about why this choice is important encouraged users to consider this decision more seriously than they did otherwise. The information on AI also stood out here, but shown alone did not sufficiently meet users’ information needs – this is discussed in more detail later on in this report.
- However, the preparation screen was typically skimmed, suggesting that it is likely to work best when it communicates a small number of key points clearly and quickly. Adding too much information may increase the risk of overload or reduce users’ ability to apply the information during the journey.

On reflection, users want further information so they feel more informed about the decision:

- Optional routes to additional detail (specifically additional pages or expandable links about generative AI-based services or how search services work) may support users who want more information.
- Clear reassurance and information on reversibility should be shared with users, for example by including guidance or how to change default search services at another time in settings.

User needs around a confirmation screen

Summary of findings

- We saw that the confirmation screen also created a positive friction⁶, sometimes **prompting further reflection** on the decision.
- We heard that users generally experienced the confirmation screen as **expected and reassuring**, and it provided clear feedback that their choice had been applied. Seeing assurance that this choice was reversible helped meet users' needs and expectations here.

Key findings

Users typically found the confirmation screen reassuring, and many found the language and visuals clear. The explicit statement that the selection had been applied helped users feel confident that their action had been registered. Information indicating the choice was changeable in settings was particularly valued.

"It's good that you can set it, but if you don't get on with it there's also knowing that you can go back and change it." - Occasional user

Although it added an extra step, users rarely described the confirmation screen as burdensome. In contrast to other "extra steps" tested, this screen was generally viewed as logical and helpful friction that help users to slow down to review their choice at this point.

A small number of users attempted to return to the choice screen after reading the confirmation screen. In these cases, the confirmation appeared to clarify the impact of the change, prompting some users to consider exploring alternatives more closely.

Other exploratory points

After the test, users reflected further on the confirmation screen.

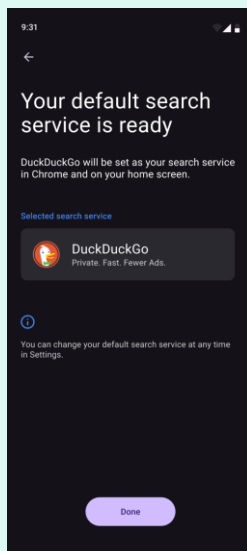
After the tasks, users often reported expecting a confirmation screen, including in journeys where it was not included. Some referenced it as a useful addition because it combined confirmation with reassurance about reversibility.

"I'm a bit old school... I like the first choice where it gave that extra information and how to change it. Annoying as that is, adding extra steps as you go through, it's important to know what you can do if you made a mistake or you find it doesn't work for you." – Occasional user

⁶ Center for Financial Inclusion. (2024). Positive friction for responsible digital lending: A call to action. <https://www.centerforfinancialinclusion.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/cfi-positive-friction-for-reponsible-digital-lending-report-2024.pdf>

Some users, particularly those with lower digital confidence, requested more detail on where the relevant setting sits within device settings. Users suggested that a hyperlink, a short “path” description, or a simple diagram could provide helpful guidance.

Case study 4



Tomasz - Early adopter

Tomasz felt the confirmation screen was clear, and he liked the information it provided about changing his default search service in the future. However, he felt this could be improved by including further information on where to change the service in settings.

He also reflected that having an added screen here is good, because it made him read the information more than he would have otherwise.

“They could be clearer about where you would go to change it, rather than expecting me to find out.”

Optimising confirmation screens to meet user needs and expectations

Observationally, users wanted reassurance about the reversibility of their choice:

- A confirmation step appeared to support reassurance and comprehension with limited reported burden. Including a clear route back (e.g. a more salient or obvious back button in the bottom left hand corner) to the choice screen may support users who reconsider after seeing what the change means in practice.

Reflectively, users want further clarity on that reversibility:

- Users also indicated that clearer guidance on how to change their default search options post-device setup choice screen could strengthen the reversibility message (e.g. brief steps or a simple visual cue), particularly for users with lower digital confidence.

User needs around the option to trial a search service

*Q. How can the design of screens be optimised to meet user needs and expectations when users are **given an option to trial**?*

Summary of findings

- We saw that the presence of an option to trial was associated with **higher engagement for some users**. A small number selected it to explore less familiar options.
- We heard that a trial option was generally perceived as a **low-commitment and reversible route**, which appeared to increase users attention to the decision and willingness to consider options with which they were less familiar.
- We saw and heard that where a trial option was included, users often needed additional context-setting (e.g. via a preparation screen) explaining what a trial is, what a “search service” refers to, and how a trial would affect their device.

What we tested

As part of this journey, the following screens were tested:

- A choice screen offering either an option to trial or setting a default search service.
- A confirmation screen which showed users what this choice involved.

This journey primarily tested a mechanism rather than a language change, so reflective feedback – on the trial concept and how it might work – is particularly important for this journey.

This journey differed from the way the option to trial a search service would work in real life if implemented, as there was no choice reversibility, confirmation or user changes required as part of the user test. A follow-up screen, which would be showed two weeks after selecting a trial, was also not tested with users as part of this.

Testing as part of a pre-task

20 users were asked to test this journey as part of a pre-task, ahead of their guided user test. These users were asked to complete the journey then answer some short questions. Following this, they were asked to change their default search service on their device for seven days ahead of their guided user test, to match the search service they selected as part of the task.

Those who took part in the pre-task and trialled a different search service for seven days found the experience interesting and positive. Even if they were not satisfied with the service they trialled, they felt it gave them a new perspective and understanding about what is important to them in a search service. They also showed more engagement with the choices available to them in the guided user tests across all the journeys we tested with them.

Key findings

When presented with the option to trial a search service, users lacked clarity about what the ‘trial it’ option meant in practice, pointing to a need for clearer, contextual information. Many missed the information on the choice screen or were unsure what the option to trial a search service would

practically mean for them and their device. The majority skimmed the text on the choice screen here (as they had in some on the choice screen only flow) and missed the instruction around trialling a service.

Users did notice the option to trial when coming across and/or clicking on the button at the bottom of the page, which clearly stated 'trial it', but many had already made a commitment or decided which service they would choose at this point.

For some, this button led to confusion as it was not accompanied by a sufficient level of information. Those with the lowest level of confidence were most likely to find this confusing and wanted more context on the option to trial.

Once users reached the confirmation screen, the impact of a trial option became clear, as this screen provided further information about what a trial meant in practice. Some users wanted to return to the previous screen as they understood what a trial meant in this context, and the impact this would have on their device.

Many users still chose a service that was familiar to them, or that aligned with the choice they made on other screens. However, they were more likely to pay closer attention to the other services that were available to them, and were more likely to engage with taglines or other information that could help them make a choice. Some did select new services for a trial period, with this journey enabling the most 'different' choices compared to the other journeys we tested.

Other exploratory points

Users across the sample said they found the idea novel and exciting, which helped increase engagement with this low salience topic. Even those who found the current version confusing, and felt it could be improved, saw that there could be clear benefits here.

"That's really good, because I was thinking of changing but I wasn't quite sure. If I had this I'd just have a go with that Ecosia and see how I got on." - Occasional user

"I don't want to trial something. But for someone who doesn't know these options, they might want to trial something new... If there's some users who might want to try something because they're not satisfied with their search results, it might be useful for them." – Early adopter

Users said they liked that this option required a low level of commitment and that the reversibility of the decision was clearly noted. This helped provide reassurance to users and made them feel more empowered to make the 'correct' decision here, rather than default to what felt most familiar. In particular, doing a trial was seen to help address some of the questions and needs users had around information – helping them understand the feel, features and user experience of a new search service.

Users particularly liked the confirmation screen, which they found clear, easy to read and not too taxing. They felt this provided the best explanation of what the trial included, and how it would impact their device. As with other confirmation screens, users found the note on reversibility particularly helpful, although they did feel it could include more detail about where to find search options in their device settings.

Users spontaneously called for a number of improvements to this flow. In particular, many called for a preparation screen which would include the information that they saw as part of the confirmation

screen. Users argued this would help them understand what a trial would mean in practice, and would anticipate the questions many asked at the choice screen on this journey. Users pointed out that a preparation screen could also mitigate misunderstandings such as a free/paid trial.

"I did think for a moment it might have been a free trial but then realised it's not... perhaps some might think there is future payment and it needs some warning." – Early adopter

Users were asked what they thought the ideal duration of a trial would be. There was little consensus here, with some feeling a week or two would be ideal, and others arguing this would be too short, or too long.

Optimising the option to trial to meet user needs and expectations

Observationally, users needed clarity about the purpose of the option to trial:

- A preparation screen before the trial decision stating clearly the low commitment and reversibility of the choice may help meet this user need - improving comprehension of what trialling involves, particularly for users with lower digital confidence. As with the main preparation screen, this could also introduce positive friction that supports more deliberate engagement.

"When I make the selection to test drive, I'd want to know where the settings are, if I changed it in the meantime what would happen, and what a test drive meant, because on the first screen it just said you have the option to test drive but didn't say what that was." – Occasional user

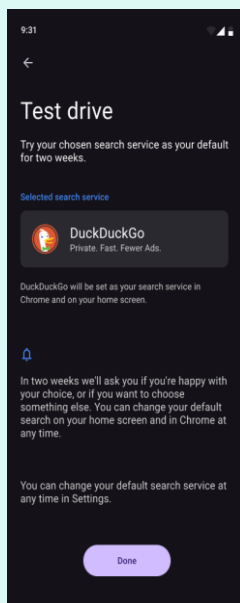
Observationally, users needed reassurance on the reversibility of their choice:

- The confirmation screen may be strengthened by meeting users' needs for choice reversibility and reassurance – by providing a clear route back to the previous choice screen, enabling users to act on their improved understanding without having to restart.

Some hesitant users felt they needed an option to trial to let them explore unfamiliar options without feeling locked in:

- An option to trial helped hesitant users try unfamiliar search services without feeling they were committing too early. This was particularly important for generative AI-based services, where users raised practical questions about how the experience would work and were wary of being tied into an option they did not recognise.

Case study 5



Tony - Early adopter, high digital confidence

Tony trialed DuckDuckGo as part of the pre-task. He was familiar with the service but had not used it for multiple years. He found using it a positive experience as it made him consider his search behaviour differently and enjoyed comparing the interface and features between this and Google (his usual search service), and saw benefits to both services. The trial also made him consider other services for the future. He felt a week would be a sufficient amount of time to trial a new search service, as that worked well for him as part of his trial.

"It's made me question my choice of provider in general... it's positive to remind people that there are other options."

User needs around the inclusion of generative AI-based services

*Q. How can the design of screens be optimised to meet user needs and expectations when **generative AI-based services are included** alongside traditional search services?*

Summary of findings

- As the user journey and the design of this concept are very similar to other choice screen without generative AI-based services, we saw that some users **did not always notice the generative AI-based services**.
- We saw that users who noticed generative AI-based services showed curiosity, slowed down and **spent more time** on this screen.
- While some users expressed interest in trying generative AI-based services, we saw many **select a familiar, traditional search** service.

The challenge of defining ‘traditional’ vs ‘generative AI-based’ services

This research does not intend to define which service should be categorised as traditional versus generative AI-based services, particularly, given that the line between these two are fast-moving and blurring, and user needs and expectations are likely to continue shifting as AI adoption progresses. For example, search services not primarily associated with generative AI-based services, such as Google Search, Ecosia, and DuckDuckGo, have adopted generative AI functionality, such as AI-assisted search, where, alongside traditional results, they now provide AI-generated summaries and a more conversational experience.

Rather, our focus was on how the presence of generative AI-based services alongside more traditional search services may affect existing user needs, engagement, and understanding, acknowledging that these may change rapidly over time.

Both self-guided and guided user testing sessions included choice screens with generative AI-based service options included amongst traditional search services. The table below shows how this research presented search service options to participants. Generative AI-based services are highlighted in blue. Traditional search services from the choice screen that were replaced with generative AI-based services in the generative AI-based service inclusion journey are marked as ‘replaced’.

Choice screen with traditional search services	
Service name	Change
DuckDuckGo	-
Yahoo! Search	-
Google Search	-
Microsoft Bing Search	-

Choice screen with generative AI-based services included	
Service name	Change
DuckDuckGo	-
Yahoo! Search	-
Google Search	-
Perplexity	Added

Ecosia	-
Mojeek	-
Qwant	-
Yandex	<i>Replaced</i>
Startpage	<i>Replaced</i>
AOL	<i>Replaced</i>
Brave Search	<i>Replaced</i>
Ask.com	<i>Replaced</i>

Google Gemini	<i>Added</i>
ChatGPT	<i>Added</i>
Microsoft Bing Search	-
Ecosia	-
Mojeek	-
Qwant	-
Microsoft Copilot	<i>Added</i>
Claude	<i>Added</i>

Many users viewed generative AI-based services as different to traditional search services, although many also reported that they are increasingly using them for search. For example, traditional services were typically used for fast and targeted search, and were more likely to be used for actions like searching for a specific website, searching the web for simple information or searching the web for a product to buy while generative AI-based search services were typically used for more complex or time-consuming search, and were therefore more likely to be used for searching the web for further in-depth research or admin, and sometimes searching for a product to buy.

What we tested

We tested a journey which included generative AI-based services. This consisted of a choice screen with added generative AI-based services, followed by a device home screen.

To note, the journey we tested illustrated a hypothetical scenario at this stage, as generative AI-based services cannot currently be selected as a default search service on devices, so users would not have experienced this previously.

Key findings

Some users did not always notice generative AI-based services because they scanned quickly for their current or preferred service. Where users did notice them, they often described the inclusion as surprising (e.g. surprised how ChatGPT worked in Chrome). This appeared linked to how users conceptualised traditional search services versus generative AI-based services. While users were often surprised by this, some did select a generative-AI based service.

"I'm surprised that AI services are available as a default search option – I wouldn't choose one myself, don't think it's as accurate as on Google or Safari." – Early adopter

"So Perplexity, that's quite interesting, the tagline 'get trusted answers to any questions'... I'd be interested to ask it questions I know the answer to, and see whether it comes up with the same. I've picked that one and set it as my default." – Early Adopter

When users noticed generative AI-based services, they often slowed scrolling and engaged more with the list, including reading taglines and comparing options. Responses varied by digital confidence and AI use: users with lower confidence and less AI familiarity sometimes paused due to

unfamiliarity and curiosity, while more AI-forward users often questioned how these services would operate as a default and why they were listed alongside traditional services. Some AI-forward users selected a generative AI-based service partly to explore the implications for their device and experience.

On this choice screen, as well as on preparation screens, the word “AI” stood out to users, drawing their attention and increasing engagement. However, it is important to note the strength of this effect may decrease over time as the concept of AI becomes more salient and integrated in users’ lives.

Other exploratory points

After the test, users reflected further on the choice screen.

Many users were unsure how generative AI-based services would work in practice as default search services. Those with lower digital confidence and AI use (Traditionalists and Occasional users) were often concerned about the idea of using generative AI-based services because they felt they would give them a poorer search experience. Users with moderate to high AI usage expressed openness to the idea of using a generative AI-based search service, but questioned how this would work in practice. On further reflection, they felt they needed further information and reassurance about how this would work on their device before making what felt like a significant change. In particular, they felt they needed further information on the following points to make the ‘right’ decision:

- How they would be able to access websites through services they perceive as being more conversational and suited to activities such as research, schoolwork or creative tasks.
- Whether selecting a generative AI-based service could introduce paid features or subscription requirements, with some assuming that there may be hidden costs involved.

Users also reflected that the lack of distinction between traditional and generative AI-based services was confusing. Many users felt that these services are different, and used for different search tasks, catering to different types of people. As discussed in the [section covering user needs and existing mental models for search](#), users had two different mental models for searches using generative AI-based services and traditional search services. However, with the introduction of AI summaries, users feel the boundary between these two types of services is becoming blurred.

This led many to call for categorisation, labelling or filtering to help them distinguish between generative AI-based services and traditional search services. This was felt strongly when services were provided by the same company, with users most likely to mention the difference between Google Search and Google Gemini.

"I like having the mix of options. For more audience. The older generation might not be so much into AI, or maybe, there's going to be people who are not a big fan, and who might want to try. I'm both. I'm open to using the new ones." – Occasional user

Seeing a range of generative AI-based services also raised a number of challenges and concerns for users. In particular, users worried about the accuracy and reliability of generative AI-based services, with this concern being higher for users who had previously noticed the preparation screen warning on AI accuracy. Concerns also surrounded data privacy, environmental impacts and potential bias. While

these mostly surrounded generative-AI services, they did also extend to traditional search services (e.g. bias of results order following use of a traditional search services) as users weighed up their options.

“It’s a very fast developing field, so I expect whatever can be said about integrating AI into search this week might not be accurate next week. Its changed so much in the last 6 months and it’s not clear to me” – Occasional user

Optimising choice screens including generative AI-based services to meet user needs and expectations

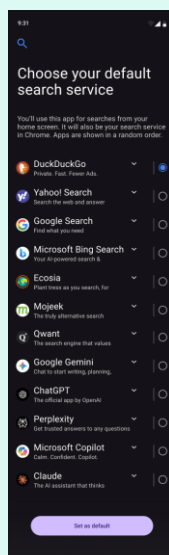
Observationally, users needed better information about how generative AI-based services will work in practice:

- If generative AI-based services are included, users may require clearer plain-language explanation of what this functionality means in practice. This could be provided via a preparation step.

Reflectively, users had specific concerns around the feasibility and user experience of generative AI-based services:

- An option to trial may help address some of the uncertainty users raised by allowing experiential learning rather than relying only on explanatory copy.
- Providing further reassurance about the reversibility of the choice made will help address some of users’ concerns here. This is particularly relevant if a generative AI-based service is selected.

Case study 6



Darcy - Traditionalist

Darcy had recently began spending less time online than usual, and said she finds the introduction of AI frightening.

She preferred using Google for quick, everyday searches and feels generative AI-based services like ChatGPT could be more useful for detailed or specific topics, such as children’s healthcare queries.

She was concerned about how these generative AI-based services would handle her data, especially her sign-in methods (i.e. via Chrome) and whether her information is being recorded.

User needs around a prompt when opening Chrome user journey

Q. What are consumers' needs in relation to a prompt that resurfaces within a browser, prompting them to make a choice of default search service before continuing?

Summary of findings

- The prompt when opening Chrome browser screen was often **experienced as confusing**, largely because it did not explain why it was appearing at that moment or what the user was being asked to do.
- Users expected to see clear context about **why they needed to complete this user journey in Chrome** and why it required their attention.

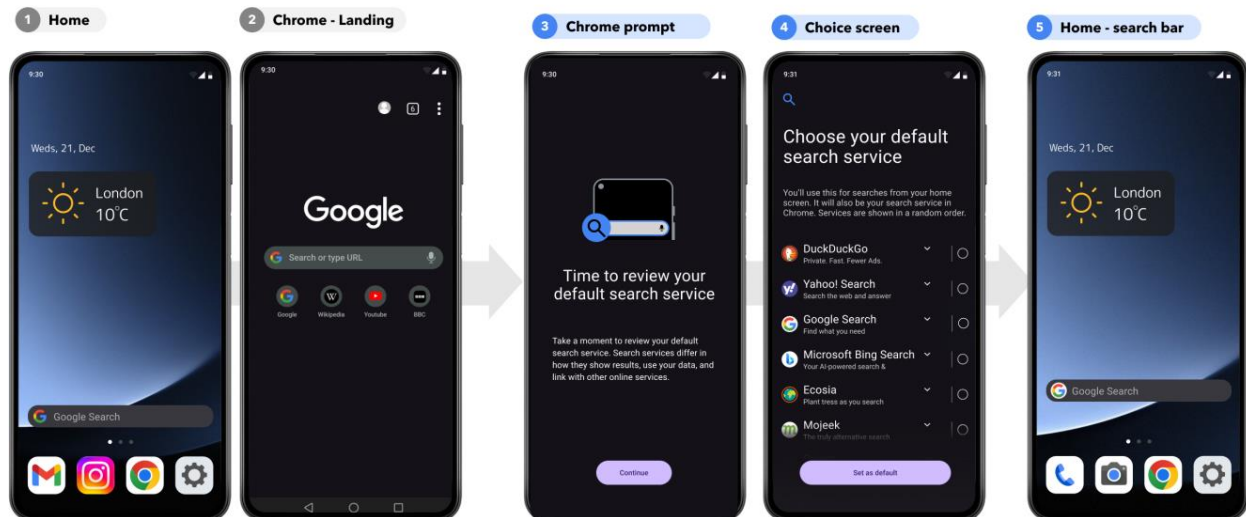
What we tested

Users tested a journey which explored users' responses to a prompt shown when the user opened a simulated Chrome browser, where the choice moment was 'resurfaced' on the simulated Chrome browser landing page. The journey required the user to make a default search choice before continuing. Once selected, the user returned to simulated Chrome browsers and could proceed with their original goal, now using the chosen service. This journey was inspired by the DMA search choice screen in the EU which is shown to Chrome users on desktop and iOS devices.

Therefore, while findings from testing this journey may help optimise this screen, they may not reflect user experiences in a real-world context (e.g. interruptions during a busy day and opening Chrome to search when in a rush). All participants were shown this screen, whether they had completed a trial as part of a pre-task or not.

The journey that users tested covered:

- The review prompt when opening Chrome browser screen.
- A choice screen.



Key findings

Users generally found this screen confusing, as its purpose was unclear, and it lacked contextual information about why users were seeing it. Users felt unsure why they were being shown this screen now, and what it was asking them to do. In the context of this uncertainty, many found the wording of “review” particularly confusing, leading to some misinterpretation of the screen.

“This makes me think, why has this come up now?” – Occasional user

As this screen caused confusion, users often rushed through to the choice screen, with a limited understanding of what they were being asked to do. Consequently, many rushed their choice of service, as they looked to see what would happen and how their device would be impacted.

Other(exploratory points

Many users called for better information about why they being shown this screen and why they need to review their choice ‘now’. This group thought this screen should include some of the information from the preparation screen, to help highlight the importance of the choice and why they are being interrupted.

“I think it needs to say ‘we asked you to select your default service’– people just click through and scan through, needs to allude to the fact it previously asked.” – Early adopter

The wording on the current screen contributed to the confusion felt by many users – “review” felt confusing in this context, with some wondering if they were being asked to rate their search service, rather than make a choice. Some suggested that different wording such “is your current service working well for you” would make the screen easier to understand and more engaging.

“My phone telling me to do xyz feels like the ownership of the choice is a little bit not in my hands. ” – Traditionalist

Some users also called for the ability to skip this screen and return to it later, either on their own or through a reminder, in case it interrupts people while they are performing an urgent task. These users

felt that a skip button would allow users to still access search if needed, while still highlighting that this choice is important. However, there may be some value in interrupting users at this stage, to encourage them to consider different search services.

Optimising prompts when opening Chrome browser to meet user needs and expectations

Users need greater information and context about what they are being asked to do:

- A journey with Chrome prompt may benefit from stronger context-setting on the initial prompt and a brief explanation of what is being asked.
- Including elements of preparation-style context (why it matters; what will happen next) may reduce confusion and support comprehension.

Users need to be able to make this choice at a time when they can engage with the decision fully:

- Users also indicated a preference for the option to delay or return later when the prompt interrupts a time-sensitive task, though the impact of such flexibility on engagement would need further testing.

Appendices

The following items are included in this appendices section:

- Relevance and limitations of this research
- Sample overview
- Self-guided testing tasks script
- Pre-task instructions
- Guided testing topic guide
- Behavioural audit
- References

Relevance and limitations of this research

These findings are drawn from a structured programme of user testing. The sample size and research approach were qualitative. Qualitative user research findings are an exploration and representation of a range of user experiences designed to help iterate and improve designs. The findings of any research of this type cannot be generalised or used to predict how larger populations of users would behave in live production environments. We have noted some specific limitations below:

- Research environment vs real life: whilst our prototypes journeys were realistic and created using interactive prototypes on Figma to replicate real life as much as possible, testing did not fully replicate real-world conditions. For example:
 - The research did not replicate the experience of setting up a device in real life.
 - A choice screen option to trial was tested with users not fully carrying out a trial in real life conditions.
 - The user journeys did not detail what generative AI-based service options look like in a browser.
 - The inclusion of an incentive for users taking part in the tests may have influenced engagement.
 - The research did not fully replicate the feeling of an interruption of a prompt while searching on Chrome.
- Researcher bias and social desirability: reflective feedback could have been shaped by the interview context and moderator probes. The approach combining guided and self-guided user tests aimed to address this potential limitation as much as possible while still exploring user needs in detail.
- This research also showed and tested features that currently do not exist and are not available to users. If, or once, choice screens and mechanisms are rolled out, users would engage with these behaviours differently if they have gone through these journeys previously – meaning that behaviours may vary in the longer term.
- The search services shown in the choice screen prototypes may not reflect the selection that would be shown in a final choice screen. The options selected were chosen for familiarity

rather than a representation of the final product. To note, the research did not intend to cover which services should and should not be eligible for a choice screen.

- Due to the nature of user research it is not appropriate to draw conclusions from quantitative measures such as duration time on choice screen(s) or number of clicks on any part or throughout the journey. Any analysis of this type of data captured during user testing would not be generalisable to or representative of larger populations as the sample has neither the size nor the coverage to allow generalisation. Any conclusions drawn from analysis of these data are likely to be affected by the statistical noise inherent in small samples and limited observations. In addition the different journeys tested were rotated between users, meaning there will be ordering effects influencing duration times that present an additional complication to any quantitative analysis.

While this research may not reveal the full range of user needs and potential issues they may face around choice screens, the qualitative nature of these user tests means this provides a reasonable indication of what the main issues may be by reaching saturation on the range of issues encountered. Running user tests with a similar (or smaller) sample size is a standard practice in user research.

Sample overview

Self-guided tests:

Gender		Age			Ethnicity		Total
Male	Female	18-30	31-44	45+	White	Ethnic minority	
21	19	12	13	15	32	8	40

Guided tests:

Gender		Age			Category			Ethnicity		Total
Male	Female	18-30	31-44	45+	C1	C2	C3	White	Ethnic minority	
17	23	11	13	16	10	20	10	27	13	40

Self-guided testing tasks script

Task title	Description	Content
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Thank you for taking part in this research	Intro screen	<i>Your opinion matters. Please say whatever your intuition tells you to during the tasks.</i> Imagine you are setting up a new phone for yourself. You will be shown some screens to help you choose what settings you would like for your phone. • Please explore and use the screens as you would if you were setting up your own phone. • Please think out loud as you go and voice any thoughts that you have about the screens, such as how easy or difficult they are to navigate, or what you think the screen is asking you to do. • After each screen, you will also be asked some questions about your experience. <i>To participate in the session, we ask you to enable both camera and audio. Please note you will not be able to participate if you don't grant access. This is because we will be asking you to speak aloud as you move through the activity</i> <i>Note: If you don't attempt to answer questions aloud during the test this will affect your incentive payment for this activity.</i> <i>When you're ready, click "Get Started".</i>
Screens/accompanying questions 1 - 4 to be presented in a random order with 5 anchored		
Screen 1	Prep screen - Storyboard	Note on screen: <i>Remember to think out loud as you work through.</i> Concept 1 (note for test set up – not for participant) Information about choice to increase user engagement (e.g. testing the mock-ups of 'preparation screen' prior to choice screen). This screen will be visual helping the user picture what their decision means.
Screen 1 questions	Open ended questions	What, if anything, stood out to you about this user journey? What, if anything, do you think this user journey was asking you to do? • <i>What, if anything, could have made this clearer?</i>
Screen 2	Prep screen - Reciprocity	Thanks for giving feedback – you will now be shown a different user journey. Note on screen: <i>Remember to think out loud as you work through.</i> Concept 2 (note for test set up – not for participant) - the preparation screen shows information on 'how this works' and 'why it's important to take time making decision' to help prompt a more informed choice
Screen 2 questions	Open ended questions	What, if anything, stood out to you about this user journey? What, if anything, do you think this user journey was asking you to do? • <i>What, if anything, could have made this clearer?</i>

Screen 3	Choice screen – Gen AI-based with traditional services	Thanks for giving feedback – you will now be shown a different user journey. Note on screen: <i>Remember to think out loud as you work through.</i> Concept 3 (note for test set up) - AI tools alongside traditional search services
Screen 3 questions	Open ended questions	What, if anything, stood out to you about this user journey? What, if anything, do you think this user journey was asking you to do? What, if anything, could have made this clearer?
Screen 4	Choice screen - Trial	Thanks for giving feedback – you will now be shown a different user journey. Note on screen: <i>Remember to think out loud as you work through.</i> Concept 4 (note for test set up) - Inclusion of 'option to trial a search service' before making the selection on the choice screen (including 'trialling button', follow up prompt after trial finishes).
Screen 4 questions	Open ended questions	What, if anything, stood out to you about this user journey? What, if anything, do you think this user journey was asking you to do? What, if anything, could have made this clearer?
Prompt screen, screen 5 and questions fixed to be shown after 1-4		
	Prompt screen	Now imagine that you have set up your phone, and have been using it for a few weeks. On the next screen you will be shown, please open the Chrome app to search for a topic as you normally would. Don't forget to keep voicing your thoughts! <i>[Participants will receive forced pop-up message directing them to choice screen once they open the Chrome app]</i>
Screen 5	Choice screen – Prompt in Chrome	Note on screen: <i>Remember to think out loud as you work through.</i> Concept 5 - Prompt via Chrome: user journey of someone entering the choice screen through Chrome, rather than as if they were setting up the device from new.
Screen 5 questions	Open ended questions	What, if anything, stood out to you about this user journey? What, if anything, do you think this user journey was asking you to do? What, if anything, could have made this clearer?

Closing questions	Open and closed questions	There are lots of different ways that people search for things online. What is most important to you when you use online search services? <i>[Open text]</i> You will now be asked to quickly rate each of the user journey designs you've gone through. On a scale of 1-5, how much does this user journey help choose an online search provider that is important to you? <i>[Show 5 concepts separately with likert scale of 1-5 for quick participant rating]</i> What about this user journey helped (or did not help) meet their preferences about online search? <i>[Open text] [To show separately after each of 5 concepts]</i> How, if at all, could designs like this be changed to even better meet your needs? <i>[Open text]</i>
Thank you	Outro screen	Thank you for providing us with your time in this research, your responses have been very useful!

Pre-task instructions

Introduction

Thank you very much for taking part in this exciting research – we're looking forward to meeting you!

Before your interview, there are a couple of short tasks we would like you to do. This will take no longer than 5 minutes to set up, and you will receive £X as a thank you for doing this pre-task (on top of the thank you payment for taking part in the interview).

We have included some instructions on the tasks below, but please do get in touch with the team if you have any questions.

Description of the task

What we would like you to do:

1. **Complete a short online task:** Please click through the link here to go through the online activity [link to 'Option to trial' journey prototype]. Take a note of **which option** you chose in the online activity.
2. **'Test' your chosen option on your own mobile device:** For the week before your interview, we would like you to test out the search provider on your device. Please use the same option you chose in the task above and use it as your default for a week. We don't mind which search provider you use. We have included some guidance below on how to change your default search provider on your device.
If you chose an option such as Google, Bing, Yahoo or DuckDuckGo – [here](#) are the guidelines for how to change your search provider in your web browser and your home screen (only for Android users).
If you chose an option such as ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini – here are the guidelines for how to use the app for that service.

For ChatGPT, please click [here](#).

- For Copilot, please click [here](#).
- For Gemini, please click [here](#).

3. Please answer the questions below – you can do so in this form or send back your thoughts in an email, whichever is easiest for you. We will also ask you a couple of questions about the pre-task in the interview.

Follow-up questions

Which search provider did you choose to use for one week? What made you choose this one?

**If you chose a different provider to what you usually use:
How did using a different search provider impact your experience with search more generally?**

**If you chose a different provider to what you usually use:
What do you think this experience of testing a different search provider would be like on another one of your devices?**

Guided testing topic guide

The semi-structured interview sessions followed this structure below. This topic guide was further divided into two versions: one for participants who completed the pre-task (trial), and one for those who did not.

Introduction

Section	Key instructions and probes
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Introduction & Consent Aim: To introduce the participant to the research.	<i>Moderator to introduce Thinks and the research:</i> • Hello, thanks for joining today. My name is XXX and I am a researcher from Thinks Insight & Strategy, an independent research agency. • We're currently carrying out research on behalf of the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) to understand choices made by people around device (e.g. mobile phone) settings. We want to understand how people make choices about search services on their devices. • <i>[If required]</i> I am joined today by a colleague from the CMA, who will be listening in to the session. They will be off camera, and might jump in at the end with any additional questions. <i>Moderator to explain terms of the session:</i> • The interview will last up to 45 minutes. • We're an independent research agency so I'm here to understand your experiences and listen to your honest views and opinions – there are no right or wrong answers. • The research findings will be anonymised and you will not be personally identified in any of our reporting. You can opt out of the research at any time before the end of this session. We won't then provide your input to the report. • Thinks will hold your name and contact information for quality monitoring purposes only and will not pass on any personal data to any third party. • If you say something that gives me reason to think you or someone else is at risk of harm, we may be legally obliged to pass this information to the relevant authorities. • This data will be stored securely and deleted at the end of the project. • Finally, I'd like to record the interview today for note-taking purposes – this recording will only be shared with the immediate team working on this project <i>[if CMA observing: The recording won't be shared with the CMA team]</i>. <i>Moderator to share details of the session:</i> • In today's session, you will go through some mobile design prototypes. These are early versions of screens that show what future experiences might look like. • We will ask you to share your screen and share your thoughts by speaking aloud as you go through them. ○ <i>For example: why you have clicked something, what you notice, how you feel, what makes sense, what you expect to happen next.</i> • We're interested in your honest thoughts and feedback. Again, this is not a test, there are no right or wrong answers.	5 mins	5
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Introduction (Warm-up questions) Aim: To understand general online behaviour	Before we start, I'd like to ask about your online behaviour generally. - Can you tell me a bit about how you use the internet day to day? - What words would you use to describe the way you use the internet?	2 mins	7

Observational tasks & trial exploration

Section	Key instructions and probes		
Observation tasks (Behavioural-first) Aim: to observe user interaction with 3 choice screen tasks in random order of prototypes – in order to understand how the design of choice screens be optimised to meet user needs and expectations	Thank you. Now, I'll now share the prototype link with you. <i>Moderator to share prototype link with the participant and ask them to share screen:</i> Imagine you are setting up a new phone for yourself and you have just turned it on. You will be shown some screens to help you choose what settings you would like for your phone. I'd like you to use and explore the screens on your own - please think out loud as you go. If you have any issue or questions, please let me know. <i>Randomly assign tasks (randomise flow order) to participant:</i> Preparation screen: <i>impact of information about the on-device effect of the user's choice on engagement and understanding and information on 'how this works' and 'why it's important to take time making.</i> Inclusion vs. no inclusion of generative AI-based services alongside traditional search providers. <i>After each task:</i> Great. Now I will ask you a few questions before we move onto the next task. - What stood out to you most from your experience doing this task? - How would you describe your experience? - What did you find helpful, or less helpful while doing this task? - What did you find easy or less easy? - What did you find clear or less clear? - Probe on comprehension of wording used in the task. <i>Moderator to reflect on the search service choice they made in each task:</i> - What choice did you make here?	15	20

	○ What contributed to this? • What impact do you think this choice will make? [Probe on impact on their device if participant is unsure] • How is this similar or different to what you currently use on your devices?		
Test-drive (trial) and resurfacing exploration Aim: to understand consumers' needs in relation to inclusion of 'option to trial a search service' before making the decision	<i>B) Participants assigned to 'non-trial group'</i> Trial screen [link] Chrome review prompt [link] Imagine this screen appears on your phone, please navigate as you would normally and think aloud as you go. <i>Moderator observes and probe:</i> • I see you selected [option] Can you tell me why? • Do you think the option to trial a provider impacted your choice? If so, how? • Is there anything that could help make this task easier? • Anything unclear? • Anything particularly helpful? • If you could set up your own trial period how long would you like it to last? • How long (e.g. 1 week, 1 month...)? How clear is the wording 'test drive' on the button you pressed? • What wording or name for this would be clearer? • <i>Moderator to suggest alternative names:</i> Test drive Two week trial Test your default <i>A) Participants assigned to 'trial group' that completed pre-task (skip straight to this task if they are in group A)</i> Thanks for sharing your thoughts. Last week, you were asked to complete a short task and try a search provider. Now let's talk about that experience. <i>Moderator to share direct link to (Chrome review prompt with the participant and ask them to share screen (i.e. trial finished, now revisit your decision):</i> [link] Can you tell me which option you chose last week and why? What did you learn from trialling the option you chose? What, if anything, did it change about the way you use search?	5 mins	25

	<i>Moderator observes and probes on choice after trial</i> • To what extent did doing this trial make you want to try a different option in the future? • Do you think the option to trial a provider impacted your choice? If so, how? • If you could set up your own trial period, how long would you like it to be? • How long (e.g. 1 week, 1 month...)?		
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Reflective feedback

Section	Key instructions and probes		
Mental models Aim: to understand how prior knowledge and awareness links to needs and choice	What are your needs in terms of online search? What things are most important to you? What is less important? Do you know what your default search service is on your phone? Have you tried to change it?	5 mins	30
Teach back exercise Aim: to identify gaps, opportunities, misunderstanding	<i>USE AS NEEDED DEPENDING ON CONVERSATION AT EACH FLOW TO FILL GAPS</i> <i>Moderator shares their screen with different choice screen options side by side for easy movement between them and specific probing for reflections on different options.</i> Thank you. Now let's revisit the tasks to hear more about your thoughts. <i>Teach back exercise on what added info on each concept is telling them (capturing how much they retained and how they interpreted the information) – cover task 1, 2, 3 – spending about 60 seconds on each:</i> 1. I'd like you to explain what these design concepts are asking you to do back to me in your own words, as if you were describing them to a friend. This helps us understand what's clear, what's confusing, and how you're interpreting the information — there are no right or wrong answers. 2. Is there anything confusing? 3. Is there anything important that felt missing?	5 mins	35
Explicit prompts on information screens, choice	<i>Moderator to reshare screen focusing on 'preparation screens'</i> • What could be added or changed here to help you pick the best option for you? • How much information is right for you at this stage?	10 mins	45

screens, AI choice presentation Aim: to get further insights on what information is useful before making a choice and while considering options	- Is there anything else you think would be helpful for people with these screens? <i>Moderator to reshare screen focusing on 'choice screens'</i> - What could be added or changed here to help you pick the best option for you? - What could be added or changed here to help others pick the best option for them? - What could be changed or added here to help understand why this decision is important? <i>Moderator to reshare screen focusing on 'Generative AI-based services on screens'</i> - How did you feel about the AI-related wording you saw on the screen? <i>Moderator to probe on risks or limitations of AI</i> <i>Moderator to probe on labelling AI vs non AI</i> - What information did you find helpful when making decision? - Did any of these screens make you more or less likely to pick an AI-powered service? Why? <i>Moderator to reshare screen focusing on 'Prompt in Chrome screen'</i> - How did you feel about this screen 'popping up' on your phone screen? - What do you think might improve this? <i>Moderator to probe on ways the interruption could be mitigated.</i>		
Wrap-up	<i>Moderator to thank participants for their time and remind about incentive payment.</i>	-	45

References

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