

The source ecosystem behind AI answers

A cross-brand study of search results, citations, and buyer-question evidence

Viziquo Research, September 2026

What the source records show

The findings describe observed source participation in designed organic audit questions.

12.1%

of citation-bearing observations
included a brand-owned URL

2.3%

of five-surface observations showed
an owned page in search but no
owned citation

29.9 pp

higher competitor-citation rate for
vendor choice than diagnosis within
matched panels

One provider supplies 74.1% of the citation-bearing observations. The combined figures describe this corpus, not an equal-provider benchmark.

The dataset and the analysis panel

The full exports establish scale. The findings use a narrower latest-run organic panel.

Study layer	Count	Meaning
Distinct audited brands	143	One brand URL counts once
Audit runs	184	Repeated runs remain in the inventory
Citation URL records	72,223	Eight captured provider surfaces
Search-result URL records	167,788	Five captured provider surfaces
Latest-run organic observations with a citation	2,591	Denominator for citation findings
Latest-run organic observations with any source	2,607	Citation or exported search result

A provider-question observation is one brand, provider, latest run, conversation, and scenario with an exported source. It is not a unique buyer.

Four observations for one buyer question

The answer, source records, and brand outcome can differ.

01

Buyer question

Keep the exact wording and buyer task.

02

Search export

Record which URLs appeared, when a search layer exists.

03

Answer citations

Record which URLs the answer actually cited.

04

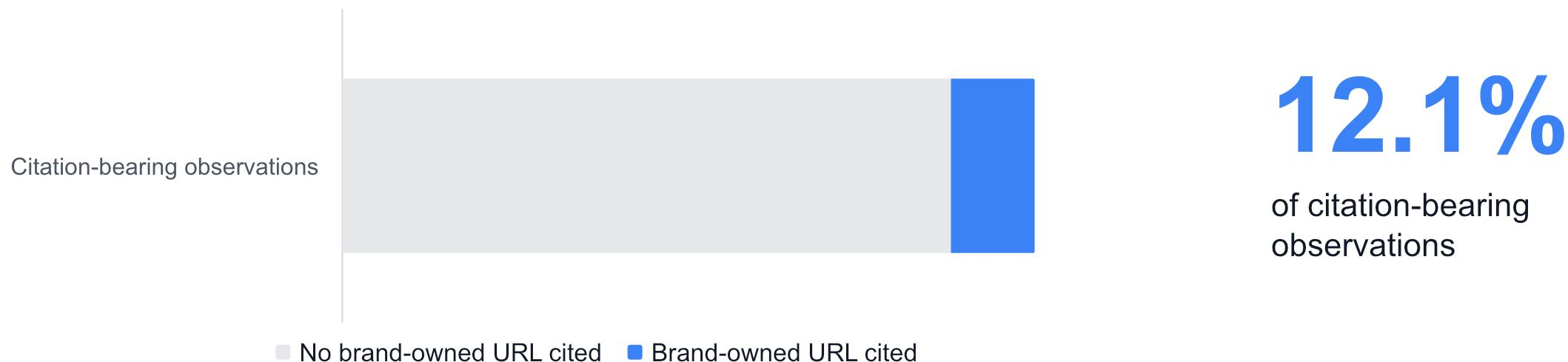
Brand outcome

Read whether the answer omitted, mentioned, or recommended the brand.

Search presence does not prove a page was read. A citation does not prove the answer recommended the brand.

Brand-owned pages rarely entered citation sets

Across eight citation surfaces, 314 of 2,591 eligible organic observations had an owned URL.



The observation must already have at least one citation. This is an owned-source measure, not total brand visibility.

The median panel rate was 7.1%

The middle half of 177 brand-provider panels ranged from 0% to 20%.

7.1%

median rate within a brand-provider panel

13.2%

mean of panel-specific rates

11.6%

pooled owned-citation rate across the other seven provider panels

The largest provider supplies 143 of 177 panels and 1,919 of 2,591 eligible observations. The seven-provider figure covers 78 of 672 observations.

Search presence and citations were different states

The five surfaces with search exports yielded 2,484 organic observations with a recorded source.



These are mutually exclusive export states, not a search-to-citation conversion funnel.

Every source needs two labels

Ownership is relative to the audited brand. Source role describes the publishing surface.

Ownership

Brand-owned

Configured competitor-owned

Neither configured category

Source role

Documentation

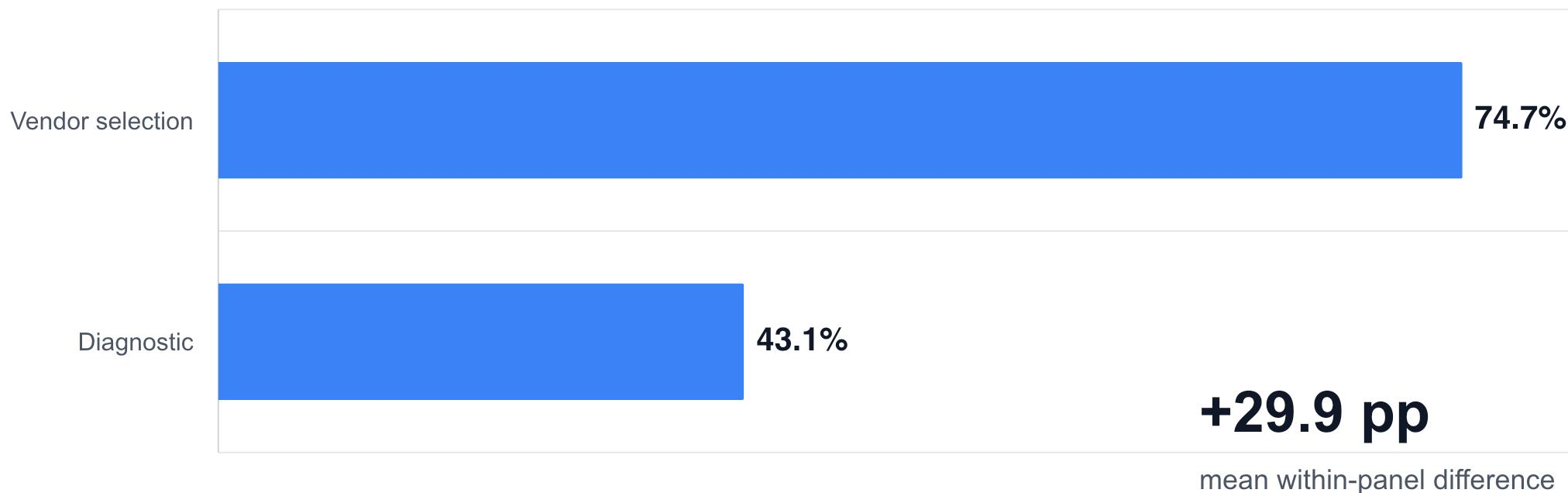
Review directory

Community, media, or reference source

A competitor documentation page has both labels. “External” may include an unconfigured competitor, so it does not certify independence.

Vendor-choice questions cited competitors more often

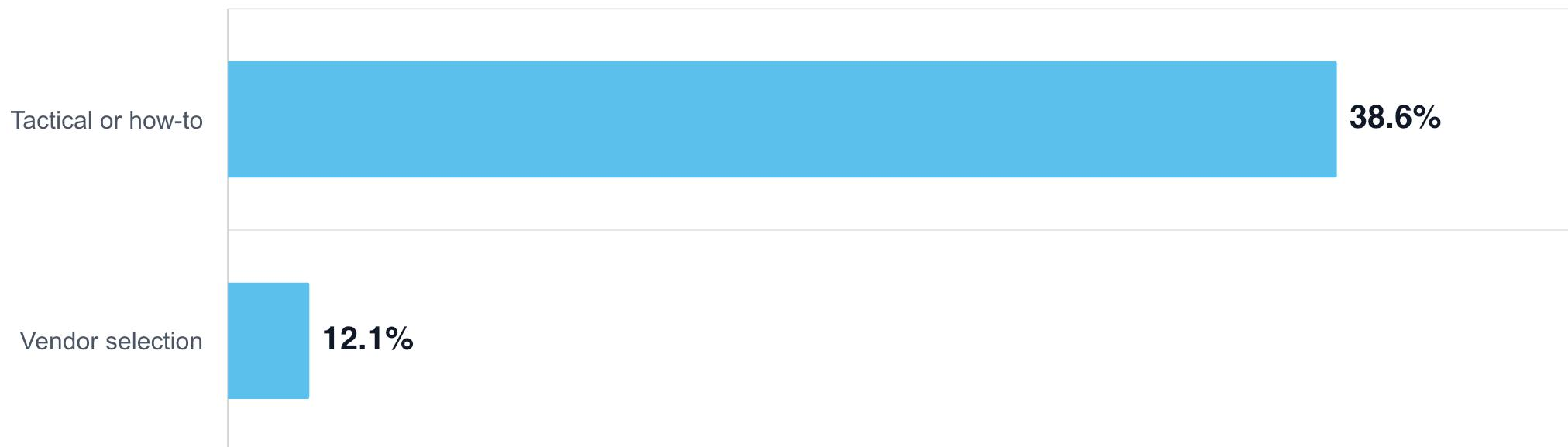
Mean question presence across brand-provider panels with each panel weighted equally.



The paired comparison uses 157 panels with both question types. The other seven provider panels averaged an 11.2-point difference across 32 pairs.

Reviewed documentation appeared more on tactical questions

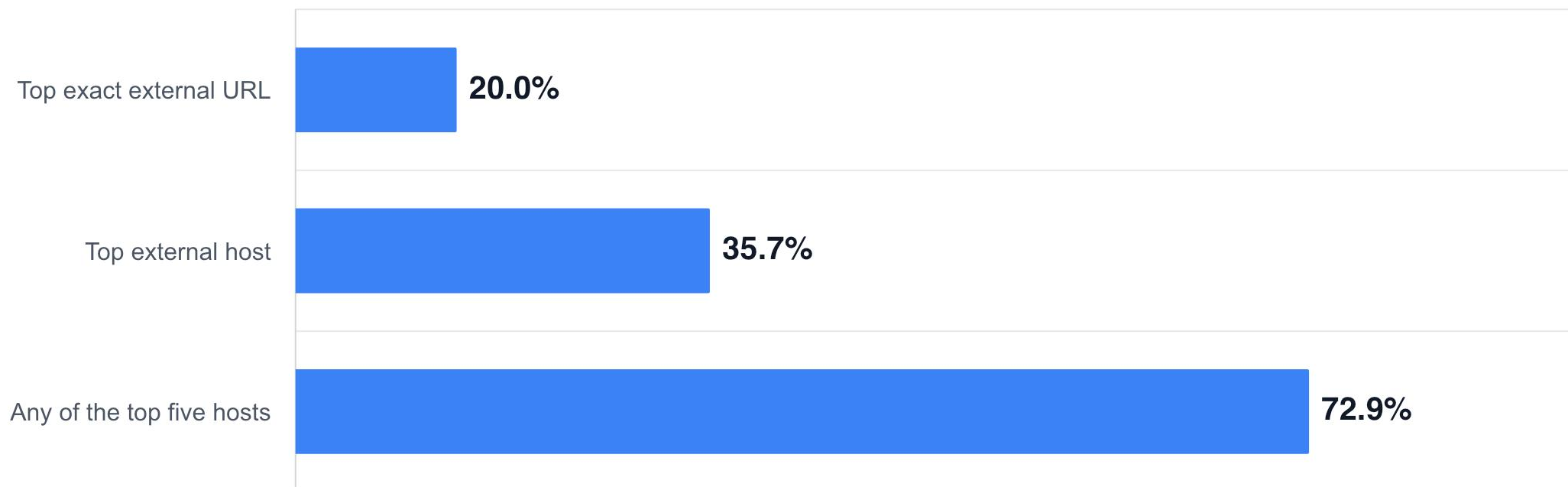
This source-role comparison is incomplete because many hosts remain unverified.



Mean panel-specific presence of reviewed external official documentation. Verified operator-family labels cover 53.6% of citation rows overall.

Hosts recurred more often than exact pages

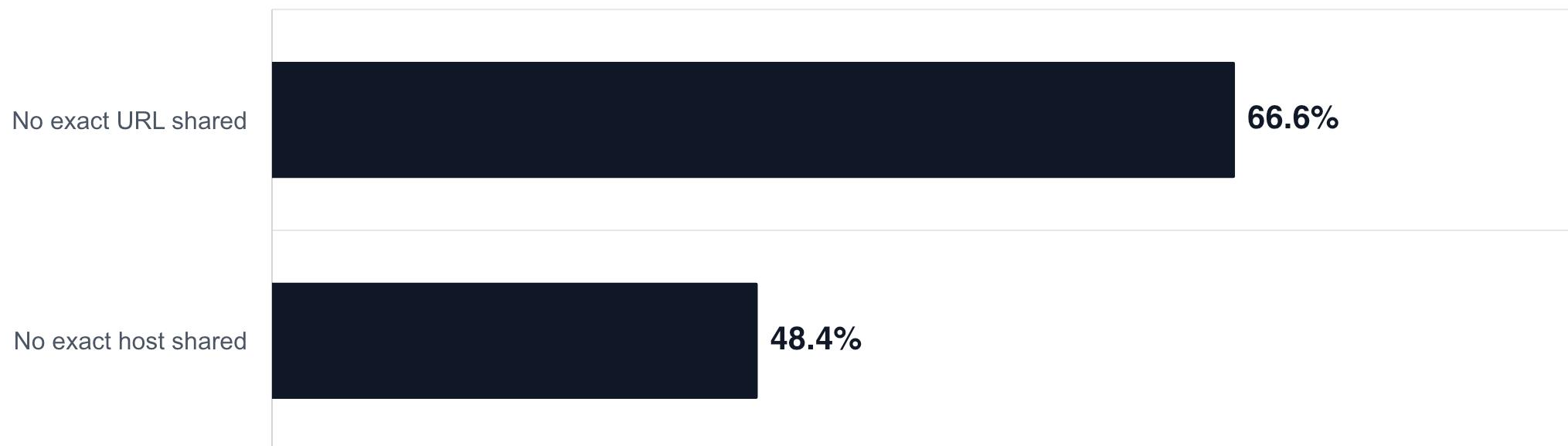
Median question reach across 170 panels with at least five external-citation questions.



Each URL or host counts once per question. The top-five value is a union, not a sum of five percentages. Exact hosts retain subdomains.

Matched questions often used different cited pages

Nine audited brands contributed 182 organic scenarios with citations on at least two surfaces.



The 1,606 provider-pair comparisons are not independent. Only nine scenarios from two brands had citations on all eight surfaces.

What to inspect after an unbranded question

Use the answer and recorded sources together before choosing a content or SEO action.

Observed state	Next diagnostic question
Brand absent, no owned URL	What evidence supported the answer, and do we publish a relevant page?
Brand mentioned, no owned citation	Which external pages supported the brand description?
Owned URL in search only	How does that page compare with sources cited for the answer claim?
Owned URL cited	Did the citation support a meaningful mention or a peripheral detail?
Configured competitors recur	Which buyer tasks and decision criteria brought them in?

Preserve the exact question, provider, date, and run conditions. Compare repeat runs before attributing a change to an intervention.

What the exports cannot establish

The measured states are useful, but several conclusions require additional evidence.

No-source answers	Conversations without an exported citation or search result are absent.
Provider balance	One provider supplies 74.1% of the latest-run citation-bearing observations.
Source-role coverage	46.4% of citation rows lack a verified operator-family label.
Cause and effect	A recorded search result does not reveal retrieval decisions or why a citation appeared.

The medians and quartiles describe this audited panel. They are not population confidence intervals.

Coverage across the eight captured surfaces

The largest surface contributes most observations, so the pooled rate is not an equal-surface benchmark.

Surface group	Surfaces	Brand-provider panels	Citation observations	Owned-cited
Largest surface	1	143	1,919	236
Other surfaces combined	7	34	672	78
All surfaces	8	177	2,591	314

74.1% of citation-bearing observations came from the largest surface

The 177 panels are brand-surface combinations, not 177 distinct brands. Search exports exist for five surfaces only.

A citation gap is the start of an investigation

The source records point to the next question, not a guaranteed fix.

Measure

Keep a stable set of buyer questions and save each answer with its sources.

Compare

Separate search presence, answer citations, and brand mentions.

Investigate

Inspect competing evidence before choosing a page or channel to improve.

Viziquo Research (2026). The source ecosystem behind AI answers.

viziquo.com/research/ai-answer-source-ecosystem-2026