
the7stars
HUMAN
MAGIC,
MACHINE
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THE ROLE OF AI IN CHRISTMAS SHOPPING, GIFTING AND FESTIVE PLANNING

Christmas gifting comes with pressure as well as excitement. Finding something that feels right means balancing budgets, ideas, different recipients and the expectation that a gift should still feel personal.

That makes Christmas a natural moment to reach for tools that make the process easier. Alongside friends and family, search engines, retailers and physical stores, AI is becoming another source of inspiration and advice.

However, Brits aren't fully handing Christmas over to AI. Instead, they are using it selectively: to make an increasingly complex shopping journey easier, while keeping the parts that make gifting feel human firmly in their own hands. At the7stars there are four trends we've identified for how AI is appearing in Christmas shopping journeys this year.

1. The Christmas Journey is becoming hybrid rather than automated
2. The strongest audience opportunity lies with overwhelmed Christmas organisers
3. The more meaning the relationship, the more consumers want a human in the loop.
4. The invisible shortlist: How is AI shaping its recommendations?



(Source: the7stars QT, August 2026)

THE RELIANCE ON LLMS VS OTHER SOURCES FOR CHRISTMAS

The Christmas journey is becoming hybrid rather than automated.

8%

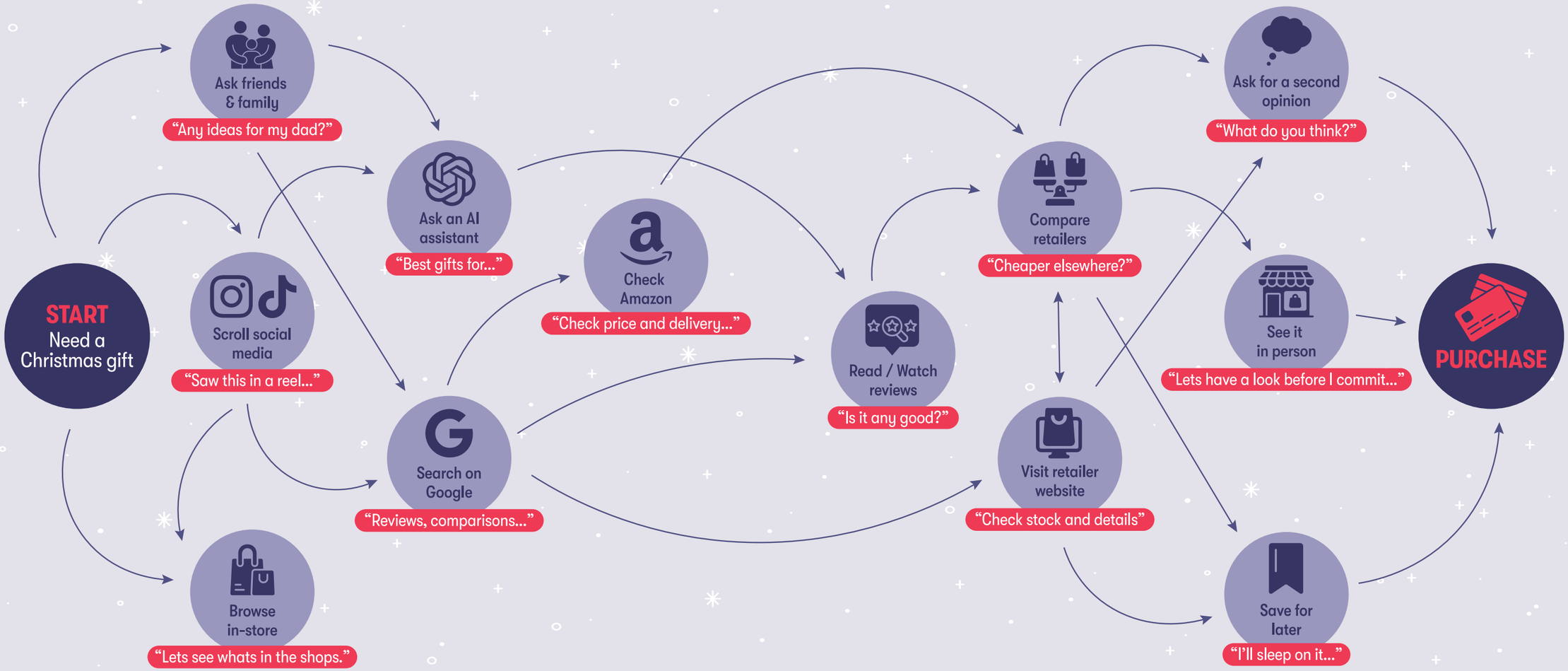
OF BRITS START THEIR SEARCH WITH AI ASSISTANTS

There has never been one starting point for Christmas shopping, and AI hasn't created one. Friends and family, search engines, stores and online marketplaces still lead inspiration, with fewer than 1 in 10 Brits starting with an AI assistant (Pulse). But AI's influence may be greater than shoppers realise, as search engines increasingly embed features such as AI Overviews and AI Mode into the familiar search journey.

Where Christmas inspiration starts:

- FRIENDS & FAMILY 21%
- SEARCH ENGINES 20%
- PHYSICAL STORES 17%
- ONLNE MARKETPLACES 16%
- AI ASSISTANTS 8%

The journey also crosses channels: almost half of shoppers split their Christmas shopping between online and in-store (IPA). As such, a typical Christmas gifting journey in 2026 comprises a complex mass of sources:



Where AI does appear, it supports both the thinking and the legwork. Last year, the7stars found that LLMs were becoming more present across inspiration, research and shortlisting. This Christmas, AI's growing role is already visible in online shopping behaviour. Over the Christmas quarter, the proportion of outbound clicks from Amazon UK going to AI platforms have more than tripled year on year (Similar Web). ChatGPT rose from the 49th to the 19th most-visited destination after Amazon, overtaking Argos (Similar Web).

Traffic from Amazon UK to Google remained steady suggesting that AI is adding a step rather than replacing search.

But an AI recommendation isn't the end of the hunt. People still want a human in the loop before they purchase. If AI suggests a gift that looks right, 3 in 5 shoppers would go on to read customer reviews, half would search for it on Google, and 4 in 10 would check it on Amazon (Pulse). Shoppers are using AI to help get to an answer, but still looking elsewhere to validate the final decision.

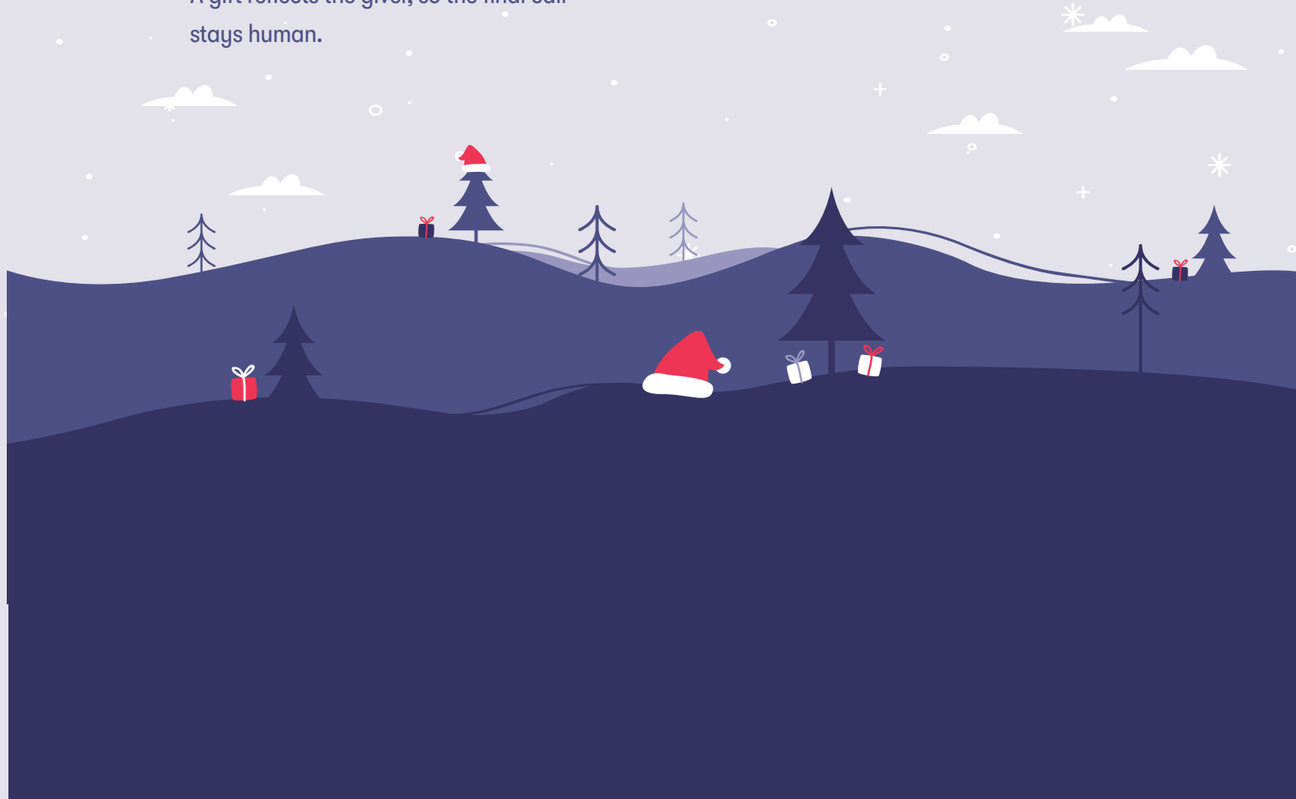
If an AI tool suggested a Christmas gift that looked right, which of the following would you want to do before buying it?



For brands, this makes reassurance beyond the AI recommendation crucial. Reviews, clear product information and a convincing retail presence all have a role in turning a suggestion into a purchase. Getting onto the shortlist is only part of the job; brands still need to earn the final decision.

As one Christmas shopper put it: ***"I listen to everything [friends and family] say to me all year, and take note and remember things they like."*** (Male, 55–64, East of England). A gift reflects the giver, so the final call stays human.

AI hasn't replaced Amazon, Google, physical stores or word-of-mouth – but it increasingly connects the dots between them. The result is a Christmas journey that is hybrid, not automated.



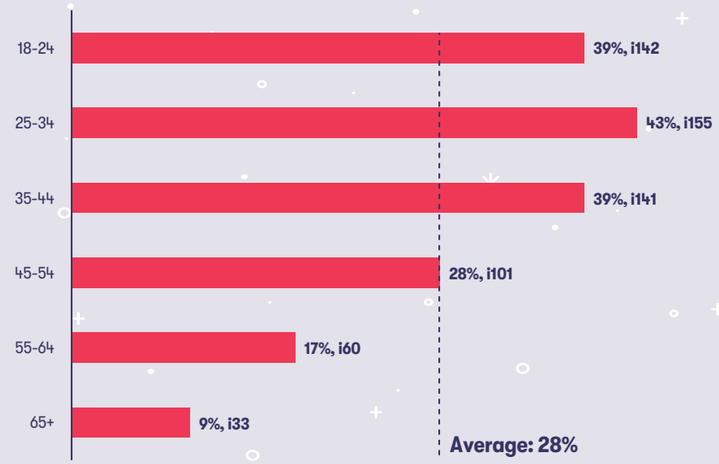


THE AUDIENCE NUANCE IN USING LLMS FOR CHRISTMAS

The strongest opportunity lies within overwhelmed Christmas organisers.

Younger shoppers are the most open to using AI for Christmas gifting. Around 2 in 5 under-35s would consider using an AI chatbot for gift recommendations, compared with fewer than 1 in 10 of those aged 65+ (TGI). But age only tells part of the story.

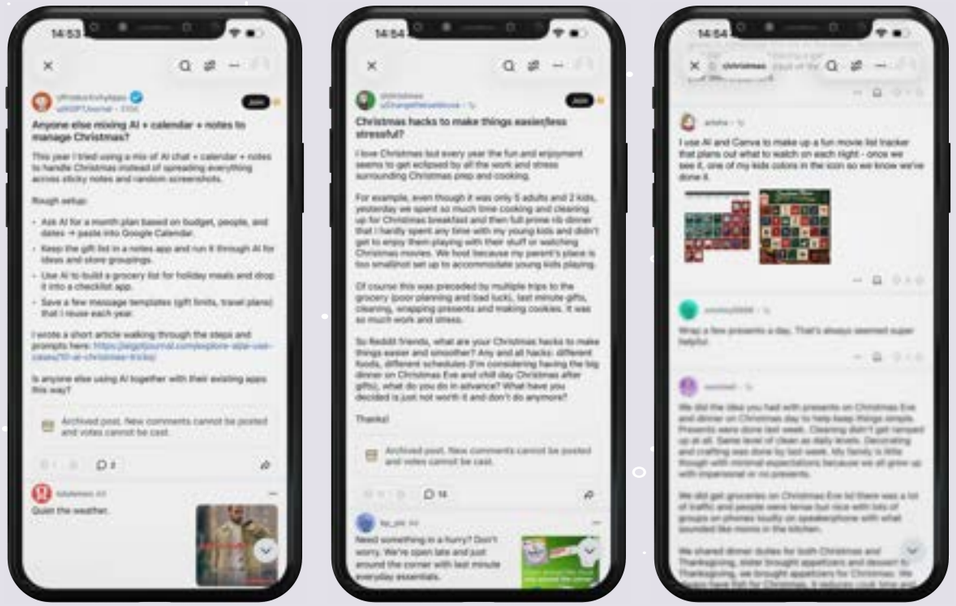
"I would consider using AI Chatbots for Christmas gift recommendations"



Focusing solely on younger shoppers overlooks another important audience: those under pressure. Consideration rises to 40% among those with children at home, compared with 23% among those without. Household size follows a similar pattern as well as full-time workers being more receptive than average. Together, this suggests AI resonates with people who have more Christmas to organise and less time to organise it.

50% (1,113)

OF THOSE THAT AGREE "I WOULD CONSIDER USING AI CHATBOTS FOR GIFT RECOMMENDATIONS, ALSO FIND SHOPPING FOR CHISTMAS STRESSFUL



For stretched Christmas shoppers, AI emerges as a new source of inspiration

"I would consider using AI Chatbots for Christmas gift recommendations"



Stress also appears to be part of that story. More than half of all parents who would consider using AI for gift recommendations find shopping for Christmas gifts stressful.

And the appeal goes beyond gifting. One Reddit user described asking Claude to plan their Christmas dinner, tweaking its suggestions and then asking which elements could be prepared a day ahead: ***"Everything tasted great and I got more compliments than I normally do."*** This demonstrates how AI can support the wider organisational load around Christmas.

Therefore, the opportunity for AI isn't just among the most digitally confident. It's among the people with the most to navigate at Christmas. For brands, that could mean organising their advice around the whole Christmas workload. Helping someone plan gifts for several relatives within a budget, or work out what can be prepared before Christmas Day, responds to the pressure they are actually under. The value comes from taking something off their list.



33% SAY WOULD FEEL COMFORTABLE USING AI TO HELP CHOOSE A GIFT FOR THEIR PARTNER, YET 34% SAY IT IS THE RELATIONSHIP FOR WHICH AI FEELS LEAST APPROPRIATE

THE VARIATION IN LLM RELIANCE DEPENDS ON THE GIFT RECIPIENT

The more meaningful the relationship, the more consumers want a human in the loop.

A I has sparked a much wider debate about effort, authenticity, and what should remain distinctly human. From AI-written wedding vows to Valentines Day cards and birthday messages, consumer backlash has focused not on quality, but instead a growing concern that meaningful acts are being outsourced. That tension matters at Christmas, because gifting is ultimately a demonstration of how well we know someone.

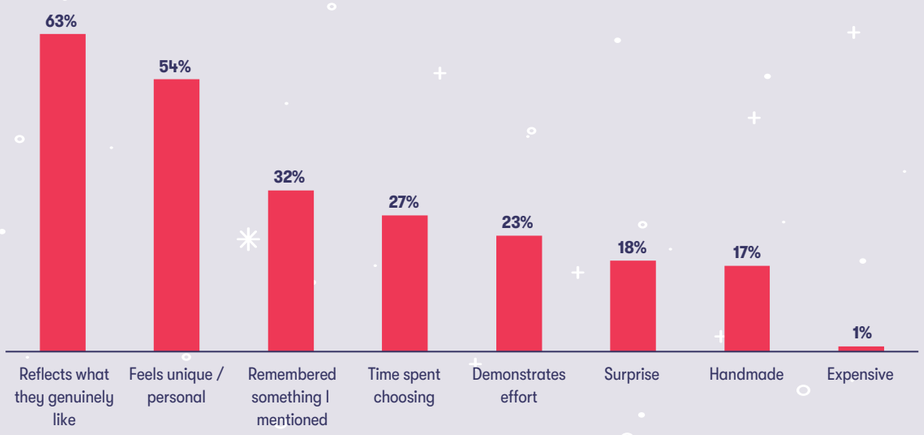


For Brits, thoughtfulness is rooted in personal understanding: 63% say a thoughtful gift reflects something the recipient likes, 54% say it should feel personal or unique, and 32% say it remembers something they have previously mentioned (Pulse). The value of a gift lies less in what was spent and more in the thought behind it.

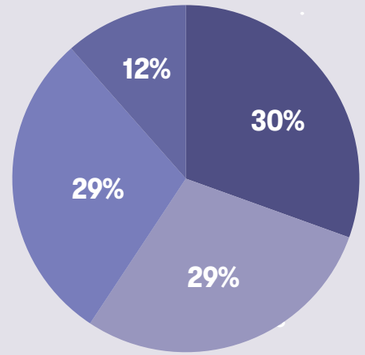
3 IN 5

ARE COMFORTABLE WITH AI BEING INVOLVED IF THE GIVER REMAINS PART OF THE PROCESS

What makes a gift thoughtful?



This doesn't mean that AI has no place in thoughtful gifting. Nearly 3 in 5 are comfortable with AI being involved if the giver remains part of the process or it helps them find the perfect gift (Pulse). Only 11% say that they are uncomfortable with AI being involved in gift selection altogether (Pulse).



- Gifts are more meaningful when chosen in person
- AI is fine as long as their giver remains involved in the processs
- If someone gets me the perfect gift, I don't mind if they use AI to find it
- I'm uncomfortable with AI playing a role in the gift selection

But who the gift is for changes the rules. Shoppers are most comfortable using AI to help choose presents for Secret Santa recipients (41%), friends (40%) and colleagues (34%), where inspiration and convenience may matter more (Pulse). As the relationship becomes more personal, comfort falls. Using AI to choose gifts for a partner appears more contentious: 33% would feel comfortable using AI to help choose a gift for their partner, yet 34% say it is the relationship for which AI feels least appropriate (Pulse).

How comfortable are you using AI to help choose gifts based on the recipent?

SECRET SANTA 41%

FRIENDS 40%

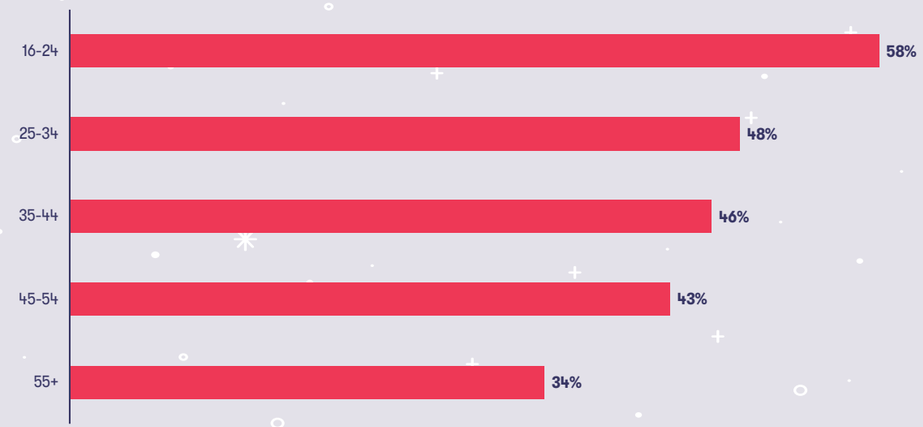
COLLEAGUE 34%

There is a similar tension among younger shoppers. They may be the most open to using AI in the Christmas purchase journey but 58% of 16–24-year-olds say AI makes the perfect gift less meaningful, compared with 34% of those aged 55+ (Pulse). Being comfortable with the technology doesn't necessarily mean wanting it to take over the moments that feel personal.

58%

OF 16-24 YEAR OLDS SAY AI MAKES THE PERFECT GIFT LESS MEANINGFUL, COMPARED TO 34% OF THOSE AGED 55+

AI makes the perfect gift less meaningful



As the7stars' *Cultural Codes* have identified, younger audiences are increasingly drawn to so-called 'nowstalgia', romanticising even the recent past as a source of comfort, familiarity and authenticity in an uncertain and increasingly automated world.

Therefore, although younger consumers may embrace AI as a practical tool, they are more likely to question its role in moments that carry emotional significance. Rather than signalling innovation, visible AI involvement can sometimes risk undermining the personal investment that makes a gift feel meaningful in the first place.

Ultimately, consumers aren't deciding whether AI belongs in gifting at all. They're deciding where its help ends and human thought should begin. The more meaningful the relationship, the more important that distinction becomes.

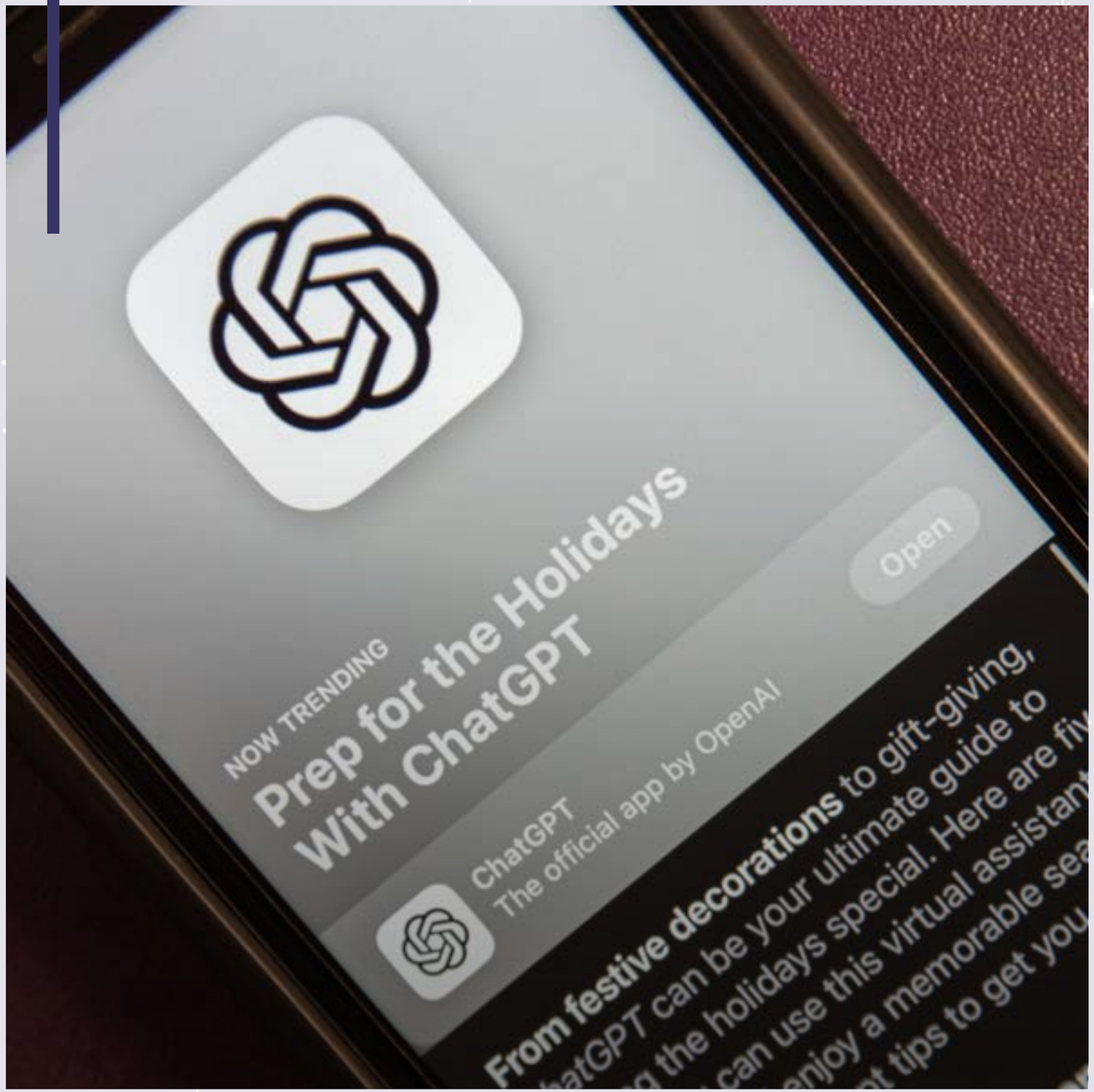
There is an opportunity here for brands to help shoppers put what they know about someone to work. "A gift for Dad" offers little direction; "A gift for Dad, who's just started growing vegetables and hates buying things for himself" gives AI something much more useful. The personal understanding still comes from the giver.

40%

WITH CHILDREN AT HOME WOULD CONSIDER AI GIFT RECOMMENDATIONS VS. 23% WITHOUT CHILDREN

1 IN 2

PEOPLE ARE OPEN TO AI GIFT RECOMMENDATIONS FIND CHRISTMAS PRESENT SHOPPING STRESSFUL



THE INVISIBLE SHORTLIST: HOW IS AI SHAPING ITS RECOMMENDATIONS?

If AI is increasingly helping shoppers narrow down Christmas choices, what makes it onto those shortlists matters.

To explore this, we tested 60 identical gift prompts across Copilot, ChatGPT, Gemini and Claude. While the platforms generated a wide range of gift ideas, the retailers behind them were often much more familiar. Large, established names such as John Lewis, Amazon and Boots repeatedly surfaced, with John Lewis appearing in 78% of prompts of the prompts tested.



As gift prompts became more specific, recommendations began to shift towards category specialists such as Lakeland and Waterstones. This creates an interesting challenge for smaller brands. Shoppers may turn to AI for fresh inspiration and still be directed towards the biggest names. Helping people search for a particular interest, occasion or need could give specialist brands a better chance of entering the conversation. In other words, AI can broaden the shortlist, but specificity from the shopper helps it get there.

However, the four models did not build shortlists in exactly the same way.

Copilot leaned more heavily towards established retailers such as Amazon and John Lewis, while Gemini surfaced a wider range of specialist retailers and brands. Claude described more direct web searching, while ChatGPT produced a more streamlined selection of retailers.

The bigger story is then what these differences add up to. **AI may reduce the effort in Christmas discovery without necessarily expanding the choice.** For time-poor shoppers, that can be useful: AI helps turn a huge universe of possibilities into a manageable shortlist. But it could also make visibility harder for smaller or more niche brands if established retailers continue to dominate AI recommendations.

Whilst this is not surprising, it may make the present-buying journey that little bit harder for people who are looking for a truly unique gift.

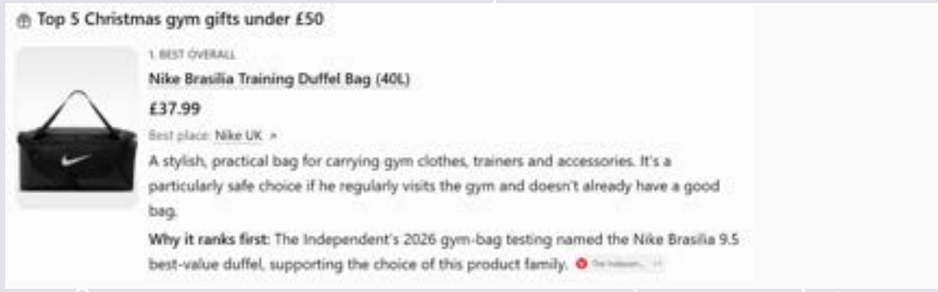
As for whether the use of AI in the purchase journey makes the gift less thoughtful, it seems that consumers are not yet decided.

AI may help shoppers find the right gift, but whether its involvement feels thoughtful still depends on the recipient and the giver's own contribution. As AI becomes another step in how shoppers discover and shortlist products, brands need to know whether these platforms can find, understand and trust them.

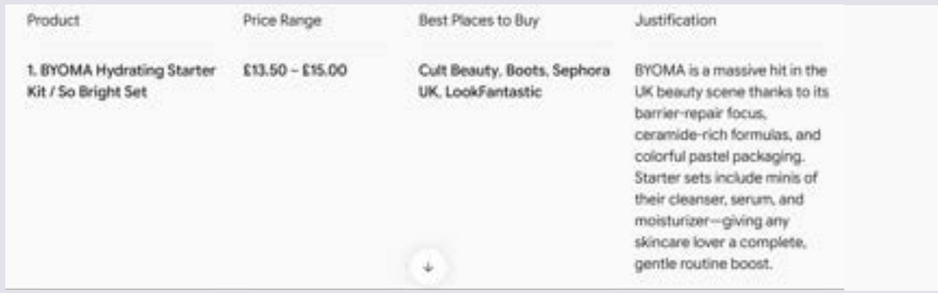
the7stars' GEP & AI Search Readiness Audit assesses a brand's visibility across Google AI Overviews, ChatGPT and Copilot against the characteristics of an AI-search-ready brand, showing where it stands versus competitors and where improvements can make the biggest difference.



(Source: CoPilot)



(Source: ChatGPT)



Product	Price Range	Best Places to Buy	Justification
1. BYOMA Hydrating Starter Kit / So Bright Set	£13.50 – £15.00	Cult Beauty, Boots, Sephora UK, LookFantastic	BYOMA is a massive hit in the UK beauty scene thanks to its barrier-repair focus, ceramide-rich formulas, and colorful pastel packaging. Starter sets include minis of their cleanser, serum, and moisturizer—giving any skincare lover a complete, gentle routine boost.

(Source: Gemini)

AI CAN SHORTCUT THE WORK, BUT NOT THE MEANING

Christmas offers a clear example of how people want AI to fit into their lives. Shoppers are willing to use it to generate ideas and make an overwhelming task easier during a stressful period. However, that doesn't mean handing over the decision entirely.

Its opportunity is therefore not to automate Christmas, but to remove some of the effort around the moments people still want to own.

The more complex the task, the more valuable AI can become. But the closer we get to the people who matter the most, the more important human judgement remains.

The future of Christmas isn't human or machine. It's human magic, with a little machine help.



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- IPA Insight report on Christmas shopping (link to add)
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- Gemini
- Claude



