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The Role of Search Engine Optimization and Content Marketing in Enhancing Brand Awareness in Digital Businesses: An Integrative Literature Review

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Abstract: The growth of internet use in Indonesia has changed the way digital businesses communicate with their markets. Competition is no longer decided only by price and product, but also by how easily a brand is found, recognized and remembered by consumers when a need arises. This article examines the role of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Content Marketing in enhancing brand awareness in digital businesses. The study applies an integrative literature review of peer reviewed articles indexed in Scopus and nationally accredited SINTA journals, supported by recent conceptual work on generative search. The sources were selected on the basis of topical relevance, publication quality and recency, and were analyzed thematically. The review shows that SEO strengthens brand awareness mainly through discoverability, namely repeated organic exposure on search engine result pages and the credibility attached to high ranking positions. Content Marketing contributes through engagement, by offering informational, entertaining and social value that forms brand associations and encourages sharing. The two strategies are complementary: SEO without useful content produces visibility that is quickly forgotten, while good content without SEO is rarely found. The article proposes a Discoverability, Engagement and Credibility framework with five propositions, including a feedback loop in which stronger brand awareness in turn improves search performance. The rise of AI generated search answers is identified as a new contingency that requires businesses, especially micro, small and medium enterprises, to produce content that is credible, well structured and worth citing.

Keywords: *Search Engine Optimization; Content Marketing; Brand Awareness; Digital Business; Digital Marketing; MSMEs.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has changed the relationship between firms and consumers in a fundamental way. Consumers who previously relied on shop windows, print advertising and word of mouth now begin almost every purchase process with a search query, a scroll on social media or a question to a digital assistant. In Indonesia, the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association reported that internet users reached about 229 million people in 2025, or roughly 80 percent of the population [1]. This figure is not merely a statistic of connectivity. It describes a market in which the first encounter between a consumer and a brand increasingly takes place on a screen, and in which a brand that cannot be found online is, for practical purposes, absent from the consumer's consideration set.

Within this environment, brand awareness has become a strategic asset rather than a by-product of advertising. Keller defines brand awareness as the strength of the brand node in

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memory, reflected in the consumer's ability to recognize or recall the brand under different conditions [2]. A brand that is recognized and recalled has a greater chance of entering the consideration set, of being chosen over competitors and of building brand equity in the longer term. For digital businesses, and particularly for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), the challenge is that advertising budgets are limited while the number of competing brands online keeps growing. A bibliometric study of Scopus indexed research has shown that Indonesia is now the most productive country in publications on digital marketing for small and medium enterprises, a sign that this issue is very real for the national economy [3].

Two strategies are widely used to answer this challenge, namely Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Content Marketing. SEO is a set of technical, on-page and off-page practices intended to improve the position of a website in the organic results of search engines [4], [5]. Content Marketing is a strategic approach that creates and distributes valuable, relevant and consistent content to attract and retain a defined audience, so that the brand is perceived as helpful rather than merely persuasive [6], [7]. In daily practice both strategies are often handled by different people, sometimes even by different agencies, so that their joint effect on brand awareness is rarely planned deliberately.

The academic literature also tends to treat the two topics separately. Research on SEO is dominated by information systems and computer science perspectives that focus on ranking factors, while research on Content Marketing grows mostly in marketing journals that focus on engagement, trust and loyalty [8], [9]. Empirical work that explicitly links SEO to brand outcomes is still limited; Chen and Sénéchal note that, although SEO is a long standing marketing topic, its relationship with brand equity has received little attention [10]. At the same time, the search environment itself is changing. Generative AI systems now compose direct answers to user questions, and this changes what it means for a brand to be visible [11], [12].

Based on these considerations, this article has three objectives. First, to analyze the role of SEO in enhancing brand awareness in digital businesses. Second, to analyze the role of Content Marketing in enhancing brand awareness. Third, to explain the synergy between the two strategies and to formulate a conceptual framework, together with research propositions and practical implications, that is relevant to digital businesses and MSMEs in Indonesia. The article contributes by bringing together two streams of literature that have developed in parallel, and by updating the discussion with the emerging issue of generative search.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

- *Brand Awareness in the Digital Business Context*

In the customer based brand equity model, brand awareness consists of two dimensions, brand recognition and brand recall [2]. Recognition is the ability of consumers to confirm prior exposure to a brand when the brand is presented as a cue, while recall is the ability to retrieve the brand from memory when the product category or a need is mentioned. Awareness precedes the formation of brand image; without a brand node in memory, associations have nothing to attach to. In digital markets the cues that trigger recognition and recall have multiplied. A brand name in a search result snippet, a logo in a short video, an article shared in a messaging group or a mention by an influencer can all function as exposure that builds the brand node.

Studies in digital and social media marketing confirm that online activities have a measurable effect on brand awareness. Dwivedi et al. place brand awareness among the central outcomes of digital and social media marketing and call for research that connects specific digital tools with brand level outcomes [13]. In a study of an event organizer company, Azizan et al. found that electronic word of mouth, advertising and interaction on social media had positive effects on brand awareness, while customization did not have a significant effect [14]. These findings indicate that awareness in the digital space is formed not only by the firm's own messages but also by the conversations and interactions that the content provokes.

- *Search Engine Optimization*

SEO refers to the process of improving the quality and quantity of organic traffic to a website by making it more relevant and more accessible to search engine algorithms. The literature usually classifies SEO activities into three groups [4], [5]. Technical SEO covers site architecture, page speed, mobile friendliness, security and indexability. On-page SEO covers keyword research, title tags, meta descriptions, headings, internal links and, most importantly, the quality and relevance of the content. Off-page SEO covers backlinks, brand mentions and other signals of authority from outside the website. Ziakis et al. show that factors such as content relevance, backlinks, page speed and secure connections are associated with better positions on Google [4].

SEO has also become increasingly data driven. Drivas et al. demonstrate how big data analytics on web metrics can be used to identify the factors that improve organic visibility and to support decisions on website optimization [15]. From the user side, Lewandowski and Schultheiß found that a large share of internet users have only limited knowledge of how SEO shapes the results they see, and many find it difficult to distinguish optimized content from results that are purely relevance based [16]. This finding is important for brand awareness, because it means that consumers tend to accept the ranking order as a natural signal of quality and relevance.

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➢ *Content Marketing*

Content Marketing differs from conventional advertising in its orientation. Instead of interrupting consumers with promotional messages, it offers content that consumers want to consume because it informs, entertains or solves a problem. Hollebeek and Macky define digital content marketing as the creation and dissemination of relevant and valuable brand related content to current or prospective customers on digital platforms, with the aim of developing favorable brand engagement, trust and relationships [6]. Du Plessis emphasizes that content marketing in social media content communities works through storytelling and non intrusive communication, so that the brand becomes part of the conversation rather than an interruption to it [7].

Empirical studies identify several value dimensions of content. Lou and Xie show that informational, entertainment and social value in branded content enhance consumer brand experience, which in turn increases brand loyalty [17]. Lou et al. found that non hard sell content can be effective in brand building because it is perceived as useful rather than manipulative [18]. In the business to business setting, Terho et al. describe how content marketing activities support customers along different stages of the customer journey, from the first awareness of a problem to the evaluation of suppliers [19]. Ho et al. add that the effectiveness of content marketing depends on organizational capability, namely the ability to plan, produce, distribute and evaluate content in a consistent manner [20].

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses an integrative literature review. Following Snyder, an integrative review is appropriate when the aim is to assess, critique and synthesize literature on a topic in a way that allows new theoretical frameworks and perspectives to emerge, particularly when the relevant literature is spread across several disciplines [21]. This fits the present topic, since research on SEO and research on Content Marketing have developed in different scholarly communities. The review was not designed as a full systematic review with exhaustive database screening; however, several principles of transparent reporting recommended in the PRISMA 2020 statement, such as explicit inclusion criteria and a clear description of the analysis, were adopted [22].

Sources were searched in Scopus indexed journals, journals accredited by SINTA (Science and Technology Index of the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology of Indonesia) and peer reviewed conference proceedings, using combinations of the keywords search engine optimization, content marketing, digital content marketing, brand awareness, brand equity, digital marketing and MSMEs. The inclusion criteria were: (1) the article discusses SEO, Content Marketing or brand awareness in a digital context; (2) the article is published in a peer reviewed outlet indexed in Scopus or SINTA; (3) priority is given to publications from 2017 onward, while foundational works are retained when they define key constructs; and (4) the full text or a reliable abstract is accessible. Opinion pieces, unreviewed blog articles and sources without clear authorship were excluded. A national report was used only to describe market context.

The research stages were carried out as follows:

- Identifying the problem concerning the importance of SEO and Content Marketing in enhancing brand awareness in digital businesses.
- Collecting relevant literature on SEO, Content Marketing and brand awareness from trustworthy and indexed sources.
- Analyzing the concepts and strategies of SEO that contribute to brand visibility.
- Analyzing the role of Content Marketing in building interaction, trust and brand awareness among consumers.
- Evaluating the relationship between SEO and Content Marketing in supporting brand awareness, and synthesizing the findings into a conceptual framework and propositions.
- Drawing conclusions, practical implications and directions for future research based on the analysis.

The selected literature was analyzed with a thematic approach. Each source was read and coded according to the strategy discussed, the mechanism through which it affects brand outcomes, the context of the study and its main findings. The codes were then grouped into broader themes, which became the basis for the discussion and for the conceptual framework presented in the next section.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis produced four main themes, namely the role of SEO, the role of Content Marketing, the synergy between the two strategies and their combined impact on brand awareness. Table 1 summarizes the key studies that underpin these themes.

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Table 1 Summary of Key Studies on SEO, Content Marketing and Brand Awareness

Source	Focus and Context	Approach	Main Findings Relevant to Brand Awareness
[10]	SEO and brand equity in SMEs	Expert interviews, grounded theory	Top ranking brands are perceived as more credible; SEO and brand equity reinforce each other; weak SEO can trap SMEs in a negative cycle.
[4]	Google ranking factors	Analysis of ranking factors	Content relevance, backlinks, page speed and security are associated with better organic positions.
[16]	Public awareness of SEO	Representative online survey	Many users have limited knowledge of SEO and cannot easily distinguish optimized results, so ranking acts as a quality signal.
[23]	Grocery e-commerce in Europe and the USA	Quantitative analysis of web metrics	Inbound marketing activities, including search visibility, relate to economic performance.
[6]	Digital content marketing	Conceptual framework	Content marketing fosters engagement, which leads to trust, brand attitude and value.
[17]	Branded content and consumer experience	Consumer survey	Informational, entertainment and social content value enhances brand experience and loyalty.
[19]	Content marketing in business markets	Qualitative multiple case study	Content activities support customers across stages of the customer journey.
[24]	Food tourism	Consumer survey	Digital content marketing stimulates electronic word of mouth.
[14]	Social media marketing of an event organizer	Survey and regression	Electronic word of mouth, advertising and interaction raise brand awareness; customization is not significant.
[3]	Digital marketing in SMEs	Bibliometric analysis of Scopus records	Research output grows quickly and Indonesia leads in publications; digital skills and AI are future themes.
[11]	Generative search engines	Benchmark experiments	Content enriched with citations, quotations and statistics gains visibility in AI generated answers.

Source: Compiled by the Authors from the Reviewed Literature.

➢ *The Role of SEO in Enhancing Brand Awareness*

The first and most direct contribution of SEO to brand awareness is exposure. When a website appears on the first page of search results, the brand name, domain and description are displayed to users at the very moment they are looking for something related to the product. Each display is a brand encounter, even when the user does not click. Repeated encounters across different queries strengthen recognition, and over time the brand becomes associated with the category itself, which is the basis of recall. In this sense SEO works like outdoor advertising placed precisely on the road that the consumer has chosen to take, with the difference that the placement is earned rather than bought.

The second contribution is relevance through keywords and search intent. Keyword research allows a business to understand the language that consumers actually use, including informational queries in the early stage of the customer journey. By ranking for questions such as how to choose a product or what distinguishes one option from another, a brand can be present before the consumer has even formed a preference. Erdmann and Ponzoa show that inbound digital marketing activities, in which search visibility plays a central role, are related to the economic performance of grocery e-commerce firms in Europe and the United States [23].

The third contribution is credibility. Users tend to regard websites at the top of search results as more trustworthy than those in lower positions. Chen and Sénéchal found from interviews with SEO and digital marketing experts that a brand ranked at the top of search results is perceived as more credible, and that lesser known brands should improve their SEO performance to build brand equity [10]. Because many users do not fully understand how rankings are produced [16], a high position functions as an implicit endorsement. For brand awareness this means that SEO not only increases the frequency of exposure but also improves the quality of that exposure.

The same study, however, warns of a reciprocal relationship. Well known brands tend to perform better in SEO because users search for them by name, link to them and mention them, while weak SEO may trap small firms in a negative cycle of low visibility and low brand equity [10]. This observation is particularly relevant for Indonesian MSMEs, many of which still rely entirely on marketplace pages and social media accounts without an owned website that can be optimized.

➢ *The Role of Content Marketing in Enhancing Brand Awareness*

Content Marketing contributes to brand awareness first by giving the brand something meaningful to say. Articles, short videos, infographics, podcasts and social media posts that answer consumer questions make the identity and character of the brand easier to recognize. Hollebeek and Macky argue that digital content marketing fosters consumer engagement, which then develops into trust and brand attitude [6]. In the awareness stage, engagement matters because content that is actively processed is remembered better than content that is passively seen.

Second, Content Marketing builds brand associations through value. The informational, entertainment and social dimensions identified by Lou and Xie give consumers different reasons to pay attention, and positive experiences with the content are transferred to the brand [17]. Content that

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solves a real problem positions the brand as a helpful expert. For instance, a halal food business that explains certification, ingredients and safe storage clearly is not only educating the market but also anchoring its brand to the values of trust and compliance that matter to Muslim consumers.

Third, Content Marketing extends reach through interaction and sharing. Content that is interesting tends to receive comments, likes and shares, so that the brand reaches people who have never been targeted directly. Bu et al. show that digital content marketing can act as a catalyst for electronic word of mouth [24], and Azizan et al. found that electronic word of mouth and interaction have positive effects on brand awareness [14]. The wider the spread of content, the greater the opportunity for the brand to be known by a broader public.

Finally, the literature reminds us that content marketing is a capability, not a campaign. Ho et al. emphasize planning, production, distribution and evaluation as interconnected capabilities [20], while Terho et al. show that content must be matched to the needs of customers at each stage of their journey [19]. Inconsistent content, posted only when there is a promotion, rarely builds awareness because it does not create the repeated and coherent exposure that memory requires.

- *The Synergy of SEO and Content Marketing in Digital Businesses*

SEO and Content Marketing are complementary. SEO helps content to be found through search engines, while Content Marketing provides the substance that users are looking for. Modern search algorithms reward content that is helpful, original and demonstrates experience, expertise, authoritativeness and trustworthiness, so that technical optimization without good content gives only temporary and fragile results [4], [5]. Conversely, high quality content that ignores keywords, structure and technical accessibility is unlikely to reach the audience it deserves. The two strategies should therefore be planned together, from keyword research and editorial calendars to measurement.

The synergy can be illustrated with a local example. Consider a small business in Medan that sells bika ambon and other traditional snacks. Instead of publishing only product photos, the business writes an article titled "Recommended Medan Souvenirs That Stay Fresh for the Trip Home", which answers questions about shelf life, packaging and the difference between original and modified recipes. With proper keyword optimization, such as the phrase oleh-oleh khas Medan, a clear page structure and fast loading on mobile devices, the article has a good chance of appearing in search results when travelers plan their visit. Readers obtain the information they need and, at the same time, become familiar with the brand and its products. When the article is cut into short videos and shared on social media, it gains interactions and links that further strengthen its search position. In this simple case, SEO provides discoverability, content provides engagement and credibility, and the two reinforce each other.

The same logic applies to larger digital businesses. Erdmann and Ponzoa show that inbound marketing, which combines search, content and social media, is related to the performance of online grocery firms [23], while Kannan and Li position search and content within an integrated framework of digital marketing touchpoints along the customer journey [8]. Rosário and Raimundo also note in their review of consumer marketing strategy and e-commerce that the integration of digital channels is one of the main themes of the last decade [25].

- *The Impact of SEO and Content Marketing on Brand Awareness*

The integrated application of SEO and Content Marketing has several impacts on brand awareness. The most visible impact is increased brand visibility on the internet. Websites that frequently appear in search results and are supported by high quality content are easier for consumers to remember, because exposure is both frequent and meaningful.

Another impact is wider audience reach without proportionally larger promotional costs. Unlike paid advertising, which stops delivering as soon as the budget ends, content that has been optimized can continue to be found for months or even years. For MSMEs with limited budgets this cumulative character is a significant advantage, although it requires patience, since organic results usually take time to develop.

A further impact is increased consumer trust. Information that is accurate, relevant and easy to find creates a positive experience for users. This trust can encourage consumers to interact further with the brand, to recommend it and eventually to buy the products or services offered [6], [17]. In this way SEO and Content Marketing function not only as tools of promotion but as strategies for building awareness, enhancing credibility and strengthening the competitive position of the firm in an increasingly crowded digital market.

- *Conceptual Framework and Research Propositions*

Based on the synthesis above, this article proposes a Discoverability, Engagement and Credibility framework, presented in Fig. 1. The framework positions SEO and Content Marketing as antecedents, three mechanisms as mediators and brand awareness, with its dimensions of recognition, recall and top of mind position, as the outcome.

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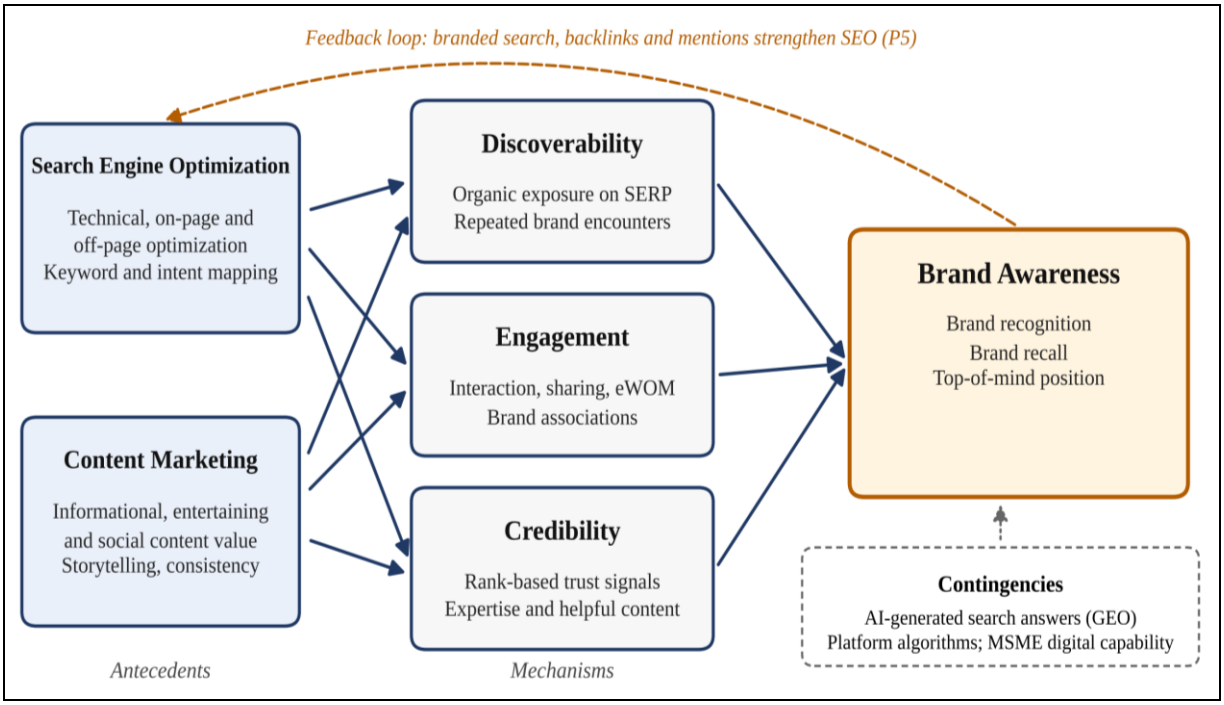


Fig 1 Discoverability, Engagement and Credibility Framework of SEO and Content Marketing for Brand Awareness
Source: Developed by the Authors Based on the Literature Synthesis.

The framework leads to the following propositions, which can be tested in future empirical research:

- P1: SEO enhances brand awareness mainly through discoverability, that is, repeated organic exposure of the brand on search engine result pages.
- P2: Content Marketing enhances brand awareness mainly through engagement, by providing informational, entertainment and social value that forms brand associations and stimulates sharing.
- P3: SEO and Content Marketing jointly enhance perceived credibility, through high ranking positions and through content that demonstrates expertise, which strengthens the memorability of the brand.
- P4: The effect of SEO on brand awareness is stronger when it is supported by high quality content, and the effect of Content Marketing is stronger when the content is optimized for search; the two strategies therefore have a complementary, interactive effect.
- P5: Brand awareness feeds back into SEO performance through branded searches, backlinks and mentions, creating a reinforcing cycle that favors established brands and requires deliberate effort from lesser known brands.

The framework also recognizes contingencies. The influence of SEO and Content Marketing on awareness depends on platform algorithms, on the digital capability of the firm and, increasingly, on the presence of AI generated answers in search, which is discussed below.

➢ *The Emerging Shift Toward Generative Search*

The search environment is changing rapidly. Generative AI systems integrated into search engines and chat assistants now compose answers from multiple sources, often without requiring users to click through to a website. Aggarwal et al. introduce the concept of Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) and show that content optimization methods, such as adding citations, quotations from relevant sources and statistics, can improve the visibility of a source within generative engine responses by up to about 40 percent [11]. Kshetri et al. note that generative AI opens new opportunities for content production and personalization in marketing, while also raising problems of accuracy, originality and trust [12].

For brand awareness, this shift has two consequences. First, being mentioned or cited inside an AI generated answer becomes a new form of exposure, which means that the credibility mechanism in the framework becomes more important than before. Content that is clearly structured, factually accurate, supported by evidence and associated with a recognizable author or organization is more likely to be used as a source. Second, the ease of producing content with AI tools may flood the internet with generic material. In such conditions, the scarce resource is not content as such but content that reflects real experience and a distinctive brand voice. Digital businesses should therefore treat generative AI as an assistant in the content process, not as a replacement for genuine expertise.

➢ *Practical Implications for Digital Businesses and MSMEs*

Several practical implications follow from this review. First, digital businesses, including MSMEs, should build an owned digital asset, such as a simple website or a well managed business profile, that can be optimized for search, instead of relying entirely on marketplace and social media platforms whose algorithms they do not control. Second, keyword research should guide the content plan, so that content answers the actual questions of target consumers at each stage of the customer journey. Third, content should be produced consistently and repurposed across formats, for

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example from an article into short videos and infographics, in order to multiply exposure while keeping the brand message coherent.

Fourth, credibility signals should be managed deliberately: accurate information, clear authorship, customer testimonials that are genuine, certifications such as halal certification where relevant, and consistent business information across platforms. Fifth, performance should be measured not only through sales but also through awareness indicators, such as impressions in search, growth of branded search queries, share of voice and engagement. Finally, for policy makers and universities, capacity building programs for MSMEs should go beyond opening social media accounts and include basic SEO, content planning and the responsible use of generative AI, in line with the call for greater digital marketing skills in the literature [3].

V. CONCLUSION

Based on the review and discussion, Search Engine Optimization and Content Marketing play important and complementary roles in enhancing brand awareness in digital businesses. SEO increases the visibility of websites in search engines so that the brand is more easily found by potential consumers, and the high ranking position adds credibility to that exposure. Content Marketing conveys valuable and relevant information that builds trust, increases audience engagement and forms brand associations. When both strategies are applied together, they extend the reach of the brand, increase its exposure in digital media and strengthen the positive image of the firm.

This article contributes a Discoverability, Engagement and Credibility framework with five propositions, including a reciprocal relationship between brand awareness and search performance, and it identifies generative search as a new contingency. The study has limitations. As an integrative literature review, it does not test the propositions empirically, and the selection of sources, although guided by explicit criteria, is not exhaustive. Future research is encouraged to test the framework quantitatively, for example with structural equation modeling on Indonesian digital businesses and MSMEs, to compare the effects across industries and platforms, and to examine how brand visibility in AI generated answers affects recognition and recall.

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