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HOW SUPPORT AND COMMUNICATION ARE CRUCIAL TO FRANCHISEES' PERFORMANCE: A COFFEE SHOP FRANCHISE CASE IN THAILAND

Abstract:

Franchise business in Thailand has experienced growth, particularly in the hospitality sector. The value of the franchising businesses in the country is expected to rise up to 20% in 2024. Past studies have largely focused on the franchisor perspective. Yet, for a sustainable franchise business success, franchisees' perceptions towards their success should be explored. The literature has highlighted the important role of franchisor support in bringing about the success of the franchise business. Similarly, communication is argued to influence franchisees' trust in and satisfaction with the franchisor. However, a limited number of studies have yet to incorporate both trust and satisfaction to explain how support and communication affect franchisees' performance. Thus, this study seeks to understand the role of support and communication of a franchisor in encouraging franchisees' performance. The mediating role of trust towards their satisfaction with the franchisor will also be explored. By doing so, this study will also address the chicken-egg relationship of trust and satisfaction.

Keywords:

Franchisee Performance, Support, Communication, Trust, Satisfaction

JEL Classification: C00, L84

1 How Support and Communication are Crucial to Franchisees' Performance: A Coffee Shop Franchise Case in Thailand

1.1 Introduction

According to Park and Jang (2017), franchising is considered a business strategy that is crucial to the success of business in the service sector, particularly the hospitality businesses. Similar to many countries in other parts or the world, franchising business in Thailand has experienced growing interest, offering opportunities to those who wish to own a small business. Due to the rising number of tourists, the demand for hospitality businesses such as food and beverages, hotels and restaurants is on a rise. Franchising within the food and service industries is thus seen as one of the strategic ways to meet these rising demands (Topfranchise.com, 2024). Indeed, 2023, the value of the franchising businesses in Thailand (excluding those of convenience stores) exceeds 300 million Thai Baht. It is expected to grow up to 15-20% in 2024 (Arunmas, 2024).

Franchising represents a system where a franchisor sells contractual rights to the franchisees to use the franchisor's established brand, business practices and resources to deliver goods or services in return for royalties from franchisees (Combs et al., 2004; Watson et al., 2005). For franchisors, franchising allows their business to grow. For franchisees, it is a means to run a business with reduced risks, which is favorable for those who wish to run a business but have limited business-running experiences, according to the Commerce Ministry of Thailand (The Nation, 2024). Thus, support and communication from franchisor are crucial for the success of the franchise business strategy, which will enable both parties to enjoy mutual benefits.

Past studies have primarily focused on the performance of franchisors (Jang and Park, 2019) although the perception of franchisees regarding the support received, which they have paid royalties for, should be explored too. When franchisees experience success in operating the franchise, the franchisor performance becomes more sustainable in a long run. This study seeks to provide an understanding of what benefits the franchisees seek to obtain from the franchisors in exchange for their royalties. When they believe to be well supported with a clear communication, how will they perceive their performance? In particular, when receiving the support and communication, franchisees may trust in the franchisor and become more satisfied with the franchisor. Thus, trust and satisfaction may be underlying factors that can induce the effect of their perception towards the franchisor on their perceived performance. Specifically, this study seeks to understand, from the franchisee perspectives, the role of effective communication and support from the franchisor in inducing their trust in and satisfaction with the franchisor, which will then have an effect on their perceived financial and operational performance. It will also identify the significant role of franchisees' trust in and satisfaction with the franchisor as an underlying mechanism, explaining the link the efforts expected from the franchisor and the performance of the franchisees. Furthermore, it will present a sequential relationship between trust and satisfaction, which addresses the argument over the chicken and egg relationship of trust and satisfaction (Kim, 2012). The understanding from the franchisee perspective in these relationships add to the existing literature that focuses on the franchisor's performance, which together contribute to the franchise system's performance.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Communication, trust and satisfaction

Franchising involves an arrangement where a franchisor sells contractual rights to franchisees, allowing them to distribute goods or services using the franchisor's brand name and business practices (Combs et al., 2004). Thus, communication between the two parties is one of the crucial factors for business success. Communication involves the exchange of significant and timely information through both formal and informal channels between partners (Anderson and Narus, 1990). Clear, consistent, and open communication significantly contributes to the overall health of the franchisor-franchisee relationship throughout the franchise agreement (Gassenheimer et al., 1996; Watson and Johnson, 2010). When franchisors actively listen and communicate effectively, franchisees can leverage the gathered information to make informed decisions (Gillis & Combs, 2009; Watson et al., 2016). Effective communication appears to be highly beneficial in today's dynamic and rapidly evolving global landscape. A recent study by Bretas and Alon (2020) highlights that during crises like the Covid-19 pandemic, franchisors are investing in communication with franchisees to respond appropriately to the disruption.

Numerous past studies highlighted the positive influence of sufficient and effective communication on building trust in various contexts (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Bialaszewski & Giallourakis, 1985; Fernández-Monroy et al., 2018). Trust can be understood as the willingness of a party to be vulnerable by placing confidence in the actions of another party (Doney et al., 1998). In franchising, open and honest communication between the franchisors and franchisees is fundamental to establishing trust (Abdul Ghani et al., 2022; Altinay et al., 2014; Fernández-Monroy et al., 2018) due to the mutual interdependency between franchisors and franchisees. When franchisors keep franchisees informed and involved, it fosters a sense of empowerment and trust. When franchisees trust in their franchisors, it represents a positive assessment of the franchisor’s ability to meet its obligations because they believe that they will find what they want from their exchange partners (Dimyati & Subagio, 2018). In effect, trust is particularly crucial during growth phases, as both parties rely on each other for success (Altinay et al., 2014; Chiou & Droge, 2015; Wright & Grace, 2011). As a result, loyalty can be expected from a trust-based relationship (Purwanto et al., 2020).

Moreover, effective communication does not just build trust, it also reinforces a good relationship which promotes franchisee satisfaction (Kalargyrou et al., 2018; Squire, 2009). Satisfaction of franchisees in this study refers to the overall contentment of the franchisees regarding their relationship with their franchisor (Eser, 2012). Since communication helps align expectations (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), facilitates discussions on improvements (Grabowski & Roberts, 1999), and resolves conflicts in franchisor-franchisee relationships (Anderson & Narus, 1990), it may aid in fostering franchisee satisfaction. According to the study of Chiou et al. (2004), communication is found to be influential for franchisee trust and overall satisfaction with the franchise system. Additionally, several studies have shown that when franchisees feel heard and their expectations are met through clear communication, their satisfaction with the franchise system rises (Johlke et al., 2000; Mohr & Spekman, 1994; Mohr et al., 1996). Thereby, higher levels of communication behavior have a stronger positive effect on satisfaction.

In conclusion, effective communication within franchising relationships plays a pivotal role in fostering trust and satisfaction among franchisees. Based on this, the researchers propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Communication positively influences franchisee (a) trust and (b) satisfaction.

Furthermore, the findings of Fernández-Monroy et al. (2018) suggest that communication may have indirect effects on satisfaction with the franchise system through trust. Anderson and Narus (1990) proposed that effective communication between firms in a working partnership is crucial for building trust. According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), trust is the belief that another party can be relied upon to fulfill their role responsibilities with confidence and integrity. In franchise relationships, trust creates a positive relational environment where franchisees feel secure and valued, leading to increased satisfaction among them. Studies have consistently shown that good communication translates into long-term success for franchises, leading to higher satisfaction and improved performance (Chiou et al., 2004; Mellewigt et al., 2011; Mohr et al., 1996). Additionally, several studies have highlighted the positive influence of communication on trust including the impact of trust on satisfaction (Chiou et al., 2004; Fernández-Monroy et al., 2018), implying a mediation effect of trust. Thus, effective communication strengthens the relationship between franchisors and franchisees through trust, fostering overall franchisee satisfaction with the franchise system.

Based on this discussion, the researchers propose the mediation effect of trust on the relationship between communication and franchisee satisfaction as follows:

H2: Franchisee trust mediates the relationship between communication and franchisee satisfaction.

1.2.2 Franchisor support

Franchisor support and franchise brand performance are crucial for the success of the franchise business system (Nyadzayo et al., 2015). Franchisees, particularly during the inception stage, require substantial support to thrive. The concept of franchisor support encompasses various assistance measures provided to a franchisee, such as training, marketing, pre-opening support, operational support, and financial assistance (Bang et al., 2023; Melo et al., 2022; Roh & Yoon, 2009). Franchisors typically offer strategies for site selection, branch replication, joint advertising to enhance business competitiveness, and bulk purchasing to boost consumer confidence (Khan, 1999). Additionally, franchisees often expect to receive managerial support while maintaining some level of managerial autonomy (Raha & Hajdini, 2023). The relationship is symbiotic: the franchisor relies on the franchisee to meet expected standards and follow guidelines, while the franchisee depends on the franchisor for support (Croonen & Brand, 2013). Gaski (1984) noted that support from the franchise headquarters can help resolve conflicts between the two parties.

Several studies have highlighted the importance of stakeholder demands and supportive mechanisms in promoting a more productive and trustful environment (Dada et al., 2012; Frazer et al., 2007; Pizanti & Lerner, 2003). Franchisor support is considered a critical determinant of franchisee trust, as it demonstrates the franchisor’s commitment to the success of the franchisee.

Croonen and Brand (2013) emphasize that franchisees tend to evaluate the trustworthiness of their franchise system based on the franchisor's ability to provide a variety of operational support services. The active engagement in providing support between franchise headquarters and franchises is crucial for trust building between the parties (Chiou et al., 2004; Lewis & Lambert, 1991). When franchisees receive adequate support, they are more likely to trust the franchisor, perceiving the support as a sign of the franchisor's reliability and competence.

Franchisor support also influences franchisee satisfaction. Hing (1995) identified that helpful advisors, comprehensive disclosure documentation, and ongoing support from the franchisor significantly contribute to franchisee satisfaction. Franchisees who perceive this support as beneficial are more likely to be satisfied with their decision to join the franchise and with their overall experience. Kidwell et al. (2007) contended that adequate support from franchisors can reduce opportunistic behavior, thereby enhancing franchisee satisfaction and the quality of the relationship. Anderson and Narus (1990) also highlighted that supportive activities by the franchisor are major factors in improving franchisee satisfaction and performance. Additionally, relational satisfaction grows when franchisees feel they are treated fairly, considered valuable partners, and sufficiently supported (Jang & Park, 2019).

Based on this discussion, the current study suggests that franchisor support is a critical factor influencing both franchisee trust and satisfaction. Thus, the researchers propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Franchisor support positively influences franchisee (a) trust and (b) satisfaction.

Franchisor support is integral to cultivating franchisee trust, which subsequently influences franchisee satisfaction. Franchisor support encompasses various forms of assistance, including training, marketing, operational aid, and financial support, all of which are critical for franchisee success and satisfaction (Bang et al., 2023; Melo et al., 2022). This support is fundamental in establishing trust, as franchisees assess the franchise system's reliability based on the comprehensiveness of the operational support provided by the franchisor (Croonen & Brand, 2013). Thus, it is anticipated that franchisor support will foster trust, and that this trust will, in turn, enhance franchisee satisfaction. Effective support from the franchisor enhances trust by demonstrating a commitment to reliability and competence, which is essential for mitigating opportunistic behavior and bolstering satisfaction (Chiou et al., 2004; Kidwell et al., 2007). Consequently, franchisee trust may mediate the relationship between franchisor support and franchisee satisfaction, highlighting the potential role of trust in translating support into favorable outcomes (Davies et al., 2011; Lewis & Lambert, 1991).

Thus, the researchers propose the mediation effect of trust on the relationship between franchisor support and franchisee satisfaction as follows:

H4: Franchisee trust mediates the relationship between franchisor support and franchisee satisfaction.

1.2.3 Franchisee Financial and Operational Performance

Trust is considered a major factor in enhancing transaction efficiency and building relationships between businesses, especially in vertically structured enterprises like franchises

(Jung, 2014; Lewis & Weigert, 2012). The relationship between trust, franchisee satisfaction, and franchise performance has garnered significant attention in franchising literature. Since the franchising system involves mutual interdependence but uneven control, the success of franchising heavily relies on the trust between the franchisor and the franchisee (Eser, 2012). Trust is a crucial component of franchises because they require honest, open communication, just as in any relationship. A strong franchise relationship is an essential company asset that should be nurtured and grown (Abdul Ghani et al., 2022). Trust in the franchisor's integrity and competence is a determinant of healthy franchising relationships (Altinay & Brookes, 2012; Altinay et al., 2014; Davies et al., 2011; Rosado-Serrano & Paul, 2018; Rosado-Serrano et al., 2018). In the franchise industry, trust is particularly important as it links operational standards and ensures uniformity across the franchise network.

Furthermore, trust is found to be positively related to cooperation and satisfaction (Eser, 2012). The literature recognizes trust as an important determinant of successful cooperation, particularly in terms of satisfaction (Mohr & Spekman, 1994). Consequently, researchers in franchising link trust to satisfaction within franchise partnerships (Altinay et al., 2014; Dickey et al., 2008). Trust has been shown to have a direct and substantial impact on franchisee satisfaction (Altinay et al., 2014; Chiou & Droge, 2015). Eser (2012) suggests that trust and amity are essential in the franchisor-franchisee relationship to ensure franchisee satisfaction. Franchisees who trust their franchisors are more likely to be satisfied with their business arrangements due to a sense of security and mutual respect. Trust is considered one of the key elements in establishing strong, positive franchisee-franchisor relationships (Croonen & Brand, 2013; Dickey et al., 2008). Thereby, it is predicted that franchisee trust in the franchisor will positively impact the overall level of franchisee satisfaction (Chiou et al., 2004).

Moreover, a lack of trust in the franchisor and franchise system may lead franchisees to engage in undesirable behaviors, such as reduced efforts to comply with franchise regulations or leaving the franchise system altogether (Davies et al., 2011). These behaviors can result in various issues, including diminished system sales, problematic franchisee recruitment, and ultimately a decrease in or stagnation of the franchise system's profitability. Therefore, trust is not only crucial for satisfaction but also for the financial and operational performance of the franchise. Research on trust in business relations defines trust as an important variable affecting performance. It is a major factor in enhancing transaction efficiency and building relationships between businesses, especially in vertically structured enterprises like franchises (Jung, 2014; Lewis & Weigert, 2012).

Based on this discussion, the current study suggests that trust is a critical factor influencing franchisee satisfaction, franchise financial performance, and operational performance. Thus, the researchers propose the following hypothesis:

H5: Trust positively influences franchisee (a) satisfaction, (b) financial performance, and (c) operational performance.

Franchisee satisfaction plays a pivotal role in the overall performance of the franchise. High levels of franchisee satisfaction predict higher morale, greater cooperation, fewer terminations of relationships, fewer lawsuits, and a lower likelihood of seeking protective legislation (Hunt & Nevin, 1974). Satisfied franchisees are more likely to be motivated, engaged, and committed to achieving the franchise's goals, leading to improved financial outcomes (Morrison, 1997). When franchisees are satisfied with the franchisor, they are more cooperative and more likely to contribute to the success of the overall franchise system (Roh & Yoon, 2009). Moreover, franchisor–franchisee collaboration is encouraged through satisfaction (Kalargyrou et al., 2018), which leads to fewer conflicts (Davies et al., 2011), lower franchisee turnover rates (Frazer et al., 2012), and greater overall productivity (Tuunanen, 2002). Hence, satisfaction with the franchise relationship positively influences franchise performance (Dickey et al., 2008).

Based on this discussion, the hypothesis is proposed as follows:

H6: Franchisee satisfaction positively influences franchisee (a) financial performance, and (b) operational performance.

1.2.4 The mediating role of satisfaction

Trust significantly enhances transaction efficiency and strengthens business relationships within franchising (Jung, 2014; Lewis & Weigert, 2012). Franchisees who trust their franchisors are more likely to experience a sense of security and mutual respect, leading to greater satisfaction (Chiou & Droge, 2015; Eser, 2012). This satisfaction, in turn, impacts franchisee performance, as satisfaction often serves as a direct measure of performance in various studies (Artz, 1999; Claro et al., 2003; Zaheer et al., 1998). According to Eser (2012), a positive correlation between trust and satisfaction implies that higher trust leads to enhanced performance. Conversely, a lack of trust can result in lower compliance, higher turnover, and stagnation in profitability, highlighting the necessity of trust for satisfaction and overall franchise success (Davies et al., 2011). Franchisee satisfaction plays a pivotal role in translating trust into improved franchise performance, as satisfied franchisees are more cooperative and likely to contribute to the franchise system's success (Roh & Yoon, 2009). High levels of satisfaction lead to better morale, increased cooperation, and fewer disputes, all of which contribute to better financial outcomes and operational efficiency (Hunt and Nevin, 1974; Morrison, 1997). Additionally, satisfaction helps streamline operations, reduce inefficiencies, and boost overall productivity (Davies et al., 2011; Frazer et al., 2012; Tuunanen, 2002). Thus, franchisee satisfaction is proposed as a mediator in the relationship between trust and franchise performance, underscoring its importance in enhancing overall franchise performance (Dickey et al., 2008). Therefore, this study proposed two hypotheses as follows:

H7a: Franchisee satisfaction mediates the relationship between trust and franchisee financial performance.

H7b: Franchisee satisfaction mediates the relationship between trust and franchisee operational performance.

A research framework is proposed as shown in Figure 1.

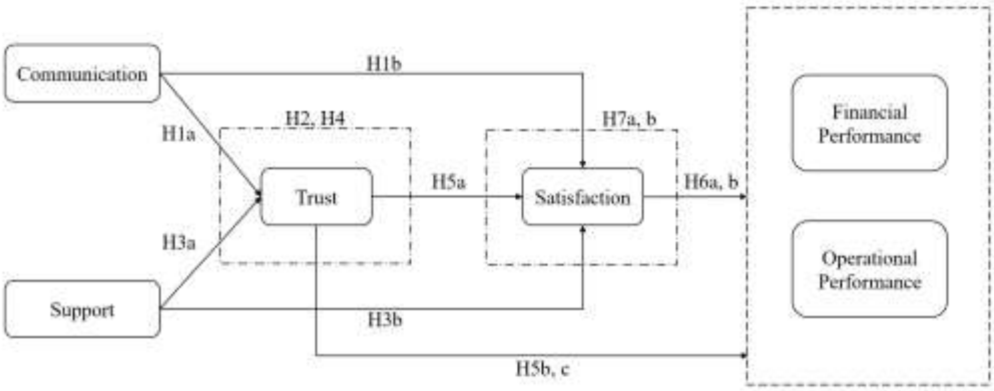

Figure1 Conceptual framework

Source: Authors' own research

Note: Sections 1.3 - 1.6 were omitted for publication purposes.

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