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THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE FIELD OF AUDITING - A MINI-STUDY STRATEGIC THINKING, INNOVATION, AND FRANCHISING IN A CHAOTIC BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT: A THEORETICAL APPROACH

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Abstract
The uncertainty of the business environment has led some experts to describe it in academic literature as 'chaotic'. This business chaos manifests itself through: technological changes, global competition, consumer preferences, economic and geopolitical events, digitalisation and artificial intelligence, etc. This paper analyses some of the factors that have shaped the business environment in the context of this chaos, as well as strategic thinking and innovation in the context of franchising. Managers' strategic thinking enables them to anticipate opportunities, whilst innovation is the key factor in helping companies adapt to market demands. Furthermore, franchising constitutes a strategy for business expansion and development, offering the possibility of replicating successful business models. Consequently, this topic is relevant from both a practical and theoretical perspective, as it provides a better understanding of how firms can develop in today's business environment.

Keywords: *Knowledge, Innovation, Strategic Thinking, Franchising*

JEL Classification: *M10; O31*

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INTRODUCTION

We believe it is important, right from the outset, to clarify how strategic thinking is understood in its entirety. A paper by Bratianu C. and Murakawa H. defines strategic thinking as a complex cognitive process that combines a temporal perspective, uncertainty, a probabilistic approach, intelligence and creativity. It also requires an optimistic attitude and strong motivation focused on anticipating and managing future changes. This type of thinking is essential in decision-making and is effectively applied in research, engineering, management, etc. (Bratianu & Murakawa, 2004). Another perspective defines strategic thinking as creativity and innovation in generating options, but above all as the ability to choose the most favourable option. It provides leaders with clarity about the present and a clear direction for the future, enabling them to adjust their efforts rapidly with minimal resources. Strategic thinking is a flexible system of problem-solving and planning, in which the leader's role is to determine what is truly essential (Nițu, 2015).

Some studies suggest that a company's innovativeness lies in its ability to implement new solutions, both technological and non-technological. This characteristic reflects not only an openness to innovation but also the ability to transform ideas into 'tangible' results (Jabłońska, 2024).

The business environment demonstrates that organisational changes are inevitable, necessary and affect all companies, 'forcing' them to adapt to new realities. Digital transformation is becoming essential for success and viability in the age of digitalisation. In summary, we can define digital transformation as a process through which organisations adapt their activities, business models and internal processes by utilising digital technologies, making it essential for survival in the economy. This is interlinked with digitalisation itself, which involves the conversion of analogue data and processes into digital format, thereby establishing the necessary technical foundation. Digital transformation, however, goes beyond the technical aspect, involving strategic, cultural and organisational changes. A telling example is Starbucks, which has integrated digital solutions such as mobile ordering and payments or the Starbucks Rewards programme, enhancing customer convenience and loyalty (Șendrea, 2025).

In the current context, digitalisation is bringing about changes to 'traditional' franchise models, in that it is creating new opportunities and challenges. New technologies are improving collaboration between franchisors and franchisees through smart tools, smart platforms, data analysis, etc. However, the adoption of these technologies involves difficulties relating to adapting the legal framework, 'educating' companies, massive

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investment in infrastructure and skilled staff, as well as the impact on the competitiveness and growth of franchises in the digital economy (Peskova, 2025).

I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper focuses in particular on some of the issues of greatest interest to the business community. More specifically, it provides a concise analysis of strategic thinking, innovation and franchising in the business environment. The current business environment is characterised by uncertainty, chaos, disruptions of various kinds, etc. Consequently, amongst other things, we believe that the concerns of top management should centre on the key points outlined in this paper.

In brief, the following methodological approaches were employed in the preparation of this paper:

- In the first phase, a review of the specialist literature was conducted. More specifically, the theoretical foundation for this topic was established.
- The second stage involved presenting key information in graphical form to facilitate and aid understanding of the theoretical aspects.
- In the third stage, we compiled a list of the top franchisors globally. This list provides an overview of the international franchise market and identifies successful business models. We have also included references to Romania amongst the companies featured in the summary.

II. HOTICISM IN THE BUSINESS WORLD

Two authors, Kotler P. and Caslione J.A., in a work that has become a standard reference, argue that there is a genuine sense of chaos in the current business environment in which millions of firms in capitalist economies have been operating, from 2008 to the present day (Kotler & Caslione, 2009). According to the two authors, there are seven factors that have shaped the current business environment and which, through their combined influence, explain the current chaos in the global economy; these seven factors are summarised as follows (Kotler & Caslione, 2009):

- Factor F1: The information revolution, which began in the 1960s with the advent of the computer and was subsequently amplified by the internet, social media, etc.
- Factor F2: Disruptive innovations: these refer to innovations and/or technologies that have a major impact on an industry or society and which subsequently lead to the gradual elimination of certain companies or industries and the emergence of new competitors. In fact, these refer to Christensen's concept, originally published in 1995 as an article in the Harvard Business Review.
- Factor F3: The rise of the 'rest of the world': this refers to the intensification of international competition through the emergence of companies such as Lenovo and Huawei from China, Tata from India, as well as firms from other Asian countries and other regions of the world.

can be used to strengthen controls, combat fraud and improve compliance.

- Factor F4: Hyper-competition refers to the intense and dynamic competition in any market, which forces companies to innovate and adapt to change in a context of uncertainty and risk.
- Factor F5: The environment refers to current aspects of the business environment, such as: digitalisation, the uncertain situation regarding global events, and the post-pandemic period, which have forced companies to 'invent' new strategies for adaptation and survival, etc. (we will discuss the disruptive strategies employed by large MNCs later).
- Factor F6: Customer ability, refers to the fact that today's consumers are far better informed and have multiple sources at their disposal to analyse and compare products, services, etc.; firms must adapt to this context in line with culture, beliefs and other factors that rapidly alter consumer trends.
- Factor F7: Sovereign funds and other current factors, refers to the influence exerted by major sovereign wealth funds, including those from oil-exporting countries, which, through the power they wield, can alter the perceptions of investors, consumers, etc. More recently, this factor has also come to include major global crises such as: the US–China trade war, the COVID-19 crisis, the war launched by Russia in Ukraine, the energy crisis, etc.

In Figure 1 below, we present a graphical representation of the influence of factors F1–F7 on the external and internal environment in which the company operates and which, through the cumulative effects of these factors, generate new constraints on the CEO's vision and the innovation processes.

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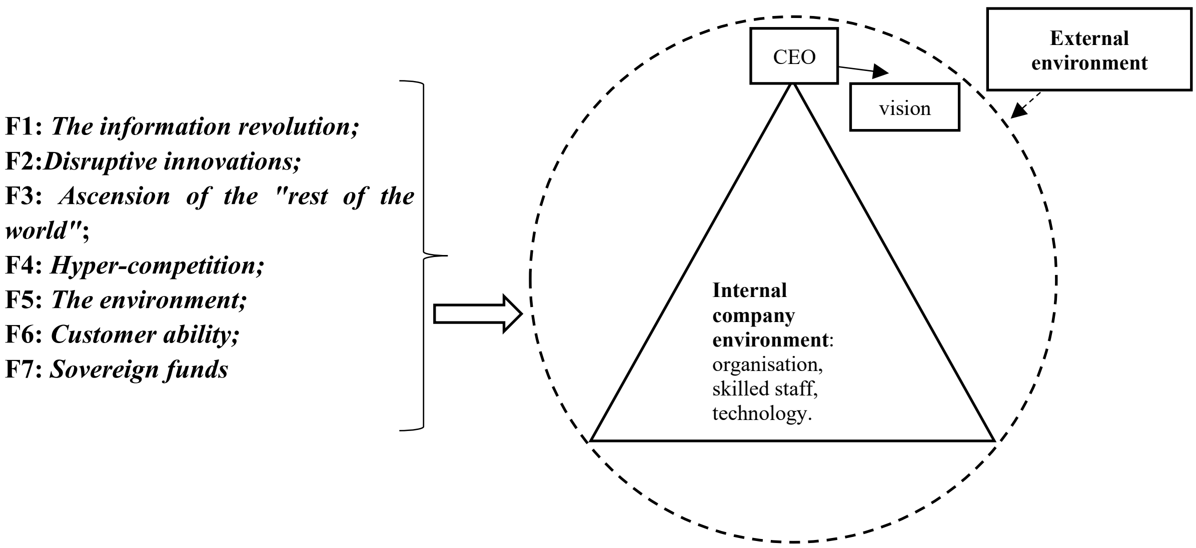

Figure 1. The influence of factors F1-F7 on inter-firm innovation. Source: Written by the author.

Christensen's concept is, in fact, based on one of Schumpeter's key ideas, namely 'creative destruction'; it was received with particular interest both by large corporations and by various theorists interested in innovation as a continuous process in the evolution of capitalist economies. The realities shaping international competition and certain service sectors have confirmed the existence of numerous disruptive innovations and technologies, and the implications these have for strategic thinking at the level of firms, society, politics, etc.

In the West, the concepts of development and innovation are interlinked, and the acceleration of technological change at a global level has further strengthened this link (Delre, 2007).

The concepts of 'social enterprise', 'social entrepreneurship' and other related terms are frequently encountered in the specialist literature aimed at identifying and implementing solutions to complex social problems, such as poverty. Although the use of these concepts varies significantly depending on the context, they essentially derive either from the economic paradigm of profit-oriented enterprises or from that of non-profit organisations. For this reason, they are not synonymous with the term 'social business', which implies a distinct model. Social entrepreneurship refers, in particular, to the individual initiative of an entrepreneur motivated by a clear social mission, whose endeavour aims to have a positive impact on the community through an innovative and sustainable vision (Yunus, 2010).

An analysis of the concepts developed by Peter Drucker highlights a number of key principles that continue to exert a significant influence on contemporary management and marketing paradigms. These principles reflect a customer-focused approach, innovation and strategic adaptability, and can be summarised as follows (Kermally, 2009):

- There is an intrinsic link between marketing and economic activity, in the sense that the essence of a business lies in its marketing function, and marketing forms the core of any viable entrepreneurial initiative.
- An organisation's identity and mission must be defined from the consumer's perspective, which involves reorienting the decision-making process in line with the needs and expectations of the market.
- The customer is the key player who determines the nature, direction and purpose of a business; they are, in essence, the generator of economic value.
- Profitability does not stem from the organisation's internal objectives, but from its ability to respond effectively to customer demand.
- The long-term success of a business is directly proportional to the level of strategic integration of the marketing function into decision-making processes.
- Market research must be based on open-ended and flexible hypotheses, avoiding the limitations imposed by traditional paradigms or unfounded assumptions.
- The primary aim of a business is not to forcefully change customers' behaviour, but to understand and meet their needs in an efficient and ethical manner.
- Innovation involves deliberately moving away from outdated structures, processes or products in favour of solutions tailored to current market demands.
- Effective marketing strategies focus on highlighting concrete benefits for the customer, as these are the source of perceived value and brand loyalty.

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Drucker tells us that an effective decision-maker must weigh up the effort and risk involved in taking action against the risk of inaction. When striving for efficiency, two major aspects must be taken into account (Drucker, 1994):

- action is required when the benefits outweigh the costs and risks
- a clear decision must be made, specifically whether or not to take action; however, resorting to compromises is not recommended.

III. STRATEGIC THINKING AND PERFORMANCE

For several decades now, particularly in the business world, ideas such as the need to cope with future changes and the imperatives of managing them through strategic thinking have been frequently discussed. However, a fundamental question remains: 'How, in practical terms, can we achieve this?' Although the answer might seem simple at first glance, Alvin Toffler offers a deeper and more nuanced perspective in his book *Future Shock*. According to him, in order to survive and avoid what he calls 'future shock', the individual must become considerably more adaptable and competent than ever before. Developments over recent decades have confirmed the validity of many of Toffler's predictions. However, certain authors emphasise that his analysis did not sufficiently capture the profound impact of accelerated change on corporate structures and on the way in which they function and adapt (Trout & Rivkin, 2008).

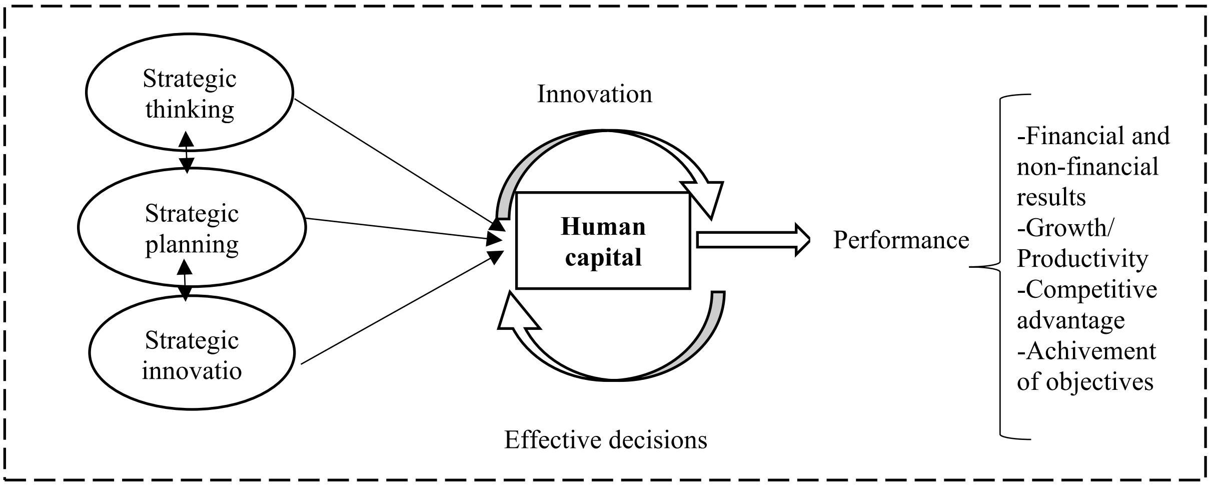

Figure 2. The link between strategic thinking and performance. Source: Author's elaboration based on AlQershi N., *Strategic thinking, strategic planning, strategic innovation and the performance of SMEs: The mediating role of human capital*, Management Science Letters, 11, 2021

Globally, the challenge in innovation is not a lack of innovators or ideas, but rather the successful management of innovation itself. Whatever the innovation, in order for it to become useful, it must pay for itself over time. In addition to the cash returns that an innovation can generate, it brings certain indirect benefits which also lead to financial resources (Andrew & Sirkin, 2011):

- ✓ Knowledge – the entire innovation process generates knowledge throughout its duration. This knowledge takes the form of patents, various rights, trade secrets, commercial assets, etc. In particular, large companies pursue certain projects for the benefits derived from this knowledge. A telling example is the AIBO robotic dog produced by Sony. The product's sensor-based components help to facilitate the creation of subsequent products;

Brand – a successful innovation can improve a company's market position, thereby attracting more customers, strengthening relationships with partners and suppliers, and so on. One example of this is the internet-enabled fridge produced by LG Electronics Digital Appliance Company in 2002. Thanks to this innovation, the company expanded into the US market and became a competitor in the premium segment.;

- ✓ Ecosystem – innovators create a well-established ecosystem comprising customers, suppliers, investors, partners, various organisations, etc., thereby building a reputation in the market. Through various innovations, the company can secure advantages such as: priority access to raw materials, favourable terms in various contracts, exclusivity regarding certain goods or services, etc. One example of this is Dolby Laboratories, which worked closely with the professional recording industry to produce a revolutionary noise-reduction system. The company succeeded in establishing its own technology as the

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industry standard across the entire market.;

- ✓ The organisation – in innovative organisations, qualified staff remain and commit to the organisation. Retaining qualified staff within the organisation brings with it a number of benefits beyond those of a financial nature. An example of this can be found in the case of the Utopias product, produced by The Boston Beer Company in 2002. This product led to the institutionalisation of innovation at Boston Beer.

Authors Diamandis P. H. and Kotler S. suggest that, to stay ahead of developments, we must understand the trends in the Gartner Hype Cycle. The same authors emphasise that it is absolutely essential for entrepreneurs to recognise the moment when a technological innovation emerges from the 'trough of disillusionment' and ascends the 'slope of enlightenment' (Diamandis & Kotler, 2016). Technology in franchising refers to the use of digital tools to: enhance the customer experience, streamline operational activities and expand the business. Some relevant examples include: POS systems, mobile apps, stock management software, online marketing, data analytics platforms, etc. (Sabaran & Abd Aziz, 2023).

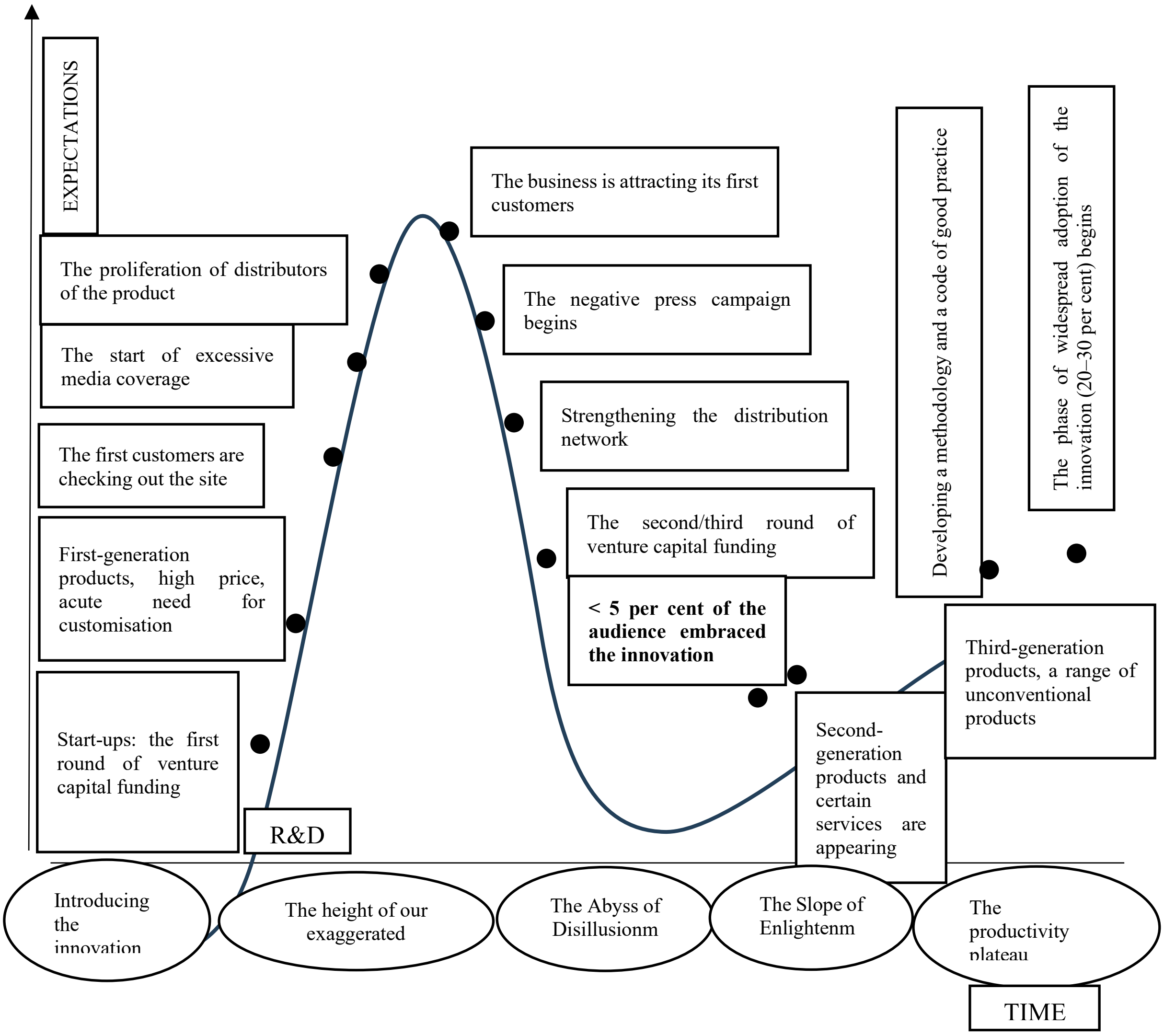

Figure 3. The indicators of the Gartner Hype. Source: Author's elaboration based on Diamandis P. H., Kotler S., *Bold. How To Go Big, Achieve Succes, and Impact the World*, PHD Ventures, 2015; the Romanian edition: *Îndrăznește! De la idei inovatoare la povești de succes*, Editura Niculescu, București, 2016

Numerous companies worldwide are adopting organisational cultures centred on promoting independence. In the past, many of these organisations managed to turn a profit without team collaboration, as the activities carried out and the products produced did not require cooperation between employees. In this context, organisational experts have broken down work into the simplest possible components, in a continuous effort to optimise processes. As a result, organisational structures have evolved towards increasingly autonomous and independent forms (Dent, 2004).

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IV. THE CONTEXT OF FRANCHISING IN BUSINESS

The specialist literature identifies the period from the late 19th to the early 20th century as the era of the first generation of franchises. Coca-Cola Co distributed its products to numerous outlets through a licensing agreement. The period that followed saw a significant expansion of franchise activities. In the US in 1960, a 'revolution' took place in the franchise system, leading to the emergence of approximately 700 franchise systems based on this business model. Following the success in the US, Western Europe adopted the model around the seventh decade of the 20th century. In 1944, there were several countries with a considerable number of franchise systems: France (600), the United Kingdom (432), Germany (390), Italy (387), the Netherlands (309), Spain (200) and Austria (170) (Molico & Wunder, 2002).

Owing to the rapid adoption of this system, various European and international organisations were established with the aim of creating a legal framework for this type of business. Of these, we shall mention only a few in passing: the International Franchise Association (founded in 1960 and based in Washington), the European Franchise Association (1971), the French Franchise Federation (1971), the Italian Franchise Association (1972), the British Franchising Association (1977), and the German Franchising Association (1978) (Molico & Wunder, 2002).

In simple terms, a franchise is a distribution system organised through vertical cooperation. It is based on rights and obligations for the duration of the contract. The economic actors involved in this contract are: the franchisor (who grants the licence) and the franchisee (who receives the licence). This 'business package', developed by the franchisor, comprises a number of components (Molico & Wunder, 2002): a clear method of supply, distribution and organisation; protection and guarantee rights for the franchisee; the preparation and training of franchisees; the establishment of obligations towards the franchisee; the development of the franchise concept throughout the contractual term. We take it for granted that franchising, as a type of business network, generates interests for both contracting parties. Below, we summarise some of the interests of both parties. For the franchisor, this system translates into (Molico & Wunder 2002): 'exploiting the advantages offered by a fully integrated branch system in terms of organisational discipline and refined marketing.'; the elimination of the many disadvantages, such as those found in a branch system.

Generally speaking, the franchisor's interests stem from the idea that they can enjoy the benefits of an independent business whilst avoiding the risks faced by a company that does not operate within a franchise business network. On the whole, it can be said that most of the issues and interests in a franchise-type business are of a common nature (Molico & Wunder, 2002).

In this type of business network, there are instances where the franchisor chooses to revoke the franchisee's licence. There may be numerous such cases, but these vary depending on the nature of the contract between the parties. To avoid having to resort to this measure, a paper published under the auspices of the Body of Chartered Accountants and Authorised Accountants of Romania (CECCAR) outlines certain 'characteristics' that a franchisee should possess in order to be accepted as a partner (Molico & Wunder, 2002): have an entrepreneurial mindset; possess the necessary knowledge in the field; be a decision-maker; possess communication skills and be open towards the franchisor and partners; be able to work as part of a team, etc.; in practical terms, their personal profile must include: presence, attitude, originality, commitment, reliability, professionalism, etc.

In today's business environment, there is a wide range of franchise options, including within Romania. The decision to choose a franchisor is based on several criteria, of which we list just a few (Molico & Wunder, 2002): the franchisor must have a successful and trustworthy business model; the franchisee must carry out 'research' into the franchisor's operations; the franchisee must conduct a financial analysis to determine whether they have the necessary resources to avoid financial difficulties, particularly in the early stages, etc. In addition to the financial resources the franchisee must possess, they must pay a series of fees (registration, consultancy, marketing, for the transfer of equipment and inventory, for the use of patents and know-how, for the early termination of the contract between the parties, etc.) (Molico & Wunder, 2002).

Regardless of the choice made by the franchisor or the franchisee, both partners are subject to risks characteristic of this business model (Molico & Wunder, 2002): risks associated with the franchisee's start-up phase; specific risks arising from the nature of the market; risks arising from the interruption of the company's operations; risks in the event of force majeure; risks arising from economic recessions, etc.

In the global economy, franchising as a type of business network enjoys a solid and well-deserved 'reputation'. The system is utilised in key areas of the movement of goods and the provision of services. Globally, the following franchises remain the benchmark (Molico & Wunder, 2002): in the computer sector: Apple, IBM, Philips, Siemens, etc.; in the automotive sector: Ford; for soft drinks: Coca-Cola; for car hire: Hertz and Avis; in the fast-food sector: McDonald's and Burger King; for the hospitality sector: Howard Johnson's, Holiday Inn, Ramada Inn, the café industry.; In addition to these, we consider that Starbucks can also be classified as a global

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franchise in the coffee shop industry. The company began operations in 1971 (Starbucks, 2026) in the USA and has expanded to include Romania. This model of coffee shop has also been adopted in the Suceava market, where we find the company Zireto.

In addition to the traditional franchise system, there are other types/systems of business networks recognised worldwide which involve a business model similar to the partnership specific to franchising. Within this business model, which is also based on business networks, we include: the agency system, the commission contract, the licence system, the system of contract dealers, joint ventures, cooperatives, conglomerates and large firms with horizontal marketing systems and extensive networks of branches (Molico & Wunder, 2002).

To highlight the scale of the franchise, we have included a continuation of Table 1 below, which sets out a selection of the world's leading franchises.

Table 1. A selection of the top franchisors worldwide

Rank	Company	Country	Industy	Acknowledgements	Networks developed in Romania
1.	**Mc Donald's**	SUA	Fast Food Franchises	Regarded as a benchmark in the fast-food industry, it is recognised as a globally successful franchise.	It has around 60 outlets in most regions, operating on a franchise basis.
2.	**Burger King**	SUA	Fast Food Franchises	This franchise targets shopping centres and major cities, intensifying competition in the fast-food market.	Burger King is continuing its expansion in Romania, where it currently has over 30 outlets.
3.	**Pizza Hut**	SUA	Pizza Franchises	The Pizza Hut franchise is internationally recognised and offers franchisees access to a strong brand.	In 2023, there were 43 restaurants under the brand; gradually, following a series of closures, the number fell to 23.
4.	**Marriott International**	SUA	Hotel Franchises	A world leader in the hotel industry, providing management and marketing systems and quality standards.	In 2026, Marriott operates seven hotels in Romania. Specifically, in Bucharest, Cluj and Sibiu.
5.	**KFC**	SUA	Chicken Franchises	KFC is built on standards relating to quality, training and marketing.	As of 2026, KFC has 32 restaurants in Bucharest alone and 111 outlets nationwide.
6.	**Dunkin' Donuts**	SUA	Bakery& Donut Franchises	It offers a strong brand; it provides support for new entrants; expansion into the coffee industry.	A venue of this kind opened in Bucharest in the 1990s, but it did not survive in the market. As of 2026, there are no such venues operating in Romania.
7.	**7-Eleven**	SUA	Convenience Store Franchises	Franchisees benefit from logistics systems and operational support. This makes it easier to manage the shops within this franchise system.	It does not have any physical premises open in Romania.
8.	**SUBWAY**	SUA	Sandwich&Bagel Franchises	The franchise 'promotes' a system that has been tried and tested worldwide, as evidenced by the brand's rapid expansion.	In 2026, SUBWAY will have 46 outlets in Romania.
9.	**Domino's**	SUA	Pizza Franchises	An efficiently structured franchise system that emphasises technological innovation.	The company operates around 19 franchised restaurants in Romania.
10.	**Baskin-Robbins**	SUA	Ice Cream Franchises	The franchise offers, amongst other things, expertise, ongoing support and a varied product range.	Romania is not one of the company's active markets.
11.	**Hertz**	SUA	Car Rental& Dealer Franchises	A car hire franchise provides access to an international customer base and integrated booking systems.	Hertz operates in three cities: Bucharest, Cluj and Timișoara. More specifically, there is one official Hertz franchise (owned by Autohellas/Autotechnica

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					Fleet Services), with operations in three cities.
12.	**Inter Continental Hotels and Resorts**	UK	Hotel Franchises	A franchise within one of the world's largest hotel chains. This brand is renowned for its expertise in the hospitality sector.	There are three IHG-branded hotels in Bucharest, Romania.
13.	**Taco Bell**	SUA	Fast Food Franchises	Unul din liderii Quick-Service Restaurant (QSR), One of the leading quick-service restaurant (QSR) chains, renowned for its rapid expansion and continuous innovation.	Taco Bell has 18 restaurants in Romania (most of which are located in shopping centres).
14.	**Choice Hotels**	SUA	Hotel Franchises	A hotel franchise offering operational support and clearly defined quality standards.	It does not currently have a market in Romania.
15.	**Wendy's**	SUA	Fast Food Franchises	The QSR franchise entered the Romanian market in 2025.	By 2026, there will be three branches open (two in Bucharest and one in Ploiești).
16.	**Groupe Auchan**	France	Food& Grocery Retail Franchises	The franchise aims to expand rapidly through local entrepreneurs, offering access to its own product range, logistics systems, etc.	The Auchan Group operates 70 Simply by Auchan franchise stores in Romania.
17.	**Ace Hardware Corporation**	SUA	Home Improvment Retail Franchises	This model offers local shops the benefits of a large international group by reducing costs through economies of scale.	It is not available on the Romanian market.
18.	**Hilton Hotels& Resorts**	SUA	Hotel Franchises	A franchise in this sector offers a solution for investors seeking an international luxury brand and access to the expertise of a major player in the industry.	It owns a total of 13 hotels in Romania.
19.	**Groupe Casino**	France	Food& Grocery Retail Franchises	Their franchise model focuses on local retail, adapts to changes in consumer behaviour and offers a diverse range of products.	It is not currently active in Romania.
20.	**Carrefour**	France	Convenience Store Franchises	The franchise is a business model in the food retail sector, with a brand that is well-known on the Romanian market as well.	There are just 8 franchises operated by partners (in addition to over 400 company-owned shops).

Source: Author's elaboration based on Nicolae H., Matei A., *Francize Profitabile 2022, De la idee de afacere la implementare în sistem franciză*, Editura Gold, București, 2021

Taking a broad view, a number of common features can be identified amongst the world's leading franchises. In this regard, there is a consistent emphasis on innovation and continuous development, underpinned by ongoing staff training programmes, a well-established body of expertise, and the adoption of intensive and well-structured marketing strategies. In the same vein, it is worth emphasising that every franchise system, regardless of its field of activity, inherently involves the creation of a network amongst the various participating members.

V. CONCLUSION

Through the analysis carried out in this paper, we set out some of the conclusions we have reached:

- Market trends are constantly changing, and firms that are not prepared to innovate, invent or discover in a systematic manner will fail to compete with the market giants who invest in the ongoing training of their staff for these processes and activities.
- In the internet age, where explicit knowledge spreads extremely rapidly and at minimal cost across countries, organisations and individuals, access to this resource is becoming possible for almost any hierarchically organised social group. However, mere access to explicit knowledge does not in any way guarantee that a firm or country will succeed in developing its own competitive advantage over time.
- In today's society, it is quite evident that probably no one can predict or anticipate the directions in which the next technological advance will occur, or which new technologies, firms or groups of firms will

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succeed in bringing such innovations to specific industries and various markets. It is, at the same time, evident that such new technologies will require continuous investment in R&D, new technical and social inventions and innovations, and new strategies for harnessing innovation in a highly competitive world.

- Strategic thinking remains a key factor in enabling managers to remain competitive in an unpredictable business environment.
- Within franchises, they foster innovation, knowledge and competitive advantage, which are essential for success. The knowledge accumulated by franchisors about the market and processes is passed on to franchisees, and vice versa, thereby ensuring compliance with existing standards in a particular industry and/or market. Constant innovation, including new products and processes, helps franchise networks to remain competitive. By combining knowledge and innovation, franchises can gain a competitive advantage, manifested through brand recognition and operational efficiency, which enables them to respond quickly to market changes.

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Ethics statement: This study is based exclusively on publicly available legal, institutional, policy and secondary academic sources. It does not involve human participants, interviews, surveys, experiments, personal data collection or clinical/biomedical material. Therefore, formal ethical approval was not required.

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