More Than Just a Summary: Researching the Right Layout for AI in Search

Challenge: Company X was preparing to launch a new AI-generated summary feature, but internal misalignment surfaced. Product managers pushed for a specific direction, while designers urged caution due to inconsistent past designs and a lack of data on which layout would make the content easier to consume. Research was needed to guide a more informed decision.

Methodology

- Preference Testing
- Unmoderated Interviews

- Given the short timeline before the product launch, I ran unmoderated user interviews to quickly gather feedback. Participants reviewed three design concepts (A, B, and C), selected a preferred option, and explained their reasoning. Before the preference test, they answered discovery questions about how they use and trust AI-generated summaries.

Key Findings

- Users preferred designs with visually prominent, inline citations, as these enhanced transparency and made it easier to trace information back to its source.

- This preference aligned with a broader insight: users rely on AI-generated summaries for straightforward answers, but when a topic requires deeper analysis or multiple perspectives, they want clear access to sources to evaluate the information themselves.

Outcome

- As a result of this research, the design team had the confidence to move forward with a solution that balanced user needs and product manager expectations.

- The research also empowered the design team to advocate for greater consistency in how references are presented across the site—shaping their look, feel, and functionality.

What I learned

- While the research led to a successful outcome, I added a caveat to one of the findings: the length of the AI summary may have influenced user responses. Due to time constraints, I couldn't test longer versus shorter AI summaries, leaving this factor unexamined. I was mindful in how I communicated this limitation to stakeholders—framing it as an opportunity for future exploration rather than a flaw—so as not to undermine the overall value of the research.

"It tells you that in this AI summary this is where the information is coming from and that feels more reliable to me." AI Developer