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AI Search Visibility And Brand Trust Formation: A Conceptual Framework For Startups In The Indonesian Digital Market

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Abstract

Background. The rapid proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI)-mediated search environments has fundamentally restructured how consumers discover and evaluate brands in digital markets. Despite growing scholarly attention to AI as an operational marketing tool, a critical gap persists regarding its role as a brand trust-building signal — particularly for startups and unknown brands that lack established reputational capital.

Aims. This paper addresses two interrelated gaps: the absence of a conceptual framework examining AI search visibility as a trust signal, and the neglect of startups as a distinct context in AI marketing research.

Methods. Using a conceptual research design grounded in systematic literature synthesis, this paper integrates Trust Transfer Theory, Signaling Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model to develop a conceptual framework that explains how AI search visibility shapes brand trust formation. Four theoretical propositions are developed: AI search visibility positively influences brand trust (P1); brand trust enhances purchase intention (P2) and recommendation intention (P3); and collectivist cultural orientation moderates the relationship between AI search visibility and trust (P4).

Conclusion. The Indonesian digital market provides the contextual grounding, given its collectivist orientation, dynamic startup ecosystem, and rapidly growing AI adoption.

Implementation. Findings offer theoretical extensions and practical implications for startup brand strategy in algorithm-mediated marketplaces.

Keywords: AI search visibility; brand trust; startups; Trust Transfer Theory; Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

The digital search landscape has undergone a profound structural transformation. Traditional search engines, which presented consumers with ranked lists of hyperlinks requiring active evaluation, are increasingly supplanted by AI-mediated search systems that synthesize and curate consolidated responses in natural language (Werner et al., 2024; Pham et al., 2024). Platforms such as Google AI Overviews, ChatGPT, and Perplexity now function as primary discovery channels through which consumers encounter brands, products, and

services. This evolution reflects a fundamental change in how information retrieval functions, wherein AI systems increasingly mediate the discovery process that consumers traditionally performed through independent evaluation of search results (Pham et al., 2024; Nogueira et al., 2025).

This structural shift carries asymmetric consequences for different market actors. Established brands with significant reputational capital can sustain consumer trust independent of search presentation format. Startups and unknown brands, however, occupy a fundamentally different position: they lack brand recognition, face acute information asymmetry, and depend disproportionately on digital discovery mechanisms to achieve consumer attention and credibility (Sharma & Klein, 2024; Connelly et al., 2025). It is important to clarify the relationship between these two terms as used in this paper. Startups constitute a strategically important subset of unknown brands — they are unknown brands distinguished by explicit growth ambition, technology-enabled scalability, and an acute trust deficit arising from the complete absence of any market track record. The term 'unknown brands' encompasses a broader category that may include dormant, niche, or geographically limited firms; startups are foregrounded here because they represent the most strategically consequential case, where the trust deficit is most severe, and the potential payoff from AI-mediated visibility is greatest. SMEs, by contrast, may have accumulated years of operational experience and familiarity with regional customers; startups enter markets with no prior consumer exposure whatsoever. This structural distinction makes AI-mediated visibility particularly consequential for startups: for an entity with zero brand recognition, a single algorithmically endorsed appearance may represent the primary mechanism through which initial consumer trust can be established.

Despite substantial growth in AI marketing research, existing scholarship has predominantly examined AI as an operational tool — encompassing chatbots, recommendation engines, and personalization systems — rather than as a structural force shaping brand trust formation through search visibility (Nogueira et al., 2025). Furthermore, startups represent a conspicuously absent research context in this literature. This paper addresses both gaps by developing a conceptual framework integrating Trust Transfer Theory (Stewart, 2003), Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973; Connelly et al., 2025), and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Li et al., 2025). The framework is contextually grounded in the Indonesian digital market, which offers a collectivist cultural orientation, rapidly growing AI adoption, and one of Southeast Asia's most dynamic startup ecosystems (Google, Temasek, & Bain & Company, 2024).

Unlike previous studies that primarily view artificial intelligence as an operational marketing tool, this study conceptualizes AI Search Visibility as a strategic trust-building signal for startups and unknown brands. By integrating Trust Transfer Theory, Signaling Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the study proposes a novel framework explaining how AI-generated visibility fosters brand trust and subsequently influences purchase and recommendation intentions. Furthermore, the study introduces collectivist cultural orientation as a contextual moderator within the Indonesian digital market, thereby extending AI marketing and startup branding literature into an underexplored theoretical and cultural domain.

Although research on artificial intelligence in marketing has expanded rapidly, existing studies have largely focused on AI applications such as chatbots, recommendation systems, and personalization technologies. Limited attention has been given to AI-mediated search visibility as a mechanism for brand trust formation, particularly among startups and unknown brands that lack reputational capital. Furthermore, prior studies have not integrated Trust Transfer Theory, Signaling Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model to explain how AI-generated visibility influences consumer trust and behavioral intentions. Additionally, the moderating role of collectivist cultural orientation remains underexplored, especially in emerging digital economies such as Indonesia. Therefore, this study addresses these theoretical, contextual, and cultural gaps by proposing a comprehensive conceptual framework linking AI search visibility, brand trust, purchase intention, and recommendation intention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

AI-Mediated Search And Consumer Behavior

The emergence of AI-mediated search represents a qualitative departure from the information retrieval paradigm that characterized digital search for over two decades. Where traditional search required consumers to independently evaluate multiple sources, AI-mediated search consolidates this cognitive labor into synthesized, conversational responses (Werner et al., 2024). Bick et al. (2024) documented that 39.4% of working-age adults had adopted generative AI tools, with information search among the most common use cases. Kim and Priluck (2025) found that consumers evaluated AI-based results as less biased than traditional

search results, suggesting that AI-generated content carries a perceived objectivity advantage with direct implications for brand trust.

Cui and van Esch (2025) conceptualized the emerging delegate economy, wherein AI agents increasingly perform discovery, evaluation, and recommendation on behalf of consumers. Their concept of Algorithmic Fidelity — the capacity of a firm to be accurately discovered and represented by AI systems — positions AI search visibility as a strategic brand asset, particularly consequential for startups that lack the technical infrastructure for algorithmic optimization.

Brand Trust Formation For Unknown Brands

Brand trust reflects a consumer's willingness to rely on a brand based on positive expectations regarding its competence, benevolence, and integrity (McKnight et al., 2002; Khamitov et al., 2024). The meta-analysis by Khamitov et al. (2024), synthesizing fifty years of empirical trust research, confirmed that brand trust consistently predicts purchase intentions and recommendation behaviors, with particularly strong effects under conditions of elevated perceived risk and brand unfamiliarity. For unknown brands specifically, trust formation processes differ fundamentally from those governing established brands. Without accumulated experience or reputational knowledge, consumers rely on available signals to form initial trust assessments (Sharma & Klein, 2024). Hochstein et al. (2023) demonstrated that digital trust operates through distinct mechanisms compared to offline trust, with platform credibility and perceived technological competence playing central roles. Extending this line of inquiry specifically to AI contexts, Chen et al. (2025) proposed that consumer trust in AI systems operates through cognitive trust — the rational evaluation of AI capabilities — as a foundational layer that must be established before behavioral acceptance can develop.

Startups In The Indonesian Digital Market

Startups enter markets with no existing brand recognition, no customer testimonials, and no track record of quality delivery, facing a structural trust deficit that independent brand-building efforts are slow and expensive to overcome (Chang et al., 2024). This trust deficit is categorically more severe than that experienced by established SMEs, which at a minimum possess accumulated operational history and localized word-of-mouth credibility. For startups, the challenge is not rebuilding damaged trust but constructing brand trust from an absolute zero baseline — a condition that amplifies the potential value of any credibility-borrowing mechanism, including AI-mediated visibility.

Indonesia provides a particularly relevant empirical context. Culturally, Indonesia scores low on individualism (score: 14/100) and high on power distance (score: 78/100) according to Hofstede's framework, indicating a collectivist society with strong deference to institutional authority (Beugelsdijk et al., 2017).

The scale of Indonesia's digital economy further underscores the strategic importance of this context. According to the e-Conomy SEA 2024 report by Google, Temasek, and Bain & Company, Indonesia's digital economy reached a gross merchandise value (GMV) of USD 90 billion in 2024 — a 13% year-on-year increase — making it the largest digital economy in Southeast Asia. E-commerce alone contributed USD 65 billion of this GMV, growing 11% in the same year. Indonesia currently hosts approximately 2,500 technology startups, the largest startup ecosystem in Southeast Asia, accounting for approximately 53% of the region's total startups (CB Insights, 2023). This combination of a rapidly expanding digital marketplace and a dense startup population creates precisely the conditions in which AI-mediated search visibility is most strategically significant.

METHOD

This paper adopts a conceptual research design grounded in systematic literature synthesis and multi-theoretical framework development. A structured literature search was conducted across major academic databases — including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar — using search terms including 'AI search visibility,' 'brand trust,' 'trust transfer theory,' 'signaling theory,' 'elaboration likelihood model,' 'startup marketing,' and 'Indonesian digital market.' The search prioritized peer-reviewed publications from 2020 to 2026 to ensure theoretical currency, while retaining seminal foundational works where necessary for theoretical grounding.

Inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed journal articles addressing AI-mediated search, brand trust, signaling, or startup marketing within the specified theoretical and contextual scope. Exclusion criteria comprised non-peer-reviewed industry reports (except where used solely for descriptive market statistics), studies unrelated to digital trust or AI marketing mechanisms, and duplicate or superseded publications.

The resulting literature base was analyzed for theoretical relevance, internal consistency, and applicability to the Indonesian startup context. Three established theoretical perspectives — Trust Transfer Theory (Stewart, 2003), Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973; Connelly et al., 2025), and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Li et

al., 2025) — were selected for their complementary explanatory potential and collectively integrated to construct the proposed conceptual framework. This theoretical triangulation approach enables the development of internally consistent propositions that can guide future empirical investigation in AI marketing and startup branding research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theoretical Framework

Three theoretical lenses — each capturing a distinct dimension of the AI visibility to brand trust relationship — are integrated to construct the conceptual framework advanced in this paper.

Trust Transfer Theory, originally advanced by Stewart (2003), rests on the premise that trust is not confined to the entity in which it originates but migrates along associative pathways to entities perceived as connected to the trusted source. When a consumer has established confidence in an AI search platform — attributing to it qualities of intelligence, comprehensiveness, and neutrality — any brand featured within that platform's generated output inherits a portion of that confidence by association. Park and Yoon (2025) provided direct experimental corroboration of this dynamic in AI contexts, demonstrating that transparency signals emitted by AI systems generate trust that subsequently flows toward firms associated with those systems. The implication for startups is particularly significant: a brand with no prior market presence that appears within an AI-generated response effectively borrows institutional credibility from the platform, accessing a form of endorsement that would otherwise demand substantial time and financial investment to develop organically.

Signaling Theory, originally developed by Spence (1973) to explain labor market dynamics and subsequently extended to marketing contexts by Connelly et al. (2025), addresses the challenge of communicating unobservable quality attributes in markets characterized by information asymmetry. For signals to carry credibility, they must be difficult or costly for low-quality entities to imitate. AI-mediated visibility constitutes a signal type that is structurally distinct from all conventional alternatives. It is not funded by the featured brand — unlike advertising — and therefore escapes the discounting that consumers apply to commercially motivated communication. It does not originate from direct product experience — unlike consumer reviews — and is therefore not subject to suspicion of individual bias. And unlike formal third-party certifications, it arises from a continuous, data-driven algorithmic process that consumers perceive as evaluative rather than transactional. The credibility of this signal is anchored in the AI platform's institutional reputational stake: a platform that

systematically surfaces low-quality brands will progressively erode user trust and lose traffic to competitors, creating a structural incentive for recommendation quality that consumers may implicitly perceive even without consciously articulating the underlying cost logic.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Li et al., 2025) provides the individual-level cognitive mechanism that explains how these signals are processed. When consumers encounter a startup brand in an AI-generated search result, they characteristically lack both the prior knowledge and the motivational investment required to engage in systematic, attribute-by-attribute evaluation. Under such low-elaboration conditions, the ELM predicts that attitude formation will proceed via the peripheral route, wherein judgments are shaped by heuristic cues rather than deliberative reasoning. AI-mediated visibility functions precisely as such a cue: it conveys quality through associative inference rather than through explicit evidence, allowing consumers to form favorable brand assessments on the basis of the platform's perceived authority rather than the brand's demonstrated track record. Li et al. (2025) confirmed this peripheral processing mechanism in AI content contexts, reinforcing its applicability here.

These three theoretical perspectives operate at complementary levels of analysis and are mutually reinforcing rather than competing. Trust Transfer Theory identifies the directionality and source of trust enhancement — trust flows from the AI platform to the featured brand through perceived association. Signaling Theory explains the credibility basis that makes this transfer substantive rather than superficial — the platform's institutional stake provides a structural guarantee of signal reliability. The ELM specifies the cognitive pathway through which individual consumers process this signal — peripheral cue processing under low elaboration conditions. In the Indonesian cultural context, this triad of mechanisms is further amplified by collectivist cultural orientation: high power distance and low individualism predispose Indonesian consumers to defer to institutional authority signals, making the trust transfer mechanism potentially more potent than in individualist Western markets.

Conceptual Model And Propositions

Building on the integrated theoretical framework, this section develops four theoretical propositions. The conceptual model (Figure 1) depicts AI search visibility as the independent variable, brand trust as the mediating variable, purchase intention and recommendation intention as outcome variables, and collectivist cultural orientation as a moderator. Additionally, two theoretically grounded direct paths (A and B) from AI search visibility to purchase intention and recommendation intention respectively are included as alternative

mechanisms warranting future empirical examination. These direct paths are theoretically anchored in the Mere Exposure Effect (Zajonc, 1968), which proposes that repeated or salient exposure to a stimulus — in this case, a startup brand appearing in an AI-generated search result — generates affective familiarity and approach tendency independent of deliberate cognitive evaluation. Under this mechanism, consumers may develop purchase or recommendation inclinations toward a startup brand simply through the salience of its AI-mediated appearance, without engaging in the trust-formation process that constitutes the primary theoretical pathway. Whether trust fully or partially mediates the relationship between AI visibility and behavioral intention is therefore a critical empirical question for future research. Table 1 presents the construct definitions and proposed operationalization.

Table 1. Construct Definitions And Operationalization

Construct	Role	Conceptual Definition	Proposed Operationalization
AI search visibility	Independent	The degree to which a startup or unknown brand appears within AI-generated search responses rather than conventional ranked hyperlink lists.	Experimental manipulation: AI-mediated vs. traditional condition (proposed for future empirical study).
Brand trust	Mediator	Consumer's willingness to rely on a startup brand based on positive expectations of its competence, benevolence, and integrity (McKnight et al., 2002).	5-item reflective scale adapted from McKnight et al. (2002) (proposed for future empirical study).
Purchase intention	Dependent	Self-reported likelihood of purchasing the featured startup brand's product (Dodds et al., 1991).	4-item scale adapted from Dodds et al. (1991) and Spears & Singh (2004) (proposed for future empirical study).
Recommendation intention	Dependent	Willingness to recommend the featured startup brand via word-of-mouth (Zeithaml et al., 1996).	4-item scale adapted from Zeithaml et al. (1996) (proposed for future empirical study).
Collectivist cultural orientation	Moderator	Degree to which individuals prioritize group norms and defer to institutional authority cues (Beugelsdijk et al., 2017). *Note: Startups vary in their target consumer collectivism; this variable operates at both country and individual levels.*	**For experimental and survey-based studies (preferred):** Individual-level collectivism scale (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998) — avoids ecological fallacy in single-country designs. **For cross-national comparative studies:** Country-level Hofstede individualism score (Indonesia = 14/100). Both proposed for future empirical study.

Note: Operationalization specifications are proposed for future empirical testing. For P4, individual-level measurement is preferred for experimental designs to avoid ecological fallacy; country-level measurement (Hofstede) is appropriate for cross-national comparative studies.

Proposition 1 (P1): AI search visibility positively influences brand trust formation for startups and unknown brands, such that brands featured within AI-generated search responses will elicit higher brand trust than equivalent brands featured within traditional search results. When an unknown startup brand appears within an AI-generated search response, consumers lacking prior brand knowledge rely on peripheral cues to form trust judgments. Convergent empirical support is provided by Guerra-Tamez et al. (2024), who found that AI exposure significantly enhanced brand trust among Generation Z consumers, and Park and Yoon (2025), who demonstrated trust transfer from AI platforms to associated companies.

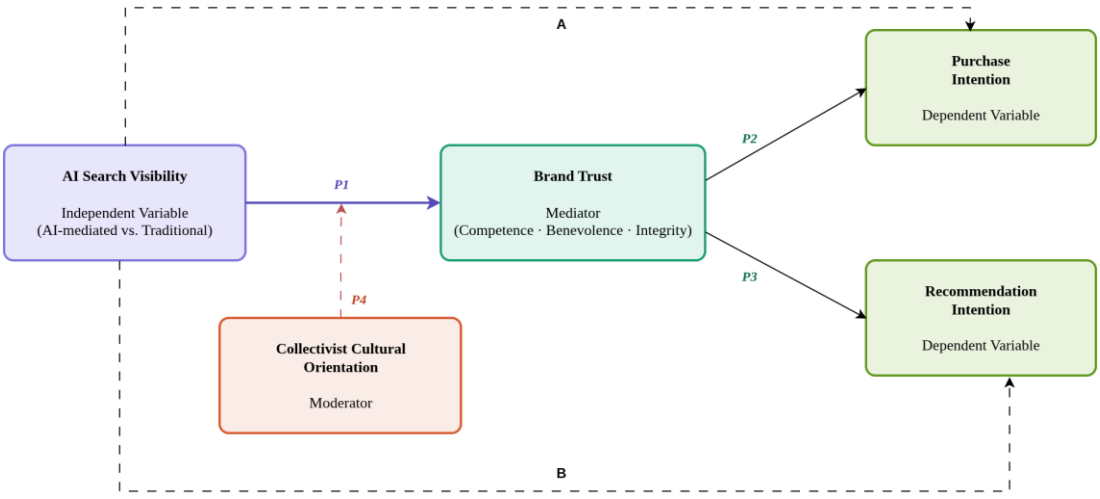
Proposition 2 (P2): Brand trust positively influences purchase intention for startups and unknown brands, such that higher brand trust will generate stronger purchase intention toward the featured startup brand. Brand trust reduces perceived risk, lowers decision hesitation, and facilitates the psychological transition from evaluation to purchase commitment (Khamitov et al., 2024). For startups where perceived risk is elevated due to absent quality signals, trust effects on purchase intention are expected to be particularly pronounced. This mechanism is especially relevant in the Indonesian digital market, which recorded USD 65 billion in e-commerce GMV in 2024 (Google, Temasek, & Bain & Company, 2024).

Proposition 3 (P3): Brand trust positively influences recommendation intention for startups and unknown brands, such that higher brand trust leads to stronger recommendation intention toward the featured startup. Beyond purchase intention, brand trust influences the willingness to recommend through word of mouth. Recommendation intention is particularly strategic for startups, which rely disproportionately on organic word-of-mouth to expand market reach without the advertising budgets of established competitors (Chang et al., 2024).

Proposition 4 (P4): Collectivist cultural orientation positively moderates the relationship between AI search visibility and brand trust, such that the trust-building effect of AI search visibility is stronger in high-collectivism cultural contexts than in low-collectivism cultural contexts.

In collectivist societies such as Indonesia, where power distance is high and individualism is low (Beugelsdijk et al., 2017), consumers are culturally predisposed to defer to institutional authority cues. The implicit endorsement conveyed by AI inclusion may therefore carry greater persuasive weight in collectivist contexts than in individualist Western markets where skepticism toward algorithmic authority is more prevalent. It is important to acknowledge that direct empirical evidence for this moderation effect specifically within AI search contexts remains absent from the current literature, and this proposition is offered as a theoretically grounded direction for future empirical investigation. Regarding measurement, future experimental and survey-based studies should operationalize collectivist cultural orientation at the individual level using validated scales such as Triandis and Gelfand (1998) to avoid the ecological fallacy that arises when country-level scores are applied to individual-level behavioral predictions; country-level Hofstede scores remain appropriate for cross-national comparative designs.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model: AI Search Visibility, Brand Trust, And Behavioral Intentions With Collectivist Cultural Orientation As Moderator



Note: P1–P4 denote the four theoretical propositions. The dashed arrow from Collectivist Cultural Orientation represents the moderation path (P4). Paths A and B represent theoretically proposed direct effect paths from AI Search Visibility to Purchase Intention and Recommendation Intention respectively, grounded in the Mere Exposure Effect (Zajonc, 1968); these paths are recommended for testing in future empirical research.

Discussion Of Theoretical And Practical Implications

The framework makes three primary theoretical contributions. First, it extends Trust Transfer Theory into AI-mediated search environments by identifying AI search visibility as a specific trust transfer mechanism for unknown brands and startups — a context that has been

systematically absent from prior trust transfer research, which has focused predominantly on platforms, influencers, and established intermediaries. Second, it contributes to Signaling Theory by conceptualizing AI-mediated visibility as a structurally distinct signal type — non-commercially originated, institutionally backed, and heuristically processed — extending Connelly et al.'s (2025) updated framework to algorithmic environments in which cost structures operate cumulatively through platform reputation rather than transactionally through individual penalties. Third, it addresses a significant gap in startup marketing literature by theorizing the specific mechanisms through which AI search visibility may help startups overcome their structural trust deficit, a challenge qualitatively more acute than that faced by established SMEs with existing market presence.

Practically, if these propositions are empirically validated, AI search optimization would represent a strategically important investment for Indonesian startups. Unlike established SMEs that may supplement AI visibility with accumulated brand equity and customer familiarity, startups must treat AI search optimization as a foundational brand-building mechanism rather than a supplementary channel. Specific operational guidance centers on the concept of Algorithmic Fidelity (Cui & van Esch, 2025) — the capacity of a firm to be accurately and favorably discovered and represented by AI systems. For Indonesian startups, achieving Algorithmic Fidelity involves several concrete actions. First, ensuring consistent and accurate NAP (Name, Address, Phone) data across all online directories, business listings, and social media profiles, since AI systems aggregate information from multiple sources and inconsistency degrades representation quality. Second, implementing structured data markup (Schema.org) on brand websites to provide AI crawlers with machine-readable signals about product categories, pricing, and organizational identity — particularly important given that Indonesian e-commerce platforms increasingly rely on structured metadata for AI synthesis. Third, building an authoritative digital footprint by securing backlinks and citations from credible Indonesian digital sources such as established local news outlets, industry associations, and reputable e-commerce review platforms, which function as the equivalent of E-E-A-T (Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness) signals in AI training and retrieval environments. Fourth, developing product and brand content in natural-language formats that mirror the conversational query patterns consumers use with AI search tools — for example, structuring content around questions such as 'best [product category] for [use case] in Indonesia' rather than keyword-optimized fragments designed for traditional search ranking algorithms. These strategies represent a cost-effective alternative to traditional brand-building

investments, with the collectivist moderation mechanism in P4 suggesting particularly high returns in the Indonesian market.

State of the art in this research

Research Stream	Main Findings from Previous Studies	Limitations
AI in Marketing	AI is widely used in chatbots, personalization systems, recommendation engines, and customer engagement (Nogueira et al., 2025).	AI is primarily treated as an operational tool rather than a trust-building mechanism.
AI-Powered Search Behavior	AI-mediated search changes consumer information retrieval and decision-making processes (Pham et al., 2024; Werner et al., 2024).	Limited attention to how AI-generated search visibility affects brand trust.
Brand Trust Formation	Brand trust significantly influences purchase intention and recommendation behavior (Khamitov et al., 2024).	Most studies focus on established brands with existing reputations.
Trust Transfer Theory	Trust can be transferred from trusted platforms to associated entities (Stewart, 2003; Park & Yoon, 2025).	Research has not examined trust transfer from AI-generated search results to startup brands.
Signaling Theory	Consumers rely on credible signals to reduce uncertainty and information asymmetry (Connelly et al., 2025).	AI visibility has not been conceptualized as a unique market signal.
Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)	Consumers use peripheral cues when evaluating unfamiliar products and brands (Li et al., 2025).	AI search visibility has not been investigated as a peripheral trust cue.
Startup Marketing	Startups face trust deficits due to lack of reputation and customer experience (Chang et al., 2024).	No integrated framework explains how AI search visibility may reduce startup trust deficits.
Cultural Context Studies	Collectivist cultures rely more on authority and institutional cues (Beugelsdijk et al., 2017).	The moderating role of collectivism in AI-mediated trust formation remains unexplored.

CONCLUSION

This paper has developed a conceptual framework examining AI search visibility as a brand trust-building signal for startups and unknown brands in the Indonesian digital market. Drawing on Trust Transfer Theory, Signaling Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the framework proposes that AI search visibility positively influences brand trust (P1); brand trust influences purchase intention (P2) and recommendation intention (P3); and collectivist cultural orientation amplifies the trust-building effect of AI search visibility (P4). The framework also acknowledges two theoretically grounded direct effect pathways (Paths A and B) from AI search visibility to behavioral intentions, anchored in the Mere Exposure Effect (Zajonc, 1968), which future empirical research should examine alongside the mediated trust pathway.

The framework contributes to the AI marketing, brand trust, and startup marketing literatures while providing actionable guidance for practitioners navigating algorithm-dominated digital discovery environments. Empirical investigation of the proposed framework through experimental methodology and cross-cultural comparative designs represents a productive and theoretically rich direction for future research.

Several boundary conditions warrant future examination. Consumer AI literacy may operate as an independent moderator distinct from cultural orientation: an individual with low general trust in AI systems may resist the peripheral trust-transfer mechanism proposed in this framework regardless of their collectivist orientation. The relative strength of trust-mediated versus mere-exposure direct pathways constitutes a further boundary condition; disentangling these two mechanisms empirically will require experimental designs that manipulate exposure frequency independently of platform-attributed credibility, as the two pathways are conceptually distinct but may be difficult to isolate using cross-sectional survey data alone. Additional boundary conditions include product category involvement effects, the distinction between full and partial mediation through brand trust, and longitudinal dynamics of trust formation as AI search becomes increasingly familiar to consumers.

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