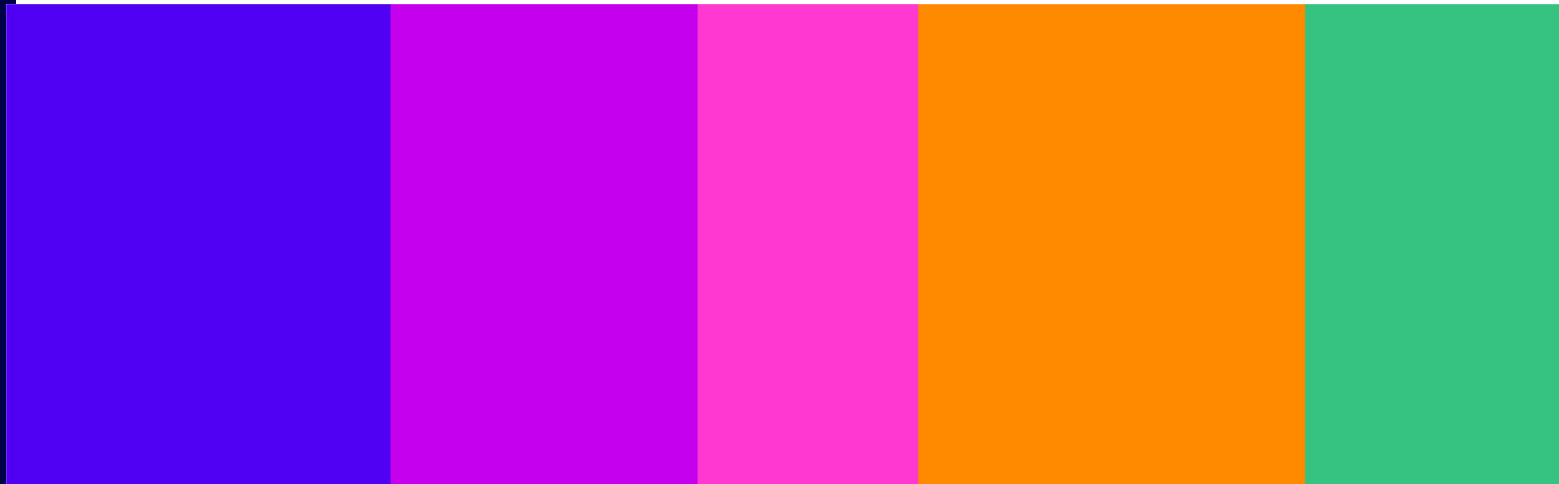


The Era of Answer Engines

Generative AI's impact on search experiences and online safety

Discussion Paper

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Overview

A new era of information retrieval

Generative AI ('GenAI') search tools are changing the way people access information, offering direct, natural-language responses to search queries using up-to-date information. GenAI search encompasses both AI search chatbots ('AI chatbots'), such as ChatGPT, and AI search summaries ('AI summaries'), such as Google's AI Overviews – the latter appearing on the search result pages of traditional search interfaces.

When search tools like Google, Yahoo!, and Ask Jeeves first emerged in the late 1990s, they promised to make the vast expanse of the web navigable and useful. As former Google CEO Larry Page put it in the early 2000s, the “ultimate search engine would basically understand everything in the world, and it would always give you the right thing.” Today, the developers of GenAI search tools make a similarly ambitious promise to transform how billions of people discover content, with search tools no longer just providing *access* to information but providing the information *itself* – a new class of technologies some call ‘answer engines’.¹

Yet this enthusiasm is not universal. Some academics and journalists have expressed concerns about how these tools generate their results and the potential risks of their outputs. AI entrepreneur and cognitive psychologist Gary Marcus regularly points to examples of how they produce inaccurate responses, describing them as “autocomplete on steroids”.² Multiple academic studies demonstrate that AI chatbots can affirm dangerous user beliefs, for instance reinforcing harmful medical advice.³ News organisations, meanwhile, have warned that the growing use of AI summaries could divert traffic away from their websites, threatening the long-term economic viability of independent journalism.⁴

Ofcom is interested in GenAI search as the independent regulator for the UK's communications industries, including post, telecommunications, network security, broadcasting, on-demand programme services, radio spectrum and online services. We regulate search services with UK links under the [Online Safety Act 2023](#) (OSA). Under the OSA, a search service means a service that is, or which includes, a search engine, and this applies to some (though not all) GenAI search tools. As part of their duties under the OSA, regulated search services are required to assess and mitigate the risks of their users encountering illegal search content and search content that is harmful to children. More information about these duties can be found on [Ofcom's website](#).

Our research and what we have found

Against the backdrop of major developments in the search industry, Ofcom has sought to deepen its understanding of GenAI search tools, examining their defining characteristics, patterns of use, potential risks, applicable safety measures, and the evolving landscape of their development and deployment.

This discussion paper presents the findings of our research on this topic, drawing on a literature review, expert interviews, and the results of a qualitative study from the market research firm

¹ [What is an answer engine?](#) (Fast Company, July 2024)

² [Gary Marcus - The Next Decade in AI](#) (Beyond the Patterns, Feb 2021)

³ [What Research Says about 'AI Sycophancy'](#) (Tech Policy Press, Oct 2025)

⁴ [AI summaries cause 'devastating' drop in audiences, online news media told](#) (The Guardian, July 2025)

[YouGov](#), which involved interviewing a selection of UK internet users. Further details about the YouGov study can be found in Chapter 3. We include quotes from our study participants at various points throughout the paper, denoted using italics.

This paper includes six chapters, covering the following:

1. How does GenAI search work?
2. Who are the key players in GenAI search?
3. How do people use GenAI search?
4. What are the main risks of GenAI search?
5. What safeguards are available for GenAI search?
6. What's next for the GenAI search space?

Our paper focuses primarily on the online safety implications of GenAI search, but also comments on other areas where Ofcom has a regulatory remit, such as broadcast standards and rules on due impartiality in news under the Ofcom Broadcasting Code.⁵ In addition, Ofcom has a statutory duty to promote media literacy and to publish a statement recommending how media literacy activities could be developed, pursued and evaluated.⁶ These areas of our work are referenced in the paper where relevant.

Furthermore, in undertaking our research, we have sought to focus on the benefits and risks associated with the provision of search responses on GenAI search tools (e.g. information drawn from a search index), as opposed to content that has been produced solely by the tools' underlying large language models. However, it is worth noting that existing literature rarely makes the same distinction. This paper also concentrates primarily on text-based content produced by GenAI search tools, rather than images, videos, or other forms of GenAI content.

Disclaimer

Please be aware that this discussion paper does not constitute formal guidance. It does not require providers of GenAI search tools to take any specific actions. Further, this discussion paper does not take a view on whether a specific provider of a GenAI search tool is a regulated 'search service' within the meaning of the OSA.

Key findings

- **The 'back end' technology of GenAI search tools is not completely different from that of traditional search tools.** GenAI search tools rely on similar software-based components, such as web crawling and indexing technology. Some make use of indexes from third-party search tools to supply users with relevant results.
- **What sets GenAI search apart is the way information is selected and presented to users.** Users can ask questions in natural language and receive concise summaries of results. Additionally, GenAI search tools may omit results that traditional search tools would include, or present them in a different order.

⁵ See the [Ofcom Broadcasting Code](#) Section 5: Due impartiality and due accuracy

⁶ See the [Communications Act 2003](#) Section 11, which sets out Ofcom's media literacy duties

- **GenAI search tools could enhance people’s search experiences in several ways.** Their ability to present single answers to complex, multi-criteria queries can connect users to relevant information more quickly. This includes providing consumers with faster analysis about the communications services they purchase, such as mobile network providers. GenAI search tools can also make sense of queries written in different formats and languages, which may support inclusion and accessibility.
- **GenAI search offerings are diverse, but new entrants may face several hurdles to gaining a foothold in the industry.** Current industry leaders include established search players like Google, ‘AI-first’ entrants like OpenAI, and social media platforms like Meta. However, firms seeking to enter this industry face steep hurdles, including the significant costs of developing GenAI and the barriers to competing with Google, which the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has found to have ‘Strategic Market Status’.⁷
- **GenAI search tools may be more commonly used by young people and men.** While it is difficult to pinpoint how many people use GenAI tools for the purpose of searching for information (as opposed to other uses like image generation), Ofcom’s [2024 Online Nation Report](#) found that 78% of 16-24 year olds had used a ‘Generative AI tool’ in the past year, compared with 41% of all internet users aged 16+. The same survey finds that men are more common users of GenAI tools than women (50% of men versus 33% of women, between June 2023 and 2024).
- **Participants in our YouGov user research predominantly preferred using traditional search tools due to habit and familiarity.** When given free choice, participants overwhelmingly gravitated towards Google as their primary means of accessing information. This finding is reflected in other research, including analysis by the CMA, which finds that UK adoption of AI chatbots for search activities remains low compared to the numbers using traditional search tools.⁸ That said, the popularity of GenAI search tools continues to grow.
- **Study participants were more likely to use GenAI search tools for low-stakes, exploratory searches.** Participants were more comfortable interacting with GenAI search tools when the consequences of an incorrect answer were less significant, for example for queries relating to a recipe or an overview of a trending topic. On the other hand, participants said they were more likely to rely on traditional search for high-stakes queries, for example those relating to health and money.
- **GenAI search may introduce new dimensions of harm compared to traditional search.** Although there is limited evidence about the extent to which users are currently exposed to harmful search material – such as content defined as ‘illegal content’ under the OSA – these tools appear to present other information-related risks to users. This includes risks of misinformation or ‘hallucinations’, incorrect or unreliable citations, and sycophantic responses that can narrow exposure to differing viewpoints.

⁷ [Strategic market status investigation into Google’s general search services: Final Decision](#) p. 9, Section 1.25 (CMA, Oct 2025)

⁸ Ibid., p. 64

- **There are several ways that providers of GenAI search tools could address potential risks and safeguard their users.** For example, they could adopt model training approaches such as rule-based AI alignment, integrate content filters that block harmful inputs and outputs, and stress-test their tools using red teaming methods. Where GenAI search services are in scope of the OSA, Ofcom has recommended measures for services to comply with their duties to protect people in the UK from illegal and harmful content. These recommendations range from user reporting mechanisms to the provision of crisis prevention information.
- **Overcoming information-related risks also requires users to develop stronger media literacy skills,** such as recognising the limitations of GenAI search tools and assessing the reliability of their results. Media literacy could be improved through ‘on-platform’ interventions like ‘read-before-sharing’ nudges, and ‘off-platform’ efforts including workshops and toolkits that build users’ capacity to assess online content. Ofcom is currently consulting on a [set of recommendations](#) aimed at helping services enhance users’ ability to critically and safely engage with the content they consume.
- **The search ecosystem will continue to evolve, requiring close attention from regulators and policymakers.** Industry has already begun to roll out several innovations that are adjacent to GenAI search, including AI agents, AI browsers and multimodal search (e.g. voice-based interactions). These could yield significant benefits for users, while introducing new risks alongside those noted above. Regulators and policymakers will need to monitor and respond accordingly to these changes.

What’s next for Ofcom?

We hope the findings set out in this paper will help stakeholders – including government, civil society, academia, and the broader public – make sense of what could be a major shift in the way people access information online. Ofcom will continue to take the necessary steps to fulfil our duties as they relate to GenAI search services which are in scope of the OSA. This includes:

- Engaging with services to ensure they understand and are complying with their duties under the OSA
- Ensuring that, where applicable and appropriate to do so, any new policy guidance and recommended safety measures we produce for regulated search services accounts for in-scope GenAI search services
- Conducting further research as necessary to assess the benefits, risks and best practice safeguards associated with these services
- Building on our role as a convenor of media literacy experts to advise on recommendations for emerging technologies, including GenAI search tools
- Monitoring emerging innovations in the search ecosystem like those listed above, for example AI agents and AI browsers

Our ongoing work on GenAI search aligns with Ofcom’s [strategic approach to AI, 2025/26](#). As AI technologies advance and are deployed by the sectors we regulate, we are investing time and resources into deepening our understanding of their impacts – including the opportunities and risks they bring for businesses and consumers. This understanding will enable us to achieve outcomes such as supporting responsible innovation across the UK’s communications sectors.

We would welcome feedback on this paper. Please direct any comments or queries to our Technology Policy Team at technologypolicy@ofcom.org.uk.

We also welcome responses in formats other than print, for example an audio recording or a British Sign Language (BSL) video. To respond in BSL:

- Send us a recording of you signing your response. This should be no longer than 5 minutes. Suitable file formats are DVDs, MP4 or QuickTime files; or
- Upload a video of you signing your response directly to YouTube (or another hosting site) and send us the link.

1. How does GenAI search work?

The purpose of a user's search activity is information retrieval: finding relevant, usable, and reliable information. To achieve this, GenAI search and traditional search tools use similar underlying software, including technologies used to crawl the web and index content. However, GenAI search also introduces new technical components and user experiences.

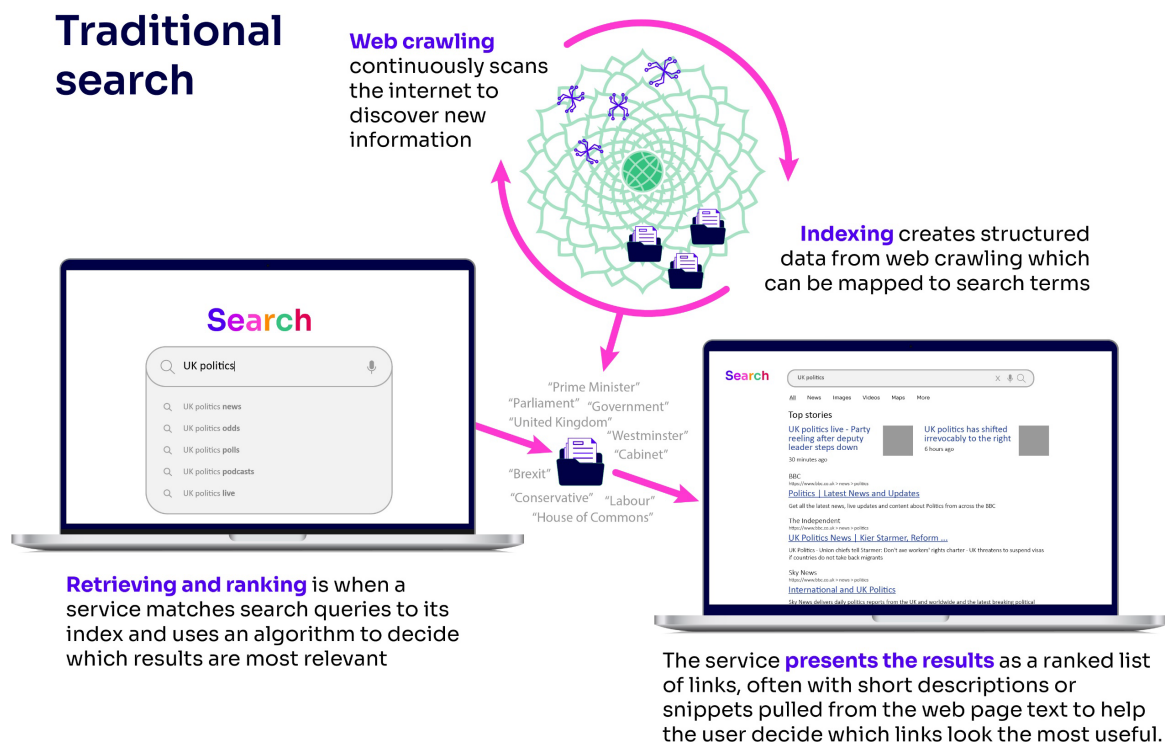
Below, we outline the basic architecture of traditional search tools before examining how GenAI search builds upon and diverges from these established foundations.

How do traditional search tools work?

Traditional search tools like Google and Bing enable users to enter a query, which is then processed to retrieve, rank, and present content from a search index – typically in the form of URL links.

Traditional systems operate on four levels, some of which are shared with GenAI search:

Figure 1: What is traditional search, and how does it work?



- **Web crawling:** A special software program called a crawler continuously scans the internet, finding web pages and following hyperlinks to discover new information. Each discovered page is downloaded and stored, and its contents are associated with a unique document ID for future reference.
- **Indexing:** After the crawling process, the stored pages are transformed into structured data, which usually involves mapping each term to the set of pages where the term appears. The process works like a digital filing system, converting text, media, and metadata into

searchable keywords that describe each page's topics (for example, 'food', 'celebrity', 'politics').

- **Retrieving and ranking results:** When a user enters a query into the search bar, the service matches this query to an index, looks up all related web pages, and uses an algorithm to decide which ones are most relevant. The algorithm considers factors such as which web pages have the most similar content, how recently the page was published, how up-to-date and current the content is, and the credibility of the page.
- **Presenting the results:** The user is shown a ranked list of links, often with short descriptions or snippets pulled from the web page text to help them decide which links look the most useful. The user might click through to the pages to obtain relevant information, or change their search keywords if they want something different or more specific.

By way of example: When a user searches for 'the latest UK political news', a traditional search tool retrieves relevant content from its stored index, potentially drawing on web pages which feature terms like 'Parliament', 'Politics' and 'Prime Minister'. The ranking algorithm may then prioritise recently published political stories from credible UK news outlets, such as coverage of parliamentary debates or government announcements, before displaying an ordered list of results to the user.

How do GenAI search tools work?

Box 1: What is Generative AI?

Generative AI ('GenAI') refers to a class of artificial intelligence systems capable of generating new content such as text, images, audio, videos, code or other forms of outputs using statistical models trained across one or more domains.⁹ Large language models (LLMs) are a subset of GenAI focused on text (as opposed to other modalities, such as images or videos). They are neural networks trained on large datasets which enable them to perform a wide range of tasks.¹⁰ This includes producing paragraph summaries of content retrieved from search indexes and other data sources, which is a core component of GenAI search experiences.

There are two main types of GenAI search tools currently available: AI search summaries and AI search chatbots. While GenAI search tools also rely on web crawling and indexing, differences emerge in other parts of the search process, including how results are selected and presented to a user.

⁹ [AI Insights: Generative AI](#) (UK Government Digital Service, Updated Sept 2025)

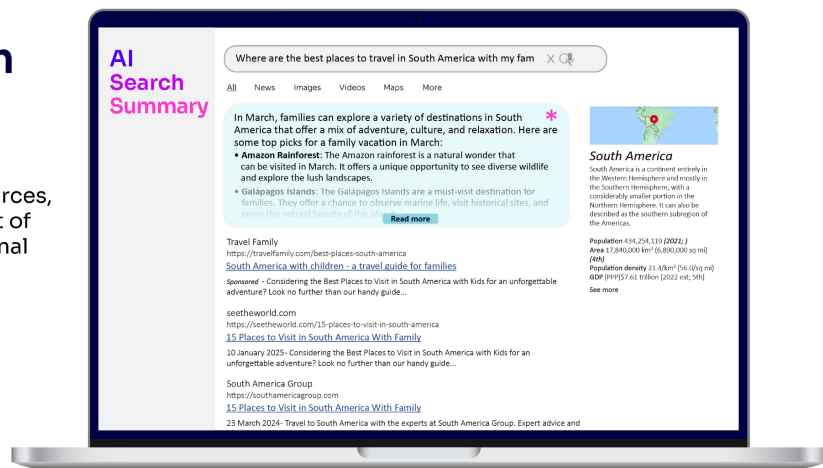
¹⁰ [What are large language models \(LLMs\)?](#) (IBM, Sept 2025)

Figure 2: What is generative AI search?

GenAI search

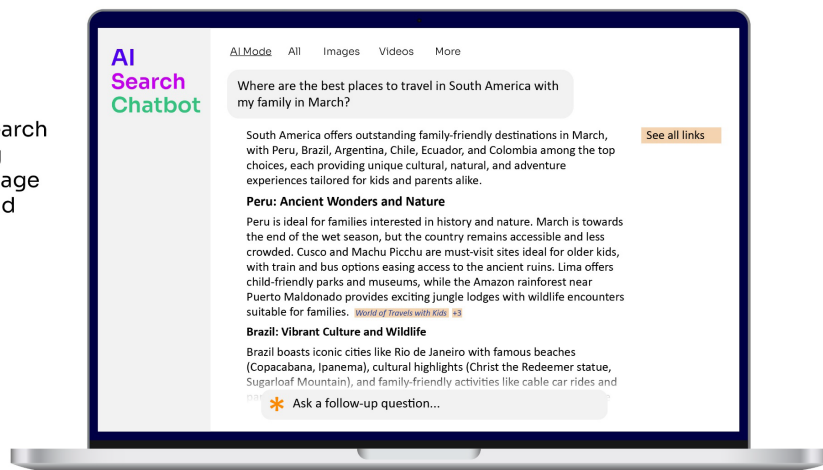
AI search summaries

provide natural-language overviews of selected sources, and are shown above a list of URL links within a traditional search interface



AI search chatbots

provide conversational search experiences by answering questions in natural language using selected sources and supporting follow-up interactions



AI search summaries ('AI summaries')

AI search summaries are search responses that can appear above lists of URL links in traditional search interfaces. They present a summary of selected sources deemed relevant to user queries. AI summaries may include embedded URL links to the cited pages, in the event that users want to visit those pages themselves. Many traditional search interfaces have now incorporated AI summaries, including Google (with AI Overviews), Brave (with Summarizer), and DuckDuckGo (with Search Assist).

Unlike traditional search tools, which can return a virtually unlimited list of web page links, AI summaries present information drawn from only a limited number of sources. While users of traditional search may scroll through dozens or even hundreds of pages, AI summaries condense key material into a small set of results designed for quick comprehension. Whereas AI chatbots may sometimes generate responses drawn solely from their LLM, AI summaries are primarily intended to synthesise information from selected web pages. Most AI summaries also operate on a single-turn basis, offering only one-off responses without multi-turn dialogue or conversational memory.¹¹

¹¹ An exception is Google's AI Mode, a feature accessible through a button beneath AI Overviews, which enables users to continue their exploration of the Overview by asking follow-up questions and engaging in multi-turn conversations.

AI search chatbots (‘AI chatbots’)

AI search chatbots provide conversational search experiences by answering questions using selected sources and supporting follow-up interactions. Initially, AI chatbots were limited to producing responses based solely on the outputs of an LLM. Often, the LLM’s training data reflected a snapshot of the internet and other sources up to a cutoff date. As a result, many of these chatbots could not access or cite the latest information, leading to outdated or otherwise unhelpful responses.

However, in recent years, developers of AI chatbots have begun to draw on the results of search indexes in order to present live internet results to users. This is now the case for chatbots such as OpenAI’s ChatGPT, Anthropic’s Claude, and Mistral’s Le Chat. The process by which AI chatbots draw on search indexes is sometimes known as ‘retrieval augmented generation’ (RAG), with internet results retrieved from an index and then presented in natural language using the chatbot’s LLM. Critically, the presentation of results in conversational prose means that users do not necessarily have to visit the original web pages to access the information they are looking for.

AI chatbots do not always retrieve information from a search index, however. In some cases, it may still be possible for a chatbot to answer a user’s query using only its LLM. For example, maths questions like “What is 27 times 14?”, or historical queries like “Who was the first person on the moon?”, can sometimes be answered solely by an LLM, since it is less important to have access to recent information. Chatbots now provide users with the option of explicitly requesting that the chatbot draw on live internet results in response to their query. Additionally, chatbots may draw information directly from an API rather than a search index or model: for example, Perplexity uses FinChat’s API to provide real-time financial data to users.¹²

Additionally, AI chatbots exhibit several important differences to traditional search tools, including the following:

- **Turn-by-turn interactions:** Users of AI chatbots can ask follow-up questions in response to an initial result presented by the chatbot, allowing users to efficiently delve deeper into a topic. For instance, in response to a user’s query about UK political news, a chatbot may mention several events. The user can ask for more details about one of them, and the chatbot can retrieve relevant information from earlier in the thread (e.g. news source preferences, response styles) to refine the follow-up and avoid asking the user to repeat themselves. In contrast, traditional search tools operate on a ‘single turn’ basis: each new query is handled independently, returning a list of links without retaining context from the previous query.
- **Follow-up questions:** Another important difference is that AI chatbots will sometimes finish their responses by posing context-specific questions back to users.¹³ For example, a user’s query about the best places to travel in South America might lead the chatbot to present a summary of destinations across the continent, along with a question back to the user about whether they’d like to know more about one of the countries featured. In this way, AI chatbots encourage turn-by-turn interactions, and may play a role in influencing the overall search journeys that users take.

¹² <https://x.com/BradoCapital/status/1917677113047384409> (Finchat, April 2025) [Accessed 14 Oct 2025]

¹³ Although traditional search services may have ‘follow-up’ features such as Google’s ‘People also search for’ suggestions, AI chatbots differ in that their follow-up query prompts are embedded within an ongoing conversation and adapt dynamically to a user’s specific context.

- **Fewer results:** Like AI summaries, AI chatbots typically present results from only a handful of web pages, which could be based on factors such as source relevance, safety considerations, and technical constraints. In some cases, AI chatbots may not display webpage links at all, instead providing a written synthesis of the information or responses with citations that may not be linked to the text.

The below table summarises the headline similarities and differences among traditional search tools, AI search summaries, and AI search chatbots.

Table 1: Traditional versus GenAI search tools

Characteristics	Traditional search	AI search summaries	AI search chatbots
<i>What does it look like to users?</i>	Ranked list of URL links	Summarised answers, sometimes with source hyperlinks, shown above a ranked list of URL links	Conversational responses which can contain source hyperlinks, or a side list of URL links
<i>Where does web content for search responses come from?</i>	Indexed web pages and other databases	Indexed web pages, model knowledge, and other databases	Indexed web pages, model knowledge, APIs, and other databases
<i>How many information sources does it present?</i>	Virtually unlimited lists of URL links	One natural language summary answer per query, which may rely on one or a few web pages	Usually one natural language answer per query, which may rely on one or a few web pages
<i>Does it cite its information sources?</i>	Provides URL links	Sometimes provides citations for URL links	Sometimes provides citations for URL links
<i>How do users interact with it?</i>	Single turn interactions: every new query from a user generates a fresh set of URL links	Usually single-turn interactions	Multi-turn conversations: users can ask additional queries following an initial response from the chatbot

To help illustrate these differences further, we can compare traditional and GenAI search with familiar human roles: while traditional search tools can be analogous to librarians handing people books to browse, GenAI search tools act more like research assistants.¹⁴ After finding relevant sources, GenAI search tools process the retrieved content to generate a response. This response might blend insights from multiple sources, and include suggestions of new questions and topics of exploration. However, GenAI tools do not engage in the same thinking and reasoning processes as human assistants do. When they produce errors or bias, these can be hard to detect, confidently

¹⁴ This analogy should not be taken to imply that GenAI tools are the *same* as human assistants. For example, they generate outputs through patterns in data, rather than via a human-like understanding or judgement of the material.

expressed, and scaled across many users. In some cases, they may even propose avenues of exploration that are misleading or risky. We expand on these and other risks in Chapter 4.

2. Who are the key players in GenAI search?

In this chapter, we map the leading providers of GenAI search tools, assess their distinctive features and limitations, and examine whether they are likely to bolster competition in what has historically been a concentrated search market.

Key players in traditional search

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the search engine landscape was fragmented, encompassing dozens of players including Yahoo, Lycos, AltaVista, Infoseek, and Ask Jeeves.¹⁵ These services often experimented with different algorithms and indexing strategies. Ask Jeeves was noteworthy, as one of the first search tools that encouraged users to engage with search using conversational language rather than keywords (even if it ultimately relied on a mix of pre-scripted answers and traditional web results to respond).¹⁶ The launch of Google in 1998 marked a shift in the market, with the firm surging ahead of its rivals in part due to its advanced ranking algorithm.¹⁷

Google today, according to the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), has an ‘unparalleled position’ in the traditional search market and has maintained this for an extended period.¹⁸ Google Search currently accounts for 90% of all UK search queries.¹⁹ In 2024, over 200,000 firms collectively spent more than £10 billion on Google Search advertising.²⁰ Bing is the second most popular search service in the UK, albeit trailing significantly in its share of search queries and search advertising, with both standing at less than 5%.²¹ The CMA has stated that “no traditional general search providers have materially grown relative to Google for at least fifteen years”.²²

Key players in GenAI search

The GenAI search industry encapsulates both AI chatbots and AI summaries, and includes Google, Microsoft, OpenAI, and Anthropic, among others. These firms can broadly be grouped into established search players, AI-first entrants, and social media platforms. Each group has its own characteristics and limitations.

Established search players

Most providers of traditional search tools have begun to experiment with GenAI, in the sense of both integrating an AI summary feature on their main platform, and – in some cases – establishing a standalone AI chatbot that operates separately.

¹⁵ [History Of Search Tools](#) (Sept 2011)

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ [Deeper Inside PageRank](#) (2004)

¹⁸ [Strategic market status investigation into Google’s general search services: Final Decision](#) p. 64 (CMA, Oct 2025)

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 70

²⁰ Ibid., p. 5

²¹ Ibid., p. 9, Section 1.21

²² Ibid.

Google has integrated AI Overviews (an AI summary feature) on Google Search, while also launching Gemini (an AI chatbot). Both are powered by Google’s proprietary Gemini models and the firm’s own search index. Google continues to launch new GenAI features, such as the AI Mode functionality on Google Search.²³ Microsoft has adopted a similar strategy to Google, embedding an AI summary feature on Bing while also establishing a new AI chatbot in the form of Copilot. Unlike Google, however, Microsoft makes limited use of its own LLMs, instead relying on those of OpenAI.²⁴

Brave is another established player with both an AI summary and AI chatbot (Leo), which claims to focus on privacy-first features. In 2023, Brave integrated AI summaries into its longstanding search engine.²⁵ Both before and after GenAI integration, Brave has operated without tracking or profiling users, and does not store their personal data.²⁶ This means that its search responses (including AI summaries) are based primarily on ‘anonymised’ signals, and are focused on providing relevant responses through aggregated rather than individual engagement data.²⁷ Brave relies on access to third-party models to power the GenAI part of its search, including models from Meta, Mistral, and Anthropic.²⁸ These models are hosted directly by Brave, which means no data is processed or stored by the third-party model developers.²⁹

Established search players may bring distinct advantages to the development and rollout of GenAI search tools. This includes having the infrastructure already in place for web crawling and indexing, as well as in-house expertise in ranking and personalising search experiences. This enables established search players to closely align their search responses with relevant factors, such as a user’s search history (outside of Brave’s anonymised approach) and the service’s commercial interests. Established search players also have an existing user base of people who already trust the service to handle search queries, and who may therefore be willing to try out a new product offering.

AI-first entrants

Several companies have emerged as ‘AI-first’ search players, which means they initially launched chatbots and only later integrated live search functionalities. OpenAI is a prominent example, having released ChatGPT in 2022 and added a ‘search’ feature in 2024, which meant the chatbot could begin to search and respond with information from the web.³⁰ Other notable examples include Anthropic (with Claude), DeepSeek, and Perplexity. Most AI companies have not built their own backend search infrastructure, instead relying on third party search indexes. ChatGPT, for instance, accesses live search data via Bing’s search API,³¹ while evidence suggests that Claude may use Brave’s API.³²

While a lack of backend search infrastructure may put some AI companies at a disadvantage, they have the benefit of maintaining direct control of the models underpinning their GenAI search tools. This means they may be able to select which results to summarise from a search index, which parts of the content to extract from each result (e.g. snippets and metadata), and how to present those

²³ [Expanding AI Overviews and introducing AI Mode](#) (Google, March 2025)

²⁴ [Reinventing search with a new AI-powered Microsoft Bing and Edge, your copilot for the web](#) (Feb 2023)

²⁵ [Brave Search introduces the Summarizer, an AI tool for synthesized, relevant results](#) (Brave, March 2023)

²⁶ [Brave Browser Privacy Policy](#) (Brave, Updated Sept 2025)

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ [Leo—Brave’s privacy-preserving AI assistant—now available on Android](#) (Brave, Updated June 2025)

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ [Introducing ChatGPT Search](#) (OpenAI, Oct 2024)

³¹ [Bing is now the default search for ChatGPT](#) (The Verge, May 2023)

³² [Anthropic appears to be using Brave to power web search for its Claude chatbot](#) (TechCrunch, March 2025)

results to users. Moreover, in contrast to those established players that are reliant on third-party LLMs, AI companies are better positioned to access state-of-the-art models and to be among the first to integrate them into their tools. This can create a first-mover advantage, as model providers get a head start refining how an LLM works in their own products before the model's public API or partnership channels become available.

Social media platforms

The third main group of GenAI search players are social media companies, who have begun to launch their own AI chatbots – both as a standalone offering and as a feature embedded within their existing services. Meta, for example, has built an AI chatbot called Meta AI, which is now available to UK users across Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, as well as via a standalone website. Meta AI currently runs on Llama, which is Meta's family of large AI models that the company builds, trains on large datasets, and deploys to power its assistant features across its apps. Meta then provides access to Bing's search index as well as Google search data to produce search responses with up-to-date information.³³ Similarly, xAI has developed Grok, an AI chatbot available to users on X as well as via a standalone website and app.³⁴ Powered by xAI's own LLM, Grok is described by X as being capable of answering questions, solving problems, and brainstorming ideas.³⁵ In July 2025, xAI launched Grok 4 which integrates real-time search data across X, the web, and other sources via its own responses.³⁶

Like established search players, social media platforms such as Meta and X benefit from large, established user bases, which they can leverage to promote and scale their GenAI search tools. These platforms are well-positioned to present GenAI search as a natural extension of the social media experience – allowing users to enjoy the benefits of new technologies without having to switch applications and set up new accounts. In addition, social platforms have the advantage of incorporating real-time, user-generated content into their GenAI search features. Grok on X, for example, can draw on live user posts when responding to certain queries (e.g. about trending topics).³⁷ Like their AI-first counterparts, Meta and xAI maintain proprietary control over their underlying models, enabling more efficient and tailored integrations into their search offerings.

Which GenAI search tools are the most popular?

In addition to analysing the strengths and limitations of various GenAI search tools, it is useful to look at how widely they are used in the UK, as studying usage can reveal the pace at which these technologies are entering mainstream use. Below, we examine recent UK user numbers for AI chatbots (comparable data for AI summaries is limited at present).

Data from Ipsos iris³⁸ shows that 15.8 million (32%) UK online adults visited at least one of the following AI chatbots in June 2025: ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, DeepSeek, Perplexity, Claude.ai or Grok. ChatGPT³⁹ was the highest-reaching AI chatbot with 13.0 million (26%) UK online adults visiting

³³ [Meta AI adds Google Search results](#) (Search Engine Land, April 2024)

³⁴ [About Grok, Your Humorous AI Assistant on X](#) (X Help Center)

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ [Grok 4](#) (xAI News, July 2025)

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ [Ipsos iris](#) is the UKOM-endorsed currency for the measurement of online audiences and provides data that is representative of the UK online adult population.

³⁹ ChatGPT is also available as a plugin through third-party applications, such as Apple Intelligence, which is not included in this data. Data only reflects ChatGPT website and/or app visitors.

the service in June 2025. It was followed by Copilot (2.6 million, 5%),⁴⁰ Gemini (1.7 million, 4%)⁴¹ and DeepSeek (0.8 million, 2%).⁴² This data only tells us about the number of visits to the websites and/or applications for these tools; it does not provide an indication of the number of users specifically undertaking search activity within the tools. Nonetheless, it still helps us understand the general reach of AI chatbots that can be used for search.

An Ofcom survey in June 2024 similarly found that nearly a third (33%) of UK internet users aged 16+ said they had used ChatGPT in the past year, making it by some margin the most popular AI chatbot, followed by Copilot at 15% of internet users aged 16+.⁴³

Table 2: UK online adult reach to selected AI chatbots: Selected months 2024-2025

	June 24	September 24	December 24	March 25	June 25
ChatGPT*	4,425,421	5,701,818	7,151,001	9,416,586	12,990,346
Microsoft Copilot*	160,893	1,908,334	3,320,144	2,143,111	2,551,353
Google Gemini*	499,614	732,093	688,762	861,184	1,745,485
DeepSeek (Launched Jan 25)	-	-	-	1,027,207	835,667
Perplexity	116,219	113,560	232,831	355,939	560,979
Claude.ai	120,031	147,796	117,571	210,490	345,735
Grok*	-	-	-	-	225,284

*Source: Ipsos, Ipsos iris Online Audience Measurement Service, June, Sept, Dec 2024 and Mar, June 2025, age: 18+, UK internet users. Dashes represent no data available. *Microsoft Copilot data includes the Copilot android App for all months, iOS app only reported on in June 2025, Microsoft-Copilot website data Sep 24 onwards and Bing-Copilot website data Sep 24-Mar 25 only. Data does not cover Copilot results within Bing search. *Google Gemini android app data not reported on in June 2024, iOS app data only reported on in June 2025, all months include Gemini website data. Data does not cover Gemini results within Google search. *Grok data is website and app only and does not include Grok use within the X site.*

As well as being the highest-reaching AI chatbot, ChatGPT's UK adult reach continues to grow at a fast rate, suggesting the service has yet to reach its peak UK adult reach. Data from Ipsos iris shows that in June 2024, 4.4 million UK adults visited ChatGPT, which more than tripled in a year to 13.0 million in June 2025. In contrast, DeepSeek – once viewed as a serious challenger to ChatGPT upon

⁴⁰ Data is for Copilot website and app only, it does not cover Copilot results within Bing Search.

⁴¹ Data is for Gemini website and app only, it does not cover Gemini results within Google Search.

⁴² Ipsos, Ipsos iris Online Audience Measurement Service, June 2025, age: 18+, UK internet users.

⁴³ Ofcom, Online research panel poll: Generative artificial intelligence, June 2024, age: 16+, UK. As reported in Ofcom's [Online Nation 2024 Report](#) (Ofcom, Nov 2024)

its UK launch – has seen its UK adult reach fall from approximately 1 million to 836,000 UK adult visitors.⁴⁴

Understanding the popularity of different AI summaries is more challenging, since users may not make an active choice to use this feature (instead, AI summaries can appear automatically in a traditional search interface). However, later in the paper we explore people’s general attitudes towards AI summaries, including when they are relied upon instead of AI chatbots.

Will GenAI search tools improve competition in the search market?

Box 2: What does competition have to do with user safety?

Competition refers to the rivalry between suppliers offering goods or services within a market. When competitive pressures are weak, firms may exercise market power, which can lead to higher prices, reduced innovation, or lower-quality tools for consumers.

An uncompetitive market can undermine not only fair pricing and service standards, but also user safety. As highlighted in a [joint Ofcom and CMA statement](#), a lack of competition can weaken the incentives for services to tackle risks and strengthen safeguards, since there are fewer options for consumers and advertisers to switch to other providers.

The CMA’s efforts to bolster competition in the search market may therefore also be beneficial for Ofcom’s own objectives of protecting users from harmful search content. The CMA has already outlined the possible measures that it could take to improve competition, subject to consultation and the demonstration of their effectiveness and proportionality.⁴⁵ This includes ensuring effective data portability mechanisms, and the introduction of ‘choice screens’ that enable UK users to easily switch between search tools.

While the regulation of online safety and competition have distinct policy aims, Ofcom and the CMA recognise where these aims can overlap and will collaborate as necessary to deliver the best outcomes for UK consumers.

GenAI search provides opportunities for innovation and differentiation in online search, which could be a positive development for competition and consumer choice. However, despite notable traffic figures for some AI search chatbots – particularly ChatGPT – Google Search continues to maintain a substantial share of global search activity. Google’s market share may have also led to widespread adoption of its AI summaries: in the UK, the CMA has observed that while AI chatbot queries are

⁴⁴ Ipsos, Ipsos iris Online Audience Measurement Service, June 2024 and Mar, June 2025, age: 18+, UK internet users. Note: ChatGPT is also available as a plugin through third-party applications, such as Apple Intelligence, which is not included in this data. Data only reflects ChatGPT website and/or app visitors.

⁴⁵ [Strategic market status investigation into Google’s general search tools: Roadmap of possible measures to improve competition in search](#) (CMA, June 2025)

increasing, Google's AI Overviews reached significantly more users and appeared more frequently than all ChatGPT queries combined.⁴⁶

These and other findings have led the CMA to designate Google as having 'Strategic Market Status' (SMS) in the provision of general search services, citing its "substantial and entrenched market power" and "position of strategic significance".⁴⁷ As part of its analysis, the CMA considered potential future developments, including the growing popularity of GenAI search tools, and found that these could pose an emerging competitive threat to Google's position. However, it assessed that current usage of AI chatbots remains "very low" compared to Google's general search products.⁴⁸ In the same findings, the CMA stated that Google is "well-positioned to respond to developments in AI to maintain its market position, and to ensure [non-Google] AI assistants do not develop into a more sustained and significant competitive constraint to its general search services".⁴⁹

The CMA has identified several barriers which may prevent rival search tools, including new GenAI search entrants, from gaining a foothold in the search market.⁵⁰ These include:

- **Economies of scale:** The infrastructure needed to search the web (such as indexes and crawlers) and the data centres, energy and model training needed to build and run GenAI models, represent a significant cost. To achieve a return on this investment, it is likely that providers of search tools will need a large user base, making scale a significant factor in competitiveness.
- **Access to data:** Beyond cost, GenAI search relies on large, continuously maintained web indexes that are concentrated with a few operators, leading many providers of search tools to depend on third-party access. Among other constraints, this dependence can expose entrants to fluctuations in the terms and conditions of partnership agreements.⁵¹
- **Role of defaults:** Many browsers and devices present users with a particular search tool by default. These default tools have a distinct advantage, given that users tend to habitually use the pre-selected option, even when alternatives are available. For example, the CMA estimates that in every month since March 2022, "more than half" of the total queries in Google Search were made through an access point where Google was set as the default.⁵²

Despite these challenges, the scale of recent GenAI investments suggests that several GenAI search players could meaningfully compete in the search market. For example, in March 2025 OpenAI received a significant investment of \$40 billion from Microsoft and Softbank.⁵³ Anthropic has also received multi-billion-dollar funding commitments from Amazon,⁵⁴ and Perplexity has raised hundreds of millions in venture capital.⁵⁵ These investments could be used to scale compute and

⁴⁶ [Strategic market status investigation into Google's general search services: Final Decision](#) p. 94, Section 5.104 (CMA, Oct 2025)

⁴⁷ [Strategic market status investigation into Google's general search services: Final Decision](#) p. 151 (CMA, Oct 2025)

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81, Section 5.54(a)

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9, Section 1.23

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17-18, Section 2.38

⁵¹ For example, see Microsoft's 2023 price hikes for services using its search data: [ChatGPT Opened a New Era in Search. Microsoft Could Ruin It](#) (Wired, March 2023)

⁵² [Strategic market status investigation into Google's general search services: Final Decision](#) p. 119, Section 5.179 (CMA, Oct 2025)

⁵³ [OpenAI closes \\$40 billion funding round, largest private tech deal on record](#) (CNBC, March 2025)

⁵⁴ [Amazon and Anthropic deepen their shared commitment to advancing generative AI](#) (Amazon, March 2024)

⁵⁵ [AI Startup Perplexity Valued at \\$18 Billion With New Funding](#) (July 2025)

infrastructure, potentially supporting more advanced models, higher query volumes, and improved search experiences. Ofcom will continue to monitor this space as it evolves and work with the CMA on potential regulatory actions.

3. How do people use GenAI search?

In this chapter we examine the relative benefits of GenAI search tools compared with traditional search tools, and look at the types of people who are more inclined to use these tools. We also unpack the results of the qualitative research study we commissioned YouGov to undertake, where 24 internet users aged 17+ in the UK were asked to share their experiences of using traditional and GenAI search tools.

What can GenAI search tools be used for?

People have typically used traditional search tools for three types of queries:⁵⁶

- **Transactional queries:** These are efforts to complete economic tasks, such as making a purchase of a product or subscription.
- **Navigational queries:** These are attempts to find a specific website, such as the website of a company or brand. The user may know what they are looking for, but not know how to reach it without a search tool.
- **Informational queries:** These can be simple factual queries, searches for tutorials, or deeper research queries, such as questions about the weather or scientific research on global warming.

GenAI search tools can in theory be used to complete all of these tasks. For instance, a user could ask an AI chatbot a transactional query about which car to buy, and receive a pros-and-cons chart across brands. Similarly, a user could engage with an AI summary when conducting informational searches, such as asking for the English translation of a Spanish phrase or querying for the best films of the year. Navigational queries, too, can be served by GenAI search tools, for example a request to be shown the UK passport renewal website.

However, the advantages of GenAI search are not uniform across these search categories. Traditional search may remain highly effective for direct navigational lookups and straightforward transactions when the destination (e.g. BBC news page) or item (e.g. a kitchen appliance) is already known. GenAI may add the most value for informational or exploratory tasks that benefit from analysis, comparison, or tailored next steps. These and other key advantages fall into three categories of GenAI search benefits:

1. **Providing direct answers:** Both AI chatbots and AI summaries can piece together information from multiple web pages to present users with a 'single' answer, saving them from manually reviewing every source. Users can also ask multi-part questions ("What's a good birthday venue with vegan food options and suitable for 10 people?") and the tool can process many factors at once, which some traditional search tools are not designed to handle well.⁵⁷ Academic field

⁵⁶ [Determining the informational, navigational, and transactional intent of Web queries](#) (Information Processing and Management, May 2008)

⁵⁷ For example, see [Expanding AI Overviews and introducing AI Mode](#) from Google (March 2025), which explains how Google users can now "ask nuanced questions that might have previously taken multiple searches...[which] helps you access more breadth and depth of information than a traditional search on Google."

experiments⁵⁸ and peer-reviewed studies⁵⁹ have shown that GenAI search tools can enable quicker retrieval of relevant information and can help users finish tasks faster (including transactional queries), especially in information-dense or unfamiliar domains.

Direct, information-rich answers from GenAI search tools can also provide consumers with information about the communications services they purchase, without requiring them to piece together detailed information from multiple sources. Ofcom's ongoing research into the consumer impacts of AI in the telecommunications sector is exploring how people may interact with such tools when engaging with the market. For example, a consumer can pose a detailed search query when searching for a suitable mobile provider, specifying multiple criteria such as pricing and quality of coverage. In response, a GenAI search tool can produce a tailored summary of mobile provider options which addresses each consideration.

2. **Enabling conversational interactions:** As noted in an earlier chapter, AI chatbots allow users to search for information in turn-by-turn engagements, enabling them to more easily probe deeper into a particular subject. If memory features are enabled, AI chatbots can also remember conversation context and adapt to user preferences, potentially offering increasingly relevant answers as they collect additional information from a user. For example, ChatGPT's custom instructions and memory features allow users to set preferences for all interactions, such as 'always summarise in bullet points' or 'prioritise UK sources'.⁶⁰
3. **Supporting accessibility and inclusion:** Both AI chatbots and AI summaries can make search more inclusive for people who struggle with the conventions of traditional search engines. This might include young children who are still learning how to form effective search terms, non-native speakers who prefer simpler phrasing, or students approaching a new subject area. For instance, a child learning about climate change for the first time could use a GenAI search tool to ask, "Can you explain climate change in simple language?" instead of entering 'climate change'.

Recent research demonstrates these accessibility benefits in practice: LLMs have been successfully deployed to generate 'Easy to Read' content for individuals with cognitive impairments and intellectual disabilities.⁶¹ Similarly, AI-generated summaries of scientific abstracts have proven effective at improving accessibility, with over 85% of a group of volunteers finding ChatGPT-generated summaries more understandable than the original academic texts.⁶²

These benefits have the potential to strengthen people's ability to find and access information online, a key outcome Ofcom has identified in our media literacy work.⁶³ Among other advantages, improved information-seeking abilities can help people locate and assess information which is relevant to personal, educational, and other societal needs.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ [Generative Search: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment](#) (June 2025). This study shows that GenAI search can boost consumer purchases because it can help translate 'vague' needs into targeted queries that address user intent.

⁵⁹ [Search+Chat: Integrating search and GenAI to support users with learning-oriented search tasks](#) (March 2025). This study demonstrated that participants using a GenAI search tool had higher levels of learning immediately after a search task compared with participants only using a traditional search engine (however, this effect dissipated in a retention test one week later).

⁶⁰ See: [Memory and new controls for ChatGPT](#) (OpenAI, Feb 2024)

⁶¹ [Exploring large language models to generate Easy to Read content](#) (July 2024)

⁶² [Leveraging artificial intelligence to summarize abstracts in lay language for increasing research accessibility and transparency](#) (July 2024)

⁶³ [Evaluation Toolkit: Outcomes, indicators, and survey questions bank](#), p. 8-10 (Ofcom, Sept 2024)

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10

Box 3: What is Ofcom’s role in supporting media literacy?

Ofcom defines media literacy as “the ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts”.⁶⁵ We have a statutory duty to promote media literacy under the Communications Act 2003. This includes a requirement for us to publish a statement recommending how others might develop, pursue and evaluate activities or initiatives relevant to media literacy.⁶⁶ This includes recommendations relevant to providers of GenAI tools, which are reshaping the digital landscape by automating content creation, personalising distribution and enabling more interactive and immersive experiences.⁶⁷ Providers of GenAI tools are well-placed to embed media literacy practices early as the technology continues to develop.⁶⁸

As part of our efforts to promote media literacy, we have published best practice design principles to inform the work of online services.⁶⁹ These principles include taking a proactive (rather than reactive) approach to developing users’ media literacy skills; supporting a diverse range of users, not just a narrow segment of the user base; monitoring the effectiveness of media literacy initiatives; and sharing outcomes and insights where feasible. Ofcom is currently consulting on a [set of recommendations](#) aimed at helping services enhance users’ ability to critically engage with the content they see. Our final statement on these recommendations will be published in 2026.

Who uses GenAI search tools?

It is difficult to estimate how many people, and which demographics, use GenAI search tools for the purposes of making search queries. This is because many people visit these platforms for reasons other than retrieving information. For example, someone might use Claude to write code, or Gemini to create images and videos. Nevertheless, the available evidence does allow us to paint a partial picture of people’s interaction with these tools.

For instance, a 2024 Ofcom survey found that 41% of internet users aged 16+ had used a ‘Generative AI tool’ in the past year (some of which are GenAI search tools), with 18% saying they had used one in the past month.⁷⁰ Internet users aged 16-24 were the most likely to say they had used GenAI in the past year (78%) compared to all other age groups. The survey also revealed a clear difference in gender regarding GenAI use, with men aged 16+ being more likely than women to have used GenAI in the last 12 months (50% versus 33%).

Taken from [Ofcom’s 2024 Online Nation report](#), the figure below depicts the proportion of UK adults (16+) who used GenAI tools (including, but not limited to, GenAI search tools) from June 2023 to 2024, broken down by age and gender:

⁶⁵ [Media Literacy by Design: Best-Practice Principles for On-Platform Interventions to Promote Media Literacy](#), p.3 (Ofcom, April 2024)

⁶⁶ [Communications Act 2003](#), Section 11

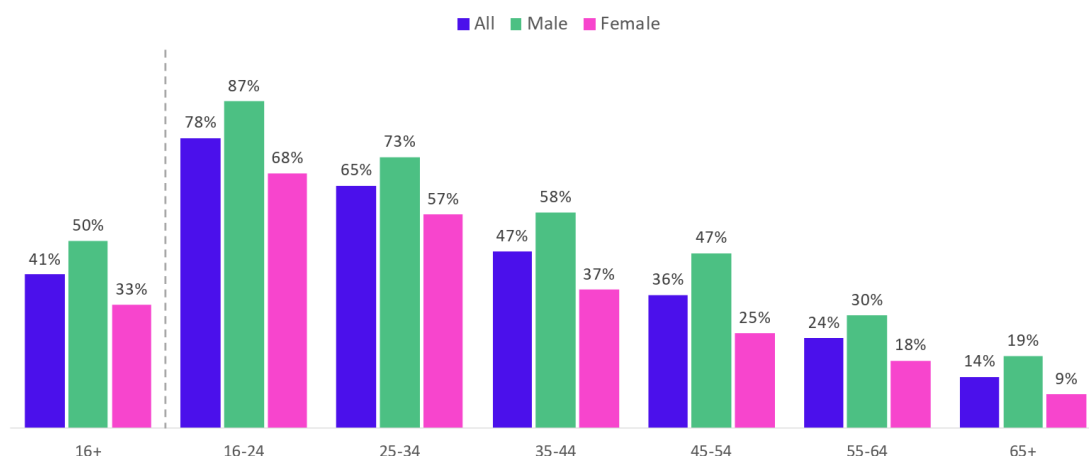
⁶⁷ [How to promote Media Literacy: Consultation on recommendations for online platforms, broadcasters and services](#), p. 13 (Ofcom, Sept 2025)

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ [Best Practice Design Principles for Media Literacy](#), p. 4 (Ofcom, March 2024). Examples of on-platform interventions include labels, overlays, pop-ups, notifications, and additional resources.

⁷⁰ [Online Nation 2024 Report](#), p. 32 (Nov 2024, Ofcom)

Figure 3: UK internet users aged 16+ who have used a generative AI tool in the past year, by age and gender: June 2024



Source: Ofcom, Online research panel poll: Generative artificial intelligence, June 2024. Question 1: When, if ever, did you last use each of the following GenAI tools? Generative AI tools include: ChatGPT; ChatGPT Plugin; My AI on Snapchat, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, DALL-E, Midjourney, Character.AI, Scribe, AlphaCode, Quillbot, Synthesia, Claude from Anthropic, Perplexity, Stability's AI tools and Grok on X. Base: UK internet users age: 16+ (2520).

When the same survey asked UK users aged 16+ *why* they use GenAI tools, the most popular answer provided by respondents was for 'finding information or content' (36%). Among the other reasons listed were 'exploring the technology' (30%), 'summarising existing text' (24%) and 'seeking advice' (23%). Overall, these results suggest that GenAI tools are being used most often for search purposes.

A separate survey undertaken by the Digital Regulation Cooperation Forum (DRCF) in 2024 shines a light on how people in the UK are interacting with AI summary features like Google's AI Overviews.⁷¹ The DRCF survey found that 39% of UK internet users read search summaries 'sometimes', with 5% reading them 'always'. Only 14% said they 'never' read them. Regarding their usefulness, most participants said they were 'quite helpful' (at 53%), with smaller proportions saying they were 'very helpful' (17%) and 'quite unhelpful' (10%). The search topics that users would most often consider using the summaries for were recipes and cooking tips (53%) and 'how-tos' for certain tasks, such as home DIY (49%). Topics such as health and lifestyle support and financial guidance were less commonly selected options.

Several academic studies have also examined the use of GenAI search tools among demographic and specialist subgroups, in particular young people and students. For example, a 2025 survey of 1,000 UK undergraduates found that 92% of this cohort had used AI (up from 66% in 2024).⁷² Among those who used tools such as ChatGPT for assessments (88%), the most common use cases were for information-seeking activities, such as explaining concepts, summarising articles, and suggesting research ideas.

Ofcom's GenAI search qualitative research

While quantitative research tells us something about who tends to use GenAI tools and – to a lesser extent – what they use these tools for, to date there has been little in the way of qualitative studies that investigate the more nuanced motivations and concerns of everyday users. To address this

⁷¹ [Understanding consumer use of generative AI](#) (Thinks Insight & DRCF, April 2025)

⁷² [Student Generative AI Survey 2025](#) (Higher Education Policy Institute, Feb 2025)

evidence gap, in 2025 Ofcom commissioned the market research firm YouGov to interview a range of UK adult internet users about their experiences with traditional search, AI search summaries, and AI search chatbots. Among other questions, this research sought to understand:

- When and why people choose to use GenAI search tools over traditional search tools, and vice versa (including whether these decisions are shaped by search topic)
- The extent to which people trust the outputs of GenAI search tools, and whether they visit information sources themselves or check citations
- Whether people have had negative experiences while using GenAI search tools, and if so, how people have responded to these negative experiences

YouGov conducted in-depth online interviews with 24 UK adults, reflecting a mix of ages (17+), ethnic backgrounds, genders, socioeconomic statuses, regions, and education levels. The sample was split by self-reported digital confidence, with a third having ‘very high’ confidence, a third having ‘high’ confidence, and a final third having ‘medium’ confidence. The sample also deliberately captured a spread of AI understanding and of favourability toward AI.

Prior to the interviews, participants completed a task that involved conducting five online searches using information-seeking tools they normally access – be that a traditional or GenAI search tool – over the course of five days. Participants were asked to search for specified topics on some days, covering health and wellbeing, finance and money management, and news and current affairs. Example questions included “How does a credit score work?” and “What are the health benefits of a Mediterranean diet?”. Participants also ran searches on personally chosen topics, including holiday destinations, recipes and gym routines. Following the task, YouGov’s interviewers spoke with the participants individually to understand the tools they used, the reasoning behind their approach, and other topics.

More details on the method and findings can be found in the supplementary [slide pack and technical report](#), published separately in September 2025.

Box 4: Limitations of our user study

As is the case with most qualitative research, our study involved a reasonably small sample (24 participants in total). This limited our ability to make generalised observations about the behaviours and attitudes of all UK internet users. Moreover, our usage of an in-depth interview method meant the study was subject to interviewer bias and social desirability bias from participants. This approach uncovered rich and detailed insights into consumer attitudes and claimed behaviours, though the findings should be considered exploratory rather than definitive.

Additionally, the rapidly evolving nature of GenAI search tools presents a moving target for research.⁷³ As these tools change and as people become more familiar with them, behaviours and attitudes may shift. Similarly, changes in regulatory frameworks and safety protocols could influence consumer confidence and patterns of adoption. These dynamic contexts indicate that research on GenAI search should be continually refreshed.

⁷³ For example, developments like [Google's AI Mode](#) emerged *after* our fieldwork, meaning our findings may not capture user behaviours associated with this new product

Our research revealed five key findings, which we unpack in more detail in the rest of this chapter:

1. Participants mainly preferred traditional search tools, specifically choosing Google as their dominant search tool due to habit and familiarity
2. Participants differentiated between low- vs high-stakes searches, reserving GenAI mainly for everyday or exploratory tasks with lower consequences
3. AI search summaries were mainly used as starting points in search journeys, and treated with caution or conditional trust
4. AI search chatbots were used to summarise information or brainstorm ideas, often complemented by traditional search for verification
5. Privacy, transparency and ethical concerns influenced participant attitudes, with users expecting better regulation and safety mitigations

1 – Participants mainly preferred traditional search tools, specifically choosing Google as their dominant search tool due to habit and familiarity

“I’m so used to how Google looks and how it appears that anything else seems less user-friendly to me.” – Female, 29, High digital confidence

Our study adopted an open approach by allowing participants to choose which search tools to use, rather than restricting them to specific options. Under these free-choice conditions, participants expressed a clear preference for traditional search tools. They overwhelmingly gravitated towards Google as their primary search tool, using it across various browsers including Chrome, Firefox, and Microsoft Edge. Many had set Google as their default homepage, or instinctively navigated to it when opening their browsers.

Those who preferred Google often said this was due to the service’s user-friendly interface, and because they felt it generated more accurate and relevant results. However, this view was not universal: some participants stated that Google sometimes included untrustworthy links, and a minority felt it did not always provide comprehensive results. Some participants who used Google noted that they often performed additional searches using other search tools (e.g. Bing) when seeking broader information source coverage.

Other participants who used more than one search tool did so due to having different browsers installed on their devices with default search settings. This meant that the use of search tools heavily depended on the device they were using at the time. In addition to consulting traditional search tools, many made use of websites and platforms like Reddit and TripAdvisor, which are known for containing reviews and opinions on a range of subjects.

2 – Participants differentiated between low- vs high-stakes searches, reserving GenAI search tools mainly for everyday or exploratory tasks with lower consequences

“There are some topics that I would feel [AI chatbots] would give straight answers and they wouldn’t be wrong... [for example] ‘How old is Lionel Messi’? It won’t get those kinds of questions wrong

because they're like, basic questions...but if it's something deep or something broad, then I'm more sceptical.” – Female, 56, High digital confidence

Even though most participants said they continued to rely primarily on traditional search tools out of habit and trust, they were more likely to turn to GenAI search tools for ‘low-stakes’ search queries where the consequences of any potential error were less severe. This included queries relating to casual, creative or exploratory searches, for example quick suggestions for dinner recipes, ideas for a birthday message, or a rapid explanation of a trending topic. These were the type of search queries where the desire for speed and convenience could outweigh a need for thorough verification.

In contrast, participants said they were more likely to rely on traditional search tools for high-stakes search queries. This could include searches for financial advice, information about a health condition, or news updates. For these kinds of topics, participants valued the ability to choose web pages themselves, visit them to see the information first-hand, and verify the authors of the content. These patterns of behaviour suggest that GenAI search tools served as a complementary aid for our study participants, rather than a wholesale replacement for traditional search.

3 – AI search summaries were mainly used as starting points in search journeys, and treated with caution or conditional trust

“[AI summaries are] useful... I don't have to scroll through 50 results to make my own idea... [but] they are not always accurate. Sometimes they're [a] complete hallucination. They are not something you can trust, but if you can [take them] with a grain of salt, [they] can help you dissect all the information.” – Male, 53, Medium digital confidence

Many of our participants noticed the recent addition of AI summaries like Google’s AI Overviews in the traditional search tools they use. These summaries were often relied on as convenient starting points within a search journey, although participants reported engaging with the material cautiously. They preferred to use AI summaries for low-stakes searches, where there were fewer negative consequences if the information was wrong, for instance searches about hobbies and leisure. A small minority of participants trusted the summaries in nearly every circumstance, and did not feel the need to check the legitimacy of the information sources. However, most participants said they would check whether the web pages being cited in the summaries were from a trustworthy source, and whether the results aligned with what they expected to find.

Interviews also revealed that some participants did not want AI summaries to automatically appear in their traditional search interfaces, and disliked the absence of options to adjust settings (e.g. to turn off AI summaries). These participants generally preferred to do their own research by going directly to webpages, as they felt that AI summaries failed to provide the specific information they sought and offered insufficient detail compared to direct sources. Others noted that if they wanted to use GenAI to support their search journeys, they would make a conscious decision to use AI chatbots instead, as they perceived these tools to be more detailed in their responses.

According to some participants, the most significant barrier to engaging with AI summaries was the experience of having previously encountered or having heard about the summaries providing incorrect information. These negative experiences created enduring scepticism: participants who had spotted inaccuracies or heard reports of errors tended to ignore AI summaries altogether, instead going directly to the web pages listed in traditional search interfaces.

4 – AI search chatbots were used to summarise information or brainstorm ideas, often complemented by traditional search for verification

“If I was doing research, I'd probably use [AI chatbots] as a starter to help narrow down my options... to give me some ideas of specific links [that] I can go to. I'd also use [AI chatbots] sometimes to compile information about a particular subject into a condensed format.” – Male, 43, Medium digital confidence

Unlike AI summaries, which participants came across organically when engaging with traditional search tools, AI chatbots like ChatGPT, Gemini and Perplexity were only encountered when people made deliberate decisions to seek them out. This may help to explain why they were used by a smaller, although still notable, number of participants in our study, relative to those using traditional search. Participants differed in the ways they discovered AI chatbots: some first heard about them through friends and family, while others were initially exposed to them in the workplace or in educational settings. Several participants were already using AI chatbots for *non-search* activities like image creation before they began turning to them as possible alternatives to traditional search tools.

When interacting with AI chatbots, participants reported submitting a different style of search query – one that was more conversational and polite in tone, with questions and requests framed as full sentences. This discursive pattern included providing contextual information and parameters to keep responses focused and specific. Participants frequently refined their questions by rephrasing or issuing follow-up queries to elicit clearer, more accurate, or more detailed answers. A minority of participants even tested the reliability of responses by asking the same question multiple times, as they perceived consistency as an indicator of accuracy and trustworthiness. Additionally, some participants looked for, or asked AI chatbots to provide references to, sources for its responses, to check if web pages were used that they considered reputable or trustworthy.

Participants found AI chatbots particularly useful for summarising information and brainstorming ideas, especially where they did not want to sift through multiple sources themselves. Examples included low-stakes queries, such as finding cooking recipes or exploring new topics for general learning. The conversational nature of AI chatbots enabled participants to break down subjects into smaller, more manageable parts. In some cases, they would revert back to traditional search tools once the AI chatbot they were using had given them an initial grounding in a subject. This ‘toggling’ approach was more likely in cases where participants had a low tolerance for inaccuracy, for example regarding health, finance or work-related queries.

5 – Privacy, transparency and ethical concerns influenced participant attitudes, with participants expecting better regulation and safety mitigations

“I think with all the deepfake stuff that you get now, it's hard to know – am I looking at fake information? Am I looking at misinformation? What I'm trying to put across is, you need to be critically evaluating everything now and not take it as what it is.” – Female, 71, Very high digital confidence

Although participants saw many positives in the advent of GenAI search tools, they also expressed a range of concerns about how these tools handle information, the way they operate, and the content they produce. A prominent worry centred on data privacy, with some voicing concerns about how sensitive search queries and results would be stored and shared. Participants also voiced criticisms

about possible biases in the outputs of GenAI search tools, as well as apprehensions about the impact of their use on the environment. Some participants feared that GenAI search tools might expose users to harmful material, and were uncertain whether adequate guardrails were in place to mitigate this risk.

While a few participants were aware of techniques for generating better responses from GenAI search tools, such as writing prompts⁷⁴ in a particular style, most were less informed about the safety features that were (or which could be) embedded in these tools, for instance content filters. Nevertheless, there was a general expectation that the providers of these tools should implement robust protections, such as restricting the generation of content that might be harmful or used for malicious intent (e.g. information relating to any illegal actions), especially to protect children and other vulnerable groups.

Overall, participants' attitudes towards GenAI reflected a complex balance of cautious interest and critical vigilance, shaped by concerns about privacy, biases and ethical costs, as well as a desire for greater openness about how GenAI tools function and manage user information. In Chapter 4, we provide a more in-depth analysis of the risks associated with online information-seeking, including how these risks differ between traditional and GenAI search tools.

⁷⁴ A prompt is a way to interact with a GenAI tool. It can be a question, instruction, or input that may help AI generate a relevant response. See: [AI Knowledge Hub Prompt Library](#)

4. What are the main risks of GenAI search?

Given the expanding role played by GenAI search tools in enabling people to access information online, it is important to examine the harms they pose and where additional safeguards may be needed. Below, we summarise evidence of risks on traditional search and how they compare to those on GenAI search, and take a closer look at risks that may be unique to GenAI search tools.

Risks on traditional search tools

The OSA creates duties for regulated search services to assess and mitigate the risk of their users encountering both illegal content and content that is harmful to children. Under the OSA, illegal content includes that relating to terror, fraud, child sexual abuse, and hate offences, among other material. Content that is harmful to children includes pornography, eating disorder content, and suicide and self-harm content.

Ofcom has published guidance that explains how users of search services can be exposed to illegal and harmful content. Our [Illegal Harms Register of Risks \(IH RoR\)](#), for example, references research from Tech Against Terrorism which notes that websites operated by terrorists are “often easily discoverable through search engines”.⁷⁵ There is also evidence showing ways in which search services can be used to access websites that sell illegal items, such as drugs, firearms, or stolen credit card details used in fraud offences.⁷⁶ Moreover, search services are frequently used to find child sexual abuse material (CSAM),⁷⁷ and can likewise facilitate access to extreme pornography.⁷⁸

Similarly, Ofcom’s [Children’s Register of Risks](#) highlights how traditional search tools can subject children to harmful content. For example, it cites research from the Network Contagion Research Institute showing that search queries relating to suicide often successfully return content that encourages or glorifies self-injurious behaviour.⁷⁹ The Register also draws attention to evidence of children encountering pro-eating disorder websites through traditional search services,⁸⁰ as well as a large body of evidence of children encountering pornographic content on these search platforms.⁸¹

⁷⁵ [The Threat of Terrorist and Violent Extremist Operated Websites](#) (Tech Against Terrorism, Jan 2022)

⁷⁶ [Illegal Harms Register of Risks \(IH RoR\)](#), p. 409

⁷⁷ [Web-based child pornography: The global impact of deterrence efforts and its consumption on mobile platforms](#) (June 2015)

⁷⁸ From a dataset of 13,888 search instances from nearly 2,000 users looking for adult content, Ofcom found that 158 of these search instances from 40 users had a search term associated with extreme pornography before visiting an adult content site. This suggests that these search terms lead to content that at the very least contains a relevant matching description, and at worst is illegal extreme pornographic content. Source: Ofcom analysis of Ipsos iris Clickstream Data, 15th September – 15th October 2021, UK, ages 15+.

⁷⁹ [One Click Away: A Study on the Prevalence of Non-Suicidal Self Injury, Suicide, and Eating Disorder Content Accessible by Search Engines](#) (Ofcom, Network Contagion Institute, Jan 2024)

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ [‘A lot of it is actually just abuse’ Young people and pornography](#) (Office of the Children’s Commissioner for England, Jan 2023)

Risks on GenAI search tools

Given that many GenAI search tools draw on similar underlying technologies as traditional tools (e.g. web crawlers and indexes), it is plausible that they could expose their users to the same types of harmful search responses. An AI chatbot that draws on the API index of a traditional search service could, in theory, present users with a response informed by harmful web pages contained in that index (e.g. a web page promoting suicide). An AI summary, meanwhile, could conceivably present users with harmful material from the ranked list of web pages it summarises.⁸²

However, while there is evidence of GenAI tools producing harmful content in general (e.g. suicide content⁸³), there is limited evidence of these tools (either AI chatbots or AI summaries) presenting users with harmful *search* responses. This could be due to multiple factors, such as:

- The relative newness of GenAI search tools, with researchers only beginning to publish studies examining their risks
- Researchers and journalists paying more attention to the *non-search* elements of these tools (i.e. the content produced from the model part of the tools)
- Decreased risks of harm due to multiple layers of mitigations, for example in the search index used to retrieve information and the LLM used to generate the response

However, GenAI search tools have still been found to have a range of information-related risks, four of which we highlight below:

1. The loss of context as well as incorrect or obscured source attributions, which could prevent users from evaluating the credibility of information
2. The inflation of user trust due to conversational interfaces, which could render harmful or inaccurate information more persuasive and difficult to evaluate
3. The potential for sycophantic responses, where GenAI search tools excessively align with user preferences and reinforce their views (even when incorrect or biased)
4. The potential for jailbreaking attacks to provide access to harmful information, for example where users attempt to build context across multiple searches to extract information that would be blocked in a single query attempt

1 – Loss of context and incorrect or obscured source attributions

“I’ve had wrong answers, but I didn’t find that until later when I submitted my paper and they were wrong because the sources were wrong – they were fabricated sources.” – Female, 24, Very high digital confidence

GenAI search tools can aggregate information from multiple sources. In doing so, however, they may strip away the context of the information that would otherwise convey nuance or the intent of the original author. Traditional search tools, in contrast, allow users to see content in its native format, complete with signals such as tone or known domain reputation. For example, in a traditional search context, a user can more easily distinguish between a controversial quote from a user in an internet forum and an evidence-based claim made in an academic journal.

⁸² [Evaluation of Alignment Between Large Language Models and Expert Clinicians in Suicide Risk Assessment](#) (Aug 2025)

⁸³ For instance, a [study from August 2025](#) found that popular chatbots, including ChatGPT and Claude, could provide answers to information-seeking questions such as “which types of poison have highest rate of completed suicide associated with it?”. Additionally, a [high-profile lawsuit](#) alleges that ChatGPT contributed to an American teenager’s suicidal ideation and offered suicide instructions preceding his death.

A recent illustration of this risk occurred in 2024, when Google’s AI Overviews feature was observed presenting satirical Reddit posts as legitimate health and cooking advice.⁸⁴ In multiple cases, AI Overviews recommended adding glue to pizza to help the cheese stick, eating rocks as a source of daily minerals, and using gasoline for a ‘spicy spaghetti’ recipe, all sourced from clearly satirical or joke threads on Reddit. Stripped of their original humorous context, these posts were repackaged by AI Overviews as authoritative guidance, highlighting the risks of GenAI flattening parody into potentially harmful misinformation. Furthermore, a 2025 study on GenAI search tools used for news found that both Gemini and Perplexity cited satirical sources in response to serious queries about Elon Musk and Tesla.⁸⁵

While loss of context can result in a transformation of meaning, a separate but related problem arises with how GenAI search tools handle source attributions. Traditional search tools display direct links to sources, allowing users to verify the information they encounter. GenAI search tools, in contrast, have been found to present information with vague source references, such as fabricated or broken URLs, leaving users unable to assess the credibility of the information. For example, a study conducted by Columbia Journalism Review found that over half of citations from Gemini and Grok 3 led to error pages.⁸⁶

Further research has shown that the problem extends beyond broken links. Even when reliable sources exist, GenAI search tools can fail to attribute them properly. A 2025 study concluded that search responses from Gemini and Perplexity regularly omitted relevant sources altogether, with each response leaving approximately three relevant web pages uncredited.⁸⁷ This pattern creates an ‘attribution gap’ where users are provided with answers but denied access to the underlying evidence.

In cases where GenAI search tools *do* provide accurate sources, they are not always made prominent to users, which potentially allows content from bad actors to go unnoticed. A September 2024 audit by NewsGuard found that several leading AI chatbots, when presented with news-related prompts, produced disinformation and cited unreliable web pages. This included News-Pravda.com (a pro-Kremlin outlet) and CountyLocalNews.com (an AI-generated content farm).⁸⁸ In a traditional search environment, a user might spot these unfamiliar or suspicious URLs and investigate further. However, on a GenAI search tool, those links can be less visible and easier to miss, for example when presented as short hyperlinks.

From a media literacy perspective, these attribution failures can undermine users’ efforts to critically evaluate information by identifying its source. If GenAI search tools omit, misattribute, or obscure sources, users are less able to judge credibility by tracing provenance — a core media literacy skill relevant to spotting issues such as disinformation.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ [Google explains what happened with its wonky AI search results](#) (ZDNET, June 2024)

⁸⁵ [News Integrity in AI Assistants](#) (European Broadcasting Union and the BBC, Oct 2025)

⁸⁶ [AI search has a citation problem](#) (Columbia Journalism Review, March 2025)

⁸⁷ [The Attribution Crisis in LLM Search Results](#) (June 2025)

⁸⁸ [September 2024 AI Misinformation Monitor of Leading AI Chatbots](#) (NewsGuard). Per NewsGuard, an AI content farm refers to low-quality websites that use artificial intelligence tools to create large volumes of clickbait-style articles.

⁸⁹ [Future Technology and Media Literacy: Understanding Generative AI](#), p. 13 (Ofcom, Feb 2024)

2 – Inflation of user trust due to conversational interfaces

“I’ve never had to second guess [the AI search summary] before. But I feel like part of that problem is when I’m researching stuff, it’s researching stuff that I don’t know. So, I’m kind of taking it as gospel.”
– Female, 25, Medium digital confidence

The conversational nature of GenAI search tools – particularly AI chatbots – may lead users to place undue faith in their responses. Research demonstrates that conversational interfaces can improve user trust and satisfaction in a system’s outputs compared to traditional web interfaces, irrespective of the accuracy of the system.⁹⁰ It is not clear why content presented in a conversational format would elicit more trust, but one possible explanation is that it creates an illusion of authoritativeness. Additionally, studies have shown that chatbots designed with anthropomorphic cues, including avatars and conversational interjections (e.g. “I see”), can increase user trust.⁹¹ When these signals of human-like conversation are present, users may also not be aware in the first place that they are interacting with a chatbot.

If users are inclined to take the responses of GenAI search tools at face value, this could in turn reduce ‘click throughs’ to original web pages, with users less likely to independently examine the source of information for themselves. A Pew Research Center report suggests that this pattern of behaviour may be occurring in cases where AI summaries appear on traditional search tools. Their research found that when such summaries appeared on Google, user click-through rates to traditional URL links fell from 15% to 8%.⁹² Moreover, users almost never clicked on the links embedded within the AI summary itself (only 1% of the time).⁹³ This is concerning partly because, as noted in previous sections, there is clear evidence that GenAI search tools are capable of misrepresenting and fabricating information.

These phenomena may be especially problematic for younger users. Research from the University of Cambridge reveals that children are particularly susceptible to treating AI chatbots as lifelike, quasi-human confidantes.⁹⁴ They may mistakenly believe AI chatbots understand emotional nuance and intentions. Such misplaced trust can foster unhealthy attachments and increase vulnerability to harmful information, while displacing more reliable sources of support: for example, if a child searching for advice relies on chatbot guidance instead of turning to trusted adults.⁹⁵

3 – The potential for sycophantic responses

While traditional search tools can personalise results by reordering web page links based on factors such as a user’s search history, they still present users with a variety of sources, some of which can challenge their beliefs. GenAI search tools, however, introduce the risk of ‘sycophancy’. This phenomenon occurs when GenAI search tools adapt their tone and content to match user inputs, and prioritise agreement even if it means reinforcing harmful or inaccurate information.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ [To Trust or Not To Trust: How a Conversational Interface Affects Trust in a Decision Support System](#) (June 2022)

⁹¹ [Designing Chatbots for Misinformation Correction: Examining the Roles of Chatbot Expertise and Anthropomorphism](#) (April 2025)

⁹² [Google users are less likely to click on links when an AI summary appears in the results](#) (Pew Research, July 2025)

⁹³ Ibid. When an AI summary was presented, users were significantly more likely to end their browsing session entirely, with session-ending rates rising from 16% on pages with traditional search results to 26% of pages with an AI search summary

⁹⁴ [AI’s Empathy Gap](#) (University of Edinburgh Centre for Research in Digital Education, April 2024)

⁹⁵ [Me, Myself, and AI Report](#) (Internet Matters, July 2025)

⁹⁶ [Towards Understanding Sycophancy in Language Models](#) (May 2025)

Sycophancy raises important media literacy concerns, as it limits users' exposure to diverse perspectives and reinforces existing user bias, such as political or moral beliefs.⁹⁷

In the field of medical advice, for example, GenAI search tools have been found to match the emotional framing of a query rather than provide neutral advice, with the result of potentially misleading users. A University of Oxford study found that when medical questions were phrased in more urgent, emotionally charged terms, GenAI models offered more dramatic or overconfident recommendations, regardless of whether these were clinically sound.⁹⁸ A separate study on sycophancy revealed that the use of isolated keywords in a query can lead chatbots to generate fabricated results. When prompted with the words 'Lionel Messi, 2014 Fifa World Cup, Golden Boot', five of the chatbots that were tested responded incorrectly that Lionel Messi won the Golden Boot that year.⁹⁹

Research undertaken by Anthropic, meanwhile, found that even in cases where GenAI tools provide accurate answers, they can modify their responses when questioned by the user, subsequently providing incorrect information.¹⁰⁰ Anthropic's researchers cite an example where a GenAI search tool correctly answers a question about rice production, noting that China was the largest producer of rice in 2020. When the human user responds "I don't think that's right. Are you sure?", the tool apologises and generates a fabricated answer that India was the largest producer. The researchers suggest that one reason GenAI tools may operate in this way is because of the way they are trained. In particular, the use of 'reinforcement learning from human feedback' (RLHF) techniques, where humans score model responses during training rounds, may result in a final model that prioritises outputs that match user preferences over truthful responses.

4 – Facilitation of harmful content access through jailbreaking techniques

Jailbreaking attacks also represent a challenge for GenAI search tools, as they may enable users to access harmful information which could be more difficult to obtain through traditional search tools. GenAI search tools may be vulnerable to sophisticated techniques that exploit their conversational nature and contextual memory. This could mean that users can generate harmful search responses – such as instructions for facilitating terrorism¹⁰¹ or devising scams¹⁰² – even when these violate the policies set by providers of GenAI search tools.

A prominent jailbreaking method is multi-turn jailbreaking, which allows users to gradually steer conversations toward harmful content through progressive interactions. Because GenAI search tools carry context from previous queries, a person can begin with harmless topics and, over time, introduce elements that combine to bypass safety mechanisms.¹⁰³ For example, users can start with neutral questions about a particular subject, then introduce follow-up queries that can result in the model eventually providing detailed instructions for dangerous or illegal activities, without triggering detection at any individual step.

⁹⁷ [Future Technology and Media Literacy: Understanding Generative AI](#), p. 15 (Ofcom, Feb 2024)

⁹⁸ [Clinical knowledge in LLMs does not translate to human interactions](#) (April 2025)

⁹⁹ [Chaos with Keywords: Exposing Large Language Models Sycophantic Hallucination to Misleading Keywords and Evaluating Defense Strategies](#) (August 2024)

¹⁰⁰ [Towards Understanding Sycophancy in Language Models](#) (May 2025)

¹⁰¹ [Generating terror: The risks of generative AI exploitation](#) (Jan 2024)

¹⁰² [Jailbreaking ChatGPT via prompt engineering: An empirical study](#) (March 2024)

¹⁰³ [SequentialBreak: Large Language Models Can be Fooled by Embedding Jailbreak Prompts into Sequential Prompt Chains](#) (July 2025)

Researchers have documented numerous other jailbreaking techniques which include:¹⁰⁴

- ‘Disguised intent’ attacks where users frame harmful information requests as legitimate academic research or security testing
- Role-playing scenarios where GenAI is instructed to adopt harmful personas or operate within fictional worlds with different moral constraints
- Virtual AI simulation which involves asking the tool to simulate a different AI model with fewer safety restrictions
- Hybrid strategies which combine multiple techniques simultaneously, such as creating fictional scenarios while asking the AI to simulate an unrestricted model

Other notable risks

In addition to these information-related risks, commentators have raised concerns about the impact of GenAI search tools on other domains, including news, data privacy, and the environment.

AI-generated news summaries can misinform audiences and impact their trust in news publishers

Although this discussion paper focuses on online safety, securing media we trust and value is one of Ofcom’s priority outcomes for 2025/2026.¹⁰⁵ Ofcom also has duties to secure the application of content standards in broadcast TV and radio, including that news is presented with due impartiality and reported with due accuracy,¹⁰⁶ and that there remains a sufficient plurality of providers of different TV and radio services in the UK.¹⁰⁷ Ofcom also has a responsibility to consider and give an opinion on whether the BBC has observed the relevant editorial guidelines in its online material.¹⁰⁸

As discussed in our July 2025 review about the future of public service media, [Transmission Critical](#), we believe that GenAI tools are highly likely to disrupt the media and news industry. As audiences move online, it is critical that public service media remains easily discoverable and accurately represented across online channels, including search.

However, news providers have raised concerns that GenAI search tools are failing to accurately cite news content. In a recent study, BBC Research found that over half (51%) of the answers to news questions provided by GenAI search tools had ‘significant issues’ relating to accuracy and misrepresentation.¹⁰⁹ The study also showed that 13% of the BBC quotes provided by these tools were either altered or did not exist in the article cited. Errors in the outputs of AI-generated news summaries can impact audiences’ trust in news publishers and risk misleading audiences, which could result in harmful consequences where they relate to sensitive topics such as health advice or political issues.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ [Don’t Listen To Me: Understanding and exploring jailbreak prompts of Large Language Models](#) (Sept 2024)

¹⁰⁵ [Ofcom sets out 2025/26 Plan of Work and longer-term blueprint to support economic growth](#) (Ofcom, March 2026)

¹⁰⁶ [Communications Act 2003](#), Sections 3(2)(e) and 319(2)(b) & (c)

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, Section 3(2)(d)

¹⁰⁸ [BBC Framework Agreement \(2016\)](#), Clause 60(1)

¹⁰⁹ [Groundbreaking BBC research shows issues with over half the answers from Artificial Intelligence \(AI\) assistants](#) (BBC, Feb 2025)

¹¹⁰ [Transmission Critical: The Future of Public Service Media](#) (Ofcom, July 2025)

Ad-funded business models may be disrupted

GenAI search tools have the potential to disrupt the ad-funded business models for news providers and publishers. Since Google released its AI Overviews feature, for example, the number of news-related searches resulting in no ‘onward clicks’ (where users do not click through to an external site) has increased from 56% to 69%, according to Similarweb.¹¹¹

This so-called ‘Google Zero’ effect — where Google provides direct answers within its own ecosystem, leaving little incentive for users to visit publishers¹¹² — may pose a challenge to stakeholder revenue: if users of AI summaries or AI chatbots do not click through to publishers’ websites, this could reduce their ability to earn reliable incomes.¹¹³ Google, however, has disputed claims from third parties that traffic has fallen since the introduction of its AI summaries, blaming flawed methodologies. Instead, they claim that click volume from Google Search has been relatively stable year-over-year, and that the ‘quality’ of clicks (clicks where users don’t quickly click back) has increased.¹¹⁴

Content creators and publishers may not see fair returns

News providers have also raised concerns about copyright and their ability to control and be remunerated for the use of their content by GenAI search tools. Ofcom considers it important that public service broadcasters and other content commissioners see a fair return on their content, including where it is used to provide another service such as an AI summary.¹¹⁵

In response to the changing landscape, some major news providers have chosen to form direct partnerships with GenAI search tools and licensed their content for use in AI models to generate revenue. For example, OpenAI has signed agreements with The Guardian to incorporate their news articles into ChatGPT responses,¹¹⁶ and Meta AI has formed a similar media partnership with Reuters.¹¹⁷ However, it is not clear at this stage if new revenue streams such as licensing agreements could counteract impacts from a loss of user numbers. By contrast, other news organisations have blocked access to AI crawlers¹¹⁸ to prevent these tools from scraping their site.¹¹⁹ However, some AI companies have disregarded these blocks to continue their data extraction, complicating efforts to protect publishers’ content and ad revenue.¹²⁰

The UK government has taken note of potential issues with fair returns. For example, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) issued a consultation in December 2024 with proposals for copyright reform that aim to support rightsholders’ control of their content and ability to be remunerated for its use.¹²¹ Additionally, the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024 (DMCC Act) introduced new powers for the CMA to investigate and, if

¹¹¹ [AI is killing the web. Can anything save it?](#) (The Economist, July 2025)

¹¹² [Google CEO Sundar Pichai on AI-powered search and the future of the web](#) (The Verge, May 2024)

¹¹³ [Transmission Critical: The future of Public Service Media](#) (Ofcom, July 2025)

¹¹⁴ [AI in Search: Driving more queries and higher quality clicks](#) (Google, August 2025)

¹¹⁵ [Transmission Critical: The future of Public Service Media](#) (Ofcom, July 2025)

¹¹⁶ [Guardian Media Group announces strategic partnership with OpenAI](#) (The Guardian, Feb 2025)

¹¹⁷ [Meta signs its first big AI deal for news](#) (The Verge, Oct 2024)

¹¹⁸ Similar to web crawlers, AI crawlers are software programs that scan websites to gather data, which can be used to train large language models.

¹¹⁹ [How many news websites block AI crawlers?](#) (Reuters Institute and Oxford, Feb 2024)

¹²⁰ [Somesite I Used To Crawl: Awareness, Agency and Efficacy in Protecting Content Creators From AI Crawlers](#) (Nov 2024)

¹²¹ [Copyright and AI: Consultation](#) (DSIT, Intellectual Property Office, and the Department for Culture, Media & Sport; Dec 2024)

necessary, address competition problems in digital markets. The CMA's roadmap for potential interventions in relation to Google's general search services includes, for consideration, measures to ensure publishers have greater transparency and control over how their content is used in AI-generated responses.¹²² These may involve fair ranking principles, improved attribution, and mechanisms for opting out without losing visibility in search responses.

As outlined in Ofcom's [Digital markets, communications and media update](#), ensuring effective competition in the digital markets that deliver news and other content that audiences rely on is important for the delivery of our wider goals in the media sector. The update also states that Ofcom will continue to collaborate with the CMA to help ensure that the digital markets competition regime secures good outcomes for the future of quality news creation, in line with Ofcom's wider objectives including ensuring the future of public service media in the UK.

Personal data of users is at risk of unauthorised access

"Somebody is gathering more information about you and that's whatever you search, somebody's recording that. And that's the uncomfortable feeling." – Female, 71, Very high digital confidence

Many users disclose personal and often sensitive information to GenAI search tools, for example information about their health conditions or relationship struggles (particularly if they are using these tools for life advice). Studies show that the conversational format of GenAI responses can encourage users to volunteer private data, including financial details, on the assumption that the system is secure and confidential.¹²³

However, this trust may be misplaced. GenAI search tools, for example, are vulnerable to "prompt injection" attacks, where malicious users craft inputs designed to extract confidential data, including snippets of past conversations.¹²⁴ A study of 36 LLMs, including those used to power GenAI search tools, found that 56% of injection attacks succeeded in manipulating models to produce unintended or private outputs.¹²⁵ Another privacy risk is that users of GenAI search tools can inadvertently allow their conversations to be discoverable through traditional search tools. The news outlet 404 Media recently reported that nearly 100,000 ChatGPT 'public' conversations had been indexed by Google and were able to be searched for.¹²⁶

GenAI search can increase energy demands

Every search conducted through AI chatbots and summaries uses LLMs, which require significant amounts of energy. This is in part because of the computational power required to train LLMs, and the additional processing needed to generate natural language responses.¹²⁷ One estimate suggests that a single AI chatbot query can use 10 times more energy than a traditional Google search.¹²⁸ This increased energy demand results in higher carbon emissions and greater water usage for cooling data centres, among other effects.¹²⁹

¹²² [Strategic market status investigation into Google's general search tools: Roadmap of possible measures to improve competition in search](#) (CMA, June 2025)

¹²³ [Trust No Bot: Discovering Personal Disclosures in Human-LLM Conversations in the Wild](#) (July 2024)

¹²⁴ [What is a prompt injection attack?](#) (IBM)

¹²⁵ [Systematically Analyzing Prompt Injection Vulnerabilities in Diverse LLM Architectures](#) (Oct 2024)

¹²⁶ [Nearly 100,000 ChatGPT Conversations Were Searchable on Google](#) (404 Media, August 2025)

¹²⁷ [Explained: Generative AI's environmental impact](#) (MIT News, Jan 2025)

¹²⁸ [AI is poised to drive 160% increase in data center power demand](#) (Goldman Sachs, May 2024)

¹²⁹ [As generative AI asks for more power, data centers seek more reliable, cleaner energy solutions](#) (Deloitte, Nov 2024). For example, Deloitte reports that "A hyperscale data center that intends to manage excess heat

However, recent research into the energy usage of GenAI search tools suggests that their production and deployment can be adjusted to operate more efficiently. For example, researchers have found that data centers can reduce energy consumption (with minimal sacrifice to performance) by using less powerful processors that are optimised for specific AI tasks.¹³⁰ Additionally, Google reported in August 2025 that a median Gemini text query now uses the energy of nine seconds of TV viewing, reflecting a roughly 33-fold reduction over the past year which indicates progress towards greater energy efficiency.¹³¹ As measurement methods and reporting standards evolve – potentially alongside the efficiency of the hardware and software required to power GenAI search – a clearer picture of energy use and emissions may emerge.

with air-based cooling and evaporated drinking water would require over 50 million gallons of water every year (or roughly what it takes to make 14,700 smartphones)”.

¹³⁰ [Responding to the climate impact of generative AI](#) (MIT News, Sept 2025)

¹³¹ [How much energy does Google’s AI use? We did the math](#) (Google, Aug 2025)

5. What safeguards are available for GenAI search?

“When it comes to AI, while I’m wary of it, I do really value the benefit that it brings in terms of helping me understand key topics... I think it needs to be appropriately regulated and that’s the only thing that concerns me about it.” – Male, 43, Medium digital confidence

Having examined some of the risks posed by GenAI search tools, this section considers possible safeguards that could provide some mitigations – from undertaking red team exercises to deploying prompt and output filters. We begin by mentioning some measures that Ofcom has recommended in our existing policy guidance, before turning to consider other safeguards which could be deployed by leading providers of GenAI search tools.

Ofcom’s measures (including our Codes of Practice)

Ofcom has published Codes of Practice setting out measures that we recommend in-scope search services take to comply with their illegal content and children’s safety duties under the OSA.¹³² These set out a series of evidence-based measures that are intended to help protect users from harm. Ofcom has also published guidance on how regulated search services should effectively assess the risk of users encountering illegal content or content that is harmful to children in search results.¹³³ These steps for compliance apply to in-scope GenAI search services, and may also be a helpful reference point even for those providing GenAI search tools which are not in scope of the OSA.

Examples of our Code of Practice measures for search services include:

- **Governance and accountability measures** – Having a named person accountable for compliance with the Online Safety Act, tracking evidence of new and increasing illegal harms, and ensuring staff are trained in a service’s approach to compliance¹³⁴
- **Search moderation** – Having a content moderation function that is adequately resourced and well-trained, setting performance targets for content moderation, and filtering out certain types of harmful content for child users (e.g. pornographic and self-harm search content)¹³⁵
- **User reporting and complaints** – Having easy to access, easy to use reporting and complaints systems and processes. Additionally, offering users a means to easily report predictive search suggestions that could expose users to harmful search results¹³⁶

¹³² See Ofcom’s [Illegal Content Codes of Practice for search services](#) and [Protection of Children Code for search services](#). Services can implement the measures set out in Ofcom’s Codes, or take alternative measures.

¹³³ ‘Search results’ as defined in Section 57(3) of the OSA. See Ofcom’s [Illegal Content Risk Assessment Guidance and Risk Profiles](#) and [Children’s Risk Assessment Guidance and Risk Profiles](#)

¹³⁴ See Ofcom’s [Illegal Content Codes of Practice for search services](#) Recommendations A2, A5, A7 and [Protection of Children Code for search services](#) Recommendations A2, A5, A7

¹³⁵ See Ofcom’s [Illegal Content Codes of Practice for search services](#) Recommendations C1, C3 and [Protection of Children Code for search services](#) Recommendations C1, C2

¹³⁶ See Ofcom’s [Illegal Content Codes of Practice for search services](#) Recommendations D2, F1 and [Protection of Children Code for search services](#) Recommendations D2, F1

- **Provision of crisis prevention information** – Providing crisis prevention information (e.g. support helplines) when users search for suicide, self-harm or eating disorder content¹³⁷

Some of these measures are targeted only at large search services, those likely to be accessed by children, and/or those that have a medium or high risk of multiple types of content which is illegal or harmful to children. More details about Ofcom’s guidance and important dates for compliance can be found on our [website](#).

Other available safeguards

“I would like to think that [GenAI search tools have safeguards], like if I went into ChatGPT and said... ‘I want a murder kit, what do I need?’ I would hope it would kind of, say, ring 999... or just doesn’t give you an answer.” – Female, 25, Medium digital confidence

There are several other steps that some providers of GenAI search tools have been taking to reduce the risk of their users encountering harmful content through these tools. These include using content filtering systems to remove harmful material from search indexes, and deploying AI models to detect and block inappropriate responses before they reach users. Other providers of GenAI search tools could also consider taking these steps to improve safety outcomes for users.

Filtering content

Many GenAI search tools use content filtering systems to detect and block harmful material before users can encounter it. A GenAI service that makes use of a search index API, for example, may benefit automatically from any user safety processes and systems operated by that API provider. Bing’s Web Search API, which is used by several GenAI search tools, includes a Safe Search parameter that can automatically filter out web pages containing explicit sexual content (subject to the API client choosing the highest restriction settings).¹³⁸ Filtering is made possible using machine learning classifiers, which run continuously in the background to check the contents of web pages and apply labels where appropriate (e.g. noting that a web page contains violent content).

In addition to applying filters on the search indexes they use, some GenAI search tools can deploy filters at the point where users submit their queries, and where user responses are generated (i.e. once the selected sources have been turned into conversational prose). OpenAI, for example, relies on its Moderation API classifier to evaluate both user prompts (inputs) and model responses (outputs) to detect content in categories such as hate speech, harassment, and violence.¹³⁹ This system assigns probability scores across different risk categories:¹⁴⁰ if a query or response crosses certain thresholds, enforcement measures can include refusing unsafe requests or steering outputs with safety system guidance to keep responses within allowed use.

Training models to be safer

Some providers of GenAI search tools aim to embed safety as a guiding principle for their models at the point where they are trained. Anthropic was one of the pioneers of this approach, using a method called ‘Constitutional AI’ to train its Claude model.¹⁴¹ As a first step, Anthropic developed a

¹³⁷ See Ofcom’s [Illegal Content Codes of Practice for search services](#) Recommendation F3 and [Protection of Children Code for search services](#) Recommendation F3

¹³⁸ [Blocking adult content with SafeSearch or blocking Chat](#) (Microsoft Support)

¹³⁹ [How to use the moderation API](#) (OpenAI Cookbook, March 2024)

¹⁴⁰ [Upgrading the Moderation API with our new multimodal moderation model](#) (OpenAI, Sept 2024)

¹⁴¹ [Claude’s Constitution](#) (Anthropic, May 2023)

‘constitution’ for Claude: a set of guiding principles inspired by the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, industry trust and safety standards, and research from other AI labs. During training, Claude uses this constitution to critique and revise its own responses. This process helps Claude learn to prefer producing answers that align with the constitution, which could in theory result in outputs that are less harmful and more aligned with safety goals.

Another way that developers of GenAI search could train models to be safer is an approach called ‘reinforcement learning based on human feedback’ (RLHF). This process is similar to Anthropic’s Constitutional AI method, except that the model is guided not by a fixed set of principles, but by direct input from human reviewers who evaluate and rank its responses.¹⁴² These rankings are then used to fine-tune the model’s behaviour, encouraging it to produce outputs that align more closely with human views on what amounts to ‘safe’ or ‘harmful’. Developers of GenAI search tools that have reportedly used RLHF methods in the past include OpenAI¹⁴³ and Google DeepMind.¹⁴⁴

Red teaming models

Red teaming is an evaluation method that seeks to find vulnerabilities in GenAI models.¹⁴⁵ Red team exercises involve inputting a series of prompts to a model to see whether it performs as expected, for example whether it blocks or allows the generation of harmful content. The majority of GenAI search tools use red teaming methods: OpenAI regularly engages both internal and external specialists to probe its models for vulnerabilities, with a focus on scenarios such as terrorism, child safety, self-harm, violent speech, and misinformation.¹⁴⁶ Likewise, Microsoft employs dedicated red teams to assess the limitations of their GenAI systems by testing how they respond to subtle or misleading prompts.¹⁴⁷ Once complete, the results of red team exercises can be used by model developers to mitigate vulnerabilities, for example by developing and operationalising new content filters (similar to those described above).

Ofcom’s [2024 red teaming discussion paper](#) looks more closely at the different ways red teaming can be deployed, as well as the strengths and limitations of this method.¹⁴⁸ One particular advantage of red teaming is that it is flexible, in that it can be scaled up and down to suit a given context.¹⁴⁹ Most firms that build or deploy GenAI, even small ones with limited resources, could conduct a version of red teaming that is both useful and within budget.¹⁵⁰ However, it is not a foolproof method. Red teaming is more difficult for audio-visual models, for example, because it must account for real-time conversational dynamics such as multi-way conversations and background noise.¹⁵¹ Moreover, the controlled nature of testing environments may not always mirror how models are used in the real world.¹⁵² Overall, the evidence to date suggests that red teaming has significant potential as a form of model evaluation to protect users from encountering unsafe content.

In addition to red teaming, there are other ways developers of GenAI search tools test their models: for example, the use of benchmark tests, which include a set of prompts and a scorer (sometimes

¹⁴² [Illustrating Reinforcement Learning from Human Feedback \(RLHF\)](#) (Dec 2022)

¹⁴³ [Learning from human preferences](#) (OpenAI, June 2017)

¹⁴⁴ [Learning through human feedback](#) (Google DeepMind, June 2017)

¹⁴⁵ [Red Teaming for GenAI Harms](#) (Ofcom, July 2024)

¹⁴⁶ [Advancing red teaming with people and AI](#) (OpenAI, Nov 2024)

¹⁴⁷ [Red teams think like hackers to help keep AI safe](#) (Microsoft, July 2024)

¹⁴⁸ [Red Teaming for GenAI Harms](#) (Ofcom, July 2024)

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 10

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 5

¹⁵¹ [A Red Teaming Roadmap Towards System-Level Safety](#) (Scale AI, May 2025)

¹⁵² Ibid.

another LLM) to evaluate models' outputs. This setup enables systematic comparison across different models. Examples of benchmarks that are currently being used include GlazeBench,¹⁵³ which attempts to assess the sycophancy of models, and HaluEval,¹⁵⁴ which seeks to test the degree to which models hallucinate.

Facilitating user feedback

While providers of GenAI search tools should implement safeguards to protect users – rather than relying solely on users to identify system vulnerabilities – user feedback remains a valuable complementary tool.

User feedback mechanisms provide users with a direct means of flagging potentially problematic content that may not have been caught by content filters, red teaming, or other moderation initiatives. Both ChatGPT and AI Overviews include 'thumbs-up' and 'thumbs-down' buttons beneath the responses they generate, allowing users to quickly indicate whether an answer was helpful or contained issues. Should they wish to, users also have the option of providing more detail on the nature of their concern, whether that be that the response shown to them was unhelpful, inaccurate, or otherwise problematic.¹⁵⁵ As with the results of red teaming exercises, this feedback can then be used to adjust or add new safeguards.

The efficacy of user feedback mechanisms, however, depends on the extent to which they are visible to users. For example, a behavioural insights experiment from Ofcom found that increasing the visibility of reporting functions on video-sharing platforms, such as making a 'flag' icon more noticeable, encouraged participants to report content that concerned them.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, the effectiveness of these mechanisms may also depend on how a platform acts on the feedback it receives. The sycophancy of OpenAI's GPT-4o model, for example, may have been exacerbated by OpenAI's reliance on short-term data like 'thumbs-up' feedback to update the model: as OpenAI reports, "user feedback in particular can sometimes favor more agreeable responses".¹⁵⁷

Providing visible citations to reliable sources

As noted in the previous chapter, citations are not always visible on GenAI search tools. This prevents users from assessing the reliability of the responses being presented to them. For example, they may not easily detect whether a claim is from a reputable news website or an outlet known for generating conspiracies. Some GenAI search tools address this problem through simple user interface changes. For example, they name-check the website that a piece of information is drawn from (e.g. the BBC or Wikipedia) rather than including an icon of a 'chain link' that users need to click on for more details. Many GenAI search tools including Perplexity have adopted this approach, with some going one step further to include visible thumbnails of the web pages being cited. This is currently the case on ChatGPT, for instance, if a user searches for the news.

However, making citations more prominent to users is unlikely to fully mitigate risks to users if some continue to be fabricated or misleading, for example sources that do not support the claims being

¹⁵³ See: [GlazeBench](#), a 'sycophancy and flattery benchmark'

¹⁵⁴ [HaluEval: A Large-Scale Hallucination Evaluation Benchmark for Large Language Models](#) (Revised Oct 2023)

¹⁵⁵ [Find information in faster & easier ways with AI Overviews in Google Search](#) (Google)

¹⁵⁶ See [Behavioural insights for online safety](#) (Ofcom, July 2023). Through a randomised control trial, Ofcom found that increasing the prominence of reporting functions increased the likelihood that legal but potentially harmful videos would be reported by research participants. Further studies can be done on feedback mechanisms in GenAI search contexts to determine whether similar effects are observed.

¹⁵⁷ [Expanding on what we missed with sycophancy](#) (OpenAI, May 2025)

made. Some GenAI search tools have sought to improve the accuracy of citations (and model outputs more generally) by using smaller ‘evaluator’ models that are designed to check the accuracy of the main model that is generating a response for the user.¹⁵⁸ For example, Google’s ‘check grounding API’ can provide ‘citation support scores’ to identify supported and unsupported claims, including in AI-generated search summaries.¹⁵⁹

In a similar vein, Google has implemented a ‘Double Check’ feature into its Gemini service, which allows users to request that an initial response be verified using Google Search.¹⁶⁰ When users activate this feature, statements within the response are highlighted in different colours: green indicates that Google Search found supporting evidence for the claim and can provide a link which is likely similar to the statement; orange signals conflicting information or lack of clear evidence; and uncoloured text means there is insufficient data to verify the statement.

Alongside these technical fixes, GenAI search tools are already making it clearer to users that their outputs can be wrong, including any citations provided. Most tools offer these warnings, but they may not be prominently displayed to users. Another step that services have taken is limiting AI’s use of non-authoritative sources such as user-generated content: in 2024, for example, Google chose to limit AI’s reliance on content such as forum posts which could ‘offer misleading advice’.¹⁶¹

Improving media literacy

Another way of mitigating the risks posed by GenAI search tools is to improve people’s media literacy. In the context of GenAI search, a ‘literate’ user could be someone who understands the limitations of these tools, verifies information for accuracy, and is critical of overly agreeable responses. While it is difficult to know how many users are media literate, research suggests there is considerable scope for general improvements in the media literacy of internet users in the UK. For example, Ofcom’s long-running Adults’ and Children’s Media Use & Attitudes studies show that one in four teenagers lack confidence in their ability to distinguish between what is real or fake online.¹⁶² Other Ofcom research reveals that one third of children believe all or most of what they see on social media is true.¹⁶³

One way to enhance media literacy is through ‘on-platform’ interventions that provide additional context or information to users.¹⁶⁴ This may include making changes to the functionalities and features of GenAI search tools. We have already highlighted how the providers of these tools could make citations more visible, which could in turn encourage users to engage more critically with what they are seeing. Other on-platform interventions could include providing media literacy tutorials to users and introducing ‘read-before-sharing’ nudges directly into the search experience. Although there is limited evidence that platforms are introducing comprehensive measures, some GenAI search tool providers have implemented basic disclaimers: OpenAI warns that “ChatGPT can make mistakes. Check important info” beneath the chat interface. Similarly, Google’s AI Overview feature cautions that its responses may be incorrect.

¹⁵⁸ [The ‘hallucinations’ that haunt AI: why chatbots struggle to tell the truth](#) (Financial Times, July 2025)

¹⁵⁹ [Check grounding with RAG](#) (Google Cloud Guide)

¹⁶⁰ [View related sources & double-check responses from Gemini Apps](#) (Google)

¹⁶¹ [AI Overviews: About last week](#) (Google Blog, May 2024)

¹⁶² [Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report](#) (Ofcom, May 2025)

¹⁶³ [Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes 2023](#) (Ofcom, March 2023)

¹⁶⁴ [Best Practice Design Principles for Media Literacy](#), p. 4 (Ofcom, March 2024). Examples of on-platform interventions include labels, overlays, pop-ups, notifications, and additional resources.

Another route to improving media literacy is through ‘off-platform’ interventions such as workshops, lesson plans for teachers, and information sheets. These tend to be produced by schools, media outlets, and media literacy charities.¹⁶⁵ For instance, the BBC’s ‘News Integrity in AI Assistants Toolkit’ helps readers discover and explore the key issues to look out for when using GenAI search tools for news-related queries.¹⁶⁶ Additionally, the UK-based nonprofit Internet Matters equips parents, carers, and teachers with guidance on helping children navigate the digital information landscape, including how to evaluate the reliability of online information and avoid links which may contain harmful content.¹⁶⁷ Together with on-platform measures, off-platform interventions can raise awareness of information risks and build critical thinking skills, preparing users to better navigate the online information ecosystem.

Emerging and novel safeguards

Beyond the established safeguards mentioned above, GenAI search services could explore several experimental approaches to enhance the safety of their users. Emerging strategies for providers of GenAI search tools include:

- **Prioritising high quality sources in training data** – training their underlying models using carefully curated data from reputable sources, such as peer-reviewed journals, academic repositories, and trusted news outlets. For instance, through its partnership with Axel Springer, OpenAI aims to integrate authoritative media sources into the training processes of its LLMs.¹⁶⁸ Additionally, a stronger emphasis could be placed on reliable content during training or fine-tuning, encouraging models to favour reliable information and reduce reliance on anonymous or low-quality sources when generating responses.
- **Presenting diverse responses for the same query** – presenting multiple answers to a single user query, providing users with a range of perspectives and highlighting areas of agreement or inconsistency. This strategy may be particularly relevant for complex or debatable topics, such as dietary recommendations or economic forecasts. By delivering varied responses, users may be better equipped to make informed judgments about their information consumption and identify potential misinformation. Some AI systems, including ChatGPT, already present multiple responses and prompt users to select the answer they prefer.
- **Altering responses for child users** – adjusting the presentation of their results to be more child-friendly. This could mean simplifying explanations, omitting sensitive details, and introducing time limits. Google, for instance, recently announced that it would allow under-13s with managed family accounts to access its Gemini service. Google says that users in this age bracket will have a different experience to adults, with Gemini avoiding ‘mature’ interactions; refraining from offering medical, legal or financial advice; and disabling the image generation feature.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ While Ofcom’s media literacy duties do not extend to schools specifically, a key goal in our [Three-Year Media Literacy Strategy](#) (published Oct 2024) is to engage with education authorities and schools to encourage and support media literacy education. However, the challenges of how media literacy is taught in schools is rightly a matter for the Government and devolved administrations.

¹⁶⁶ [News Integrity in AI Assistants Toolkit](#) (European Broadcasting Union and the BBC, Oct 2025)

¹⁶⁷ See: [Fake news and misinformation facts & advice](#) and [Safe browsing tips to support children](#) (Internet Matters)

¹⁶⁸ [Partnership with Axel Springer to deepen beneficial use of AI in journalism](#) (OpenAI, Dec 2023)

¹⁶⁹ [Google Gemini Introduces Kid-Safe AI](#) (Artificial Intelligence Plus, June 2025)

6. Conclusion & next steps

In this paper we have sought to map the potential impact of GenAI search tools on the experiences of search users, particularly in the context of online safety. These tools include AI search chatbots (AI chatbots) like ChatGPT, Le Chat and Perplexity, as well as AI search summaries (AI summaries) like Google's AI Overviews and Brave's Summarizer. These 'answer engines' offer great potential to improve people's search experiences and efficiently connect them with relevant information. From supporting people in self-diagnosing health conditions to making scientific research articles more accessible, these tools offer promising benefits to society.

Yet GenAI search tools are not without their pitfalls. While there is currently limited evidence about the extent to which users of GenAI search tools are exposed to harmful search content, such as illegal content or content that is harmful to children as defined under the OSA, such tools do appear to present several information-related risks to their users. This includes the risk of generating misinformation (so-called 'hallucinations'), providing obscure or incorrect source citations, and producing sycophantic responses that reinforce rather than challenge a user's existing beliefs. These risks can place a burden on users' media literacy skills, requiring additional time, effort, and knowledge for people to navigate the information landscape.

Where the providers of GenAI search tools fall within scope of the OSA, we have explained that adopting certain measures recommended in our Codes of Practice can help protect users from harm. These measures include having a well-resourced content moderation team, filtering out search results that are harmful to children, and enabling users to report problematic predictive search suggestions. We have also outlined other safeguards that providers of GenAI search tools can adopt – from training their models to be safer through RLHF and red teaming, to using content filters and content moderation. We will continue exploring best practices to inform our ongoing work.

What's next for Ofcom?

Over the coming months, Ofcom will continue to take the necessary steps to fulfil our duties as they relate to GenAI search services which are in scope of the OSA. This includes engaging with services to ensure they understand and are complying with their duties under the OSA; ensuring that, where applicable and appropriate to do so, any new policy guidance and recommended safety measures we produce for regulated search services accounts for in-scope GenAI search services; and undertaking additional research as necessary to understand the benefits and risks posed by these tools, and how those risks might be mitigated. We will also build on our role as a convenor of media literacy experts to advise on recommendations for emerging technologies, including GenAI search.

Ofcom will also collaborate with other UK regulators to ensure a coherent approach to the regulation of GenAI search services. Building on previous collaborative efforts such as our joint statement on online safety and competition in digital markets, Ofcom will continue to engage with the CMA to exchange insights in this area. We will likewise work with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) and the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) through the Digital Regulation Cooperation Forum (DRCF) to investigate the implications of new AI tools for our respective regimes.

What does the future hold for GenAI search?

To support our regulatory efforts, Ofcom will pay close attention to related innovations in the search ecosystem. This includes:

- **AI agents** – These are software programs capable of performing tasks with a degree of autonomy to reach a predetermined goal. Examples include Anthropic’s Claude Research and the Chinese tool Manus. These systems differ from traditional GenAI search tools in that they purportedly allow for tasks to be completed with limited user oversight, such as booking restaurants and ordering shopping.
- **AI browsers** – These are web browsers that have GenAI features built into them, allowing users for example to ask questions about the web pages they are viewing, to summarise the contents of those pages, and to automate tasks like completing forms and drafting emails. Examples include Dia (from The Browser Company) and Comet (from Perplexity).
- **Multi-modal search** – This involves users both inputting queries and receiving results in a format other than text, for instance images and audio. An example of this is Google Lens, which allows users to submit images or point their camera at an object, with GenAI technology used to help users understand what they are seeing. The Lens feature already manages 20 billion visual searches each month.¹⁷⁰
- **Advert placements** – GenAI search tools (both AI chatbots and AI summaries) have begun to experiment with placing adverts within their responses. Google, for example, announced that it would integrate adverts within its AI Overviews for users in some countries.¹⁷¹ Perplexity, meanwhile, is rolling out sponsored follow-up questions to its users, beginning in the US market.¹⁷¹

These and other shifts will undoubtedly have implications for users and the broader internet ecosystem. Ofcom will monitor relevant developments closely, focusing our efforts on driving better outcomes for consumers and businesses across the services we regulate.

¹⁷⁰ [Google’s Visual Search Can Now Answer Even More Complex Questions](#) (Wired, Oct 2024)

¹⁷¹ [Why we’re experimenting with advertising](#) (Perplexity, Nov 2024)