“Easy” Default Browser Settings

iOS and Windows

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Mozilla

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01. Summary

The ability to choose and set a default browser represents more than just a technical setting—it's a fundamental expression of user autonomy and an important mechanism for fostering competition in the digital ecosystem. When gatekeepers design interfaces that obscure or complicate these choices, they not only compromise user agency but also effectively reinforce their market dominance.

The European Union's Digital Markets Act (DMA) requires that “gatekeepers” like Apple and Microsoft "allow and technically enable end users to easily change default settings." This report presents findings from research examining how users navigate the process of changing their default browser settings on iOS and Windows, two platforms designated as “core platform services” under the DMA. In February 2024, we studied iOS 17 and Windows 10/11 and in February 2025, we conducted a follow-up study on iOS 18.2.1/18.3.1, which had adopted some of our prior recommendations.

Key Findings

- Participants across both platforms struggled to find default browser settings, with most requiring multiple attempts and experiencing significant friction.
- Search functionality on both platforms frequently failed to return relevant results for common terms like "browser" or "default browser."
- On iOS, Apple made improvements in iOS 18.2+ by adding a dedicated "Default Apps" section and eliminating hidden options, but discoverability and search functionality barriers remain.
- On Windows, most participants *were not* able to successfully change their default browser, with many misled by Microsoft's "Recommended Browser Settings" that steers users to Edge.

Our compliance recommendations focus on three key areas: implementing centralized access to default settings, improving interface clarity and consistency, and enhancing search functionality. Through direct observation of users attempting to change their default browsers, our research provides empirical evidence of the specific barriers encountered across platforms. While some progress has been made on iOS, significant hurdles remain that prevent users from easily exercising their choice of a default browser. Our findings demonstrate that current implementations on both iOS and Windows still fall short of providing an experience that would meet the DMA's "ease of use" standard and therefore remain non-compliant with the DMA’s obligations—over a year after they came into effect.

02. Background

Regulatory Context

Default browsers play a fundamental role in shaping users' digital experiences. When a user taps a link in an email, message, or third-party app, the operating system opens that link in the default browser. This seemingly simple setting has significant implications for user choice, privacy, and competition in the browser market.

The European Union's Digital Markets Act (DMA) has established requirements for "gatekeepers" like Apple, Google, and Microsoft to enable easy default app selection. Article 6(3) of the DMA specifically requires that gatekeepers "allow and technically enable end users to easily change default settings on the operating system, virtual assistant and web browser of the gatekeeper that direct or steer end users to products or services provided by the gatekeeper."[1]

However, the concept of "ease" remains undefined in the regulatory framework. This ambiguity is particularly significant given that approximately half of users report that they would need help changing or be unable to change their default browser.[2] In this context, the design of settings interfaces becomes especially important. Empirical evidence about how real users interact with settings in practice can help illustrate whether or not users can “easily change” default settings and thus whether gatekeepers are in compliance. Research can play a vital role in interpreting and operationalizing regulatory standards like “ease of use.” Interfaces that hide options, use confusing terminology, or require complex navigation paths can effectively prevent users from exercising choice, even when the technical capability exists.

This regulatory landscape makes our research particularly timely, as it provides empirical evidence about whether current implementations meet this "ease of use" standard and identifies specific improvements that would better align with regulatory intent.

Research Context

Traditional economic models often assume a frictionless world where consumers can easily act on their preferences. In reality, even minor usability barriers can prevent people from carrying out straightforward tasks. Usability testing offers a clear view into these real-world frictions by

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[1] European Union, *Regulation (EU) 2022/1925 on Contestable and Fair Markets in the Digital Sector (Digital Markets Act)*, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022R1925.
[2] K. Amlani and G. Petrie, *Five Walled Gardens: Why Browsers Are Essential to the Internet and How Operating Systems Are Holding Them Back*, Mozilla Research, September 19, 2022, https://research.mozilla.org/browser-competition/5wg/.

directly observing how people navigate specific interfaces. This approach reveals barriers that might otherwise remain invisible in surveys or theoretical models. When applied to regulatory requirements like the DMA's mandate for "easily" changeable defaults, usability testing offers concrete evidence of where implementations succeed or fall short. Instead of relying on abstract notions of “ease,” it allows us to identify the specific interface elements that enable or obstruct user action.

Observational research is widely used in the technology sector, where companies routinely conduct usability testing to refine their products and services. For example, Microsoft documented in its DMA compliance report that it employed user research to assess the comprehension of consent requests required under Article 5(2).[3] Regulatory bodies have also recognized the value of this approach. The UK Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) commissioned qualitative and quantitative research as part of its investigation into mobile browsers and cloud gaming. Their research revealed a telling discrepancy: while a quantitative survey found that 80% of people self-reported that they could switch their default browser without support, qualitative observations painted a different picture.[4] The CMA found that:

- “While some completed it quickly and simply – it was not unusual for respondents to fail the task (even with some help).”
- “Friction was observed throughout the switching journey. The key area of difficulty was in settings – due to lack of familiarity and not knowing where to look, or the setting itself not being obvious.”
- “Tech capability was not always a good predictor of success.”[5]

This disconnect between self-reported ability and observed behavior highlights why direct observation is essential for understanding the real-world impact of interface design on user choice. Technical capability alone is not enough—practical barriers can still prevent meaningful access. While technology companies of all sizes (including gatekeepers) routinely conduct usability testing and user research, these findings remain proprietary and are notably absent from gatekeepers’ public compliance reports. This lack of transparency has required us to invest our own resources into understanding how users interact with gatekeeper interfaces in practice, as a way to support greater accountability and openness in platform design.

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[3] Microsoft, *Information on the Compliance with the Obligations Laid Down in Articles 5 to 7 of Regulation (EU) 2022/1925: Compliance Report Annex 10 – Windows* (2024), https://www.microsoft.com/content/dam/microsoft/mscle/documents/presentations/DMA.100160%20-%20Microsoft%20Compliance%20Report%20-%20Annex%2010%20-%20Windows%20(Non-Confidential%20Version).pdf.

[4] UK Competition and Markets Authority, *Mobile Browsers Quantitative Consumer Research* (2024), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6687bed9541aeb9e928f44f8/Verian_consumer_research_-_presentation_of_key_survey_findings.pdf.

[5] UK Competition and Markets Authority, *Mobile Browsers Qualitative Consumer Research* (2024), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/667d19584ae39c5e45fe4cfb/Verian_consumer_research_presentation_of_key_qualitative_research_findings_.pdf.

Terminology Used in This Report
We use the following terms throughout this report to describe specific usability barriers encountered by users:[6]

> **Interface Clarity and Consistency:** The degree to which a system's settings and labels are clearly presented and behave in expected, stable ways across contexts. This includes consistent availability of options, transparent labeling, and predictable behavior.
>
> **Menu Structure (i.e., Information Architecture):** The logical organization and categorization of settings within a system. Poor menu structure can mislead users or bury key settings in unintuitive locations.
>
> **Discoverability**: The extent to which users can find a feature or setting without prior instruction. This includes both navigation and search, as well as users' ability to recognize relevant interface elements.
>
> **UI Visibility:** The degree to which a setting or option is perceptible in the interface. This includes placement, visual hierarchy, and salience. A setting may be technically present but still effectively invisible.

[6] Don Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things* (Basic Books, 2013); Jakob Nielsen, "10 Usability Heuristics for User Interface Design," Nielsen Norman Group, 1995, https://www.nngroup.com/articles/ten-usability-heuristics/; Peter Morville and Louis Rosenfeld, *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web* (O'Reilly Media, 2006).

03. Study 1

Default Browser Settings: iOS 17 and Windows

Research Design

In February 2024, Mozilla conducted in-depth, unmoderated interviews with 13 iOS users and 13 Windows users in Germany.[7] Participants varied in age, income, occupation, and gender, and we excluded participants working in the tech industry. This research was designed to assess whether Apple's and Microsoft's implementations enabled people to "easily" change their default browser settings.

The research involved a structured task sequence where participants were asked to:

- Rate their familiarity with default browsers.
- Describe what a default browser is.
- Report whether they had previously changed their default browser.
- Rate their confidence in their ability to change their default browser.
- Demonstrate how they would change their default browser while thinking aloud.

This approach allowed us to observe natural navigation behaviors and identify specific points of friction in the user journey.

Default Awareness

Before attempting to change their default browser, participants were asked about their understanding of and experience with default browsers:

- Nearly all participants self-reported being "familiar" or "extremely familiar" with the concept of default browsers.
- Most were able to accurately describe what a default browser is.
- Just over half said they had never changed (or were unsure if they had changed) the default browser on their device.
- Most said they would need some type of support to change their default browser (e.g. access to support content, time for trial and error, or assistance from another person).

[7] Participants were using iOS 17, Windows 10 or Windows 11.

Key Findings

Most iOS participants (11 out of 13) eventually succeeded in finding where to change their default browser, but the process was time-consuming and unnecessarily difficult.[8] Windows participants faced considerable difficulty with only a few (3 out of 13) successfully finding where to change their default browser. The remaining Windows users either abandoned the task entirely or incorrectly believed they had changed their default when they had not.[9]

Shared Challenges

- **Confusing Menu Structure**
  Participants across both platforms struggled to find the option to change their default browser.
    - **iOS:** On iOS, the option was buried within the settings under individual browser apps rather than in the general settings menus where most expected to find it. This app-specific configuration approach felt unintuitive, prompting many to search in vain through areas like "General" or "Control Center" and adding unnecessary friction to the user experience. During debriefing, more than half of the iOS participants suggested that a dedicated top-level section for "Default Apps" or "Default Browser" would make this setting easier to find.
    - **Windows:** Windows users frequently became lost in unrelated categories such as "Network & Internet" or "Personalization," indicating a non-intuitive information architecture.
- **Ineffective Search**
  The research revealed critical failures in settings search functionality across both platforms. When navigation proved difficult, many participants turned to the settings search function to locate the default browser options, but this frequently failed to return helpful results. These search failures represented a critical missed opportunity on both platforms to help users find settings they were actively looking for, effectively creating navigational "dead ends" that forced users to resort to trial and error.
    - **iOS:** On iOS, common search terms like "Default" returned results related to other default settings (like "Default Email" or "Default Language") but not browser

[8] On iOS, one participant incorrectly believed they had found where to change their default browser and one participant became frustrated and gave-up.
[9] On Windows, five participants incorrectly believed they had found where to change their default browser and five participants became frustrated and gave-up.

settings. Similarly, searching for "Internet" did not return results related to browser settings, and most surprisingly, searching for "Browser" returned no results at all (see Figure 1).

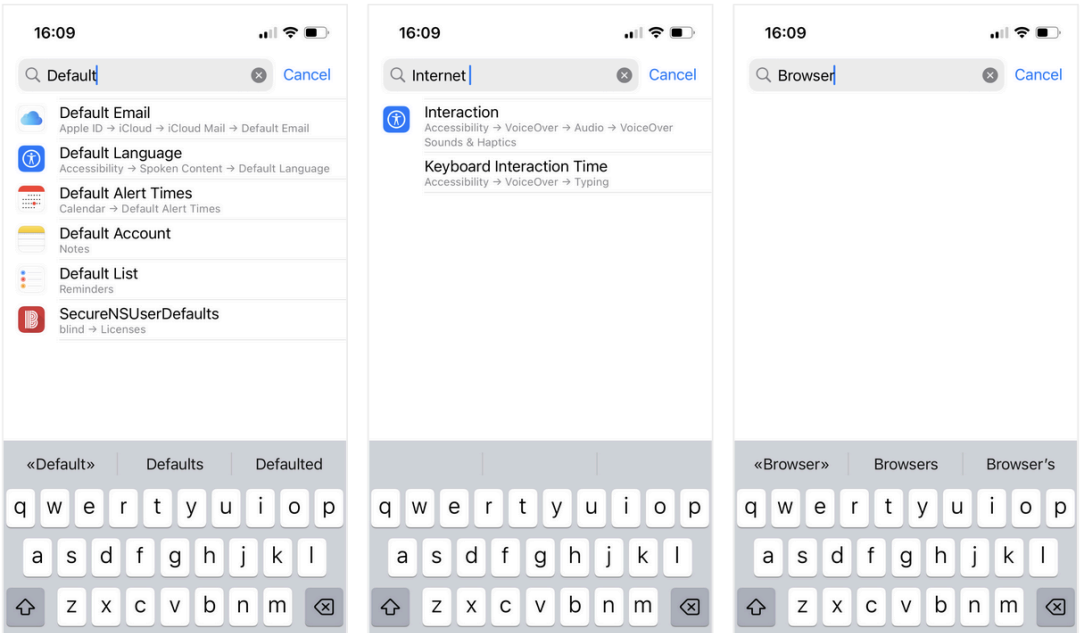

Figure 1: Searching for "Default", "Internet" and "Browser" in the iOS 17 settings menu.[10]

- **Windows:** On Windows, those who misspelled terms like "browser" received no results and—depending on their version of Windows and their current default browser—simple search terms such as "web browser" resulted in either no results (see Figure 2) or a suggestion for Microsoft's misleadingly named "Recommended Browser Settings," which primarily served to promote Edge rather than facilitate user choice.

[10] Screenshots captured on September 4, 2024 on iOS 17.

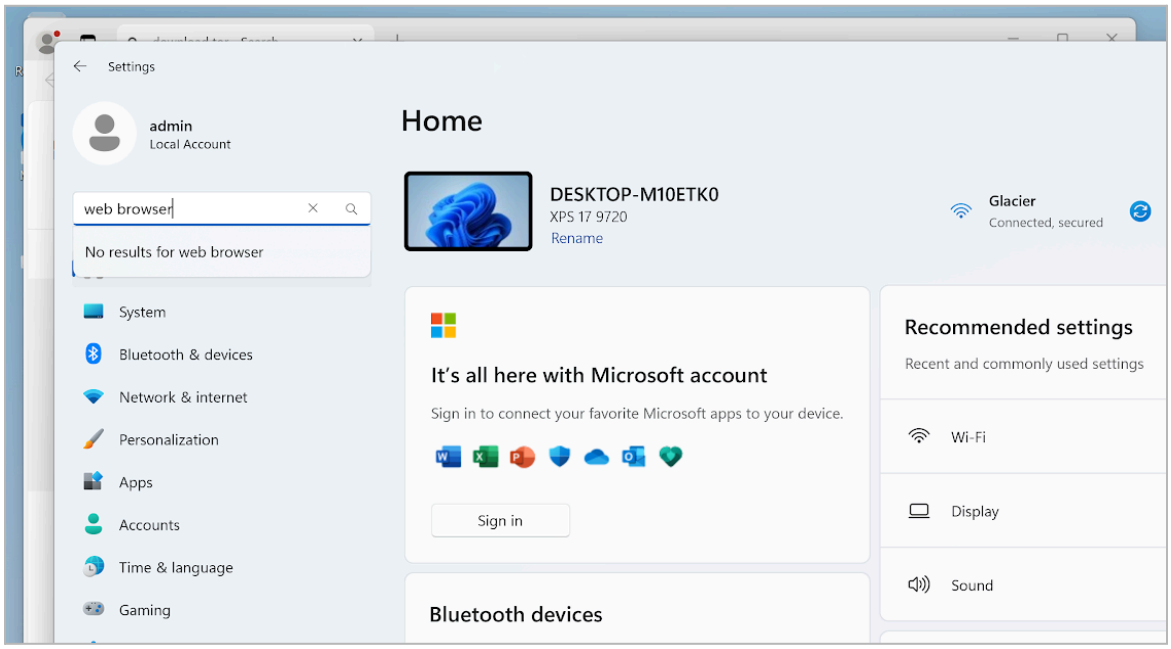

Figure 2: Searching for "web browser" in the Windows 11 Settings does not return any search results.[11]

- **Self-Preferencing**
  Both iOS and Windows demonstrated subtle or explicit nudges toward their respective default browsers. (We discuss each of these platform specific barriers in detail below.)

    - **iOS:** On iOS, settings related to the default browser became invisible when Safari was set to default, effectively hiding alternatives and making it more difficult to switch.

    - **Windows:** On Windows, the default setting interface often emphasized Microsoft Edge, particularly through the "Recommended Browser Settings" screen and associated system prompts, which participants often mistook for general browser settings.

Platform-Specific Barriers

- **Hidden Default Options on iOS**

    - iOS 17 exhibited a particularly problematic design pattern where default browser options would disappear from the settings menu when Safari was set as the default (see Figure 3). In some cases, participants were confident they knew how to change their default browser, but became confused when they accessed the

[11] Screenshot captured on September 4, 2024 on Windows 11 Pro.

Safari settings and found the option missing. Others demonstrated that they knew how to change their default browser by temporarily switching back to Safari, only to find that they were not able to easily return to their preferred default settings because the option had disappeared.

- Hiding options when Safari was default posed a significant barrier to user choice and contradicted basic principles of interface clarity and consistency—a design choice that was uniquely surprising given that Apple prides itself on its user-friendly and intuitive interfaces.[12]

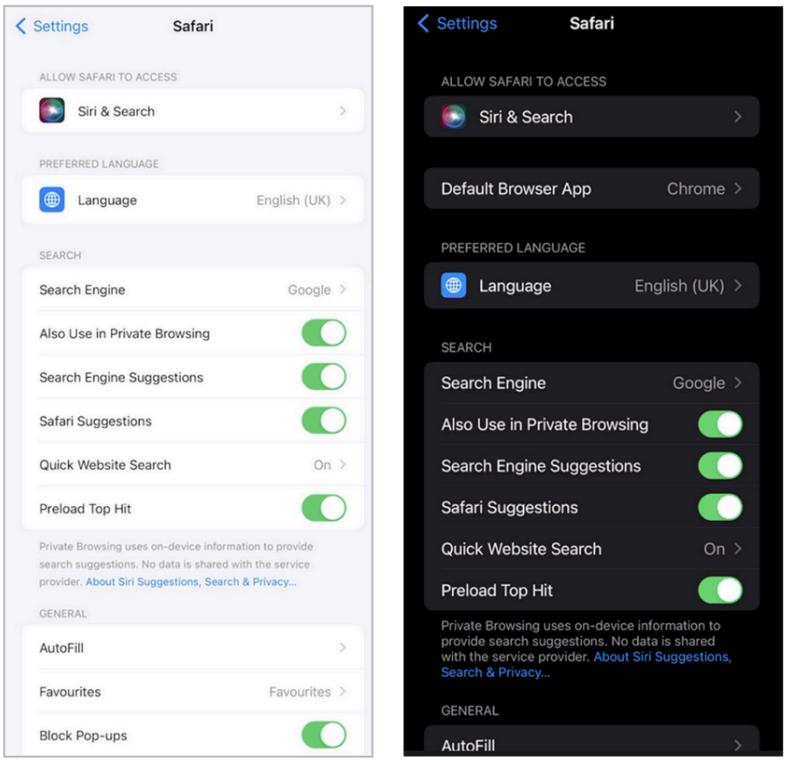

Figure 3: iOS 17 settings showing (left) Safari set as default with no “Default Browser App” menu item displayed and (right) Safari not set as default with “Default Browser App” menu item displayed.[13]

- **"Recommended" Settings on Windows:** Windows presented a different but equally significant barrier through its "Recommended Browser Settings" interface. This feature's prominent placement and misleading name led many participants to mistake it for general default browser settings, when in fact it was designed exclusively to promote Edge as the default browser. This misinterpretation occurred through two main channels:

[12] Apple, *Human Interface Guidelines*, accessed June 11, 2025, https://developer.apple.com/design/human-interface-guidelines/.
[13] Screenshots captured in February 2024 on iOS 17.

- **Prime menu placement**: Some participants were directed to the "*Recommended browser settings*" menu by clicking on the prominently highlighted "Web browsing – *Restore recommended*" call to action at the top of the Windows Settings home page (see Figure 4).

- **Search suggestions**: Other participants searched for common terms like "*web browser*" in the settings, and either encountered no results (if Edge was their default) or the "*Recommended browser settings*" (if they had an alternative browser set as default) as the first and only recommended result as they typed (see Figure 5).

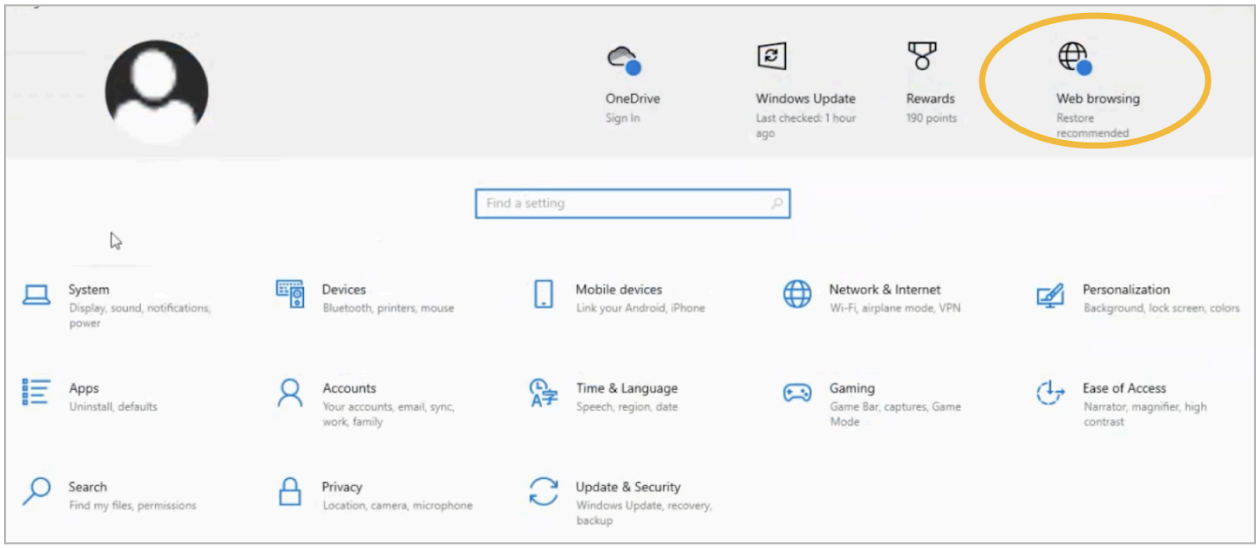

Figure 4: Windows 10 Settings with Microsoft's call to action to “restore recommended” browser settings.[14]

[14] Screenshot captured on September 5, 2024 on Windows 10 Pro. (Orange circle added for clarification.)

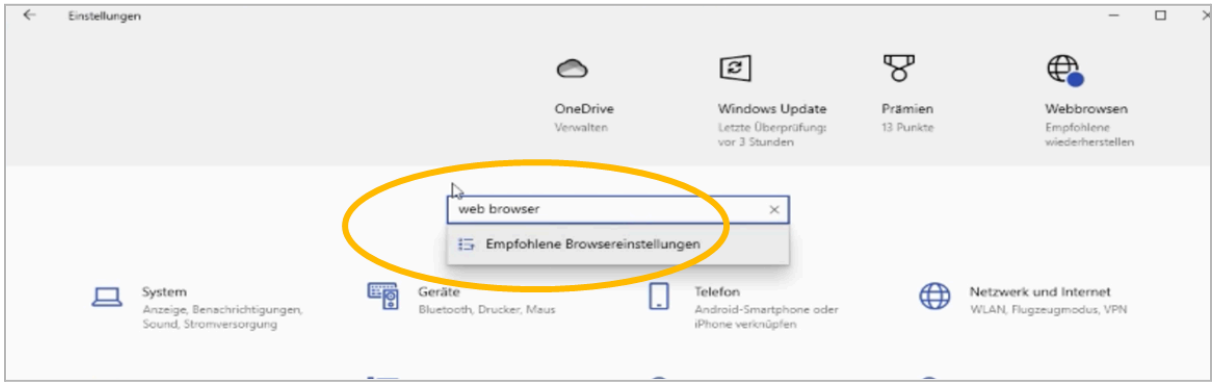

Figure 5: Searching for "web browser" on a Windows 10 device set with an alternative default browser directs users towards Microsoft's "recommended" browser settings.[15]

Recommendations

These findings highlight how interface design choices on iOS and Windows significantly impact users' ability to change their default browser. The research revealed specific barriers including challenges navigating the settings, ineffective search functionality, and interface designs that created obstacles to changing defaults.

Based on our findings from both the iOS 17 and Windows 10/11 studies, we recommended improvements in three key areas to better align with the DMA's requirement for "easily" changeable default settings:

1. **Centralized Access**
   Default settings should be available through clear, consistent, and easily accessible paths rather than scattered across different menus.

   - **iOS**: Supplement the system of configuring the default browser through individual app settings with a dedicated, centralized default settings section. This would create a consistent, predictable location for iOS users to find and change their default browser.[16]

   - **Windows**: Reinstate One-Click Set to Default: Nearly half of Windows participants attempted to change their default browser through their browser's settings rather than Windows Settings. Microsoft should restore the ability for

[15] Screenshot captured on January 9, 2024 on Windows 10. The term *"empfohlene browsereinstellungen"* translates to *"recommended browser settings"* in English. (Orange circle added for clarification.)
[16] Apple implemented this change in iOS 18.2, and we evaluate its effectiveness in our follow-up study later in this paper.

browsers to set themselves as default with a single click, eliminating the need to navigate through complex Windows settings menus.

- **Windows:** Simplify the Per-Protocol/File Type Options: Many users overlooked or were confused by the granular file and protocol settings. Replace this with a single, comprehensive "Set as Default Browser" option while still allowing advanced users to access more granular controls if desired.

2. **Clear and Consistent Interfaces**
   Settings interfaces should present options clearly without hidden elements or misleading labels.

   - **iOS**: Eliminate the practice of hiding menu items when Safari is selected as the default browser. This approach confuses users, reduces their agency, and undermines those who wish to make alternative choices. Instead, iOS should ensure consistent access to settings regardless of which browser is currently selected.[17]

   - **Windows**: End Edge-preferencing practices by: (1) renaming the misleading "Recommended Browser Settings" with a more transparent title such as "Restore Edge as Default Browser" to accurately reflect its function and (2) removing the preferential placement of Edge-promoting options at the top of the Settings home page and in search results. These tactics undermine fair competition and create significant friction for users who have already indicated their preference for an alternative browser.

3. **Effective Search Implementation**

   - Both Platforms: Improve search functionality to return relevant results and include modern search affordances.
     - Improve search functionality to return relevant results for common terms like "default," "browser," and "internet."

     - Implement modern search affordances such as spelling correction, partial word matching, and suggested alternatives when no exact matches are found. Improving this frequently utilized tool would provide a reliable fallback for users who are unable to navigate directly to settings and would help connect more people to their desired system settings.

On this final recommendation, it is worth noting that the importance of effective search functionality extends beyond simple usability and can serve as a proxy for platform intent. If users actively seek out a setting using obvious search terms and the platform fails to appropriately direct them, it is difficult to argue that the system supports choice and instead suggests intentional friction.

[17] Apple resolved this issue in iOS 18.2, and we examine the impact of this change in our follow-up study later in this paper.

04. Study 2

Default Browser Settings: iOS 18.2+

In late 2024, Apple released iOS 18.2, which implemented two of our recommendations:

1. Apple added a centralized "Default Apps" section (accessed via Settings → Apps → Default Apps).[18]
2. Apple ended the practice of hiding default browser settings options when Safari was set as default.

These changes directly addressed two of our three primary recommendations from the 2024 study. To assess the impact of these changes and identify any remaining usability issues, we conducted a follow-up study in February 2025.

Research Design

Our follow-up study mirrored the methodology of our initial research, including the same questions and sequence of tasks, but expanded the participant pool to include eight iOS users in Germany and eight iOS users in the United Kingdom.[19] As before, participants varied in age, income, occupation, and gender, and we excluded participants working in the tech industry.

Default Awareness

As in our previous study, participants were asked about their familiarity with default browsers, previous experience changing defaults, and confidence in their ability to do so before attempting the actual task.

- All participants rated themselves as "Familiar" or "Extremely Familiar" with the concept of a default browser.
- Most were able to explain the concept of a default browser.
- Most had not changed their default browser.
- Nearly all participants said they would need some type of support to change their default browser (e.g. access to support content, time for trial and error).

[18] Apple, *DMA and Apps in the EU*, accessed June 11, 2025, https://developer.apple.com/support/dma-and-apps-in-the-eu#app-controls.
[19] Participants were using iOS 18.2.1 or 18.3.1. We refer to these iOS versions in this paper as “iOS 18.2+.”

Key Findings

Our follow-up study revealed persistent challenges in the iOS default browser setting experience:

1. **Confusing Menu Structure**
   As in our previous study, we found that while most iOS participants were ultimately able to locate their default browser settings, the process was unnecessarily cumbersome. Participants often relied on trial and error, suggesting that the menu structure failed to match common mental models. Participant success was not solely dependent on the chosen path. Even when following the same approach, some participants found the setting, while others got lost or gave up.[20]

2. **"Default Apps" Discoverability**
   The new "Default Apps" section was frequently missed. Half of the participants eventually accessed the Apps setting page—where "Default Apps" was listed at the top—but only three of these participants were successful in seeing this new section. The remaining five participants continued searching, unaware that the solution was already on their screen.

   While the introduction of a “Default Apps” section (see Figure 6) is an improvement, it is only useful insofar as it is discoverable and visible. In many cases, participants were looking at the correct screen but failed to notice the relevant option—indicating not just a discoverability problem, but a UI visibility issue, where the setting lacked sufficient visual prominence or failed to stand out in context. As in our previous study, several participants suggested a top-level “Default Apps” or “Default Browser” section during the post-study debrief, suggesting that the current implementation does not align with user expectations.

[20] Two participants became frustrated and gave up.

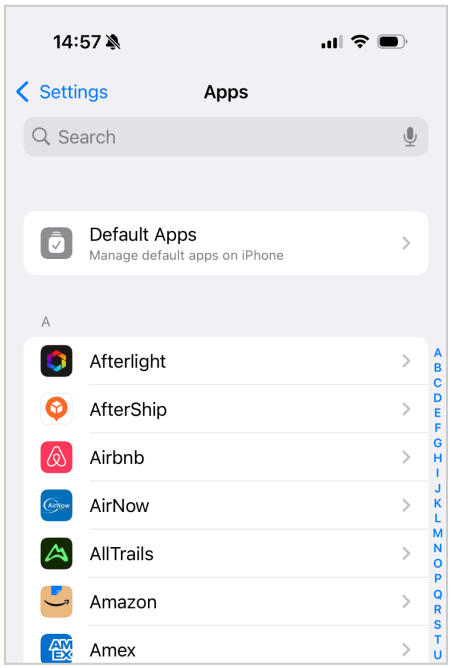

Figure 6: The “Apps” section of the iOS 18.3.1 settings menu.[21]

3. **Ineffective Search**
   As in our previous study, many participants turned to the settings search function when they encountered navigation difficulties. In iOS 18.2+, the search experience remained inconsistent and unreliable. This was particularly notable when it failed to surface the new “Default Browser” option for relevant search terms.

   - Common search terms like "Default" returned results related to other default settings (like "Default Calendar" and "Default Apps") but not "Default Browser" (see Figure 7).
   - Searching for “Browser” and “Internet” did not return results relevant to changing the default browser and surprisingly, searching for “Default Browser” did not return any results at all (see Figure 8).
   - We also observed some inconsistencies between different OS versions. One participant searched for "Default bro" and successfully saw the "Default Apps" result, while another participant received no results for the same search (see Figure 9).

   Some of this evidence suggests that Apple may have made some slight changes to the Settings search between 18.2.1 and 18.3.1, but significant issues remain. This continued search failure represents a critical missed opportunity to help users find the settings they are searching for, effectively limiting user choice.

[21] Screenshot captured on February 18, 2025 on iOS 18.3.1.

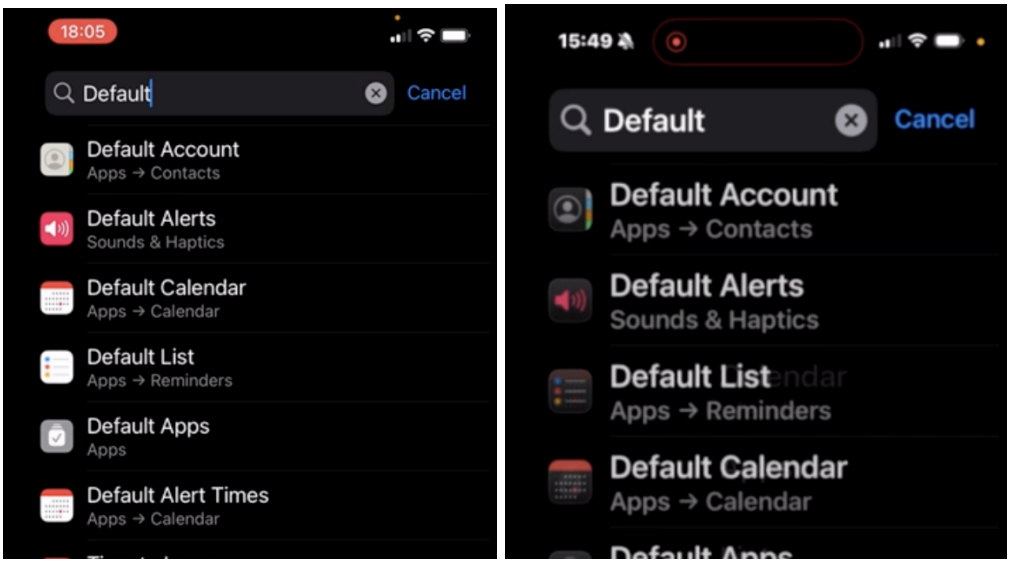

Figure 7: Searching for “Default” 18.2.1 and iOS 18.3.1.[22]

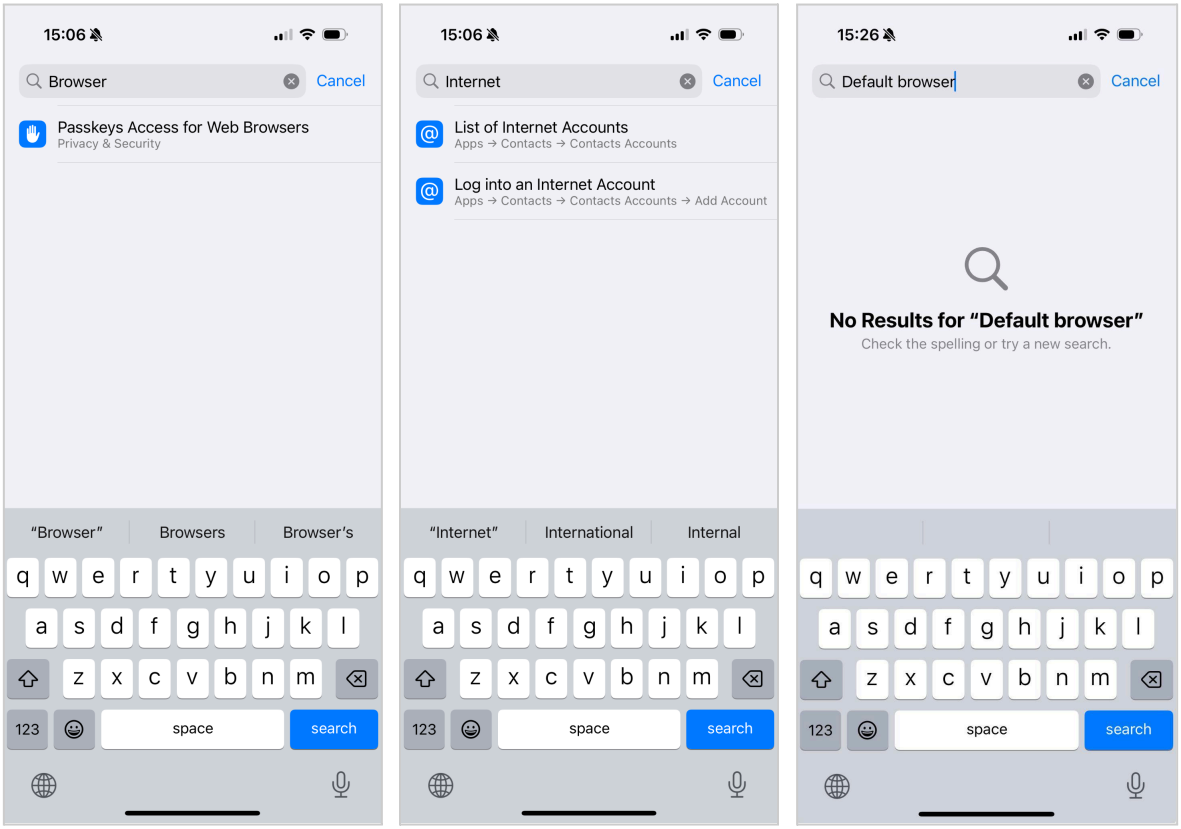

Figure 8: Searching for “Browser”, “Internet” and “Default browser” on iOS 18.3.1.[23]

[22] Screenshots captured on January 15, 2025 on iOS 18.2.1 and 18.3.1.
[23] Screenshot captured on February 18, 2025 on iOS 18.3.1.

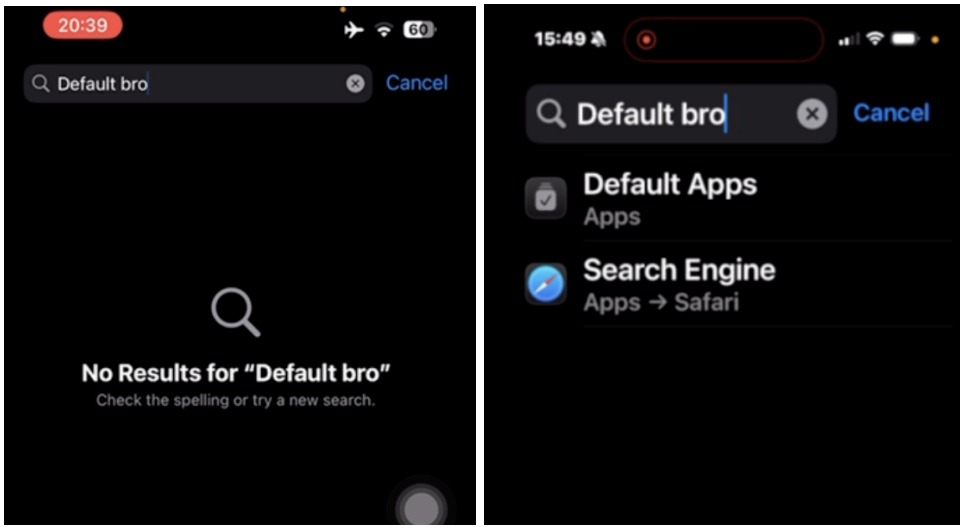

Figure 9: Searching for "Default bro" on 18.2.1 and on iOS 18.3.1.[24]

[24] Screenshots captured on January 15, 2025 on iOS 18.2.1 and 18.3.1.

05. Comparative Analysis

iOS 17 vs. iOS 18.2+

Having examined the user experience of changing default browsers in both iOS 17 and iOS 18.2+, we can now directly compare how Apple's implementation has evolved. This comparison allows us to assess which barriers have been addressed, which remain, and what progress has been made toward enabling users to “easily change default settings” as required by the DMA.

Improvements

- **Hidden Default Options**
  The most significant improvement was ending the practice of hiding default browser options when Safari was set as default. In our iOS 17 study, several participants became confused when they couldn't find options they expected to see. In the iOS 18.2+ study, this specific issue was resolved, as options remained visible regardless of which browser was set as default. This change represents an important step toward interface clarity and acknowledges that users should have access to consistent settings regardless of their current configuration.

- **Centralized Default Settings**
  The addition of a dedicated "Default Apps" section in iOS 18.2+ created a centralized location for changing default apps. This change aligned with suggestions from multiple participants in our original study who indicated they would expect these settings to be grouped together. When participants discovered this section, they found it intuitive and appreciated having default settings consolidated in one location. However, the discoverability of this menu remains an issue (see below).

- **Modest Search Improvements**
  There was some evidence of limited improvement in search functionality, with certain search terms like "Default bro" sometimes returning relevant results. However, these improvements were inconsistent across participants and OS versions.

Remaining Barriers

- **Confusing Menu Structure**
  Users in both studies encountered settings menus that did not align with their expectations about where default browser settings should be located. Many searched through unrelated categories, such as “General” or “Network,” reflecting a mismatch

between the menu structure and users' expectations of how such settings should be organized. This led to frequent trial-and-error navigation and reliance on search as a fallback.

- **"Default Apps" Discoverability**
  Even when users arrived at the correct screen, the new "Default Apps" section was frequently overlooked. Of the eight participants who accessed the relevant page, only three appeared to notice the setting. This suggests a problem with UI visibility and recognition: the setting lacked visual salience and/or labeling that aligned with user expectations, preventing users from realizing they had reached the correct location. One likely factor was the subdued gray design of the "Default Apps" section, which may have failed to attract attention when juxtaposed with the colorful app icons displayed beneath it (see Figure 6 above).

- **Ineffective Search**
  Search remained a significant pain point, with identical search terms yielding different results for participants on different OS versions. The failure of common terms like "Browser" and "Internet" to return relevant results represents a missed opportunity to surface the new "Default Apps" section and help users who are actively seeking these settings.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this follow-up study on iOS 18.2+, we recommended the following improvements to better align with the DMA's requirement for "easily" changeable default settings:

1. **Improve UI Visibility**
   The benefits of the new "Default Apps" section are limited by poor discoverability. In several cases, participants overlooked the setting even while viewing the correct screen. This highlights a failure of UI visibility and suggests that placement alone is not enough.

   - Consider moving "Default Apps" to a more prominent location, such as the top level of Settings.
   - Add visual cues to draw attention to this section when users navigate to the Apps screen.

2. **Provide Contextual Guidance**
   Context-sensitive guidance could significantly improve discoverability.

   - When people access a browser within Settings, consider opportunities to flag the new "Default Apps" section. And, consider temporarily highlighting the new "Default Apps" section for users who search for related terms.

- Use clear language and cross-link related settings for added clarity.

3. **Improve Search Functionality**
   Search remains a critical area for improvement. Given the ambiguity in regulatory language around “ease,” search functionality becomes a key test of whether users can reliably access important settings without prior knowledge or external assistance.

   - Ensure searching for appropriate search terms like "Default” and “Default Browser" consistently surfaces the correct setting. This should include both “Default Browser” and “Default Apps.”

   - Partial relevant search terms should also return default settings options rather than no results at all.

These recommendations are designed to address the specific barriers we observed that continue to prevent users from “easily” changing their default browser as required by the DMA. While Apple has made progress by implementing two of our previous recommendations, our follow-up research demonstrates that discoverability and search functionality issues continue to create unnecessary friction for users. Implementing these improvements would help transform a cumbersome process into one that meaningfully enables users to discover, access, and change their default browser settings.

06. Conclusion

Across three usability studies conducted in 2024 and 2025, we identified persistent barriers that prevent users from easily changing their default browser on both iOS and Windows platforms. While Apple has made meaningful improvements to the default browser setting experience between iOS 17 and iOS 18.2+, significant usability challenges persist. The addition of a centralized "Default Apps" section and the removal of hidden menu options represent positive steps, but users continue to struggle due to poor UI visibility, broader discoverability limitations, and inconsistent search functionality.

For Apple to fully comply with the DMA requirement that users can "easily change default settings," further improvements are necessary. The continued reliance on trial-and-error navigation suggests that the current implementation falls short of providing a truly “easy” experience that empowers user choice. In real-world conditions, many users are unlikely to demonstrate the same persistence observed in research settings, making it even more important that settings are easily discoverable and usable.

Similarly, our research on Windows shows that changing default browsers presents significant challenges, with most users unable to successfully complete this seemingly simple task. Microsoft's approach to default browser settings, particularly the confusing "Recommended browser settings" that favors Edge, creates unnecessary friction for users attempting to exercise their choice of browser.

In all three of our studies, participants demonstrated remarkable persistence, often trying multiple approaches before finding the correct setting. This persistence is notable because it suggests that changing the default browser on iOS and Windows requires more determination than should be necessary for a basic settings adjustment. It is worth noting that participants in paid studies are often more familiar with technology and more motivated to complete assigned tasks than typical users would be in everyday situations. The frictions we observed could serve as significant deterrents to changing the default browser for typical users outside of a study environment.

When people are not able to easily make choices about the technology they use, it reinforces gatekeeper control, leads to reduced browser choice, and stifles innovation. For individual users, these barriers can result in tangible consequences like reduced access to privacy and security features, missed opportunities to use specialized tools designed for specific needs, and being locked into an ecosystem that may not prioritize their interests. Changing a default browser should not require access to special support documentation or a significant time investment. These frictions don't just frustrate people, they undermine the DMA's ability to empower consumers and foster competition.

Our research highlights the importance of ongoing usability testing and iterative improvement when implementing regulatory requirements. In the absence of detailed regulatory definitions, these methods are essential for interpreting whether users can meaningfully act on their choices. Technical availability of a setting does not guarantee that it is accessible or discoverable in practice. The gap between self-reported data and observed user behavior underscores the need for interfaces that accommodate users with varying levels of technical knowledge and confidence.

Given that technology companies of all sizes conduct various types of usability testing, it is surprising that no relevant testing has been disclosed by Apple and Microsoft in DMA compliance reports. In addition, the lack of transparency over some operating system settings changes makes it difficult for people, as well as regulators and business users, to follow and account for such changes.

By addressing the persistent issues identified in our studies, Apple and Microsoft can create a more trustworthy and user-friendly approach to default browser settings that genuinely empowers user choice while also aligning with regulatory expectations. As other gatekeepers implement similar changes to comply with the DMA, our findings underscore the value of empirical user research in evaluating regulatory requirements. Usability testing offers a rigorous, repeatable method for interpreting what these standards mean in real-world contexts—and for holding gatekeepers accountable to their intent.

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