Same Question, Different Searches

When an AI answers one question, it quietly runs several searches. I asked the same four questions again and again to see how much those searches change.



3 of 30
different searches repeated word-for-word across runs

9 of 11
answers cited Reddit, the steadiest source

53%
Canadian sources once the question named a price in Canada

Data collected with Query Fan-out Explorer ↗

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4 questions · 11 answers · 33 searches · 167 citations
Collected October 28, 2026

About this study

Study 6 in my independent AI search series. Here is the brief behind it, in four parts.

1

What it is

An independent study of **query fan-out**: the hidden searches an AI runs before it answers a question. Each search decides which pages the AI can find and cite.

2

The goal

Measure how much those searches, and the sources they find, **change when the same question is asked again**, and how the type of question changes them.

3

What we want to achieve

Give content teams a clear target. If fan-out is not one fixed list, teams should plan for **stable intents and concrete details**, not chase exact sub-queries.

4

The challenge

Fan-out is **invisible**. A normal AI answer never shows the searches behind it, so most advice about fan-out is guesswork. Measuring it needs the real searches, run after run.

How the challenge was solved: I built the Query Fan-out Explorer. It sends a question to Gemini with Google Search grounding and records every search Gemini actually ran and every source it cited, so fan-out can be counted instead of guessed.

The short version

Query fan-out is the step where an AI turns your question into several searches. I used my Query Fan-out Explorer to ask Gemini four outdoor gear questions, three times each, and recorded every search it ran and every source it cited.

3 of 30	**The searches change every time.** Across all runs, only 3 of 30 different searches were repeated word-for-word. The intent held; the wording did not.
2 to 7	**Specific questions fan out wider.** General questions triggered 2 to 3 searches. A price-and-country question triggered 4 to 7, mostly product-by-product price checks.
17–62%	**Sources shift between runs.** The overlap in cited sites between two runs of the same question ranged from 17% to 62%.
53%	**Name a place, get local sources.** Canadian (.ca) sites made up about half the sources for the Canada and BC questions, and almost none for general ones.
9 of 11	**Reddit is everywhere.** Reddit was cited in 9 of 11 answers, across all four questions, more than any other site.

What it means: there is no single fan-out to rank for. Content wins by covering the stable intents behind the searches, with concrete details such as prices, places and named products, not by matching one exact sub-query.

Why fan-out matters

You see one answer. Behind it, the AI ran its own searches and built the answer from whatever those searches found.



Your page competes for the searches

An AI answer only uses pages that its hidden searches find. If your page does not match any of them, it is not in the running, however good it is.

The searches are not fixed

If fan-out changed every time, chasing one exact sub-query would be a losing game. This study measures how much it really changes.

Why my own tool

The Query Fan-out Explorer records the searches Gemini actually ran (its grounding queries) and every source it cited, so the fan-out can be counted rather than guessed.

Why outdoor gear

It continues Study 4, which used the same kinds of questions. Gear questions mix general advice, prices and local conditions, so they show how question type changes the searches.

How the study worked

Twelve runs were requested on the same evening. Eleven returned results; one run of the first question returned nothing and was left out.

1

Four questions

Two general, one specific (price and country), one local (BC), written the way a shopper would ask.

2

Three runs each

Each question was run three times in a row through Gemini with Google Search grounding, set to Canada and English.

3

Record everything

Every search Gemini ran and every source it cited were saved and compared across runs.

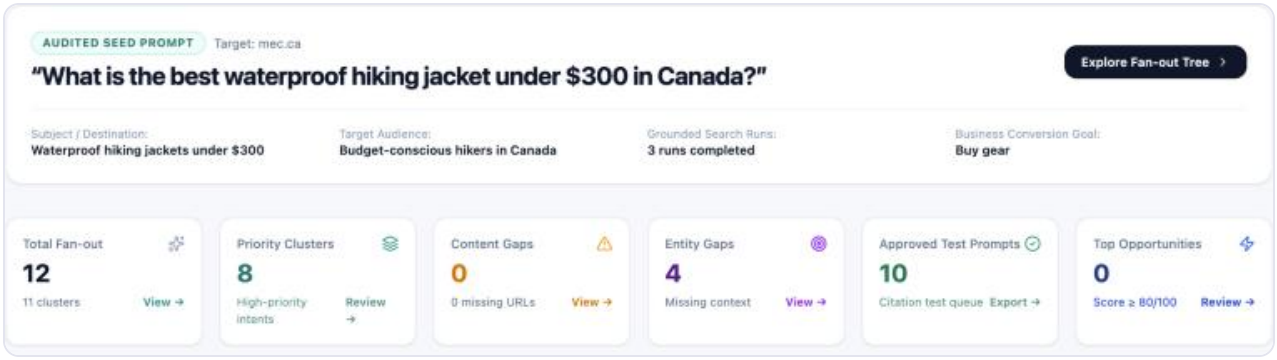
Type	Question asked	Answers
General	How do I choose a waterproof hiking jacket?	2
General	Down or synthetic insulation: which is better in wet weather?	3
Specific	What is the best waterproof hiking jacket under $300 in Canada?	3
Local	What should I pack for a first multi-day hike in British Columbia?	3

Collected on October 28, 2026, from Vancouver, using the Query Fan-out Explorer (seogirl.ca), which calls Gemini with Google Search grounding. Searches are the grounding queries Gemini reported. Sources are the cited web pages, counted by site. A search counts as repeated only when its wording matched another run's exactly (ignoring case and punctuation).

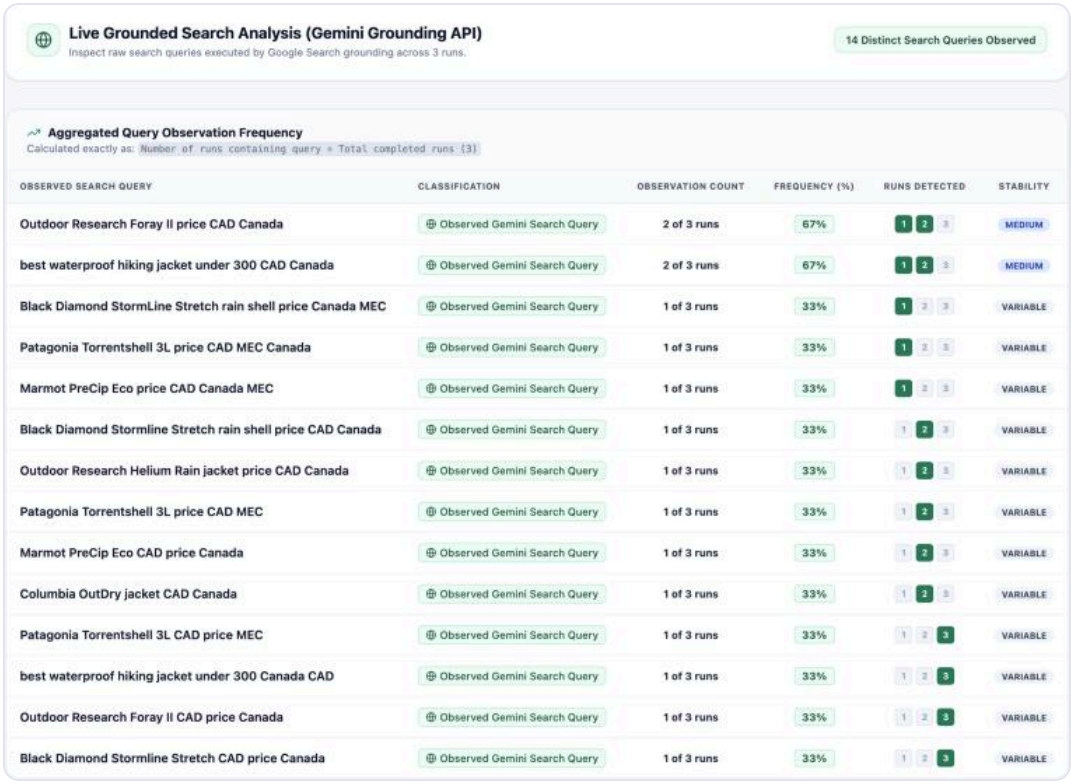
The tool

Inside the Query Fan-out Explorer

Every number in this study comes from the tool's saved runs. These are its own screens for the under-$300 question. [Try the Query Fan-out Explorer](#).



Audit summary. The question, the context sent with it, and 3 completed grounded runs.

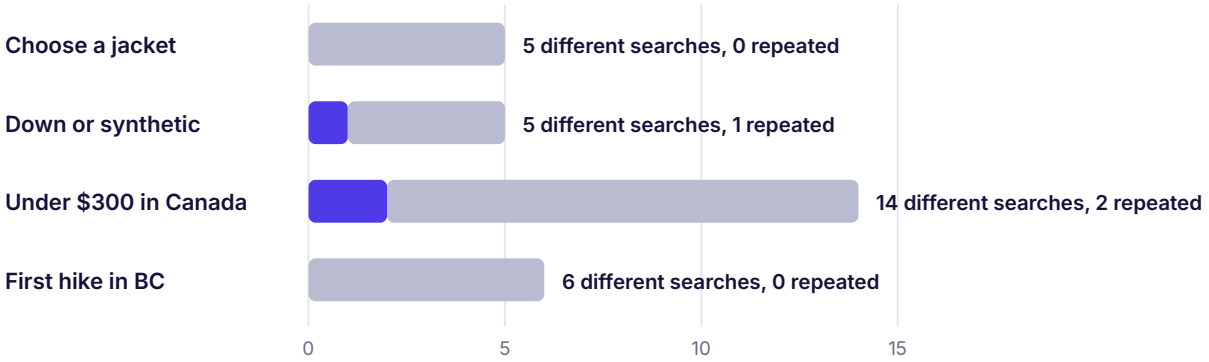


Live grounded analysis. All 14 searches Gemini ran across the 3 runs. Only 2 appeared in more than one run; the other 12 appeared once.

Finding 1

The searches change every time

Ask the same question twice and the AI searches with different words. Only 3 of 30 different searches showed up in more than one run.



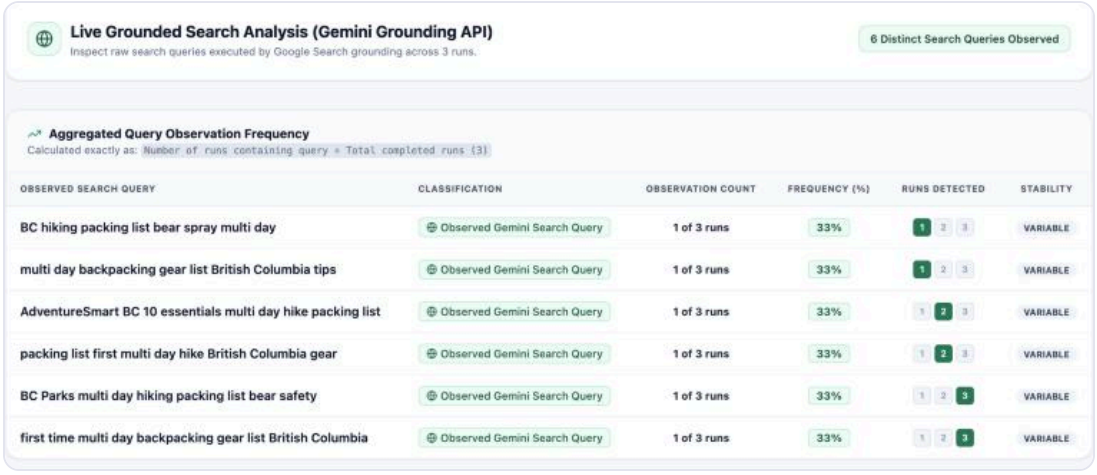
■ Repeated word-for-word in another run ■ Appeared in one run only. Counted across all runs of each question.

The intent stays, the wording moves

For down vs synthetic, every run searched a version of "down vs synthetic insulation wet weather", then added a different angle: a brand comparison, hydrophobic down, or Arc'teryx insulation tech.

So exact sub-queries are a weak target

A content plan built around one run's exact searches would miss most of the next run's. The stable unit is the intent, such as "price in Canada" or "bear safety in BC".



Live Grounded Search Analysis (Gemini Grounding API)
Inspect raw search queries executed by Google Search grounding across 3 runs.

6 Distinct Search Queries Observed

Aggregated Query Observation Frequency
Calculated exactly as: `Number of runs containing query ÷ Total completed runs (3)`

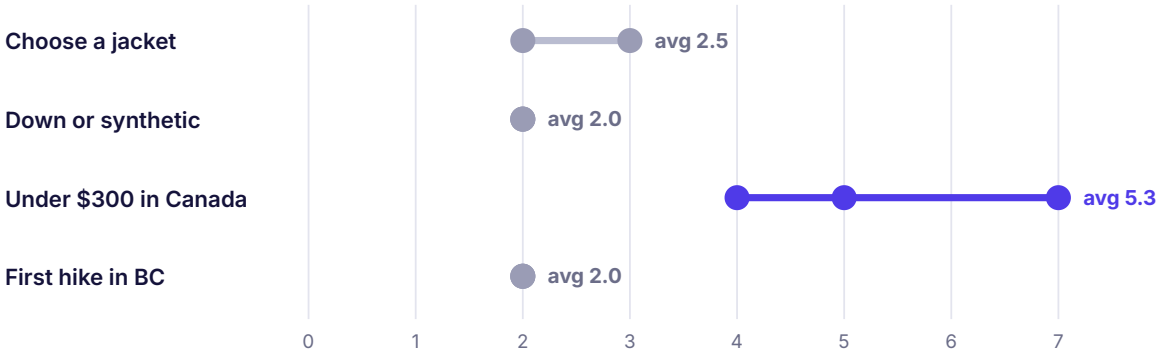
OBSERVED SEARCH QUERY	CLASSIFICATION	OBSERVATION COUNT	FREQUENCY (%)	RUNS DETECTED	STABILITY
BC hiking packing list bear spray multi day	Observed Gemini Search Query	1 of 3 runs	33%	1 2 3	VARIABLE
multi day backpacking gear list British Columbia tips	Observed Gemini Search Query	1 of 3 runs	33%	1 2 3	VARIABLE
AdventureSmart BC 10 essentials multi day hike packing list	Observed Gemini Search Query	1 of 3 runs	33%	1 2 3	VARIABLE
packing list first multi day hike British Columbia gear	Observed Gemini Search Query	1 of 3 runs	33%	1 2 3	VARIABLE
BC Parks multi day hiking packing list bear safety	Observed Gemini Search Query	1 of 3 runs	33%	1 2 3	VARIABLE
first time multi day backpacking gear list British Columbia	Observed Gemini Search Query	1 of 3 runs	33%	1 2 3	VARIABLE

From the tool, BC question. Six different searches over three runs, each seen only once (33%). Every run asked about the same needs in different words.

Finding 2

Specific questions fan out wider

Adding a price and a country turned a two-search question into a product-by-product price hunt.



Searches Gemini ran per answer. One dot per run.

One search per product

For the under-$300 question, Gemini searched the Canadian price of each candidate jacket separately: Patagonia Torrentshell 3L, Outdoor Research Foray II, Black Diamond StormLine, Marmot PreCip Eco and more.

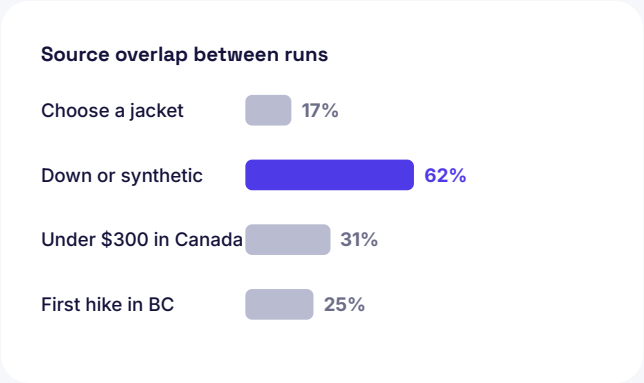
Wider searches, wider sources

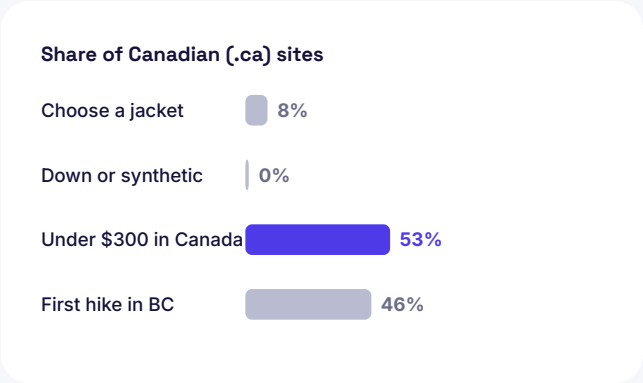
That question drew on 36 different sites across its three answers, against 12 to 26 for the others. Price-specific queries open the door to many retailers.

Finding 3

Sources shift, and local questions go local

Even when the searches look alike, the cited sites move between runs. Naming a place or a price in Canada changes who gets cited.





Stable topic, stable sources

Down vs synthetic, a settled technical topic, kept seven sites in every run, including REI, Rab and Reddit. The general jacket question shared only 17% of its sources between its two runs.

Local means local

For the BC question, sources included BC Parks, AdventureSmart, Vancouver Trails and local outfitters. For the price question, more than half were Canadian sites, mostly retailers such as Sport Chek, VPO and MEC.

Source overlap is the share of distinct sites two runs of the same question had in common, averaged across pairs of runs. All runs were set to Canada, so the low .ca share for general questions is not a settings effect.

Finding 4

The AI adds names you never typed

The searches named products, brands and authorities that were not in the question. Those names decide which pages can be found.

Question	Names the AI added to its searches
Down or synthetic	Arc’teryx, Patagonia, Coreloft, PrimaLoft, hydrophobic down
Under $300 in Canada	Patagonia Torrentshell 3L, Outdoor Research Foray II and Helium, Black Diamond StormLine, Marmot PreCip Eco, Columbia OutDry
First hike in BC	AdventureSmart and its 10 essentials, BC Parks, bear spray
Choose a jacket	Patagonia Torrentshell 3L, Arc’teryx Beta, MEC

Named entities open the door

A page that names the product, the model and its Canadian price can match these searches. A page that only says "great rain jackets" cannot.

Reddit rides along

Reddit was cited in 9 of 11 answers, across all four questions. Real discussion of a product is part of almost every answer.

The tool sends Gemini the question plus context (audience, a target site and competitor sites; here mec.ca, rei.com, outdoorgearlab.com and arcteryx.com). Mentions of those brands may be partly prompted. Names outside that list, such as Black Diamond, Marmot, AdventureSmart and BC Parks, came from Gemini alone.

What content teams can do

If the searches change every run, plan for the intents behind them and the details they keep asking for.

Plan for intents, not exact sub-queries

Group likely searches into stable intents and give each one a clear section.

The evidence: Only 3 of 30 searches repeated word-for-word.

Name products, models and places

Use real product names, model names and locations, not generic category words.

The evidence: Searches added names like Foray II and AdventureSmart that the question never used.

Publish local prices and availability

For commercial questions, show prices in local currency and what is in stock.

The evidence: The under-$300 question searched each jacket's CAD price separately.

Be a local authority for local questions

Cite and link official local sources, and write for local conditions.

The evidence: About half the sources for Canada and BC questions were Canadian sites.

Expect, and earn, community mentions

Take part honestly where your customers already talk.

The evidence: Reddit was cited in 9 of 11 answers.

Test the same question more than once

Run a prompt several times before drawing conclusions from one answer.

The evidence: Source overlap between runs was as low as 17%.

Limits, and the series

Read this as a snapshot

- **Small sample.** Four questions, eleven answers, one evening. A larger set would show how stable each pattern is.
- **One engine.** Gemini with Google Search grounding, through my own tool. Google AI Mode, ChatGPT and Perplexity may fan out differently.
- **Context in the prompt.** The tool passes an audience, a target site and competitor sites, which may steer some searches and citations.
- **Exact matching.** Searches count as repeated only when worded the same. Many differed only slightly, so intent was more stable than these counts suggest.
- **One run missing.** One of twelve runs returned no result and was excluded.

The complete series

Study 1, The AI Shelf: which brands AI recommends. **Study 2, Who Are You, Really?:** brand consistency and the knowledge graph. **Study 3, Does Size Buy Trust?:** E-E-A-T by brand size. **Study 4, Absorbed, Not Credited:** when AI credits its sources. **Study 5, Built to Be Retrieved:** how structure changes passage retrieval. **Study 6, this report:** how much query fan-out changes.

Independent research

This is an independent analysis of publicly available AI answers, collected with a tool I built. I have not worked with, or been endorsed by, any company mentioned. Brands and retailers named here appear only because the AI searched for or cited them.

SEO Girl

Where AI meets search, I make brands visible.

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