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# Franchising and Entrepreneurial Access: Bibliometric Analysis of Institutionalized Capital Transfer in Ethnic and Cultural Contexts

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***Abstract:*** Franchising is often portrayed as a pathway into entrepreneurship because it provides access to established business models, brand recognition, standardized routines, and operational support. Yet entrepreneurial opportunity remains shaped by institutional conditions, resource access, and network structures that vary across populations and contexts. Although franchising research has expanded over more than five decades, it remains fragmented across governance, performance, financing, internationalization, innovation, and social-impact perspectives. This study maps the intellectual and thematic structure of franchising research through a science-mapping bibliometric design. Drawing on 276 Scopus-indexed publications from journal sources published between 1974 and 2026, bibliographic coupling identified a largest connected component of 213 publications. VOSviewer identified 10 publication communities, which were subsequently synthesized into five higher-order thematic domains: franchisee development, financial risks, innovation and international expansion, integrative growth, and social franchising. Keyword co-occurrence analysis was used as a secondary, supportive analysis to corroborate interpretation of the publication communities and the higher-order thematic domains. The findings reveal a field centered primarily on governance and performance, with adjacent emphases on financing, internationalization, and adaptation. Inclusion- and access-related themes are present but remain weakly integrated into the field's dominant empirical conversations. Institutionalized Capital Transfer (ICT) is applied after the empirical mapping as an interpretive lens for connecting discussions of training, financing, organizational routines, networks, legitimacy, governance, and institutional constraints. The study reframes franchising as an institutionalized opportunity architecture that transfers entrepreneurial resources while also structuring access, risk, and participation requirements.

***Keywords:*** franchising, bibliometric analysis, entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial access, institutionalized capital transfer, international expansion

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Franchising is frequently portrayed as a pathway into entrepreneurship because it provides access to an established business model, brand recognition, standardized routines, training, and ongoing operational support. As an established route to business ownership, franchising enables individuals to combine entrepreneurial initiative with resources and capabilities developed and coordinated by the franchisor, including operating procedures, managerial guidance, brand assets, and connections to suppliers and customers (Chamrat et al., 2025; Combs et al., 2004, 2011). By bundling these resources within a repeatable business format, franchising may reduce some of the uncertainty and resource demands associated with establishing an independent business.

Franchising has traditionally been understood primarily as a model for commercial expansion and business growth. More recently, however, its replication and governance mechanisms have also been applied to social missions and public-service objectives, as demonstrated by social franchising and other mission-driven applications (Tracey & Jarvis, 2007). These developments broaden the relevance of franchising research beyond organizational efficiency and commercial growth to include questions of how standardized systems transfer resources, structure participation, and support replication across commercial and social contexts.

These questions are important because access to entrepreneurial opportunity remains unevenly distributed across populations and institutional environments. Research on ethnic and immigrant entrepreneurship emphasizes that entrepreneurial participation is shaped not only by individual motivation and capability but also by access to financial resources, established markets, supportive institutions, and resource-rich business networks (Aldrich & Waldinger, 1990; Kloosterman & Rath, 2001; Salehi, 2026). Family, ethnic, and community networks may provide information, labor, financing, and customers, but their value depends on the resources available within those networks and their connections to wider markets and institutions (Kalnins & Chung, 2006). Resource constraints should therefore be understood as embedded within broader opportunity structures and institutional conditions rather than as evidence of limited entrepreneurial capacity.

Against this backdrop, franchising may make operating knowledge, organizational routines, brand legitimacy, training, and network connections available through a structured business format. Franchising should not, however, be assumed to eliminate unequal access or produce uniformly positive outcomes. Prospective franchisees must obtain financing, satisfy selection requirements, pay initial and continuing fees, and operate within contractual arrangements that may constrain autonomy or redistribute financial and operational risk. Whether franchising enables or constrains entrepreneurial participation therefore depends on franchise-system design, resource requirements, governance arrangements, and the surrounding institutional environment (Baena, 2012; Combs et al., 2011; Khavul et al., 2010).

Franchising research has developed across multiple theoretical and topical streams, including governance, performance, internationalization, financing, innovation, and social-impact applications (Combs et al., 2004, 2011). These streams have generally been examined as distinct domains, resulting in limited understanding of how they collectively represent franchising as a route into entrepreneurship and small-business ownership. Yet they may reflect interconnected dimensions of the institutional arrangements through which franchise opportunities, resources, and risks are organized. A systematic synthesis is therefore needed to identify the field's dominant emphases, examine connections among its research streams, and determine how questions of resource access, participation, and inclusion are positioned within the literature.

The present study addresses this need by mapping the intellectual and thematic structure of franchising scholarship at the intersection of entrepreneurship and small business. Its purpose is not to determine whether franchising improves outcomes for particular demographic groups.

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Rather, the study examines how the literature has organized knowledge around governance, financing, capability development, participation, and institutional constraints and considers the implications of that organization for future research on unequal entrepreneurial access.

To accomplish this objective, the study employs a science-mapping bibliometric design. Bibliographic coupling identifies communities of publications that share intellectual foundations, while keyword co-occurrence analysis corroborates and helps interpret the thematic vocabulary associated with these groupings (Kessler, 1963; van Eck & Waltman, 2010; Zupic & Čater, 2015).

After the literature is mapped empirically, Institutionalized Capital Transfer (ICT) is applied as an interpretive lens to examine how the identified domains represent the transfer and governance of entrepreneurial resources and capabilities. ICT does not inform the search, selection, or clustering process and is not tested as an independent theory. Instead, it provides an integrative vocabulary for connecting discussions of training, financing, organizational routines, networks, legitimacy, governance, and institutional constraints across otherwise separate research streams.

Guided by these considerations, the study addresses the following research questions:
RQ1: What intellectual and thematic structures characterize franchising scholarship at the intersection of entrepreneurship and small business over the past five decades?
RQ2: How can the dominant research domains within franchising scholarship be interpreted in relation to entrepreneurial resource access, capability transfer, participation, and institutional constraints?
RQ3: How are inclusion- and access-related themes positioned within the intellectual structure of franchising scholarship, and what implications do these patterns suggest for future research in ethnically, culturally, and resource-constrained contexts?

This study makes three primary contributions. First, it provides a field-level bibliometric synthesis that identifies the dominant thematic domains, intellectual linkages, and underdeveloped areas within franchising scholarship. Second, it offers a theoretical reframing of franchising as an institutionalized opportunity architecture that simultaneously transfers entrepreneurial resources and structures access to them. Through the ICT lens, the study connects governance, financing, capability development, and institutional constraints to explain why the entrepreneurial value of franchising is contingent on how resources, risks, and participation requirements are configured within franchise systems. This reframing moves beyond treating franchise affiliation as inherently enabling and instead foregrounds the institutional conditions under which franchising may support or constrain entrepreneurial participation. Third, the study clarifies the structural position of inclusion- and access-related themes within the field and develops a research agenda for examining the mechanisms and boundary conditions that shape participation among resource-constrained entrepreneurs (Sonfield, 2016).

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. We first outline the conceptual basis of ICT as an interpretive framework for synthesizing resource-transfer mechanisms discussed in franchising research. We then describe the science-mapping bibliometric design and analytical procedures, present the intellectual and thematic structure of the literature, and interpret the resulting domains through ICT before discussing implications for research and practice.

### *Theoretical Background: Institutionalized Capital Transfer as an Interpretive Framework*

Franchising is a business model in which a franchisor grants a franchisee the right to operate under an established brand using standardized products, processes, and systems (Combs et al., 2011). This arrangement enables business formats to be replicated across locations while maintaining centralized control over key elements of the operation. Beyond its role in scaling business models, franchising also structures how individuals enter and engage in entrepreneurial activity. The institutional features of franchising establish entry requirements, performance expectations, and governance constraints, meaning that the mechanisms supporting replication also shape participation and access to opportunity. In this way, franchising operates not only as a mechanism for growth but also as an institutional pathway through which entrepreneurial opportunities are organized and distributed.

Early franchising research largely conceptualized the franchise model in terms of organizational performance and efficiency, focusing primarily on differences between franchised and company-owned outlets. For example, Bracker and Pearson (1986) compared the financial performance of franchised and independently owned small firms to examine whether franchising was associated with superior organizational performance. Their findings indicated no statistically significant differences in financial performance between the two ownership forms, suggesting that organizational form alone does not fully explain firm performance. However, this line of work largely treats franchising as a structural arrangement, paying comparatively less attention to how it shapes access to entrepreneurial opportunities across contexts.

Subsequent theoretical work expanded the focus beyond performance to consider the mechanisms through which franchising operates. Human capital theory suggests that franchise systems provide training and skill development that lower barriers to entry for individuals who may lack prior business experience (Becker, 1964). Similarly, social capital theory highlights the importance of networks, brand legitimacy, and relational ties in facilitating access to resources and customers (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Together, these perspectives suggest that franchising functions as a structured mechanism through which knowledge, legitimacy, and relational resources are transferred, rather than relying solely on individual effort or entrepreneurial capability. Contemporary franchising research reinforces the importance of these relational and capability-building mechanisms. For example, recent work shows how conflict-management processes can contribute to the development of organizational capabilities within franchise systems (Perrigot et al., 2021). Such evidence suggests that the resources transferred through franchising extend beyond formal training to include relational capabilities that influence how knowledge and organizational support are accessed and used. However, these approaches tend to focus on specific dimensions of resource transfer and do not fully capture how franchising coordinates multiple forms of capital within institutionalized systems.

Research on franchising has also emphasized the importance of institutional context in shaping entrepreneurial outcomes. In environments characterized by institutional uncertainty or resource constraints, governance structures, standardized routines, and capability-transfer mechanisms can reduce uncertainty and facilitate entrepreneurial participation (Baena, 2012; Khavul et al., 2010). Viewed from this perspective, franchising extends beyond a market expansion strategy by providing an institutional framework through which entrepreneurs acquire resources, capabilities, and organizational support needed to navigate institutional constraints.

Recent research further illustrates why these institutional and resource conditions matter. Legendre et al. (2021), for example, found that franchise affiliation did not necessarily reduce loan-default risk relative to independent businesses, underscoring that access to an

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established system does not eliminate financial vulnerability. These findings reinforce the need to examine franchising not simply as a resource-providing organizational form, but as an institutional arrangement in which the accessibility and usefulness of transferred resources depend on system design and context.

At the same time, franchising does not operate uniformly across contexts. Work on social franchising shows how the model can be adapted to address social and economic challenges, particularly in underserved communities (Tracey & Jarvis, 2007). These adaptations suggest that franchising may expand access to entrepreneurial opportunities while also revealing important variation in how resources and support are distributed. In some cases, franchising may reinforce inequalities through financial and operational requirements that limit access. Thus, franchising can both enable and constrain participation depending on institutional configuration. Taken together, these findings suggest that franchising influences who is able to enter, sustain, and benefit from entrepreneurial activity.

Drawing together these perspectives, this study introduces Institutionalized Capital Transfer (ICT) as an integrative interpretive framework for understanding franchising as a system that coordinates the movement of multiple forms of capital across actors and contexts. Drawing on institutional, human capital, and social capital perspectives, ICT conceptualizes franchising as a multilevel system through which capital is transferred in structured and repeatable ways. Within this framework, franchisors act as central nodes that package and distribute human capital (e.g., training and managerial knowledge), social capital (e.g., brand legitimacy and network access), and organizational capital (e.g., standardized routines and governance mechanisms). Franchisees, in turn, receive and operationalize these forms of capital within local contexts, resulting in variation in how opportunities are accessed and realized. ICT therefore conceptualizes franchising as an institutionalized system through which resources and capabilities are transferred, governed, and operationalized across actors and contexts.

ICT does not assume that the transfer of capital automatically leads to improved outcomes or equitable access. Instead, it emphasizes that the structure and governance of these transfers shape participation and outcomes. As an integrative lens, ICT connects diverse strands of franchising research by illustrating how different forms of capital interact within institutionalized systems to produce variation in access and performance. ICT also provides a shared vocabulary for interpreting findings across studies on training, governance, networks, and financial structures.

ICT builds on, but remains distinct from, established perspectives in franchising and entrepreneurship research. While human capital theory focuses on individual skills and capabilities, and social capital theory emphasizes relational networks, ICT integrates these dimensions within a broader institutional framework that accounts for how they are coordinated and transferred. Whereas agency theory emphasizes contracts and incentives, ICT focuses on the systemic movement and governance of resources. Similarly, while resource scarcity theory highlights constraints, ICT examines how institutional arrangements can both alleviate and reproduce them. For ethnic-entrepreneurship research, this perspective identifies franchise-system design, including selection, financing, training, decision rights, and monitoring, as a set of organizational mechanisms through which institutional conditions may enable or constrain participation.

To examine how these mechanisms are represented within franchising scholarship, this study employs a bibliometric analysis spanning five decades. Bibliometric methods enable the systematic mapping of a field's intellectual structure (Donthu et al., 2021), building on bibliographic coupling and network-mapping techniques (Kessler, 1963; van Eck & Waltman, 2010; Zupic & Čater, 2015). After the literature is mapped empirically, ICT is applied as an interpretive lens to examine how the identified domains represent resource transfer,

governance, participation requirements, and institutional constraints. This approach provides a theoretically grounded synthesis while identifying questions for future research on how franchise-system design may shape entrepreneurial access across ethnic, cultural, and resource-constrained contexts.

## Methods

### *Research Design*

This study employs a science-mapping design to examine the intellectual and thematic structure of franchising research at the intersection of entrepreneurship and small-business scholarship over the past five decades. The analysis combines article-level bibliographic mapping with vocabulary-level analysis to identify dominant research domains, conceptual linkages, and contemporary research fronts. This approach is consistent with prior bibliometric studies in entrepreneurship (Casillas & Acedo, 2007; Dana et al., 2021), and the analytical procedures follow established guidance on normalization, counting methods, parameter selection, and interpretive validation (Kessler, 1963; van Eck & Waltman, 2010; Waltman & van Eck, 2013; Zupic & Čater, 2015).

The study maps the conceptual organization of the literature rather than citation impact or scholarly performance. Bibliographic coupling was selected as the primary analytical technique because it identifies intellectual proximity among publications based on their shared references and is therefore well suited to mapping a field's contemporary research structure. By contrast, co-citation analysis more strongly reflects its historical intellectual foundations (Boyack & Klavans, 2010; Kessler, 1963; van Eck & Waltman, 2010; Zupic & Čater, 2015).

### *Data Collection and Screening*

We compiled the dataset from Scopus, with the search updated in August 2026. The search examined article titles, abstracts, and keywords using the following query: TITLE-ABS-KEY (franchising) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY (entrepreneur) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (entrepreneurship) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("small business")). The search was restricted to the Business, Management and Accounting subject area and to journal sources. We then removed duplicates and screened the remaining records for substantive relevance to franchising within entrepreneurship and small-business scholarship. This process yielded a final dataset of N = 276 Scopus-indexed publications from journal sources published between 1974 and 2026. Scopus was selected because of its broad coverage, consistent metadata, and extensive indexing of management and entrepreneurship journals (Donthu et al., 2021).

Titles and abstracts were screened to retain studies in which franchising constituted a central empirical or conceptual focus, including research on franchisee behavior and performance, franchisor strategy, governance and relationships, financing and risk, international expansion, and social or hybrid franchising. Records in which franchising appeared only tangentially or as an illustrative example were excluded. For each retained publication, we extracted the title, abstract, authors and affiliations, source, publication year, author keywords, and cited references.

Full texts were not required for network construction because bibliographic coupling relies on cited references, whereas keyword co-occurrence analysis draws on keywords recorded in the Scopus metadata (van Eck & Waltman, 2010; Zupic & Čater, 2015). Full texts of relevant publications were subsequently reviewed to support interpretation of the VOSviewer publication communities, development of the five higher-order thematic domains, and narrative development.

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Access- and inclusion- specific terms were not used in the search or screening process, and Institutionalized Capital Transfer (ICT) did not inform publication selection, network construction, or clustering. The literature was first mapped empirically through bibliographic coupling and keyword co-occurrence analysis. The resulting publication communities were then interpreted and synthesized into five higher-order thematic domains, after which ICT was applied as an interpretive lens for integrating the identified domains.

### *Ethical Considerations*

This study analyzed bibliographic metadata and published scholarly literature and did not involve human participants, intervention, or the collection of identifiable private information. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and informed consent were therefore not applicable.

### *Analytical Procedure*

Bibliographic coupling served as the study's primary analytical technique. The article-level network was constructed by linking publications that shared cited references. The strength of the relationship between two publications was based on the number of references they shared, with stronger bibliographic-coupling links indicating greater intellectual proximity. Publication-community membership was determined solely through this article-level bibliographic-coupling analysis (Kessler, 1963; van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

Keyword co-occurrence analysis was conducted as a secondary, supportive analysis. It provided a vocabulary-level representation used to corroborate the thematic interpretation of the bibliographic-coupling structure and support development of the five higher-order thematic domains. The keyword analysis did not determine publication-community membership or produce an alternative classification of publications.

All analyses were conducted using VOSviewer 1.6.21, which applies standardized normalization, mapping, and clustering procedures widely used in bibliometric research.

### *Parameter Settings and Network Construction*

The article-level bibliographic-coupling network was constructed using full counting and association-strength normalization. Full counting was retained to preserve the visibility of smaller but potentially conceptually distinct research streams. Community detection was performed using the smart local moving algorithm at VOSviewer's default resolution (van Eck & Waltman, 2009, 2010; Waltman & van Eck, 2013).

For the bibliographic-coupling analysis, the minimum number of citations per document was set to one. Of the documents in the Scopus dataset, 234 met this threshold. VOSviewer identified a largest connected component of 213 documents, and the bibliographic-coupling visualization and clustering analysis were conducted on this connected set. No manual adjustments were made to the network layout or the VOSviewer community assignments.

For the secondary keyword co-occurrence analysis, all keywords available in the Scopus records were analyzed using full counting. A minimum occurrence threshold of five was applied. Of the 761 keywords in the dataset, 25 met this threshold, and all 25 were retained for analysis. The resulting keyword network was normalized using association strength and clustered using VOSviewer's default clustering settings. No manual adjustments were made to keyword membership or cluster assignments.

### *Validation, Labeling, and Narrative Development*

Robustness checks were conducted to assess the stability and interpretability of the resulting structure. Nearby variations in the bibliographic-coupling clustering settings produced a broadly similar higher-order thematic structure, although the number and boundaries of individual publication communities varied somewhat across specifications.

Higher-order domain labels were developed inductively by identifying high-total-link-strength exemplar publications within the bibliographic-coupling communities and examining their titles, abstracts, and dominant conceptual focus. Related publication communities were subsequently synthesized into five higher-order thematic domains based on similarities in publication membership, exemplar studies, and substantive focus. These interpretations were cross-checked against prominent keywords and relationships in the separate keyword co-occurrence map. Two independent coders evaluated the fit of the proposed labels, and disagreements were resolved through discussion. This procedure grounded the labels in both shared-reference structure and the vocabulary used in the literature (Cobo et al., 2011; Zupic & Čater, 2015).

After publication-community membership and preliminary domain labels had been established, the authors reviewed the full texts of relevant publications to construct the substantive domain narratives. This qualitative review was used to identify recurring topics, mechanisms, empirical emphases, and boundary conditions represented within each domain. Full-text review informed narrative interpretation only; it did not affect publication selection, bibliographic-coupling links, publication-community membership, or the keyword co-occurrence analysis.

Throughout the analysis, citations and shared references were treated as relational indicators of intellectual proximity rather than as assessments of study quality. Publication-community membership was determined solely through bibliographic coupling, while the keyword co-occurrence map and full-text review supported labeling and substantive interpretation of the higher-order domains. ICT was applied only after these empirical and qualitative procedures as an interpretive lens for synthesizing the identified domains.

## Results

### *Intellectual Structure of Franchising Research*

Of the 234 documents meeting the minimum citation threshold of one, 213 formed the largest connected component used for the bibliographic-coupling analysis. The connected network contained 8,972 bibliographic-coupling links with a total link strength of 22,094. Application of the smart local moving algorithm identified 10 publication communities of unequal size (n = 71, 37, 31, 27, 24, 15, 2, 2, 2, and 2). Inspection of their publication membership, exemplar articles, and thematic relationships revealed a set of larger core communities together with smaller peripheral communities. These publication-level communities were subsequently synthesized into five higher-order thematic domains for interpretation.

The five higher-order domains therefore summarize related areas of the bibliographic-coupling structure and do not correspond one-to-one with individual VOSviewer community IDs. The bibliographic-coupling structure represents patterns of scholarly emphasis and intellectual proximity rather than causal relationships among variables.

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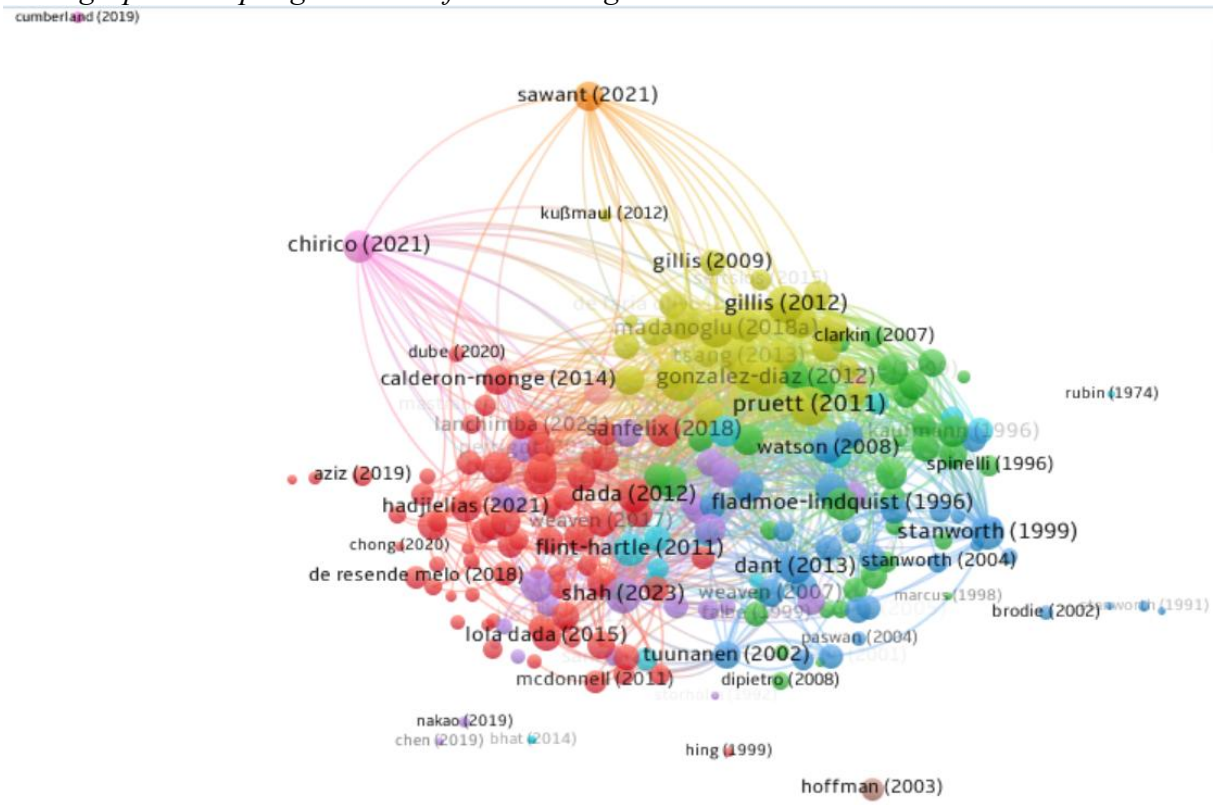
**Figure 1**

*Bibliographic Coupling Network of Franchising Research*




*Note.* The figure displays 213 publications in the largest connected component of the bibliographic-coupling network. Each node represents a publication, and links indicate shared cited references. Node size reflects total link strength, while colors denote the 10 publication communities identified by VOSviewer. The five higher-order thematic domains discussed in the text were developed through subsequent interpretation of related publication communities and therefore do not correspond one-to-one with individual map colors.

### *Supportive Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis*

A separate keyword co-occurrence analysis was conducted using all keywords contained in the 276-publication Scopus dataset. Of the 761 keywords identified, 25 occurred at least five times and were retained for analysis. The resulting network contained 25 keywords, 84 co-occurrence links, and a total link strength of 268. VOSviewer identified eight keyword clusters.

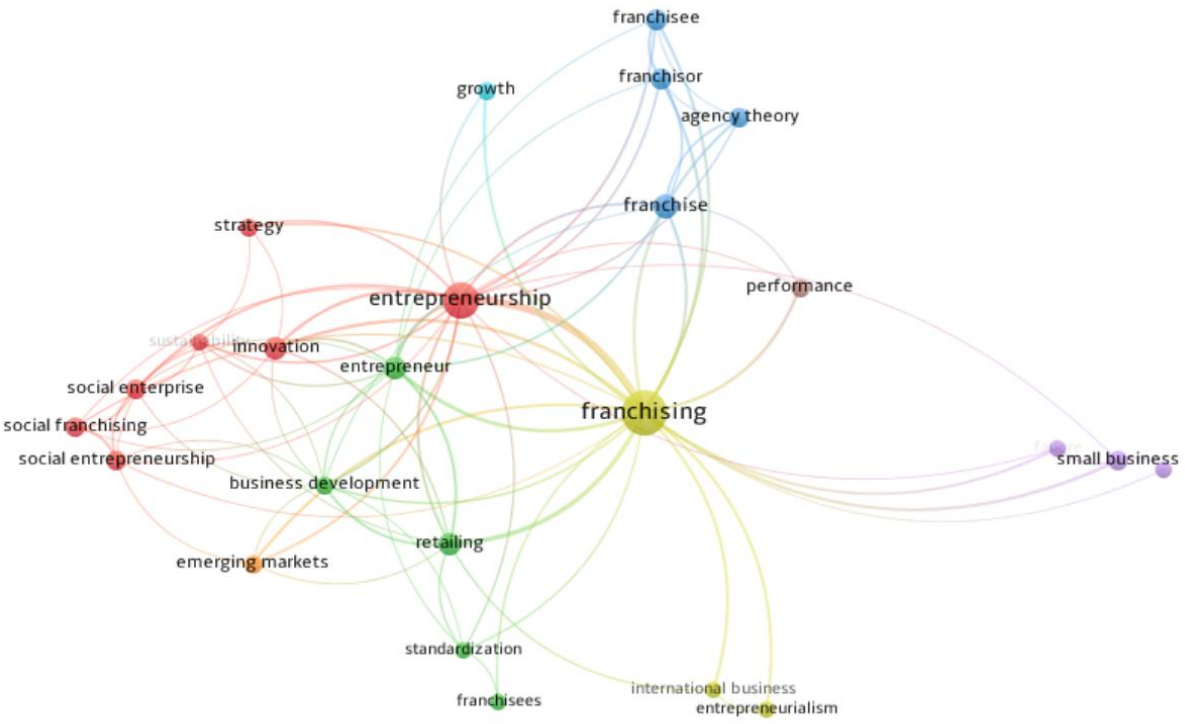
"Franchising" was the most frequently occurring keyword (n = 130; total link strength = 134), followed by "entrepreneurship" (n = 59; total link strength = 90). Other prominent keywords included retailing, innovation, entrepreneur, franchise, franchisor, franchisee, business development, social enterprise, social franchising, agency theory, and international business. Taken together, these patterns provide vocabulary-level support for the field's emphasis on entrepreneurship, governance, performance, innovation, international expansion, and socially oriented applications of franchising.

The keyword co-occurrence analysis provided complementary support for the thematic interpretation derived from bibliographic coupling. Because the keyword analysis examines relationships among concepts rather than relationships among publications, correspondence was assessed thematically rather than by expecting its eight clusters to reproduce the 10

publication communities or the five higher-order thematic domains. The prominence and co-occurrence of keywords such as franchisee, franchisor, agency theory, performance, innovation, international business, growth, and social franchising provided convergent vocabulary-level support for the interpretation and labeling of the five higher-order domains.

**Figure 2**

*Keyword Co-Occurrence Network of Franchising Research*




*Note.* The figure displays the 25 keywords occurring in at least five occurrences in the 276-publication dataset. Node size reflects keyword occurrence frequency, links indicate keyword co-occurrence across publications, and spatial proximity reflects relatedness within the keyword network. Colors denote the eight keyword clusters identified by VOSviewer. The network was constructed using full counting and association-strength normalization. The keyword map was used as a complementary source of vocabulary-level evidence to support interpretation of the five higher-order thematic domains and did not determine publication-community membership.

## Higher-Order Domain Summary

**Table 1**

*Higher-Order Thematic Domains and Their VOSviewer Community Support*

| Higher-order thematic domain | Principal VOSviewer community support | Representative mapped exemplars | Key concepts |
|---|---|---|---|
| Franchisee Development | Primarily C1 (n = 71) and C3 (n = 31), representing franchisee entrepreneurship, relationships, and | Croonen et al. (2016); Dada et al. (2012) | Franchisee selection, training, operational support, autonomy, relationship quality, |

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**Table 1**
*Continued*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | governance-oriented research | | monitoring, franchisee entrepreneurship |
| Financial Risks | Most directly represented by C6 (n = 15), with financial-performance and agency-oriented research also represented in C4 (n = 27) | González-Díaz & Solís-Rodríguez (2012); Legendre et al. (2021); Madanoglu et al. (2011) | Capital structure, leverage, credit access, default risk, financial performance, disclosure, monitoring |
| Innovation and International Expansion | Primarily C5 (n = 24), with related innovation and adaptation research appearing in other communities | Melo et al. (2015); Shane (1996); Watson et al. (2020) | International entry, partner selection, cross-market learning, standardization, adaptation, institutional variation |
| Integrative Growth (Boundary-Spanning) | Strongly represented across C2 (n = 37) and C4 (n = 27), linking growth, organizational form, governance, learning, and performance | Gillis & Castrogiovanni (2012); Kaufmann & Dant (1996); Sorenson & Sørensen (2001) | Network growth, organizational learning, governance, scaling, performance, coordination |
| Social Franchising | Specialized stream spanning principally C1 and C2; 9 mapped publications explicitly focus on social franchising (7 in C1 and 2 in C2) | Asemota & Chahine (2017); Giudici et al. (2020); Iddy et al. (2022) | Social enterprise, scaling, hybrid governance, mission alignment, training, institutional constraints |

*Note.* VOSviewer identified 10 publication communities in the 213-document connected bibliographic-coupling network: C1 (n = 71), C2 (n = 37), C3 (n = 31), C4 (n = 27), C5 (n = 24), C6 (n = 15), and C7–C10 (n = 2 each). The five higher-order thematic domains were developed through interpretation of publication-community membership, representative mapped articles, and supporting keyword patterns. Accordingly, the domains do not correspond one-to-one with individual VOSviewer community IDs, and the community sizes reported above should not be interpreted as domain sample sizes. C7–C10 were retained in the VOSviewer solution and considered during interpretation but were not treated as separate higher-order domains because each contained only two publications. Representative mapped exemplars are illustrative publications included in the bibliographic-coupling network rather than an exhaustive listing of studies in each domain. For Social Franchising, the value of nine refers specifically to mapped publications whose titles explicitly identify social franchising and is not the size of a VOSviewer community.

## Domain Narratives and Thematic Patterns

The following narratives summarize the recurring topics, mechanisms, and empirical emphases represented within each higher-order thematic domain. Interpretation through the ICT lens is reserved for the Discussion to maintain a clear distinction between the empirically derived structure and the study's subsequent theoretical synthesis.

### *Domain 1: Franchisee Development*

The Franchisee Development domain focuses on the micro-level processes through which franchise systems are implemented and sustained at the unit level. Central topics include franchisee selection, training, operational support, bounded autonomy, monitoring, and relationship quality. The literature commonly examines how these mechanisms are associated with the transfer of organizational routines, the maintenance of brand standards, and franchisee-level performance. A recurring tension concerns the balance between standardization and local discretion. Franchisees are expected to implement established routines consistently while responding to local operating conditions. Research also examines franchisee entrepreneurial behavior and the exercise of initiative within established system boundaries (Croonen et al., 2016; Dada et al., 2012). Research in this domain also emphasizes the relational processes through which knowledge and organizational support are transferred within franchise systems. Communication geared toward knowledge transfer and the culturally adapted role performance of franchisors have been identified as important contributors to franchise relationship development (Altinay et al., 2014).

Relational governance constitutes another prominent theme. Trust, transparent communication, procedural fairness, and conflict-resolution practices are frequently discussed in relation to knowledge sharing, cooperation, and the reporting of operational problems (Perrigot et al., 2021). Research on family-controlled franchise organizations further examines familiness and relational norms as alternative mechanisms for facilitating trust, coordination, and knowledge exchange (Chirico et al., 2011).

### *Domain 2: Financial Risks*

The Financial Risks domain centers on the financial structure of franchising, particularly leverage, credit access, default risk, franchisor financial health, regulatory conditions, and performance volatility. Studies in this domain examine the circumstances under which franchising may reduce perceived business uncertainty and the conditions under which its risk-mitigation properties may be limited. Research also examines franchising as a financing mechanism and the relationship between franchise-system characteristics and financial performance (González-Díaz & Solís-Rodríguez, 2012; Madanoglu et al., 2011).

Pre-entry leverage, debt obligations, and default risk are recurring concerns (Legendre et al., 2021). Brand affiliation is often discussed as a source of legitimacy for lenders and customers, but the literature does not indicate that franchise affiliation uniformly protects franchisees or franchise systems from financial distress. Monitoring, disclosure, contractual design, and relational governance also feature prominently. These studies suggest that financial risk is shaped not only by the amount and composition of capital but also by the quality of information, governance arrangements, and the surrounding regulatory and institutional environment.

### *Domain 3: Innovation and International Expansion*

The Innovation and International Expansion domain examines franchising as a mechanism for cross-context expansion and innovation under conditions of organizational control. Central themes include international entry, standardization–adaptation tensions, partner selection, learning across markets, and governance in institutionally and culturally heterogeneous environments. A recurring issue is how franchise systems preserve core routines and brand consistency while permitting sufficient adaptation to local market conditions (Kaufmann & Eroglu, 1999). The literature generally treats standardization and adaptation as

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complementary rather than mutually exclusive, with the appropriate balance depending on market conditions, institutional differences, and system capabilities.

Partner selection is also central. Local knowledge, cultural familiarity, strategic alignment, contractual clarity, and relational trust are frequently discussed as relevant to knowledge transfer and operational implementation (Kaufmann & Eroglu, 1999). Research on international franchising further emphasizes overseas expansion decisions, emerging-market conditions, and institutional variation across national contexts (Baena, 2012; Melo et al., 2015; Shane, 1996).

### *Domain 4: Integrative Growth (Boundary-Spanning)*

Integrative Growth is a boundary-spanning domain concerned with network expansion, governance design, replication, and organizational scaling. Its links with governance, finance, and internationalization-oriented areas of the bibliographic-coupling network support its interpretation as an integrative domain rather than a residual category. Mapped research in this area also connects organizational growth with learning, performance, and governance as franchise systems expand (Gillis & Castrogiovanni, 2012; Sorenson & Sørensen, 2001). The studies represented in this domain examine capabilities such as codified routines, monitoring arrangements, and distributed decision authority. These capabilities are discussed in relation to the coordination demands that emerge as franchise networks expand (Bradach, 1997).

Research in this domain also considers situations in which system growth creates increasing governance, monitoring, agency, and coordination demands. Under such conditions, monitoring demands, agency costs, and information-flow problems may become more difficult to manage (Combs et al., 2011). Distributed governance arrangements that combine centralized oversight with selective decentralization are consequently discussed as mechanisms for balancing consistency with responsiveness.

### *Domain 5: Social Franchising*

Social Franchising represents a specialized emerging thematic stream within the broader bibliographic-coupling structure connecting franchising with social enterprise, public-service delivery, and hybrid organizational models. It constitutes the clearest thematic area in the mapped literature in which socially oriented and inclusion-related applications of franchising appear as a recognizable research stream. Social franchising applies replication, standardization, training, and governance mechanisms to objectives such as healthcare, education, and community service delivery (Tracey & Jarvis, 2007). This research further examines how social-franchise models scale and replicate while maintaining their social mission and organizational viability (Asemota & Chahine, 2017; Giudici et al., 2020). This literature frequently examines contexts characterized by institutional constraints, limited infrastructure, or resource scarcity and highlights the importance of institutional arrangements, training, and relational processes in such settings (Iddy et al., 2022; Perrigot, 2022). A central concern is the pursuit of dual objectives: generating measurable social value while maintaining sufficient organizational and financial viability to support replication. Mission-aligned governance, standardized operating models, structured training, and peer-based learning are recurring themes. Its comparatively peripheral position within the broader bibliographic structure suggests that social franchising remains an emerging specialized stream rather than a central component of the field's governance, performance, and expansion-oriented literature.

## Cross-Domain Linkages and Interpretive Validation

The bibliographic-coupling network displays meaningful relationships across the identified domains. Links between Franchisee Development and Financial Risks reflect the tendency for training, support, relational governance, and monitoring to be examined alongside performance and financial outcomes. Connections between Innovation and International Expansion and Social Franchising reflect shared concerns with replication, adaptation, institutional variation, and implementation across heterogeneous environments.

The Integrative Growth domain occupies a boundary-spanning position through its connections with governance, finance, and internationalization research. Its cross-community linkages support its interpretation as a boundary-spanning domain concerned with coordinating multiple dimensions of franchise-system growth.

The secondary keyword co-occurrence analysis provided additional interpretive support. Keywords related to franchisee–franchisor relationships, agency theory, performance, entrepreneurship, innovation, growth, international business, and social franchising provided vocabulary-level convergence with the higher-order thematic domains. The keyword map therefore complemented the bibliographic-coupling structure while remaining a secondary analytical device.

The stability of the bibliographic-coupling solution across nearby parameter settings, together with the alignment between exemplar articles, full-text review, and the separate vocabulary map, supports the interpretability of the identified structure. The keyword map nevertheless remains a secondary analytical device: it corroborates and refines domain interpretation but does not determine publication membership.

## Discussion

The bibliometric analysis identifies a franchising literature organized around governance, performance, financing, internationalization, organizational growth, and social-impact applications. Five higher-order domains were identified through interpretive synthesis of the bibliographic-coupling structure: Franchisee Development, Financial Risks, Innovation and International Expansion, Integrative Growth (Boundary-Spanning), and Social Franchising. These domains show how related areas of the literature are intellectually connected and which topics receive the greatest scholarly attention; they do not demonstrate that franchising has the same effects across settings or populations.

Three field-level patterns are particularly salient. First, the literature repeatedly engages the tension between replication and control, on the one hand, and adaptation and local autonomy, on the other. This relationship is visible in the proximity between Innovation and International Expansion and Integrative Growth, where localization, learning, standardization, and scaling are treated as interdependent concerns. Bibliographic coupling makes these connections visible across research streams that are often examined separately.

Second, franchising is framed both as a potentially risk-reducing pathway into business ownership and as a governance arrangement through which financial and operational risks may be transferred or redistributed. The Financial Risks domain is adjacent to the governance and performance core but is organized around leverage, default, disclosure, monitoring, and regulatory conditions. The literature therefore treats franchise affiliation as conditionally, rather than automatically, protective. This interpretation is consistent with recent evidence from Legendre et al. (2021), who found that franchise affiliation did not necessarily reduce loan-default risk relative to independent businesses, reinforcing the importance of examining the financial conditions under which franchising may mitigate or redistribute risk. Any reduction

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in financial or operational risk depends on the design of financing, disclosure, monitoring, and governance arrangements.

Third, access- and inclusion-related themes remain weakly integrated into the field's central empirical conversations. They appear most clearly within social-franchising and boundary-oriented research rather than within the governance and performance core. Here, "peripheral" refers to the intellectual organization of the literature, not to the substantive importance of inclusion. Social-franchising research occupies a comparatively specialized and peripheral position within the broader bibliographic structure and should not be interpreted as representative of the entire social-franchising literature. Integrative Growth, by contrast, spans several growth, governance, and performance-oriented publication communities and is best interpreted as a boundary-spanning higher-order domain.

The weak integration of inclusion-related research limits the field's ability to explain how institutional conditions shape entrepreneurial participation across ethnic, cultural, and resource-constrained contexts. Entrepreneurs differ in their access to finance, markets, business networks, and institutional support, and these differences reflect broader structural conditions rather than individual motivation or capability alone (Aldrich & Waldinger, 1990; Kloosterman & Rath, 2001; Salehi, 2026). The mapped structure therefore identifies an important research gap: questions of access and participation are present, but they have not been fully incorporated into the dominant governance, financing, and capability-development streams of franchising scholarship.

### *Interpreting the Higher-Order Domain Structure Through Institutionalized Capital Transfer*

Institutionalized Capital Transfer (ICT) provides an interpretive lens for connecting the resource-transfer and governance mechanisms represented across the mapped domains. Rather than treating training, financing, routines, legitimacy, networks, and monitoring as separate inputs, ICT emphasizes how institutional arrangements configure their availability, sequencing, and accessibility within franchise systems.

Viewed through this lens, the literature portrays franchising as an institutionalized opportunity architecture that simultaneously transfers entrepreneurial resources and structures access to them. Capability-transfer mechanisms—including training, mentoring, codified routines, relational governance, and monitoring systems—are examined alongside financing requirements, disclosure practices, contractual arrangements, and institutional predictability. Recent research on conflict management in franchising similarly demonstrates how problem solving, persuasion, bargaining, and related conflict-management processes can contribute to the development of organizational capabilities within franchise systems (Perrigot et al., 2021). These institutional and organizational conditions influence whether the resources provided through franchising can support entry, effective operation, and continued participation in the franchise system.

ICT complements established theoretical perspectives without replacing them. Agency theory foregrounds incentive alignment and monitoring (Combs et al., 2011), human capital perspectives emphasize the accumulation of knowledge and skills (Becker, 1964), and resource-scarcity approaches focus on organizational constraints. ICT connects these concerns by focusing on the institutional pathways through which resources, risks, and participation requirements are jointly configured. Its contribution lies in explaining why the entrepreneurial value of franchising is conditional on system design and context rather than inherent to the organizational form.

This interpretation also clarifies how franchising may both enable and constrain entrepreneurial participation. Standardized routines, brand legitimacy, training, and network

access may reduce some entry and operating uncertainties, while financing requirements, continuing fees, contractual restrictions, and uneven access to institutional support may create or reinforce barriers. The relevant question is therefore not whether franchising is uniformly inclusive, but under what institutional configurations its resource-transfer mechanisms become accessible and productive for differently situated participants.

### *ICT-Informed Research Agenda*

Building on the mapped domains, Table 2 presents an ICT-informed research agenda linking dominant resource-transfer mechanisms to priority empirical questions and boundary conditions. These questions are grounded in the intellectual structure of the literature and are intended to guide future research rather than represent causal findings established by the bibliometric analysis.

**Table 2**

*ICT-Informed Research Agenda Derived from the Mapped Domains*

| Research domain | ICT mechanism | Priority research question | Key boundary conditions |
|---|---|---|---|
| Franchisee Development | Human and social capital | How do training design, embedded learning, mentoring, and relational governance jointly affect franchisee capability development, implementation, and persistence? | Training delivery, relationship quality, prior experience, system maturity |
| Financial Risks | Financial and governance capital | Under what conditions do leverage, disclosure, monitoring, and contractual design enable or constrain entry, financial resilience, and continuation within franchise systems? | Market volatility, credit access, disclosure regimes, enforcement quality |
| Innovation and International Expansion | Human and organizational capital | How do partner selection and learning infrastructures support selective local adaptation while preserving core routines and brand coherence? | Institutional distance, market heterogeneity, partner fit, learning systems |
| Integrative Growth (Boundary-Spanning) | Organizational capital | How must governance, information systems, coordination capacity, and financial resources develop as franchise networks expand? | Digital infrastructure, analytics capability, governance clarity, pace of growth |
| Social Franchising | Hybrid capital configurations | How do mission-aligned financing, hybrid governance, and standardized capability-development systems influence replication and service delivery in institutionally constrained environments? | Institutional gaps, financing instruments, mission complexity, service context |

*Note.* The agenda is derived from the dominant mechanisms, boundary conditions, exemplar articles, and supporting keyword patterns associated with the mapped domains. The questions are intended to guide empirical research and are not tested relationships.

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## Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three principal theoretical contributions. First, it integrates research streams that have typically been organized around governance efficiency, performance, financing, or international expansion (Combs et al., 2004, 2011). Interpreting their intellectual connections through ICT suggests that these domains represent interdependent elements of an institutionalized resource-transfer system rather than isolated areas of franchising research. This integration provides a field-level account of how governance, finance, and capability development jointly structure entrepreneurial opportunity.

Second, the study reframes franchising as an institutionalized opportunity architecture rather than an inherently opportunity-enhancing organizational form. Franchise affiliation may provide access to routines, knowledge, legitimacy, training, and networks, but the usefulness of these resources depends on how financing requirements, risks, decision rights, and support systems are configured. This contingent perspective moves beyond treating franchise participation as automatically enabling and directs attention to the institutional conditions under which franchising may support or constrain entry, persistence, and progression.

Third, the study clarifies the position of access and inclusion within franchising scholarship. These themes are not entirely absent, but they remain weakly connected to the governance and performance core and are most visible within a small peripheral stream. This pattern identifies an important theoretical blind spot: the literature has devoted substantially more attention to system performance and replication than to how participation requirements and resource-transfer mechanisms operate across differently situated entrepreneurs. The implication is especially relevant for ethnic and cultural studies, where institutional arrangements are central to explaining unequal access to economic participation and entrepreneurial opportunity.

Taken together, these contributions support a contingent understanding of franchising in which outcomes depend on institutional design, governance configurations, and contextual constraints rather than organizational form alone. The study therefore moves beyond descriptive classification by connecting the mapped structure to theoretically meaningful mechanisms and boundary conditions.

## Practical and Policy Implications

Because the evidence synthesized here is bibliometric, its practical and policy implications should be interpreted as design-relevant considerations rather than prescriptions. Three considerations recur across the mapped literature.

First, the mapped literature suggests that formal training may be more effective in supporting capability development when it is embedded within ongoing operational support, mentoring, feedback, and relational governance. This pattern highlights the importance of considering not only whether training is provided but also whether participants have the time, resources, and organizational support needed to apply it.

Second, financing, disclosure, and monitoring arrangements should be considered jointly. The Financial Risks domain indicates that franchising is more accurately understood as structuring and reallocating risk than as eliminating it. High leverage, opaque cost structures, weak disclosure, or inadequate monitoring may undermine the value of brand affiliation and operational support, particularly where entrepreneurs face uneven access to finance and institutional resources.

Third, expansion requires corresponding investment in organizational capital. The mapped literature emphasizes the importance of developing information systems, monitoring

capacity, codified routines, analytics, and coordination mechanisms alongside network growth. Expanding the number of units without strengthening these capabilities may increase information asymmetry, coordination strain, and governance complexity.

For policymakers, the mapped literature suggests that franchising's potential contribution to entrepreneurial access may depend on reducing information asymmetries, improving financing accessibility, and strengthening regulatory predictability. These interventions should not assume that all prospective franchisees face the same conditions; rather, they should account for institutional barriers that may affect participation unevenly across social, ethnic, cultural, and economic contexts.

## Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study is subject to several limitations. Its reliance on Scopus publications may exclude relevant research indexed elsewhere or published in other languages. Bibliographic coupling captures intellectual proximity rather than methodological quality, and clustering outcomes remain sensitive to normalization, thresholds, and other parameter choices. Although robustness checks indicated structural stability, alternative specifications may produce modest changes in community boundaries or interpretation.

Of the 276 publications in the final dataset, 234 met the minimum citation threshold of one, and 213 formed the largest connected component used for bibliographic-coupling analysis. Publications outside this connected component may contain relevant perspectives not represented in the mapped network.

Finally, full-text review was used to develop the domain narratives but did not constitute a systematic qualitative coding analysis of every article in the dataset. Future research could combine bibliometric mapping with comprehensive content analysis, multi-database replication, or expert validation to examine whether the identified mechanisms and boundary conditions remain consistent across broader bodies of scholarship.

Future studies should empirically examine how digitalization changes training, monitoring, and governance; how institutional environments condition entry and persistence; and how financing instruments, mentoring networks, and governance reforms affect differently situated entrepreneurs. Longitudinal, multilevel, and comparative designs would be especially useful for evaluating how the resource-transfer mechanisms identified here operate across institutional and cultural contexts.

## Conclusion

This study maps the intellectual structure of franchising research at the intersection of entrepreneurship and small-business scholarship. Bibliographic coupling identified 10 publication communities, which were subsequently synthesized into five higher-order thematic domains; keyword co-occurrence provided secondary support for their interpretation. The resulting structure is concentrated around franchisee development, financial risk, international expansion, and organizational growth, with social franchising emerging as a more specialized boundary stream.

Interpreted through ICT, these domains portray franchising as an institutionalized opportunity architecture that transfers capabilities and resources while simultaneously structuring access, risk, and participation requirements. Training, mentoring, routines, legitimacy, and governance support may strengthen entrepreneurial capability, but their value depends on financing arrangements, disclosure practices, monitoring capacity, contractual design, and institutional predictability. Franchising should therefore be understood as neither uniformly inclusive nor uniformly restrictive.

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The study's central contribution is to connect previously fragmented research streams and clarify the conditions that should be examined in future empirical work. It also indicates that access- and inclusion-related concerns remain weakly integrated into the field's dominant conversations. By foregrounding the institutional configuration of resources, risks, and participation requirements, ICT provides a basis for investigating how franchising systems may structure entrepreneurial opportunity differently across populations and contexts.

## Author Contributions

**Elizabeth J. Muniz:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.

**A. Banu Goktan:** Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.

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## Ethics Statement

This study analyzed bibliographic data from published scholarly literature and did not involve human participants, identifiable private information, or animal subjects. Institutional Review Board approval was therefore not applicable.

## Data Availability Statement

The bibliographic data analyzed in this study were obtained from the Scopus database under license and are therefore not publicly available for redistribution. The search strategy, analytical procedures, and parameter settings are documented in the manuscript to support transparency and replication.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Manuscript Preparation Process

During the preparation and revision of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for editorial assistance, including language refinement, clarity, and readability.

Generative AI was not used to generate research data, conduct the bibliometric analyses, interpret the results, or produce substantive manuscript content. All editorial suggestions were critically reviewed and revised by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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