

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Trust in franchising governance: Some insight

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**ABSTRACT** - Franchising, a business model widely employed globally, has attracted considerable attention from researchers due to its distinct structure and operational benefits. Interest in franchise systems had been driven by their rapid expansion in many industries, such as fast food, retail, and services. In these areas, firms aimed to leverage the reputation and operational expertise of established enterprises to achieve growth. This article examined the two dominant theoretical frameworks in franchise research: Agency Theory and Transaction Cost Theory and included a review of prior studies on trust in franchising governance. Agency Theory analyses the dynamics between franchisors and franchisees, specifically focusing on control and incentive alignment. In contrast, Transaction Cost Theory evaluated the cost-effectiveness of franchising as a business model compared to alternative forms of business partnerships. Furthermore, this article consolidated prior empirical research on three pivotal aspects that contributed to the governance of franchising: transparency, consistency of support, and fairness. Transparency involved the use of open and transparent communication between franchisors and franchisees. Consistency of support refers to the continuous assistance and resources provided by the franchisor. Fairness pertained to equitable treatment and practices within the franchise partnership. The synthesis of these factors introduced a new and innovative concept that built upon a well-established theory of franchising. The objective was to deepen the understanding of governance mechanisms and enhance the overall efficiency and long-term viability of franchise systems in today's business environment.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The popularity of franchising has increased as a profitable business strategy worldwide. A parent company, the franchisor, grants an individual, the franchisee, permission to operate in a particular manner through the licensing practice of franchising (Choo et al., 2007; Vaishnav & Altinay, 2009). According to Alon et al. (2021), the business concept known as franchising allows a franchisor to give a franchisee access to business expertise, intellectual property, and the ability to operate under a brand in exchange for payment (often in the form of fees and royalties). Over the last few years, franchising has become a very popular form of organisation (Grewal et al., 2011). It has also contributed to the fast expansion of retail globally (Aziz et al., 2022; Combs et al., 2004).

Nevertheless, since the 1990s, the industry's structure has evolved, with many SMEs now utilising both domestic and international franchising. International franchising was employed as an arm's length entry strategy with a high degree of externalisation of both financial risk and operational control (Alon et al., 2012; Grewal et al., 2011). Franchising is still in its early stages of development in Malaysia. Few franchise firms, including Singer, Bata, gas stations, and authorised auto dealers, were operating in Malaysia at the time the franchise industry was introduced. Nonetheless, Malaysia has continuously adopted pro-franchise laws and invites franchisors from around the globe to do business there. Malaysia has consistently been established as the centre of ASEAN franchising (Ishak, 2010; Hanafiah et al., 2023)

In addition, franchising is a commercial arrangement in which a firm, known as the franchisor, grants permission to individuals or other businesses, called franchisees, to operate using its brand, products, and business procedures (Abd Aziz et al., 2019; Abd Aziz et al., 2020). This approach promotes economic growth by substantially contributing to a country's Gross Domestic Product, generating numerous job opportunities, and attracting foreign investment (Abd Latif et al., 2021). Franchising enables rapid business expansion and market entry, resulting in increased economic activity and tax revenue. It creates work opportunities across various skill levels, thereby reducing unemployment rates.

Besides, the franchise agreement is usually predicated on a contract. Owners are franchisors, while users are franchisees. By fostering entrepreneurship, improving living conditions, and generating job opportunities, franchising plays a significant part in promoting economic development (Shumba et al., 2017). According to Ishak (2010), franchising in Malaysia is still in its infancy, having experienced significant growth since 1992 when the government began promoting the industry. One way to conceptualise franchising as a type of relational trade is to say that it is typified by complicated,

ongoing connections in which the implicit need to maintain the relationship going on overshadows the importance of any one transaction (Alon et al., 2021; Strutton et al., 1995).

Furthermore, the franchise provides the franchisee access to tested business ideas, well-known brands, and the goodwill that accompanies them. It also provides pre- and post-opening training and assistance, which are sources of intellectual capital from the franchisor (Watson & Stanworth, 2006). There are several potential areas for conflict in a relationship, even though both franchisees and franchisors enter the relationship "... believing their goals are related positively" (Gassenheimer et al., 1996). As a result, managing both complex and critical challenges effectively is crucial for franchisors.

Moreover, Ishak (2010) mentions fast food chains like A&W (opened in 1963), McDonald's (opened in 1981), and Kentucky Fried Chicken (opened in 1970), which expand their operations quickly in Malaysia, and franchising grows at a faster rate. Additionally, in the early 1980s, homegrown franchise development began, focusing on the automotive (EON), food and beverage (Sate Ria, Marrybrown), petroleum station (Petronas), and craft industries (Royal Selangor). The government designates Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA) to oversee the associated operations and tasks, aiming to assist the development of homegrown franchisees. According to Kaufmann and Dant (1992), four primary criteria affect the quality of the relationship between the franchisor and the franchisee: (i) mutuality in the relationship, (ii) appropriate use of power, (iii) flexibility in the relationship, and (iv) long-term emphasis on the relationship. In this article, researchers provide an overview of trust in franchising.

Over time, trust connections help shield competitive advantage from the damaging impacts of opportunism (Jap, 2001; Monroy et al., 2018). Consequently, developing trust through partnership management may provide an advantage over competitors (Barney & Hansen, 1994; Fernández-Monroy et al., 2018). Therefore, trust is a valuable organisational resource that can provide a competitive advantage. Trust is even more critical when highly reliable individuals or businesses interact with one another, when trust is comparatively uncommon within a group of rivals, and when the organisational and individual characteristics that contribute to highly reliable behaviour are resistant to low-cost replication (Barney & Hansen, 1994; Fernández-Monroy et al., 2018). Fairness in the context of franchises refers to the franchisee's assessment of the fairness of the franchisor's policies and processes that affect how results are distributed in the franchisor-franchisee relationship (Shaikh, 2016; Shaikh et al., 2018).

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Definition of Franchising

Spencer (2013) highlights franchising as a business model that involves a franchisor and a franchisee working together under the same brand name. Abdul Ghani et al. (2022) state that in exchange for money, the franchisor provides the franchisee the right to utilise the brand and business model in conjunction with any associated goods and services, trademarks, and other intellectual property. In comparison, Vdovichen and Voroniatnikov (2019) mention that a franchising relationship happens when a self-employed person, known as the franchisee, receives permission from the owner of the company providing the goods or services, known as the franchisor, to sell and distribute the goods under franchising and to use the company name for a set period of time. A franchise is defined as "a contract or agreement, either directly or indirectly, in verbal or written form between two or more persons," as per the Franchise Act 1998 (Amendment 2012). This includes franchisors granting franchisees the authority to operate a business in accordance with a franchisee system that is determined by a franchisor for a time period that the franchisor specifies (Franchise Act, 1998)..

### 2.2 Review of Theories in Franchising

This paper outlines an overview of the two most relevant theories in franchising study, namely are Agency Theory and Transaction Cost Theory.

#### 2.2.1 Agency Theory

The agency theory is described by Eisenhardt (1989) as an agency or agent employed by one or more parties known as principals under a contract that compensates the principal to accomplish the goals the principal desires. Furthermore, Eisenhardt (1989) examines the agency theory that has been employed by academics in various disciplines, including entrepreneurship, organisational behaviour, economics, finance, and the social sciences. The agency idea has been around for around fifty years, having been proposed by Jensen and Meckling in 1976.

Additionally, Jensen et al. (1976) define an agency relationship as "a contract in which the principal commits the agent to develop an activity in favour of this, delegating decision-making and authority to the agent". The authors further demonstrate that the total costs of bonding, residual loss, agent monitoring, contract design, and formalisation equal the agency costs. In their analysis, they also include topics such as the optimal outlet size, the agent's hiring cost, and the cost of tracking or monitoring agent involvement.

However, Gwala and Mashau (2023) highlight that the agency theory has a significant impact on numerous disciplines, including politics, psychology, accounting, management, and law. Solving the two problems that might occur in agency relationships is the aim of agency theory. The first is the apparent problem with agencies. It is necessary to check with the principal what the agent is truly doing when: (a) the principal's goals or aspirations contradict those of the

agent, and (b) it is difficult or expensive. The problem here is that the principal cannot accurately verify the agent's actions. The second is the question of risk. Information is shared when the views of the principal and agents differ on risk (Eisenhardt, 1989).

### 2.2.2 Resource Scarcity Theory

Coase (1937) presents transaction cost theory in his Nobel Prize-winning book "The Nature of the Firm." He states that franchising is the process of trading in the free market that transitions into intra-firm trade. Consequently, the company has lowered its transaction costs to the barest minimum. The sharing of information across participants in the supply chain improves the efficiency and quality of supply franchises. Klein (1980) asserts that transaction cost theory clarifies how investments and environmental uncertainty are the primary determinants of the governance mechanism.

According to an empirical study by Hussain (2012), single-unit franchisees are more suitable for a franchisor in high-uncertainty environments because they are more motivated and possess entrepreneurial skills to take advantage of local market opportunities than mini-chains. Mumdziev & Windsperger (2013) discovered in another empirical investigation that the distribution of decisional rights in franchising is explained by the presence of trust in the transaction cost model, which moderates the franchisor's tendency to transfer decision-making authority to franchisees. Furthermore, when the local market climate is highly unclear, franchisors have more control over the local outlets, which negatively affects the rights granted to franchisees.

Besides, Coase (1937) emphasises that opportunity cost, contract cost, and monitoring cost are the three primary components of transaction cost. For the opportunity cost, businesses need to determine the consumer's prospective demand and help them respond quickly. Additionally, franchise firms need to review business contracts and agreements before developing any new projects because these activities incur costs in terms of money, labour, and time (Coase, 1937). In addition, David and Han (2004) clarify that cost monitoring is necessary for the enterprise's post-purchase inspection, which incurs expenses in order to carry out the contract's execution.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

An exploratory and conceptual approach was used in the study. A survey of previous franchising literature, agency theory, and transaction cost theory served as the foundation for the conceptual dimension. Using semi-structured interviews, exploratory qualitative data were obtained from four franchisees (P1–P4) to support this theoretical framework. These testimonies offered illustrative rather than generalisable insights into the problems of fairness, consistency, and transparency in franchisor-franchisee relationships.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Profile of franchisees

Participant	Year of Establishment	Category of Business
P1	2010	Food and Beverages
P2	2011	IT Company
P3	2019	Education
P4	2012	Education

### 4.1 Transparency

Emerson (2021) stated that a considerable issue many potential franchisees faced both during and after the franchise creation process was a lack of transparency in the franchisor-franchisee relationship-building process. This lack of transparency contributed significantly to their discontent and disappointment. To develop trust, a franchisor and a franchisee must communicate openly and honestly about expectations, policies, and financial problems. In order to minimise the possibility of miscommunication and conflict, clear communication ensured all stakeholders were in agreement with operational standards and corporate objectives.

*P1: "The franchisor provided some basic information at first, but I thought that some crucial details, particularly those pertaining to recurring expenses and the utilisation of the fees, were not adequately covered. Some unexpected charges that weren't disclosed up front later caught me off guard. My level of trust in them was impacted."*

Besides, one important factor that vastly affected the relationship between franchisors and franchisees in franchising was transparency. According to a recent study by Namsrai (2023), open and honest communication helped avoid misunderstandings and conflicts, highlighting the need for good faith and transparency in franchise agreements. The implementation of transparent procedures in contractual responsibilities and operational rules could foster a cooperative corporate atmosphere and develop trust, further increasing the overall success of the franchise system (Namsrai, 2023).

*P2: "It's very important. If the franchisor is open and honest, it builds trust. But if they hide things or only share part of the story, it leads to frustration and conflict. In my case, it took time to rebuild that trust."*

In addition, transparency played a vital role in the franchise system, extending beyond written contracts, encompassing ethical behaviour and financial disclosures. Muthukrishnan and Lourens (2022) stated that transparency between franchisors and franchisees was crucial to preserving the efficacy of franchise programs. According to the survey, franchisee satisfaction and loyalty were raised when franchisors provided accurate financial reports and transparent information about how their businesses were operated. Reducing conflicts and enhancing the reputation of franchise brands required this kind of moral conduct and transparency (Muthukrishnan & Lourens, 2022).

*P4: "It would have been beneficial to have more thorough financial reporting. I was curious about how the franchisor was supporting the network with my monthly royalties and where they were going. Also, it wasn't initially apparent how marketing money was used or what kind of help I could anticipate."*

Other than that, building trust in the franchise network also required financial transparency. It ensured that franchisees were well-informed about the financial health of the franchise system and how their contributions were being used through regular and thorough financial reports. In order to preserve confidence and guarantee the long-term viability of the franchise network, financial transparency in franchise governance was crucial. Franchisors could establish a solid foundation of trust with their franchisees and show their dedication to moral business practices by offering transparent and comprehensive financial reports.

*P3: "I think franchisors should offer regular financial updates, like monthly or quarterly reports, and they should clearly explain all contract terms from the start. It would also help if they gave real examples of other franchisees' experiences, both good and bad, to set realistic expectations."*

Propositions to better understand the dynamics of the franchisor-franchisee relationship had been produced based on the findings from this theme.

- Proposition 1: Franchisees who receive good transparency from the franchisor are more likely to survive than those who do not receive such transparency."

#### **4.2 Consistent Support**

Consistent training, operational support, and marketing assistance were critical for fostering a supportive and trustworthy relationship between franchisor and franchisees. Initial and ongoing training ensured that franchisees were well-equipped to run their businesses efficiently and follow brand standards. According to Seid and Mazero (2017), the efficiency and confidence of franchisees could be increased with a comprehensive training program. Franchisors could demonstrate their commitment to success by investing in comprehensive training, and in turn, a sense of trust and loyalty within the franchise network could be fostered.

*P4: "The franchisor offered highly structured training right from the start. Everything from handling customer service to product understanding was discussed. That gave me a lot of confidence to manage the outlet. Every few months, they also provide refresher training to keep us informed of any changes."*

Another important factor that made franchisees feel valued and secure in their business was operational support. This support might involve access to a dedicated support team, assistance with day-to-day operational difficulties, and best practices across networks. Consistency across all franchise locations could be maintained and obtaining a reliable source of help was among the forms of assistance that could be provided through operational support. When franchisees believed they would receive continued support from the franchisor, it boosted trust and allowed them to focus on delivering exceptional service and driving business growth.

*P2: "Whenever we encounter daily issues, we can contact their committed support staff by phone or SMS. For instance, they promptly assisted us in resolving a problem we encountered with the POS system. I can rest easy knowing that assistance is available when I need it."*

Furthermore, marketing help was also essential for strengthening the franchisor-franchisee relationship. Franchisees frequently relied on the franchisor's knowledge and resources to create and implement effective marketing plans for client acquisition and retention. Seid and Mazero (2017) stated that franchisors showed their dedication to the success of their franchisees and the expansion of their brands by launching deliberate and consistent marketing campaigns. By working together, the franchisor could ensure that franchisees feel appreciated and supported, knowing that the company was committed to their success and their ability to compete in the market. Through the provision of essential tools for efficient local promotion and the exchange of marketing insights, franchisors enabled their franchisees to attain superior business outcomes, ultimately fortifying trust and loyalty within the franchise network.

*P1: "Another area in which they provide us with good support is marketing. They oversee national advertising and provide us with advice on local promotions. We can save time and maintain brand consistency by using their templates, designs, and even internet marketing materials."*

Propositions to better understand the dynamics of the franchisor-franchisee relationship had been produced based on the findings from this theme.

Proposition 2: Franchisees who receive consistent support from the franchisor are more likely to survive compared to those who do not receive such support.

### 4.3 Fairness

Establishing confidence across the franchise network required treating every franchisee equally, irrespective of their size or location. Ensuring that each franchisee received equitable treatment promoted cohesion and fidelity. In their paper, Seid and Mazero (2017) discussed the significance of equality in the application of franchise laws and regulations. When franchisors maintained the same standards across the board, franchisees were more likely to perceive their system as just. In addition to preserving the integrity of the brand, this consistency gave franchisees peace of mind that they were competing fairly, which was crucial for building collaboration and trust.

*P3: "Yes, I believe they make an effort to be fair overall. The guidelines and standards are the same for all outlets, regardless of size. Mine is little, but so are those in urban areas. That gives the impression that everything is in balance and that your location does not put you at a disadvantage."*

*P2: "I find that trust is increased when I observe that everyone is treated fairly and that no one is given preferential treatment. Because I know that everyone is operating on an even playing field, it also increases my sense of brand loyalty. It gives the franchise a sense of unity."*

Moreover, franchisee trust was further strengthened by the equitable distribution of resources, including marketing dollars, training opportunities, and operational support. A franchisor's dedication to each franchisee's success was evident when they distributed resources according to potential and need rather than size or geography (Nathan, 2015). With this strategy, more established franchisees continued to gain from continuous support, while smaller or newer franchisees received the necessary support to develop and prosper. Prioritising the fair allocation of resources allowed franchisors to create a cooperative and encouraging environment within their franchise where every member felt respected and in control.

*P4: "That is one thing I truly value. They pay attention to more than just the larger branches. All of us have equal access to training programs, and they even provide additional assistance to newer outlets, like mine, to aid in our development."*

Propositions to better understand the dynamics of the franchisor-franchisee relationship had been produced based on the findings from this theme.

Proposition 3: Franchisees who receive fairness from the franchisor are more likely to survive compared to those who do not receive such fairness.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, various circumstances can result in franchising governance. The connection between franchisors and franchisees is substantially influenced by trust in the governance of franchising. Building a solid and fruitful connection between franchisors and franchisees requires trust in franchising. Building and sustaining this trust is largely dependent on efficient governance procedures that prioritize justice, openness, and constant support. Empirical evidence can verify the validity of this claim and determine whether the policy needs to be adjusted in response to the evidence. Furthermore, Malaysia can foster the development and expansion of its franchise players by implementing sound and comprehensive policies, governance, and franchise programs. Additionally, correct operation and compliance with the Franchise Act will enhance the market's survival rate for franchise businesses by fostering innovation, economic growth, and a positive perception of the sector. Additionally, achieving the ideal mix of franchisee- and franchisor-managed branches will raise the long-term survival factor.

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Nur Nabila Huda Sabaran (Experiment, Writing draft, Editing, and Resources)

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Ahmad Taufik Nursal (Review and Supervision)

## AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author(s), as noted, certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organisation or agency with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, jobs, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, expertise or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials addressed in this manuscript.

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