

Articles

Exploring the Rise of Franchisor Influencers: Strategic Implications and Emerging Themes

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This study explores emerging trends in social media marketing strategies employed by franchisor influencers. Utilizing a qualitative, exploratory approach, the research involved in-depth interviews with 10 franchisor influencers, with data analyzed through thematic analysis and MAXQDA. The findings offer key insights for franchisors seeking to optimize their influencer marketing efforts, emphasizing the importance of personal branding, relationship building, strengthening influencer support systems, educating influencers on the franchise business model, leveraging storytelling, and promoting authenticity and credibility. Additionally, the study highlights the need for customized social media strategies to effectively attract qualified franchisees, increase brand awareness, and ensure long-term success. By contributing to the literature on franchising, personal branding, and social media marketing for small businesses, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the unique dynamics and challenges faced by franchisors in leveraging social media marketing.

Introduction

Franchising is a prevalent business model across diverse industries, designed to accelerate growth and enhance profitability (Kelepouris, 2023). At its core, the model strategically blends the economies of scale associated with large systems with the adaptability and responsiveness of small, localized operations (Kaufmann & Eroglu, 1999). Franchisees pay franchisors, typically through royalties on sales, in exchange for access to proven business practices, training, advertising, purchasing power, research and development, and overall business synergy. This arrangement enables franchisees to achieve rapid market penetration while benefiting from established operational systems and brand recognition.

In recent years, founders and senior executives of emerging franchise systems have increasingly adopted the role of social media influencers. This trend has been driven by the growing influence of digital marketing, the popularity of influencer-based communication, and increasing skepticism toward traditional advertising channels (Leung et al., 2022). Rather than relying solely on external influencers or celebrity endorsements, many franchisors now leverage their own personal brands and social media platforms to communicate directly with prospective franchisees and customers.

Social media influencer marketing involves a strategy in which individuals with established online followings shape audience perceptions, educate stakeholders, and build trust in brands. Traditional influencers often focus on lifestyle, entertainment, or product promotion. In contrast, fran-

chisor influencers represent a distinct category of influencers because they promote not merely products or services, but business ownership opportunities and franchise systems. These individuals leverage their authority, operational expertise, entrepreneurial credibility, and industry knowledge to influence perceptions surrounding franchise ownership.

Unlike traditional influencers, franchisor influencers occupy a role that combines executive leadership, entrepreneurial signaling, recruitment, education, and brand representation. This positioning creates unique challenges surrounding authenticity, credibility, and audience trust. While franchisor influencers benefit from insider expertise and operational authority, audiences may also perceive conflicts between authentic storytelling and commercial motivations.

The franchisor remains primarily responsible for establishing the initial value of the brand, but brand perception is also shaped by franchisee behavior, customer experiences, and increasingly, executive-led social media engagement. Through platforms such as LinkedIn, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and podcasts, franchisor influencers share operational insights, franchisee success stories, motivational narratives, behind-the-scenes content, and educational information about business ownership.

This exploratory qualitative research study examines the emerging role of franchisor influencers within the broader social media marketing landscape. Accordingly, this study explores the following research question: How do franchisor influencers utilize personal branding and social media engagement to support franchise growth and stake-

holder engagement? Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study explores the motivations, strategies, opportunities, and challenges faced by franchisor influencers. The findings contribute to the growing literature on personal branding, entrepreneurial marketing, and influencer marketing by identifying the unique dynamics associated with executive-led influencer marketing within franchise systems.

Literature Review

Personal Branding and Entrepreneurial Marketing

Personal branding has emerged as an increasingly important concept within entrepreneurship, leadership, and franchising. Personal branding theory suggests that individuals can cultivate distinct identities that resonate with audiences and strengthen credibility, influence, and marketability (Avis et al., 2013). Within entrepreneurial settings, founders and executives frequently use personal branding to humanize organizations, communicate expertise, and establish trust with stakeholders. Within franchise systems, personal branding may be particularly influential because franchise growth depends heavily on trust, credibility, and relationship development between franchisors and prospective franchisees. King et al. (2013) emphasize the importance of the “human element” within franchise brand management, arguing that franchise systems benefit when leaders cultivate stronger interpersonal and relational connections with stakeholders. Similarly, Hollenbeck (2018) argues that digital communication environments have weakened the traditional value associated solely with chain affiliation, increasing the importance of personal trust mechanisms and online reputation. As social media platforms increasingly shape stakeholder perceptions, founders and executives have become more visible representatives of organizational brands. Entrepreneurial leaders now frequently utilize platforms such as LinkedIn, Instagram, YouTube, podcasts, and TikTok to communicate organizational culture, operational philosophies, personal experiences, and strategic vision. These practices have contributed to the emergence of executive visibility as a form of strategic branding.

Influencer Marketing, Authenticity, and Trust

Influencer marketing has become one of the dominant forms of digital marketing in recent years. Influencers leverage social media audiences to shape perceptions, generate engagement, and influence stakeholder attitudes and behaviors. Existing research suggests that influencer marketing is often perceived as more authentic and relatable than traditional advertising because audiences view influencers as more personal, accessible, and trustworthy (Leung et al., 2022). However, existing scholarship also highlights several challenges associated with influencer marketing. One major concern involves authenticity. Audrezet et al. (2020) argue that influencers frequently face pressure to maintain authenticity while simultaneously en-

gaging in promotional activity. As commercialization increases, audiences may become skeptical when influencers appear overly scripted, excessively promotional, or heavily controlled by sponsoring organizations. The growing commercialization of influencer marketing has also generated broader concerns surrounding credibility and trust. Unlike traditional advertising, influencer marketing often relies heavily on perceived personal relationships between influencers and audiences. Consequently, perceived inauthenticity or excessive organizational control may negatively impact audience trust and engagement.

Existing literature further suggests that influencers may experience role conflict when balancing multiple organizational or stakeholder responsibilities. Raha and Hajdini (2020) note that stakeholders occupying multiple roles may experience tension between commercial objectives, relational expectations, and personal identity. These tensions become especially relevant within franchise systems where franchisor influencers simultaneously operate as executives, operators, recruiters, educators, and public representatives of organizational brands.

Social Media Marketing Within Franchising

The existing body of research on social media marketing within franchising remains relatively limited compared to broader marketing scholarship. Nevertheless, prior studies suggest that social media plays an increasingly important role in franchise growth, customer engagement, and brand visibility. Brookes et al. (2016) argue that franchisors benefit from actively engaging with franchisees and leveraging localized expertise to strengthen customer relationships and enhance brand visibility. Abdul Ghani et al. (2022) similarly emphasize the importance of strategic social media integration for franchise growth and organizational performance.

Research has also examined broader challenges associated with digital marketing and social media performance measurement. Peters et al. (2013) highlight the ongoing difficulty organizations face when developing meaningful social media performance indicators and evaluating marketing effectiveness across digital platforms. Despite growing interest in social media marketing, limited scholarship has examined how franchise executives themselves become influencers and utilize personal branding to support franchise growth. Existing studies have primarily focused on consumer marketing, franchisee relationships, or broader digital marketing strategies rather than executive-led influencer marketing.

Franchisor Influencers as an Emerging Phenomenon

Franchisor influencers represent a distinct and emerging category of influencer marketing. Unlike traditional influencers who typically promote products, entertainment, or lifestyle content, franchisor influencers market business ownership opportunities and franchise systems. This distinction is important because franchise ownership involves substantial financial commitments, operational responsi-

bilities, long-term contractual relationships, and organizational dependence between franchisors and franchisees. As a result, franchisor influencers must communicate not only aspirational branding but also operational realities, support structures, leadership credibility, training systems, financial expectations, and organizational culture.

The complexity of franchise ownership creates a unique communication environment in which authenticity, trust, and credibility become particularly important. Prospective franchisees are not simply evaluating products or services; they are evaluating leadership, organizational culture, operational support, and long-term business relationships. Consequently, franchisor influencers occupy a unique position within the broader influencer marketing landscape. They function simultaneously as executives, entrepreneurs, educators, recruiters, and public-facing representatives of franchise systems. This combination of responsibilities creates unique opportunities as well as tensions surrounding authenticity, organizational alignment, and audience trust. Given the limited scholarship surrounding this phenomenon, additional exploratory research is necessary to better understand how franchisor influencers utilize social media, storytelling, authenticity, and personal branding to support franchise growth and stakeholder engagement. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences, strategies, and perceptions of franchisor influencers.

Research Motivation

Unlike promoting a singular product, franchisors are fundamentally marketing business ownership opportunities. This complexity requires a more nuanced approach to influencer marketing. Franchisor influencers must communicate not only brand appeal but also operational expectations, support systems, financial realities, leadership credibility, and long-term franchisee success. Given the nascent nature of franchisor influencer marketing, a deeper understanding of this phenomenon is necessary. Existing scholarship has largely overlooked the role of franchise executives as influencers, despite the increasing prevalence of founder-driven and executive-led social media branding.

This exploratory study seeks to better understand how franchisor influencers leverage storytelling, authenticity, social media engagement, and personal branding to support franchise growth. In addition to anticipated themes surrounding storytelling and authenticity, the research uncovered several unexpected themes, including relationship building, influencer support systems, education on the franchise business model, and authenticity tensions surrounding role conflict. These findings provide important implications for future research, theory development, and practical applications within franchising and entrepreneurial marketing.

Methodology & Research Design

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative research design to investigate the emerging role of franchisor influencers within social media marketing. Given the limited scholarship surrounding this phenomenon, an inductive

qualitative approach was appropriate because it allows researchers to observe and interpret underexplored behaviors and practices in real-world settings. Qualitative research is particularly valuable during the early stages of investigating emerging phenomena because it allows themes, patterns, and conceptual relationships to emerge organically from participant experiences rather than testing predetermined hypotheses. Such exploratory work can contribute to future theory building and conceptual model development.

Participant Selection

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify participants who met criteria relevant to the study. The sample consisted of ten franchisor influencers who actively promoted themselves and their franchise brands through social media platforms. Participants represented industries including health and wellness, home services, construction, consulting services, employment services, and beauty and personal care. The sample included 70% male participants, individuals with varying years of franchise leadership experience, and executives with active presences on LinkedIn, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and podcasts. Participants were selected based on active social media engagement, demonstrated thought leadership within franchising, established franchise leadership roles, and experience using social media to support franchise growth. Data saturation was achieved during the later interviews, as no substantially new themes emerged.

Data Collection & Analysis

Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes were conducted virtually. The interview guide focused on influencer marketing strategies, storytelling and personal branding, authenticity and audience trust, social media platform selection, relationship building, perceived challenges and tensions, and education regarding franchise ownership. The semi-structured format allowed participants to elaborate on experiences while ensuring consistent coverage of major themes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Thematic analysis was conducted using MAXQDA software following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process, including familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. To strengthen rigor and reduce interpretive bias, two researchers collaboratively coded the interview transcripts. The coding process was iterative and consensus-driven. Researchers discussed emerging interpretations, refined coding definitions, and revisited coded segments throughout the analysis process. This collaborative approach enhanced consistency and strengthened the credibility of the findings.

Findings

The qualitative analysis revealed six major themes: storytelling, authenticity, social media presence, support sys-

tems, relationship building, and education on the franchise business model. Additionally, a broader conceptual theme emerged surrounding authenticity tensions and role conflict within executive-led influencer marketing. Within the findings, storytelling emerged as a central component of franchisor influencer marketing. Participants described storytelling as a mechanism for building emotional connection, communicating brand values, and motivating prospective franchisees. Participants emphasized that credibility and lived experience were essential to effective storytelling:

“You have to have credibility, which doesn’t happen overnight.”

“You have to actually build a story before you start sharing one.”

Participants frequently referenced transparency, consistency, and educational storytelling as critical elements. Storytelling also functioned as a mechanism for simplifying complex business ownership concepts into accessible and engaging narratives. Beyond storytelling, participants consistently emphasized the importance of authenticity in building audience trust and engagement. Participants repeatedly noted that audiences respond more positively to candid, unscripted, and personal content. Several participants discussed the importance of remaining genuine online:

“I try to be my normal candid self and that seems to work online.”

“The real me is the most important version.”

Participants believed authenticity enhanced trust, credibility, and conversion effectiveness. However, participants also acknowledged that maintaining authenticity while promoting franchise opportunities can create tension, particularly when balancing personal branding with organizational objectives. Participants also discussed the strategic importance of maintaining an active and intentional social media presence. Platform selection was described as highly strategic, with LinkedIn emerging as particularly important because it aligned with business-oriented audiences and prospective franchisees. One participant explained:

“LinkedIn performs well because we’re talking to business owners.”

Participants also highlighted collaboration within influencer ecosystems, including podcasts, cross-platform appearances, and shared content. Another important theme involved the need for stronger support systems for franchisor influencers. Participants expressed interest in better communication channels, training resources, operational information, marketing support, and brand guidance. At the same time, participants expressed concern that excessive scripting could undermine authenticity. This created a recurring tension between organizational alignment and authentic communication.

Relationship building also emerged as a major theme throughout the interviews. Participants consistently em-

phasized that successful franchisor influencer marketing relies heavily on relationship building rather than purely transactional marketing. Unlike traditional product influencers, franchisor influencers market long-term business relationships and financial commitments. Participants emphasized trust, expectation management, franchisee fit, long-term alignment, and community development. These findings suggest that franchisor influencer marketing may function more as relational signaling than traditional advertising.

Participants also emphasized the importance of education surrounding the franchise business model. Participants frequently discussed the need to educate audiences about franchise fee structures, support systems, capital requirements, operational realities, and brand culture. Participants believed educational content improved franchisee quality and expectation alignment. One participant stated:

“I connect emotionally, but I also explain how the business actually works.”

Discussion

The findings reveal that franchisor influencers occupy a unique and evolving position within the broader influencer marketing landscape. Unlike traditional influencers, franchisor influencers combine executive leadership, entrepreneurial signaling, education, recruitment, operational credibility, and personal branding. This hybrid positioning creates both opportunities and tensions.

Executive-Led Influencer Marketing

This study contributes to the growing literature on entrepreneurial and executive-led influencer marketing by identifying franchisor influencers as a distinct category of organizational influencer. Rather than functioning solely as brand ambassadors, franchisor influencers simultaneously serve as executives, operators, recruiters, educators, community builders, and public-facing influencers. This hybrid structure distinguishes franchisor influencer marketing from more traditional forms of influencer engagement.

Authenticity Tension and Role Conflict

One of the most significant conceptual findings involves the tension between authenticity and organizational alignment. Participants emphasized the importance of authenticity, candid communication, and personal storytelling. However, they also acknowledged the challenges associated with balancing authentic self-expression with brand messaging and franchise recruitment objectives. This finding aligns with existing literature on influencer authenticity and stakeholder role conflict (Audrezet et al., 2020; Raha & Hajdini, 2020).

Franchisor influencers face unique pressures because they are simultaneously responsible for maintaining credibility, promoting franchise growth, representing organizational values, managing expectations, and educating potential franchisees. Excessive organizational control or scripting may undermine audience trust and perceived au-

thenticity. Conversely, insufficient alignment may create reputational or operational risk for franchise systems. This tension represents an important area for future research. The findings also suggest that franchisor influencer marketing functions differently from traditional transactional influencer marketing. Because franchise ownership involves substantial financial and relational commitments, audiences appear to evaluate franchisor influencers not merely as marketers, but as long-term trust signals.

Practical Implications

The findings provide several practical implications for franchisors and entrepreneurial organizations. Franchisor influencers should prioritize authentic storytelling over highly scripted promotional content, as audiences appear to respond more favorably to candid narratives and lived experiences. Educational content regarding operational realities, support systems, financial expectations, and franchise culture may also improve lead quality and expectation alignment among prospective franchisees. The findings further suggest that franchisors should develop stronger support systems that provide influencers with communication resources, operational information, and marketing guidance while still preserving enough autonomy to maintain authenticity. Excessive scripting or organizational control may undermine audience trust and reduce perceived credibility. Platform selection should also align strategically with target audience demographics. Participants consistently identified LinkedIn as particularly effective for franchise development due to its business-oriented audience and professional networking environment. Finally, franchisor influencer marketing appears most effective when approached as a long-term relationship building strategy rather than a purely transactional marketing tactic.

Limitations and Future Research

This study presents several limitations. First, the study relied on a relatively small purposive sample of ten participants. While appropriate for exploratory qualitative research, the findings may not fully generalize across all franchise systems. Second, the study focused primarily on

franchisor influencers with active social media engagement, potentially excluding perspectives from less visible executives. Third, thematic analysis involves interpretive judgment, which may introduce researcher subjectivity despite collaborative coding procedures. Despite these limitations, the exploratory nature of this study provides foundational insights into an emerging phenomenon that remains underexamined within franchising scholarship.

Future research should further examine authenticity tensions within executive-led influencer marketing, audience perceptions of franchisor influencer credibility, the relationship between influencer authenticity and franchise recruitment outcomes, differences across industries and platforms, and quantitative measures of executive-led influencer effectiveness. Additionally, future research may explore how franchisors balance organizational alignment with influencer autonomy and authenticity.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing literature on influencer marketing, entrepreneurial marketing, and franchising by examining the emerging role of franchisor influencers. The findings reveal that franchisor influencers utilize storytelling, authenticity, relationship building, education, and strategic platform engagement to shape audience perceptions and support franchise growth. Importantly, the study identifies franchisor influencers as a distinct category of executive-led influencer characterized by hybrid organizational roles and authenticity tensions. As franchise systems continue to expand their digital presence, executive-led influencer marketing will likely play an increasingly important role in franchise recruitment, brand positioning, and stakeholder engagement. The findings suggest that successful franchisor influencer marketing requires more than visibility or follower counts. It requires trust, credibility, authenticity, operational expertise, and long-term relationship development.

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