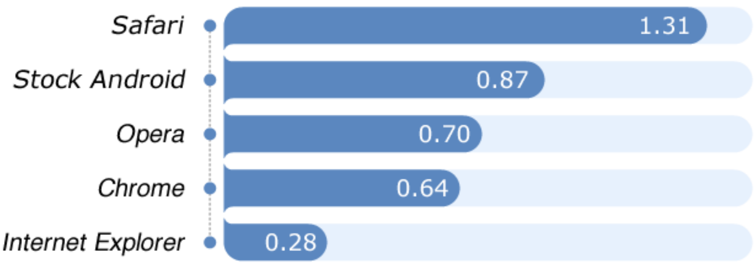
fixya

The Fixya Report Mobile Browsers

October 2013

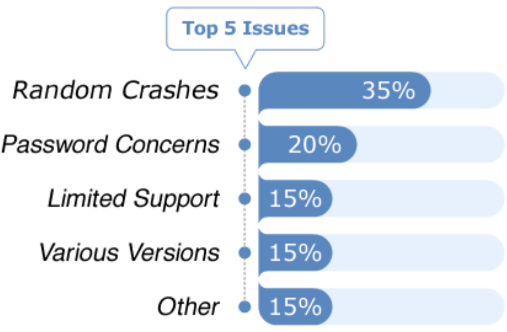
Head to Head Usability Score



Problem Impressions	NetMarketShare
61,582	95.23%

A higher score is better. Score calculated by taking software developer problem impressions found on Fixya.com divided by sample problem impressions found on Fixya.com (impression ratio), normalizing market share amongst competitors for comparison (sample market share, combined total is 100%), and dividing sample market share by impression ratio. The report includes market share data from the last year and courtesy of NetMarketShare.com.

1. Android Stock Browser



Problem Impressions	Usability Score	NetMarketShare
16,097	0.87	21.86%

Synopsis:

Developed by Google for the Android operating system, the Android Stock Browser has a long history with consumers who have purchased a mobile device. The Stock Browser comes pre-installed with the vast majority of mobile phones running the Android operating system—similar to Safari on the iPhone. This means that a good segment of users who first access their device will jump right into browsing, experience the browser, and stick with it due to its simple feel.

The Stock browser is also open source, which means that there are various versions of the browser out there depending upon which device you have. Differences between each consumers' experience with the stock browser will obviously vary based off of this fact, but the core experience between each device essentially remains the same. There doesn't appear to be as much variance between devices running different versions the Android stock browser as the variance found between mobile phones running the Android operating system.

Although some newer models have begun to use Chrome as their default browser, the Android stock browser has become extremely popular among early users and is still widely used among those with Android.

Pros:

Quick Browsing: The stock browser's paired down and simple design helps with the speed at which users are able to browse the internet, improving their experience when navigating the web. This is ideal for first-time mobile users and those who want to experience the web.

Simple Design: Related to the quick browsing feature above, the clean and simple design of the browser gives users the ability to quickly load the mobile browser and immediately begin searching the web. The downside to this is that the lack of features found with other mobile browsers are not present with the stock Android browser, although a simple experience is one that clearly works best for a certain subset of users. In our recommendation, the Android browser is best used by smartphone owners who are either new to mobile browsing or don't need a mobile browser to do much more than locate web pages.

Better Flash Support: By and large the Android stock browser has the best Flash support out of all mobile browsers, which is a positive for users who visit Flash heavy websites that haven't been optimized for mobile. However, newer versions of the stock browser on mobile phones have begun to phase out Flash support.

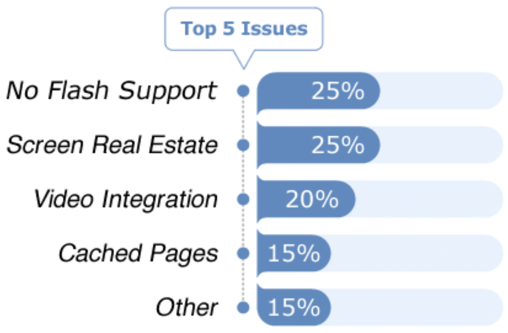
Cons:

Random Crashes: When browsing the Internet, Fixya users often report two types of crashes when using the stock browser. The first is the browser failing to respond to any commands (essentially freezing). However, simply exiting the browser and relaunching it appears to fix this issue. The second is the browser crashing and sending the user to the home page. In this situation, relaunching the browser can produce two different results—the opened page will still be visible for users where they left off or the page will have disappeared and users will be looking at an empty browser without any open pages. It is possible that this is related to Flash functions running in the background of websites which aren't completely optimized for mobile (both appear to be common causes for browser issues in mobile), but these issues still reduce the Stock Browser from delivering a flawless experience.

Password Concerns: Fixya users have expressed concern about password security when using the Stock Android browser. There appears to be two core issues—the first is that passwords are saved as text instead of the usual bullet points users usually see when entering their password on their device. This is also present when users return to the browser page. The implication of this issue is that users password are not very secure in numerous situations, specifically if someone else is in possession of their phone. It is uncertain whether this issue is one that has resulted in any serious real-world issues for Fixya users, but the concerns about their password security is something that has caused them to voice their concern.

Limited Support: According to Fixya users as well as media reports, the stock Android browser is currently being phased out of various new mobile devices and being replaced with Chrome in an attempt by Google to unify the mobile experience for their Chrome OS. Although a significant segment of mobile users still use the stock browser, support and updates for the browser will be waning in the future and new smartphone and tablet devices will likely not launch with the stock browser enabled. For consumers, this means fewer resources will likely be dedicated to the stock browser in the near future, although its open source nature could extend its shelf life longer than expected.

2. Safari



Problem Impressions	Usability Score	NetMarketShare
28,672	1.31	58.12%

Synopsis:

Safari is the default web browser on the Apple iPhone, which means that due to the popularity of Apple's iPhone smartphone device, the vast majority of smartphone users in the United States will be using this browser to search and explore the web via their mobile device.

With big names like Firefox currently not planned for iOS due to numerous factors including web engine and API access disagreements amongst the two companies, as well as the simple fact that Safari's browser comes preinstalled and is likely one of the initial things brand-new users launch when they first use their iPhone, Safari remains one of the most popular mobile browsers on the market today.

Pros:

Dead Simple UI: While the Safari mobile browser doesn't have many frills or unique features found in other mobile web browsers, its simplicity mirrors that of Apple's larger corporate ethos. Things such as browsing speed, simplicity, and the ability to open multiple windows quickly and easily at the bottom of the browser all create a simple experience that users appreciate when browsing the web on their mobile devices.

Individual Page Action Features: One of the most successful implementations of the Safari browser is the ability to take multiple actions with a specific webpage. Users are able to do a multitude of things with a specific web page, including adding it as a bookmark, adding it to the home screen for easier access, mailing a link to the page, tweet out the link to your Twitter followers, or even print the page. It's a simple feature, but one that users (with two touches on the screen) can accomplish almost seamlessly.

Reading List: In the early days of mobile web browsing, users would often leave windows open to "save" web pages for reading later. However, with Apple's Reading List, those days are gone. By saving things to a reading list you can save a web page for later and read it at your own convenience without leaving multiple tabs open.

Cons:

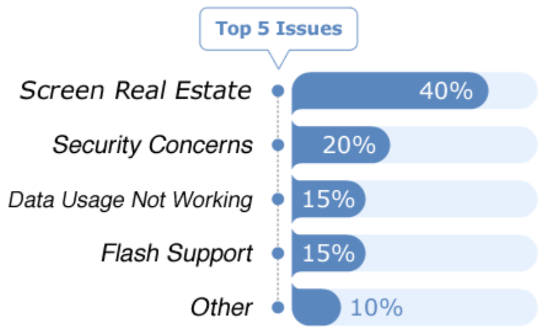
No Flash Support: Keep in mind that this isn't necessarily an issue that should leave users puzzled, as Apple hasn't supported Flash on the iPhone for the entirety of its existence. However, for users who land on Flash-based sites via their mobile Safari browser, the lack of support here can be a cumbersome issue that restricts them from using the web to its fullest capabilities. That being said, Flash for mobile is definitely on its way out. Less than five years from now this is unlikely to be an issue for users regardless of browser choice.

Video Integration: Due to the lack of Flash support on the iPhone, items such as YouTube videos will automatically redirect to a different application on the iPhone or load it on a separate page. For example, when a user browses YouTube via the mobile browser, a video that is clicked will redirect the user out of Safari into a separate page. While not necessarily a game-changer for the majority of users, this type of experience doesn't feel as natural or seamless as it could. With no Flash support for iPhone planned (that ship has long sailed) this will continue to be an issue for affected users who are used to dealing with Flash content and want to stay in the browser environment.

Screen Real Estate: Safari's mobile browsing experience is simple, which users love. However, that simplicity comes with a price as a lot of the screen's real estate gets muddled together. On Safari, the URL address bar is located at the top of the screen in the first bar, alongside a search bar that remains to the right. A second bar at the bottom of the page has sharing features, bookmarks, and windows where other web pages are open. Users also report being frustrated with the URL bar disappearing at the top of the page when you scroll down—the only way to access the bar again and/or conduct a search is by scrolling up to the top. If you're reading a particularly long web page this can be frustrating unless you decide to just clear the page and open up a new window.

However, Apple has addressed some of these issues in their newest release of Safari for iOS 7. The newest version of Safari has combined the search and URL bar at the top of the screen and minimized that bar when scrolling down on the screen as well. Unfortunately for users, Safari still contains limited real estate—there remains two bars on top and bottom of the screen, limiting web page size and reducing the amount of screen availability users have to read.

3. Opera



Problem Impressions	Usability Score	NetMarketShare
8,921	0.70	9.76%

Synopsis:

Opera has a large following of users, with Opera Software announcing in February 2013that over 300 million unique and active users use the mobile browser around the world. It is available for Android, Apple, iOS, and Windows Mobile, making it one of the most widely available mobile browsers across multiple mobile operating systems.

While it used to be a pay-to-use browser on the desktop, all mobile versions of Opera are now completely free in an attempt to compete with other non-stock mobile browsers such as Firefox and Chrome. This comes with some advertising and paid search result anchors, but nothing users are finding especially cumbersome.

Pros:

Smooth UI: Opera has a lot of good things going for it, and one of them is the slick UI that users experience when using the mobile browser. Users report an experience along the lines of Apple products, with quick and efficient navigation, status bars that inform you of anything you should be aware of, and easy to use tab-sorting tray allowing you to flip back and forth from one web page to another with ease. Furthermore, Opera offers a full screen mode for users that prefer a more immersive approach to browsing the web via their mobile device. Opera does well with the limited real estate found on mobile phones and ensures that users don't feel handcuffed with the product.

Data Charges: Opera users report using less of their mobile data plan while browsing the device when compared to other browsers they've used. According to the company, this is achieved by Opera routing data through it's own servers in order to optimize the data that is being transferred to the phone. For users on a limited data plan who also browse the web heavily and wish to avoid overage charges, this is a feature that should attract some eyeballs and gain converts.

HTML5 Support: Opera is known for its excellent HTML5 support, boasting one of the most robust feature sets for websites running on HTML5. Whether it's the ability to shrink wrap text or render the websites themselves, Opera flourishes in HTML5 compatibility compared to the majority of its competitors.

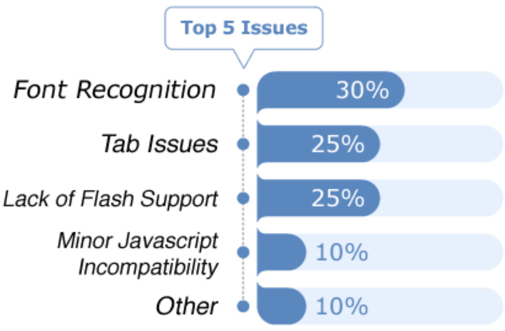
Cons:

Screen Real Estate: Make no mistake, Opera does a lot of things right with their mobile view—the browser compresses pages that are not designed for mobile, rendering them in a smaller version that fits the smaller screen. However, some users reported that this mobile view produced some strange looking web pages that did not display as one would expect, either due to the page being slimmed down or rendered in a non-aesthetic way. Users have also reported their favorites tab is missing on the page.

Security Concerns: One downside of Opera's unique way of handling mobile browsing data through its servers is that the security of web pages can be somewhat compromised. Since encrypted web pages are routed through Opera's servers and then delivered to users after being decrypted and encrypted by Opera, the initial encryption done by the website (this is common in financial sectors) is compromised to a degree. For users who do a lot of banking or online payments with their phone, seeking out an application developed by their financial institution is recommended for maximum security protection at all times.

Data Usage Not Working: Note that this is also listed as a pro to the Opera browser. Some users reported seeing no change in data usage when using Opera to other mobile browsers, reducing the need to use Opera in the event they were attempting to limit data usage.

4. Chrome


Top 5 Issues
Font Recognition 30%
Tab Issues 25%
Lack of Flash Support 25%
Minor Javascript Incompatibility 10%
Other 10%

Problem Impressions	Usability Score	NetMarketShare
3,741	0.64	3.68%

Synopsis:

Google entered the browser game relatively late compared to its competitors, but almost immediately the results have been impressive. The use of easy-to-install extensions, quick browsing speed, and intuitive use were met with rave reviews, leading Chrome's desktop version to become one of the fastest growing web browsers on the market today.

Chrome followed up that success with the release of their mobile version, supported on numerous operating systems. The reception for Chrome's release on the mobile space has been similarly well-received, with users and critics applauding the simplified look of the browser, slimmed down features, and browsing speed. Furthermore, its HTML5 compatibility remains one of the most positive features of the browser, setting it up for an easy transition into the next sphere of mobile Internet usage.

Pros:

Core Features From Desktop Version: One of the most difficult things mobile browsers encounter is translating the cushy and comfortable desktop experience to the small screen found on mobile smartphones. This isn't an easy task for many developers, but users who enjoy Google Chrome are pleased with the results. Things like incognito browsing for users who don't want to be tracked online, tabbed browsing, and one box for both URL's and Google search provide users with the features that they've grown to enjoy on Chrome for desktop.

Smooth UI: Google has a hit or miss record with their user interface for a multitude of products, ranging from dastardly complex to simple and effective. Chrome mobile manages to deliver a simple and immersive experience, with Fixya users reporting that Internet browsing comes more naturally with Chrome on mobile.

Cross Platform Compatibility: Much like Internet Explorer, Google Chrome allows you to sync across multiple platforms in order to save favorites and bookmarks. Furthermore, by signing into Chrome's desktop version and Chrome on your phone, you'll be able to read tabs that are open on your desktop computer from your phone. With many users owning multiple devices and accessing the web simultaneously, this is a very neat feature that truly makes your devices feel personalized.

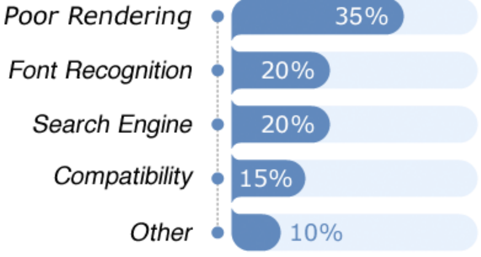
Cons:

No Flash Support: Much like Safari, Flash support is not provided with Google's Chrome mobile browser. As was mentioned in the Safari section, this should not be that big of an issue with users in five years, as industry trends are moving away from Flash in favor of HTML5 and other mobile-friendly technologies.

Font Recognition: Google Chrome will sometimes incorrectly recognize fonts displayed on websites, rendering them either too big or in a different font entirely. This issue, along with hurting the readability and aesthetic appeal of the site being viewed, can also make browsing with Chrome difficult when the text is too blurry or doesn't appear clear to the eye. On mobile phones this flaw can be limiting as the small real estate makes clear text a necessity.

Tab Issues: Tabbing is one thing Google Chrome does well for its mobile versions, but issues do come up when using this feature. Users who click on links from web pages and wish to open them in a new tab (in order to stay on the page they are currently on) will sometimes receive an "about:blank" result in the new tab and will be unable to follow the link. Caching issues also crop up in tabs that are left open, so when a user revisits that tab old information is displayed. Syncing issues with the desktop open tabs (see: "Cross Platform Compatability" in the "Pros" section) can also cause those tabs to not sync properly, meaning users are unable to visit the web pages that are open on their desktop browser.

5. Internet Explorer



Problem Impressions	Usability Score	NetMarketShare
4,151	0.28	1.81%

Synopsis:

Microsoft's Internet Explorer has long been the de facto browser due to the popularity of Microsoft's Windows operating system, but that dominance has waned in recent years with the influx of numerous competitive browsers as well as the mobile web-browsing market taking off. With a smaller percentage of Internet-enabled devices coming packaged with Internet Explorer out of the box, the browser's overall market share has become smaller than it once was.

Coupled with less than favorable reviews from critics about the quality of the browser, it was clear that Microsoft needed to up the ante when IE 10 was released, and to a large degree they did. Internet Explorer 10 is a much better product than previous iterations of the Microsoft browser, and the mobile experience mirrors that subtle, but important, improvement over its preceding releases. It comes preloaded on almost every Microsoft Window Phone device and provides a good experience for users who pick it up at first glance.

Pros:

Cross Platform Compatibility: Although this has become more of the norm amongst mobile browsers, users who use Internet Explorer on their mobile device report positive things about the browser's ability to back up things like settings, favorites, and bookmarks in the event you lose your phone or purchase a new one. Instead of having to re-configure your browser settings, logging in with your Microsoft ID will restore whatever you have previously saved.

Screen Real Estate: Internet Explorer mobile is different from other browsers (such as Safari) in how it approaches the limited screen real estate on your mobile device. Instead of having the common URL field and search bar at the top and other features (such as bookmarks and tab pages) at the bottom, IE only displays one bar at the bottom of the screen that contains the URL, an option of your choosing (more on that later), and a variety of menu options. Along with opening up the ability to see more of the web page you are visiting, IE's interchangeable icon next to the URL allows you to set up an option of your choosing such as a list of your favorite websites that can be accessed at the click of a button, a refresh page key, or easy access to your "tabs" which are a collection of web pages you have open at that time.

Touch Swipe: The ability to navigate amongst web pages is an easy experience with Internet Explorer, which makes use of common and natural gesture users utilize when using mobile devices. Going back to web pages you previously visited is accomplished by simply swiping backwards on your device, while swiping forward sends you to web pages that you saw before swiping back.

Cons:

Font Recognition: When using Internet Explorer, Fixya users report seeing strange fonts popping up on websites where those fonts aren't present. The issue causes fonts to either appear bigger or smaller than usual, take on a different form entirely like a normal font being changed to all italics for example, or a different font type altogether. It should also be noted that this issue is not confined to just the mobile version, as IE users who use the desktop version also report seeing this issue. Whatever is lost in translation in the IE browser (whether it be the specific web page not being optimized for mobile or just an issue with how IE reproduces a mobile page), this issue can cause some readability and aesthetic problems when browsing the Internet via your mobile device.

Search Engine Options: Although this much is to be expected considering the amount of capital and time Windows has put into their Google-competitor search engine "Bing", Fixya users reported having difficulty changing the default search engine to anything other than Bing when using IE mobile. Furthermore, when searching on the device, users reported being oftentimes kicked out to the separate Bing app instead of being able to search within the browser itself. This obviously causes efficiency issues, as users have to navigate between two applications (IE and Bing) to find the website they want to visit.

Poor Rendering: Although this has been changing, many websites will not recognize smartphones using Internet Explorer and will instead deliver a simplified version of the site. Along with removing IE users from seeing web pages that have more HTML features, it reduces the aesthetic appeal of browsing the web and reduces the amount of options users have for interacting with the page. This issue has been in a state of flux however, with users reporting that some websites have changed how they recognize browsers using IE and will deliver the correct smartphone page that looks better. However, until mobile Internet Explorer gains more market share, web developers may not be supporting the browser for a while (just as some have dropped desktop support of older IE versions as well).