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Absurdist marketing, radical honesty, and entrepreneurial brand leadership: a netnographic study of the aldis burger phenomenon in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how unconventional brand communication and entrepreneurial leadership jointly shape consumer trust in digital marketing. Using a contextual netnographic approach, 200 purposively sampled Instagram comments from five high-engagement Aldis Burger posts during its peak viral period (Q1–Q2 2026) were analyzed using thematic analysis. Five dominant themes emerged: Trust (30%), Humor (24%), Persona (20%), Uniqueness (14%), and Skepticism (12%), each reflecting a distinct leadership dimension. The findings indicate that entrepreneurial brand communication functions not only as a marketing strategy but also as an expression of leadership that strengthens consumer trust. Building on these findings, the study proposes three theoretically grounded constructs—Performative Honesty, Absurd Credibility, and Anti-Competitive Trust Signaling—together with the Persona-Congruence Mechanism as a moderating condition for trust formation. These constructs are presented as testable propositions for future research. The study contributes to the literature on brand leadership, digital marketing authenticity, and consumer trust while offering practical insights for entrepreneurial branding in the digital economy.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media has reshaped brand communication amid audience fragmentation and rising skepticism toward conventional promotion (Appel, 2020; Lamberton, 2016; Nesterenko et al., 2023). Yet this literature remains largely descriptive, documenting that unconventional communication attracts attention without explaining why some norm-violating strategies build durable trust while others are dismissed as gimmickry (Eisend, 2018; Rainy & Mou, 2025) the distinction this study interrogates. Brand leadership scholarship, meanwhile, holds that leaders actively construct brand meaning and shape consumer perception (D. A. Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Beck et al., 2020;

Wieser et al., 2021), a role especially salient in entrepreneurial ventures where founder and brand identity converge (Arnould & Dion, 2023; Besharat et al., 2024; Gupta et al., 2004; Waldman & Balven, 2014; Wei, 2022). These two streams have developed in parallel: communication studies rarely theorize the leader's role, while leadership studies rarely examine tactics such as radical honesty or absurdist humor as leadership behavior the first theoretical gap motivating this study.

Existing leadership constructs also sit in unresolved tension. Entrepreneurial leadership emphasizes innovation, risk tolerance, and willingness to challenge convention (Gupta et al., 2004; Ireland et al., 2003; Lückenbach et al., 2023), whereas authentic leadership assumes trust arises from non-strategic, internally motivated transparency (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Balaban & Szambolics, 2022; Moulard et al., 2015; Zniva et al., 2023). Prior research treats these as complementary without testing whether a single act e.g., publicly recommending a competitor can be both entrepreneurially calculated and perceived as authentic. This unresolved contradiction is termed the Trust Paradox, and it motivates the construct of Performative Honesty: rather than assuming authenticity and strategic intent are mutually exclusive, this study treats their co-occurrence as an empirical question, asking whether consumers judge authenticity by communicative intent or by contextual consistency and behavioral congruence.

Servant, charismatic, and transformational leadership add further constructs typically invoked interchangeably rather than differentiated. Servant leadership centers on prioritizing stakeholder welfare through costly, visible signals (Carrillat et al., 2025; Greenleaf, 1970; Khamitov et al., 2024; Van Dierendonck, 2011), while charismatic/transformational leadership centers on projecting distinctive personality and vision (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Conger & Kanungo, 1998). These are conceptually distinct one defined by what a leader forgoes, the other by what a leader projects yet most marketing-leadership studies collapse both into an undifferentiated notion of "inspirational" leadership (Arnould & Dion, 2023; Rudeloff & Damms, 2023; Schouten et al., 2021). Contemporary leadership scholarship further frames effective leadership as inherently adaptive, continuously recalibrated across stakeholders (Yulianto, 2025), which sits uneasily against authentic leadership's assumption of a stable self. This conflation constitutes a second theoretical gap it obscures which mechanism (self-sacrifice, charisma, norm-redefinition, or adaptation) actually drives trust which this study addresses by mapping distinct consumer-response themes onto distinct leadership constructs rather than a single composite variable. Radical honesty marketing acknowledging limitations or recommending competitors generates stronger sincerity perceptions than comparative advertising (Costello et al., 2023; De Hooge, 2025; Di Domenico et al., 2022; Grewal et al., 2020; Hernández-Amorós & Martínez Ruiz, 2018), but this work has focused on honesty about a brand's own limitations rather than honesty directed outward. This study extends the literature toward Anti-Competitive Trust Signaling trust cultivated by publicly recognizing competitors' merits rather than asserting one's own superiority.

Absurdist marketing similarly attracts attention through incongruity, triggering elaboration and high-arousal emotion that drive viral diffusion (J. L. Aaker, 1997; Berger & Milkman, 2012; Eisend, 2009, 2018; Festinger, 1957; Nahon-Serfaty, 2022; Stead et al., 2021; Tienari & Savage, 2024; Wang & Liu, 2022), but has been studied almost entirely in controlled advertising-stimulus paradigms rather than naturally occurring, high-noise digital contexts. This study proposes Absurd Credibility: deliberate communicative strangeness functioning as a costly credibility signal in saturated digital environments. Such strategies also depend on source credibility expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Hovland et al., 1953; Ohanian, 1990) with authenticity as a key antecedent online (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Schouten et al., 2021). Classical source-credibility theory treats persona as static, however, and cannot explain why an identical unconventional message succeeds for one leader but not another. This study therefore proposes the Persona-Congruence Mechanism: radical honesty and absurdist communication read as credible when aligned with a leader's established persona, and generate skepticism otherwise.

These dynamics are especially relevant in Indonesia, where high mobile penetration makes social media central to brand discovery and trust formation (Jusuf, 2023; Kemp, 2024), shaped by perceived competence, benevolence, and integrity (Hajli et al., 2017; McKnight & Chervany, 2001) and amplified through eWOM (Arora, 2025; Khamitov et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Moulard et al., 2015; Zniva et al., 2023). Almost none of the reviewed studies were conducted in Indonesia or Southeast Asia a contextual gap, since it remains unclear whether Western-theorized trust mechanisms hold in mobile-first, platform-vernacular markets. Taken together, this review identifies five converging gaps: (1) empirical outward-directed radical honesty as a trust mechanism is untested at scale; (2) contextual the leadership-brand-trust literature is largely untested in Indonesia; (3) methodological incongruity and authenticity effects rely on controlled experiments rather than naturally occurring discourse; (4) theoretical authentic, servant, charismatic, and transformational leadership are treated as loosely related rather than distinct, sometimes contradictory, mechanisms, and genuine versus performed authenticity is assumed rather than tested; and (5) practical brand leaders lack guidance on when unconventional strategies build trust versus trigger skepticism.

Aldis Burger an Indonesian food brand tied to entertainer Aldi Taher is analytically well-suited to closing these gaps, combining outward-directed honesty, absurdist humor, and a recognizable persona within one naturally occurring, high-virality communication stream. Its Instagram content mixes absurdist humor, repetition, and explicit endorsement of competitors, generating substantial engagement. This study conceptualizes this pattern as Absurdist Radical Honesty and, rather than treating entrepreneurial, authentic, servant, charismatic, and transformational leadership as an undifferentiated set of "positive" traits, maps specific consumer-response categories onto specific leadership constructs to test which mechanism operates where. Within Indonesia's MSME ecosystem, where virality increasingly drives brand growth (Dyatmika et al., 2023), the problem is narrowed accordingly: how do Aldis Burger's three observable strategy dimensions outward-directed honesty, absurdist humor, and persona-anchored delivery relate to consumer trust formation, and under what condition (persona congruence) does that relationship hold or break down? The study thus asks: (1) how does Aldis Burger's strategy, disaggregated into honesty, humor, and persona dimensions, reflect distinct rather than undifferentiated brand leadership behaviors? (2) how do Indonesian audiences respond to each dimension? and (3) through what mechanism and under what boundary condition does persona congruence moderate the relationship between unconventional communication and trust? The study employs a contextual netnographic approach using brand leadership as its primary analytical lens.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative interpretive approach using contextual netnography to examine naturally occurring online interactions, including comments, reply dynamics, and shared interpretations on social media (Kozinets, 2019; Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). Brand leadership theory (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gupta et al., 2004; Waldman & Balven, 2014) provided the analytical lens for interpreting consumer responses. Because all researchers were familiar with Aldi Taher's public persona, potential confirmation bias was mitigated through an audit trail and collaborative discussion of ambiguous coding decisions (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

The primary data consisted of posts and comments from five high-engagement Instagram posts on the official Aldis Burger account during Q1–Q2 2026, representing the brand's peak viral period. The selected posts covered diverse content formats, including product promotion, humor, competitor endorsement, storytelling, and interactive content. Secondary data were obtained from Indonesian media reports and industry analyses.

Purposive sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) was used to select 200 comments (40 per post) based on engagement level, viral recency, and richness of discussion. The sample size was

guided by the information-power principle (Malterud et al., 2016), which emphasizes analytical relevance over numerical saturation, making the selected dataset sufficient for in-depth thematic interpretation (Clarke & Braun, 2021).

Data were analyzed using Braun & Clarke (2006); Clarke & Braun (2021) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. Two researchers independently generated initial codes before collaboratively developing and refining themes. The resulting themes were then deductively mapped onto brand leadership constructs to provide theoretical interpretation. Trustworthiness was enhanced through source and theoretical triangulation, thick description, audit-trail documentation, and consensus-based intercoder discussions rather than statistical reliability measures, consistent with reflexive thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2021; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Saldaña & Omasta, 2016).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Overview: Marketing Strategy as Brand Leadership Expression

Aldis Burger's social media presence constitutes a coherent brand leadership communication system in which brand identity, market positioning, and leader persona are inseparably integrated. The three defining strategic features absurdist humor, radical honesty, and anti-competitive positioning each correspond to established leadership constructs, suggesting that the brand's marketing effectiveness cannot be understood independently of its leadership character. Aldi Taher functions as a brand leader in Waldman & Balven. (2014) fullest sense: the primary carrier of brand values, architect of communicative style, and living embodiment of brand identity.

Contextual observation reveals an important emergent dynamic: a distinct interpretive community formed among the brand's followers, evidenced by recurring references to previous posts, shared shorthand, and in-jokes that accumulated organically over the viral period. This community formation rarely captured in standard comment analysis indicates that audiences were not merely passive recipients of brand communication but active co-constructors of brand meaning, consistent with brand community theory (Muniz Jr & O'guinn, 2001). This finding suggests that Aldis Burger's strategy generated not merely transactions but community a qualitatively different and more durable marketing outcome.

Coding Results: Netizen Responses with Leadership Dimensions

Table 1 presents ten representative comment units drawn from the 200-unit dataset, coded by theme and mapped onto corresponding leadership dimensions. Comments are presented with contextual notation (post number, comment type) to support thick description and audit trail transparency. The selection illustrates the range of response types across the five dominant thematic categories identified in Section Thematic Analysis: Frequency Distribution and Leadership Mapping.

Table 1. Representative Coded Netizen Comments with Leadership Dimension Mapping

No	Comment (Source)	Code	Category	Leadership Dimension
1	"Jujur banget ini brand" (Top comment, Post 1)	Trust	Consumer Trust	Authentic Leadership
2	"Disuruh beli ke tempat lain" (Reply thread, Post 2)	Honesty	Radical Honesty	Servant Leadership
3	"Ini Aldi banget sih" (Top comment, Post 1)	Persona	Persona Congruence	Charismatic Leadership
4	"Ngakak parah marketingnya" (Viral comment, Post 3)	Humor	Entertainment Value	Transformational Leadership
5	"Gimmick doang ini mah" (Skeptical thread, Post 2)	Skepticism	Authenticity Doubt	Credibility Gap

6	"Jadi pengen nyobain" (Purchase intent, Post 4)	Interest	Purchase Intention	Visionary Leadership
7	"Unik banget beda dari yang lain" (Recent comment, Post 5)	Uniqueness	Differentiation	Entrepreneurial Leadership
8	"Absurd tapi menarik" (Mid-thread, Post 3)	Absurdity	Absurd Credibility	Disruptive Leadership
9	"Kok jujur banget ya" (Top comment, Post 4)	Trust	Consumer Trust	Authentic Leadership
10	"Marketing kayak gini baru fresh" (Top comment, Post 5)	Innovation	Norm Violation	Innovative Leadership

Source: Primary data, 2026. Comments translated from Indonesian.

Thematic Analysis: Frequency Distribution and Leadership Mapping

Table 2 presents the five principal thematic categories derived from the 200-unit dataset, with frequency counts, consumer meaning interpretations, and corresponding leadership dimension mappings.

Table 2. Thematic Categories, Frequency Distribution, and Leadership Dimensions

Thematic Category	n (%)	Consumer Meaning	Leadership Dimension
Trust / Kepercayaan	60 (30%)	Brand perceived as genuinely honest and consumer-oriented	Authentic & Servant Leadership
Humor / Entertainment	48 (24%)	Content generates positive affect through norm-violating entertainment	Charismatic & Transformational Leadership
Persona of Aldi Taher	40 (20%)	Founder identity frames and legitimizes unconventional strategy	Charismatic & Visionary Leadership
Uniqueness / Differentiation	28 (14%)	Strategy perceived as distinctively different from industry convention	Entrepreneurial & Disruptive Leadership
Skepticism	24 (12%)	Transparency strategy suspected to be calculated rather than genuine	Authenticity & Credibility Gap

Source: Primary data, 2026. n = 200 total comment units across five postings.

The distribution reveals two key patterns. First, Trust (30%), Humor (24%), Persona (20%), and Uniqueness (14%) together account for 88% of coded responses, indicating that consumers predominantly interpreted the campaign positively. The prominence of Trust as the largest category suggests that Aldi Taher's unconventional communication was perceived primarily as authentic and consumer-oriented, reinforcing the Authentic and Servant Leadership dimension rather than merely generating entertainment. This finding contrasts with the common assumption that absurdist marketing is driven mainly by novelty and humor (Eisend, 2018). Second, Skepticism (12%) represents a meaningful minority response, reflecting an authenticity and credibility gap in which some consumers viewed the transparency strategy as calculated rather than genuine. Rather than weakening the findings, this category defines the boundary conditions under which authenticity-based branding may be questioned

Discussion

Rather than reiterating thematic frequencies, this discussion explains the mechanisms underlying the observed patterns, situates them within existing theory, and identifies their theoretical boundaries.

The predominance of Trust suggests that radical honesty operates as a costly signal, where recommending a competitor violates expected commercial self-interest and enhances perceived credibility (Khamitov et al., 2024). This finding extends authentic leadership theory, which argues that transparency fosters trust (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), by indicating that trust depends not

merely on transparency but on the perceived cost of disclosure. However, this mechanism is inherently fragile. When audiences perceive transparency as strategically motivated, credibility may decline, creating the Trust Paradox, as reflected in the Skepticism category. This suggests that authenticity is better understood as an audience inference than as a stable organizational attribute.

Humor contributed not only to attention but also to trust formation. While incongruity theory explains why unexpected messages attract attention (Eisend, 2009; Festinger, 1957), the findings indicate that absurd humor became persuasive because it aligned with Aldi Taher's established public persona. The frequent co-occurrence of Humor, Persona, and Trust suggests that recognizable identity helps consumers resolve incongruity into positive brand evaluations. Accordingly, the proposed Persona-Congruence Mechanism extends source credibility theory by emphasizing the strategic fit between founder identity and brand communication (Hovland et al., 1953; Ohanian, 1990). Nevertheless, the present design cannot determine causality because persona and communication strategy consistently co-occurred throughout the dataset.

The Uniqueness theme reflects a mechanism distinct from trust. Whereas Trust represents evaluations of honesty, Uniqueness reflects differentiation from prevailing industry practices. This finding is consistent with entrepreneurial leadership, which emphasizes innovation and convention-breaking as sources of competitive advantage (Gupta et al., 2004; Ireland et al., 2003). However, the differentiation advantage is likely to diminish as competitors imitate similar transparency strategies.

The Skepticism category represents an important theoretical boundary rather than a residual response. Consumers who interpreted transparency as a marketing tactic rather than genuine honesty illustrate the limitations of radical honesty(Campo et al., 2021). This interpretation is consistent with persuasion knowledge theory, which suggests that consumers actively evaluate marketers' persuasive intentions (Obermiller et al., 2005). Consequently, transparency may simultaneously strengthen and weaken trust depending on how audiences interpret strategic intent.

This study contributes by proposing four conceptual propositions: Performative Honesty, Absurd Credibility, Anti-Competitive Trust Signaling, and the Persona-Congruence Mechanism. These concepts extend the literature on authentic leadership, digital marketing authenticity, and radical honesty by offering theoretically grounded explanations for trust formation in entrepreneurial branding (De Hooge, 2025; Di Domenico et al., 2022). However, because they are derived from a single-case netnographic study, they should be regarded as theoretical propositions rather than validated constructs. Future comparative and quantitative studies are needed to establish their construct validity, discriminant validity, and generalizability across industries and cultural contexts.

Table 3. Integrated Leadership-Marketing Framework for Entrepreneurial Brand Communication

Leadership Style	Manifestation in Aldis Burger	Consumer Outcome	Theoretical Basis
Authentic Leadership	Radical honesty; open acknowledgment of competitor quality	High trust and credibility perception	Avolio & Gardner (2005); Moulard et al. (2015)
Servant Leadership	Prioritizing consumer welfare over short-term sales conversion	Consumer loyalty; brand goodwill	Greenleaf (1970; Khamitov et al. (2024); Van Dierendonck (2011)
Charismatic Leadership	Absurdist persona of Aldi Taher; parasocial identity anchoring	Strong brand identification; community formation	Conger & Kanungo (1998); Schouten et al. (2021)
Transformational Leadership	Systematic redefinition of promotional communication norms	Elevated consumer engagement expectations	Bass & Riggio (2006); Nesterenko et al. (2023)
Entrepreneurial	Risk-taking through anti-	Market	Gupta et al. (2004); Ireland et al.

Leadership	competitive positioning	differentiation and salience	(2003)
Disruptive Leadership	Absurdist content as strategic pattern-interruption	Enhanced attention and viral diffusion	Eisend, (2018); Tienari & Savage (2024)

Source: Authors' synthesis of primary data and theoretical literature, 2026.

Table 3 synthesizes the study's findings into an integrated leadership–marketing framework, demonstrating that Aldis Burger's communication strategy cannot be explained by a single leadership perspective. Instead, consumer responses reflect complementary leadership behaviors operating simultaneously. Authentic and Servant Leadership explain how radical honesty fostered trust and goodwill, while Charismatic Leadership highlights the role of Aldi Taher's persona in strengthening consumer identification. Transformational, Entrepreneurial, and Disruptive Leadership further explain how unconventional communication challenged industry norms, created market differentiation, and stimulated consumer engagement through viral diffusion. Collectively, these findings suggest that entrepreneurial brand communication functions as a multidimensional leadership process in which marketing activities simultaneously shape consumer trust, brand identity, and competitive positioning.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Aldis Burger's marketing constitutes a distinctive case at the intersection of unconventional brand communication and entrepreneurial leadership. The convergence of radical honesty, absurdist humor, and anti-competitive positioning, anchored in Aldi Taher's persona, generated substantial organic engagement and strong consumer trust across a 200-unit sample of naturally occurring discourse. These conclusions derive from a single, culturally specific case and should be read as an account of mechanisms that plausibly operated here, not as generalizable laws of brand leadership communication.

Four patterns emerge. First, radical honesty aligns with authentic and servant leadership, generating trust through a costly-signaling mechanism that violates conventional marketing's self-interest assumption though this mechanism is unstable once its constructedness is suspected. Second, absurdist humor operates through a resolved-incongruity mechanism anchored to persona, consistent with charismatic/transformational leadership, capturing attention and reshaping expectations of brand communication. Third, entrepreneurial risk-taking publicly endorsing competitors and violating promotional norms generates differentiation value through category rarity, value likely to erode with imitation. Fourth, persona congruence functions as a plausible moderating condition, though this design cannot establish its causal direction independent of the trust the brand had already accumulated.

Beyond these patterns, the study proposes three constructs Performative Honesty, Absurd Credibility, and Anti-Competitive Trust Signaling and a Persona-Congruence Mechanism, offered as falsifiable propositions grounded in a single qualitative case intended to motivate future quantitative validation, not as established theoretical contributions.

For entrepreneur-leaders in competitive digital markets, authentic, servant-oriented, and entrepreneurially courageous communication may generate trust advantages unavailable to purely conventional strategies, though this single-case design cannot quantify that advantage's size. The 12% skepticism response, however, cautions that radical honesty carries authenticity risk when perceived as calculated: sustained behavioral consistency, strong persona alignment, and cultural sensitivity appear necessary for effective implementation. Practically, the Persona-Congruence Mechanism implies as a proposition, not a confirmed finding that strategies effective for Aldi Taher may work because they fit his established identity; marketers replicating the strategy without an aligned leader persona risk confusion or skepticism rather than trust.

Key limitations: (1) netnographic data cannot establish causality between strategy and behavioral outcomes such as purchase or loyalty; (2) algorithmic curation likely over-represents highly engaged, emotionally invested commenters while excluding lurkers and non-commenters; (3) single-platform (Instagram) data limits generalizability across platforms with different dynamics; (4) the distinctly Indonesian context and Aldi Taher's unique persona limit cross-cultural generalizability; (5) the Persona-Congruence Mechanism's causal direction cannot be isolated here, since persona and strategy co-occurred throughout observation.

Future research should pursue: (1) mixed-methods designs combining netnography with experiments for causal inference; (2) longitudinal tracking of trust durability; (3) cross-platform comparisons to test algorithm-dependency; (4) cross-cultural studies to identify boundary conditions for persona congruence; and (5) quantitative operationalization and testing of the three proposed constructs. A comparative design contrasting congruent versus mismatched persona-strategy cases would be especially valuable for establishing the Persona-Congruence Mechanism's causal direction.

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