International Research Journal of Marketing & Economics
ISSN (2349-0314) Impact Factor: 8.173
Vol. 13, Issue 04, April 2026

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A Scoping Review on Trust and Preference Among Search Engine Users in Response to Organic, Paid, and AI-Generated Results

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Abstract
Along with organic and ad results on search engines, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) results has changed the way users evaluate results' credibility, its relevance and trustworthiness. The traditional search engine ecosystem, which has been dominated by organic and paid results. is now also showing AI-generated results. The different forms of results (organic, ads and AI-generated) give users options to collect the information for their search queries. This scoping review integrates fifty peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2025 to understand and examine the evolving user trust, preference and behaviour within these hybrid search engine result environments. Following Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) scoping framework, the scoping review systematically studies cognitive, ethical, and socio-cultural parameters that influence users' trust. The findings suggest three patterns: first, confidence in organic results is because of perceived neutrality. Second, occasional clicks on paid search results depend on brand awareness and understanding of the sponsored results. Third, emergent over-trust in AI-generated results is the reason for linguistic fluency and automation bias. Based on this integration, the paper presents a model that combines cognitive heuristics and ethics as key factors that influence user trust. This framework clears the understanding of trust for algorithm-influenced results, sponsored results and dynamic human-AI interaction. The review concludes with research gaps suggesting the need for longitudinal and design-based studies. This will help us identify how users decide between organic, paid and AI-generated results.

Keywords:
Search engine optimisation, generative AI, AI optimisation, Search engine ads

1. Introduction

The 'searching' on the internet was redefined from a technical data retrieval process to an organic online marketing cognitive process since the inception of search engines in the late 1990s. Search engine results have become an important source to generate website traffic. The website results on search engines like Google, Bing and others not only offer information but also generate commercial conversions. The introduction of AI integration in search engines and Large Language Models (LLM) platforms like ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, Grok etc. has given more options to search engine users other than organic and paid results. This rise of AI integration demands research on how users develop trust and preferences with these integrated result types. This scoping review examines how internet users' trust has been nurtured, measured and challenged for search engine organic, paid and AI-influenced results. The review defines the foundation for the scope of subsequent research and the design of the questionnaire and academic investigation.

This scoping review maps previous research based on trust and preference development among users who navigate three result types in search engines, i.e. organic, paid and AI. By reviewing fifty previous research papers spanning search engine optimisation, human-computer interaction, search ads and generative AI, the review seeks to understand:

1. The factors that shape user trust across the search result formats.
2. Influence of AI integration on traditional trust factors among organic and paid results.
3. The empirical gaps between user preferences and their cognitive behaviour in a hybrid search ecosystem.

2. Methodology

This review adopts the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) scoping framework to systematically explore a wide and interdisciplinary corpus. Databases searched included ACM Digital Library, IEEE Xplore, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, and ResearchGate. Keywords such as *"*search engine trust," "AI search," "organic vs paid results," "generative AI," "search engine algorithm", and "search engine user preference" were employed.

The inclusion criteria were:

- Peer-reviewed journal and conference research papers published between 2015 and 2025.
- Observational or conceptual studies focusing on user trust, their perception, or ethical transparency in the search ecosystem.
- Papers providing full-text PDF access.

The focus of the review is on its objectives, methods, findings, and research gaps.

3. Evolution of Trust in Search Engines

With the technological and commercial transformation of search engines, the concept of trust in the search engine result page (SERP) also evolved. Here, trust not only refers to belief in the accuracy of the generated information but also the confidence in the system that curates, shows and ranks the information (Metzger & Flanagin, 2021). In the initial days of search engine evolution, this trust among the users was developed with organic result generation and it was grounded in a perception of the algorithm's neutral behaviour. Users believed that search engines operated as impartial mediators of knowledge (Pan et al., 2007).

3.1 The Era of Algorithmic Objectivity and Organic Trust

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, search engines started to be recognised as the true source of information. Google's founders, Brin and Page (1998), designed the 'Page Rank' algorithm. It formalised the idea that website relevance with the search query can be measured objectively through hyperlink analysis. Piorlli and Card (1999) suggested that users developed 'information searching' patterns by combining heuristic efficiency with hidden trust in search engines' capacity to generate results.

Therefore, organic results were considered authentic and authoritative, especially when they were compared with paid results. Using eye-tracking studies, Pan et al. (2007) and Joachims et al. (2017) found that users (searchers) exhibited significant positional bias. The bias was based on the assumption that top-ranking results were more trustworthy. This model was based on the assumption that search engine algorithms were value-neutral. This belief was later challenged by research into algorithmic bias and personalisation (Eslami et al., 2018; Chowdhury, 2023).

3.2 Commercialisation and the Rise of Paid Search

The introduction of paid search advertising fundamentally trusts relationships between users and search engines. As search engines began monitising users' attention, the transparency between organic trust and commercial intent blurred.

Early observational work by Jansen and Mullen (2008) and Rutz and Bucklin (2015) recognised the performance efficiency of paid results but also noted that their trust was lacking compared to organic results.

According to studies by Danaher & Dagger, 2021; Cheng & Lee, 2022, clear disclosure of the paid/advertisement/sponsored label on the result did not automatically restore trust among the users. Users perceived that even when the paid and organic results were transparent, paid results were biased. However, Diwanji et al. (2023) suggested that situational trust derived from brand

awareness and prior exposure to those brands can somewhat balance this distrust. Paid results that align with searchers' intent highlight informational value compared with organic results. Such paid results can also achieve a reasonable engagement rate. This suggests that trust is context-dependent rather than static.

To add to this research outcome, scholars such as Gupta and Dwivedi (2023) reinforced that algorithmic advertising increasingly employs AI to optimise targeting and message personalisation. This subtly shifts user perceptions from conscious scepticism to passive acceptance.

3.3 The Generative Turn: AI-Driven Search

Since the commercialisation of search engines, the emergence of Large Language Models (LLMs) acted as a catalyst to reconstruct the search trust among users. Tools like ChatGPT, Google's SGE and later AI mode, and Bing Copilot integrate conversational AI with traditional retrieval methods. The outcomes provide integrated answers instead of a ranking of website links. Research by Sun et al. (2024) and Kaiser et al. (2025) suggests that users gave higher credibility to AI-generated summaries because of their consistency and perceived authoritativeness.

However, Goyal and Aggarwal (2024) suggest that automation of trust leads to cognitive (epistemic) outsourcing. It means users judge AI results without verification. Bianchi and Floridi (2024) and Mittelstadt (2023) argue that such systems challenge the cognitive foundation of digital literacy, thereby obscuring comprehension of how knowledge is produced.

To summarise it, the evolution of trust has shifted from algorithmic faith (organic search results) to *commercial negotiation* (paid search ads) and now to *synthetic delegation* (AI-generated results). Each phase redefines the user's cognitive and ethical relationship to search technologies.

4. Cognitive and Ethical Dimensions of Trust

To understand user trust in search results, we need to distinguish between users' cognitive process and the ethical issues involved with organic, paid and AI results. Trust emerges as a psychological shortcut and a moral evaluation. Users, while using a search engine, balance their perception of usefulness with beliefs about fairness, transparency, and accountability (Floridi, 2022; Rieder & Simon, 2023).

4.1 Cognitive Heuristics and Bias in Search Evaluation

Users hardly evaluate information analytically. They rely on cognitive heuristics, i.e. mental shortcuts, to assess reliability. Tversky and Kahneman (2020) categorised such processes under

"System 1" thinking. This thinking emphasises speed and intuition over deliberation. In search contexts, Joachims et al. (2017) found that visual positioning, interface familiarity, and source reputation strongly shape users' perceived trustworthiness.

The heuristics continue to evolve with AI-generated content. Liu and Ma (2020) and Murray and Chen (2020) observed that linguistic fluency, tone consistency, and narrative consistency increase users' confidence in AI responses. Although it ignores its factual accuracy. This 'fluency heuristic' creates a new form of cognitive vulnerability, i.e. the more natural a response sounds, the more truthful it feels.

Moreover, Metzger and Flanagin (2021) suggested that cognitive overload in search tasks inspires users to accept AI explanations as default truth. This also introduces automation bias. Research by Jones and Rader (2023) supports this finding. According to them, if users lack the literacy to interpret algorithmic explanations, then excessive technical transparency can backfire.

4.2 Ethical Trust and Algorithmic Transparency

Search engine users' trust revolves around output accountability, factual accuracy, and explainability. Binns et al. (2018) and Chowdhury (2023) highlight how that information is curated. It is not just about what information is shown. Transparent search engine ranking algorithm signals, such as result explanation labels or result sources, were catalysts in improving perceived fairness. Although it may not always improve overall trust (Ali et al., 2021; Rieder & Simon, 2023).

Based on users' experience, Sinha and Theodorou (2024), found that visible transparency cues, such as "AI-generated" tags, enhance the algorithm's procedural trust. Overly technical disclosures can cause confusion. Ethical communication should prioritise both clarity and understanding.

4.3 Socio-Cultural Contexts and Trust Variability

Trust formation on search engine results is also culturally dependent. Gupta and Dwivedi (2023) and Pérez and Kaiser (2025) observed that collectivist cultures (e.g., India, Southeast Asia) place greater trust in AI results due to perceived alignment with authority. Individualist societies (e.g., the U.S., Germany) exhibit more doubt. Makrydakis et al. (2024) and Ramu (2024) found that digital literacy, education, and experience with online ads affect how much people trust paid and AI-generated results. These findings show that trust is not the same for everyone. It changes based on our thinking, culture, and expectations of others.

5. Findings

A review of fifty peer-reviewed studies shows that trust in search engines is complex and often mixed. The results highlight five main themes that together describe how trust in search platforms is changing.

5.1 Enduring Trust in Organic Results

With the advancement of AI-influenced search engine algorithms, organic search results retain their significance in terms of trust, authenticity and objectivity. Pan et al. (2007) and Metzger & Flanagin (2021) found that even if users recognise ranking manipulation, they continue to believe organic results are more credible than ads and AI results. Ramu (2024) observed that organic search results are often believed to be 'real' information in developing markets. This trust among search engine users is due to the web's cognitive simplicity over the past decades.

5.2 Conditional Trust in Paid Results

Early studies suggest that search engine users distrust paid results (Jansen & Mullen, 2008). But the recent research presents a different perspective. Diwanji et al. (2023) and Cheng & Lee (2022) suggest that users may show situational trust when search engine paid results match their search intent. This trust remains intact if ads are from known brands. Paid search results are considered curated recommendations rather than manipulative content. This consideration by users gets a boost when AI-driven personalisation enhances ads' relevance (Gupta & Dwivedi, 2023).

Transparency in all three types of results (organic, paid, AI) is crucial. Without disclosure or a label, the users develop doubts. Ad labelling is significant, but it still doesn't guarantee trust (Danher & Dagger, 2021).

5.3 Overtrust in AI-Generated Results

LLM-powered search results have become more popular in recent years. As a result, users are becoming more interested in AI-generated search results. Sun et al. (2024), Kaiser et al. (2025), and Goyal & Aggarwal (2024) indicate that AI systems build trust through the conversational fluency of the results and by connecting emotionally with the users. To contradict this indication, Floridi (2022) and Mittelstadt (2023) suggested that this trust is not significant. Users mistake *linguistic coherence* for *cognitive reliability*. Overtrust thus becomes a new form of digital vulnerability as it amplifies misinformation risks.

5.4 The Transparency–Comprehension Challenge

Multiple studies consistently highlight the tension between search result transparency and its usability. Search engine users want to know why a result appears, but they ignore explanations

that require effort to interpret. This contradiction points to the challenge of communicating algorithmic processes meaningfully.

5.5 Ethical Trust as Institutional Responsibility

The scoping review suggests that ethical trust is about systemic credibility. It is not about individual cognition. Chowdhury (2023) and Krafft et al. (2019) argue for institutional frameworks that mandate algorithmic audits, bias testing, and disclosure standards. In the future, the integration between ethical transparency and cognitive design will be required to build users' trust in search engine results

6. Conceptual Framework: Dual-Pathway Model of Trust Formation

The proposed model conceptualises user trust as a mediating construct between search-result type and user preference, moderated by cognitive heuristics and ethical transparency.

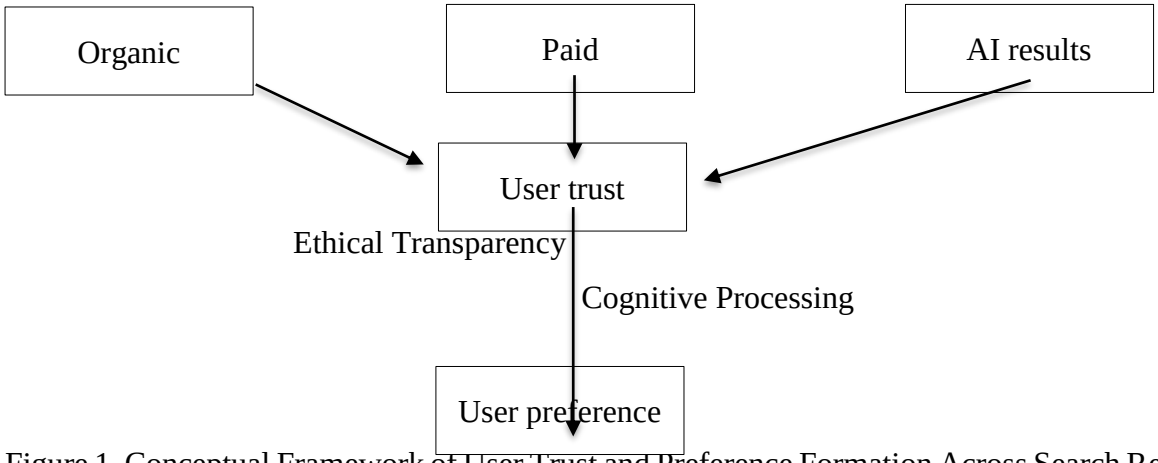

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of User Trust and Preference Formation Across Search Result Types.

This model integrates cognitive processing and AI ethics. It extends traditional Technology Acceptance Models (Dwivedi et al., 2022) toward hybrid search behaviour.

7. Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite extensive prior research, certain gaps remain in 'how' trust and preferences function in search engines in the age of generative AI.

7.1 Comparative Trust Across Result Types

A few studies used experimental designs that compared organic, paid, and AI-generated results. Existing work tends to isolate one dimension. It limits cross-format analysis. Future research should adopt mixed-method designs covering eye-tracking, clickstream, and survey data to measure real-time trust calibration.

7.2 Longitudinal Dynamics of Trust

A few recent studies (Sun et al., 2024; Goyal & Aggarwal, 2024) focus on short-term trust responses of the users after they interact with search engine results. There is a need for longitudinal studies to know how AI models' adaptation builds trust, along with users developing awareness of generative models. The processes of trust erosion or reinforcement over time remain insufficiently understood.

7.3 Cultural and Demographic Variability

Gupta & Dwivedi (2023) and Pérez & Kaiser (2025) gave initial cross-cultural evidence. But comparative research at the global level remains limited. Demographic factors like age, education, and socio-economic factors influence algorithmic trust, especially in AI-mediated contexts. Conducting multinational experiments may help identify universal versus culture-specific trust determinants.

7.4 Ethical Regulation and Standardisation

The literature lacks consensus on what constitutes sufficient AI disclosure. Chowdhury (2023) and Mittelstadt (2023) call for standardised frameworks for algorithmic accountability. Future research should focus on how data policies affect user trust in hybrid search systems.

7.5 Empirical Validation of Conceptual Models

The proposed dual-pathway framework in this review integrates cognitive and ethical determinants of trust. Future research work should operationalise its constructs (e.g., fluency, transparency, ethical perception) and test their interactions.

8. Conclusion

This scoping review finds that user trust in search engines has shifted. Earlier users used to simply accept results. With the introduction of AI-generated results, users started generating doubts. These doubts in users' perception and trust is influenced by result transparency, ethics, and cognitive shortcuts. AI enhances the overall search engine user experience. But it also creates new risks, especially when people rely too much on smooth but uncertain answers. The dual-pathway model proposed in this review provides base for future studies. As generative AI continues to change how we search, building lasting trust will rely on ethical transparency, user education, and designs that respect how people think.

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