Representation of Organizational Values through Employee Awards

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A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Employee recognition programs represent substantial investment for organizations seeking to motivate and retain talent. This study examines how employees interpret the symbolic meaning of awards including certificates, plaques, and annual recognition events. A qualitative literature review method was employed following systematic procedures for article identification and thematic synthesis. The analysis reveals that interpretation of award meaning is influenced by criterion clarity, award form, frequency, leadership authenticity, cultural background, and organizational context. Awards perceived as fair, transparent, and consistent with proclaimed values build trust and commitment. Conversely, awards with unclear criteria or inconsistency with organizational practices generate cynicism and reduce motivation. Interpretation varies across individuals and groups based on generational and cultural backgrounds. Authentic and meaningful awards strengthen organizational culture, improve retention, and encourage desired behaviors. Award programs designed with employee participation tend to be more resonant and effective. Leaders who deliver awards personally and connect them to specific contributions enhance symbolic meaning. Organizations that invest in meaningful recognition programs enjoy higher engagement and loyalty. Future research should employ ethnographic approaches to capture how award meaning is negotiated in daily social interactions across different cultural settings.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations across various sectors allocate significant resources to employee reward programs as an effort to enhance motivation and retention (Sookhai, 2024). Certificates, plaques, pins, and annual award ceremonies represent common sights in both large and small corporations. These rewards are regarded as instruments for recognizing employee contributions and reinforcing behaviors desired by organizations (Gallus & Frey, 2017). Peterson and Luthans (2006) demonstrate that timely and sincere recognition can enhance employee self-confidence and overall performance. Leadership support and attention to employee well-being prove to be primary foundations reinforcing the impetus behind such reward provisions (Darmawan et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of rewards depends not only on their delivery, but also on how recipients and colleagues interpret the symbols. Perceptions regarding reward fairness can trigger the emergence of organizational citizenship behavior alongside enhancements in workplace environmental quality (Eddine & Darmawan, 2022). A plaque or certificate can hold vastly different meanings for different individuals depending on cultural backgrounds, prior experiences, and their relationships with the organization. Understanding the symbolic meaning of rewards becomes essential because such meanings determine whether rewards will motivate or instead induce cynicism in the workplace.

Rewards within organizations function as nonverbal communication conveying values deemed important by companies. When organizations grant rewards for innovative behavior, for instance, they transmit signals that creativity is valued and expected from all employees (Gallus et al., 2023). Schein (2004) explains that cultural artifacts such as physical rewards constitute the most visible layer of culture yet are frequently misinterpreted. In this context, transformational leadership holds an

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essential role as an agent of social change rejuvenating value systems and symbolic meanings within organizations (Rojak et al., 2022). Employees read the meanings of rewards bestowed upon their peers and utilize such information to adjust their own behaviors. This behavioral adjustment process proceeds in tandem with adaptive learning mechanisms shaping individual and group learning patterns (Kurniawan & Darmawan, 2021). A reward granted consistently for specific behaviors will reinforce cultural norms within the organization. Conversely, rewards distributed inconsistently or for behaviors conflicting with proclaimed values will create confusion and undermine trust toward the organization. This interpretation process occurs continuously within daily social interactions in the workplace, shaping collective understandings regarding what is truly valued.

The symbolic meaning of rewards is not fixed, but rather socially negotiated among organization members (Derakhshan et al., 2019). An employee receiving an annual award might view it as recognition for their hard work, whereas a coworker might perceive it as proof of a special relationship with a superior. Trice and Beyer (1993) observed that organizational symbols, including rewards, possess dual meanings susceptible to differing interpretations by distinct groups. Differences in interpreting these reward symbols necessitate appropriate communication strategies to prevent friction and team conflicts (Marsal & Darmawan, 2022). Employees from different generations may interpret identical rewards differently, with younger generations tending to exhibit greater cynicism toward formal awards compared to older generations. The process of shaping understandings regarding these rewards involves cognitive mapping, which transforms individual perspectives into collective decisions and assessments (Darmawan, 2024). The social context in which rewards are bestowed such as who attends and how awards are presented influences the meanings attached to such rewards. An award conferred personally by a CEO may hold a vastly different meaning than one delivered via email by a line manager. The application of situational leadership styles is required so that forms of recognition can be adjusted appropriately to match dynamic organizational conditions (Darmawan, 2024). This meaning interpretation process occurs within a broader organizational culture framework, which is itself shaped by organizational histories and practices.

The linkage between rewards and organizational values becomes increasingly critical in efforts to build a coherent work culture. Organizations frequently utilize reward programs as tools to communicate their strategic priorities to employees (Danso et al., 2013). When a company grants awards for innovation, they assert that innovation constitutes a core value that must be embraced by everyone. The reinforcement of organizational values through reward symbols reflects the implementation of ethical principles in business decision-making to sustain relationships with stakeholders (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2022). Nevertheless, gaps between what organizations profess and what they truly value frequently occur. The consistency of upholding this value presents a managerial challenge amidst uncertainties within the industrial environment (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2021). Awards may be formally granted for collaborative behavior, yet promotions and salary increases continue to rely on individual achievements. Alignment between business process engineering pillars and quality management proves absolutely necessary to ensure reward symbols run concurrently with operational efficiency benchmarks of the organization (Rahman et al., 2022; Radjawane et al., 2022). Such situations create value ambiguities that confuse employees regarding which behaviors they ought to prioritize. Astute employees learn to read unspoken signals concerning what is genuinely valued, frequently by observing who receives rewards and why. This interpretation process renders rewards a mirror of true organizational values, rather than merely proclaimed ones.

The primary issue within reward programs lies in the assumption that recipients and observers will interpret rewards in accordance with the intent of the giver. Realities in the field frequently differ because employees bring disparate interpretive frameworks into the workplace. An employee who feels they have worked harder yet failed to receive an award may develop profound feelings of unfairness. Konovalova (2021) observed that employee recognition programs frequently fail to achieve their objectives due to a lack of understanding regarding how recipients ascribe meaning to such rewards. Therefore, HR data analytics capabilities need to be enhanced so that criteria and the determination of award recipients can be measured objectively based on data (Khairi & Darmawan, 2022). Rewards intended to motivate can conversely cause demotivation among employees who feel overlooked. Innovation in the execution of recognition programs can also adopt gamification approaches to enhance the positive engagement of all team members (Eddine & Darmawan, 2022). This problem is exacerbated when organizations lack clear and transparent criteria for granting rewards. The

ambiguity of reward criteria is prone to triggering potential tensions in employment relationships that require structured and legal handling mechanisms (Khayru, 2024). Employees who fail to understand why their peers received awards will suspect favoritism or office politics. Such suspicions damage trust toward management and weaken team cohesion that reward programs are supposed to reinforce, including maintaining work solidity within virtual or hybrid team environments (Irfan, 2024).

Another equally significant issue concerns the shifting meaning of rewards over time and across generational divides. Rewards holding profound meaning for baby boomers may lack identical resonance for millennials or Gen Z. Twenge (2006) demonstrates that younger generations possess different expectations regarding recognition and rewards in the workplace. They tend to value frequent and informal feedback over ceremonial annual awards. Plaques or certificates regarded as symbols of honor by older generations may be viewed as obsolete items by younger ones. Organizations unaware of shifts in meaning across generations will continually employ reward forms that become increasingly irrelevant. Consequently, investments in reward programs become inefficient because they fail to achieve the expected motivational effects (Mahmoud et al., 2020). Technological changes likewise influence the meaning of rewards, with digital recognition such as badges or shout-outs on internal social media becoming increasingly common. The symbolic meanings of these various reward forms must be understood to design effective cross-generational programs.

The necessity for studies concerning the symbolic meaning of rewards is grounded in high organizational investments directed toward reward programs without adequate understanding of how employees interpret them. Research indicates that billions of dollars are spent annually on employee reward programs worldwide. Without comprehension of the subjective meanings of rewards, the majority of these investments may fail to yield optimal returns. Shifts in workforce demographics and rising cultural diversity within workplaces render symbol interpretations increasingly complex. Employees from distinct cultural backgrounds may interpret identical rewards differently based on their cultural values. Organizations desiring to retain top talent need to design reward programs meaningful to a diverse workforce. Synthesizing findings from various studies becomes vital to providing evidence-based guidelines for practitioners. This study will identify factors influencing the interpretation of reward meanings and how organizations can design more effective programs.

The purpose of this research is to construct a conceptual framework explaining the process of interpreting the symbolic meaning of rewards by employees and how such interpretations reflect true organizational values. This study contributes theoretically through the expansion of organizational culture theory with a focus on reward symbols as a medium for communicating values. Its practical contribution serves as a guideline for human resource managers to design reward programs that account for interpretive variations among employees. Companies can utilize this framework to evaluate the effectiveness of their reward programs from the recipients' perspective.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative literature study approach with systematic procedures to identify, evaluate, and synthesize findings from various written sources. According to Fink (2005), literature studies within the realm of social sciences aim to produce narrative syntheses capable of identifying relationship patterns among variables that remain invisible in individual studies. The research process begins with formulating clear questions regarding the symbolic meaning of rewards within organizational culture. Literature searches are conducted through international academic databases such as EBSCO, ProQuest, and ScienceDirect utilizing keyword combinations like symbolic meaning, employee recognition, organizational culture, and awards. Inclusion criteria are applied to ensure that only studies employing empirical methods with adequate samples are incorporated into the synthesis. Cooper (2003) emphasizes the importance of documenting every decision within the literature selection process to enable replication by other researchers. Bibliographies from identified articles are also examined to discover additional relevant studies via the snowballing method.

Data analysis within this literature study applies the thematic synthesis method outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008). The first stage of analysis involves open coding, where each statement in the articles regarding the interpretation of reward meaning is assigned a descriptive label. The resulting codes are subsequently grouped into broader categories such as dimensions of meaning, determinants of interpretation, and consequences of interpretation. The second stage entails developing descriptive themes by mapping the frequency and

consistency of themes reported across all studies. The third stage consists of developing analytical themes, where researchers move beyond the content of individual studies to generate new propositions regarding how reward meanings are shaped and negotiated. Jesson et al. (2011) recommend utilizing flowcharts to visualize document selection processes and matrices to present the characteristics of synthesized studies. The validity of findings is maintained through cross-checking by two independent researchers who extract data from the same sample of articles. Differences in interpretation are resolved through discussions referring to predetermined operational definitions. This study does not aim to test hypotheses statistically, but rather to develop a conceptual framework testable in subsequent qualitative research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The interpretation of the symbolic meaning of rewards by employees is heavily influenced by the clarity of the criteria used by organizations in bestowing awards (Schiman, 2021). Alvesson and Sveningsson (2024) explain that organizational culture change requires an understanding of how symbols such as rewards are interpreted by organization members. When reward criteria lack clarity or are poorly communicated, employees develop their own interpretations that may diverge from the giver's intent. Employees who observe peers receiving awards without understanding the rationale may conclude that such awards are granted based on personal relationships rather than performance. Interpretations of this nature undermine the legitimacy of reward programs and diminish their effectiveness as motivational tools (Grasser et al., 2021). Pathan (2023) finds that job satisfaction mediates the relationship between organizational culture and employee commitment, wherein fair rewards constitute an essential component of such satisfaction. Organizations desiring effective reward programs must communicate criteria transparently and consistently. Consistency in applying criteria builds trust that rewards reflect true organizational values.

The physical form of rewards such as certificates, plaques, or trophies carries distinct meanings for employees depending on personal preferences and social contexts (Gallus et al., 2023). Robbins and Judge (2019) explain that preferences for forms of recognition vary across individuals based on personality and adhered-to values. Several employees appreciate physical rewards displayable in their workspaces as visible evidence of achievement. For other employees, physical rewards may be regarded as impractical items holding less meaning compared to sincere verbal recognition. Qin (2024) finds that building positive corporate cultures enhances employee sense of belonging, and physical rewards can form part of such cultures when bestowed appropriately. Rewards presented in ceremonial events with colleagues present carry different meanings from rewards delivered privately behind closed doors. Ritual elements within award beststowals reinforce symbolic meanings by creating shared experiences remembered by recipients and observers alike. Organizations need to account for the forms and methods of reward delivery as part of their value communication strategies.

The frequency and consistency of reward distribution influence how employees collectively interpret overall reward programs (Newman et al., 2024). Reese (2020) discusses the development of employee recognition programs promoting organization-wide learning by emphasizing the importance of appropriate frequency. Rewards granted too infrequently may prove insufficient to reinforce desired behaviors, whereas rewards bestowed too frequently can diminish their symbolic value. Employees begin to view rewards as ordinary and less special when granted excessively. Konovalova (2021) observes that employee recognition programs face new realities wherein expectations regarding recognition frequency are shifting. Younger generations desire more frequent feedback and recognition compared to preceding generations. This intergenerational preference shift underscores the importance of understanding generational values in shaping professional satisfaction and comprehensive work experiences (Irfan & Al Hakim, 2025). Nonetheless, rewards granted too frequently without clear discrimination can compromise program credibility. The implementation of innovation within human resource management becomes crucial for maintaining recognition program effectiveness while strengthening organizational competitiveness in the era of globalization (Abdullah et al., 2021). Balancing frequency and exclusivity remains an important consideration in designing meaningful reward programs.

Hubungan antara penghargaan dan nilai Organizations serve as the center of how employees interpret the symbolic meaning of rewards (Shang et al., 2018). Tadesse Bogale and Debela (2024) in their systematic review of organizational culture find that alignment between practices and proclaimed values determines the credibility of organizational culture. Employees who observe consistency between bestowed rewards and communicated values will

develop trust toward the organization. Conversely, inconsistencies create cynicism and diminish employee commitment. Shahriari et al. (2023) find that green organizational culture influences organizational commitment through job satisfaction as a mediator. The alignment of HR policies with environmental sustainability values proves effective in building sustainable, high-performing organizations (Hariani et al., 2022). Rewards aligned with sustainability values, for instance, will reinforce the commitment of environmentally conscious employees. Darmawan et al. (2020) demonstrate that human resource quality and job performance correlate positively with employee loyalty. The suitability of individual characters and personalities (the big five personality traits) likewise helps determine performance levels and employee acceptance of values appreciated by organizations (Darmawan, 2017). Rewards that are fair and consistent with organizational values will enhance the quality of employee-organization relationships.

Leadership influences how employees interpret reward meanings through the manner in which leaders bestow and communicate such rewards (Paul & Anita, 2015). Sainz, Delgado, and Moriano (2021) discover relationships between authentic leadership and organizational dehumanization alongside workplace stress. Authentic leaders bestow rewards in personal and meaningful ways rather than as bureaucratic procedures. The flexibility of situational leadership approaches enables leaders to deliver recognition on target to drive change management and team performance (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2022). Thuan (2019) demonstrates that intellectual stimulation provided by leaders can motivate subordinate creativity, with rewards constituting one form of such stimulation. Leaders who actively connect rewards to the specific contributions of recipients help employees comprehend the meaning behind physical symbols. Yıldız and Topaylı (2024) highlight the importance of positive psychological capital in problem-solving, wherein leader rewards can elevate employee psychological capital. Moreover, integrating planned communication strategies into change management assists leaders in conveying the objective meaning of every conferred recognition (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2022). Rewards bestowed with sincerity and specificity carry deeper meanings compared to rewards given as mere formalities. Employees who perceive leader sincerity in granting rewards will develop a stronger sense of being valued.

Cultural differences influence how employees from distinct backgrounds interpret identical reward meanings (Scott et al., 2020). Fernandes et al. (2023) conduct a cross-cultural analysis regarding organizational culture and individual discretionary workplace behavior. Their findings indicate that national cultural values influence how employees respond to various forms of recognition. Within collectivistic cultures, individual awards might be regarded as an insult to the group, whereas team rewards are valued more highly. Organizational misalignment and norm friction within multicultural work environments frequently trigger value conflicts if appreciation is unadjusted to local cultural backgrounds (Irfan, 2023). Mardikaningsih and Darmawan (2022) observe that digital human resource practices within remote work systems require adaptations to cultural norms. In addition, integrating aspects of diversity and sustainability becomes key to creating inclusive and competitive work environments (Mardikaningsih & Hariani, 2022). Digital rewards such as badges or internal platform recognition may hold different meanings across distinct cultures. Multinational organizations need to account for cultural variations when designing their reward programs. Rewards effective in one country may prove ineffective or even counterproductive in another. Understanding cross-cultural variations in symbol interpretation is essential for the globalization of human resource management practices.

Employee retention is influenced by how employees interpret the rewards they receive from organizations. Mngomezulu et al. (2015) examine the impact of recognition on talent retention within the workforce and find that meaningful recognition enhances retention. Employees who feel their contributions are valued through appropriate rewards tend to remain longer in organizations. Newman and Ford (2022) explain how organizations signal their loyalty to employees through actions such as rewards and recognition. When employees perceive that organizations are loyal to them, they reciprocate with greater loyalty. Tarihoran and Harsono (2025) explore employee loyalty dynamics within construction firms and find that recognition of contributions serves as an essential factor. The implementation of effective project management techniques likewise supports work efficiency and productivity deserving structured recognition (Amri & Putra, 2022). Zhang and Salleh (2024) investigate the relationship between organizational trust and loyalty in Chinese manufacturing firms. Rewards bestowed fairly and transparently build the trust that forms the foundation of long-term loyalty. The protection and regulatory clarity afforded to flexible

workers in the digital economy era similarly influence their perceptions of fairness and loyalty toward organizations (Hambodo & Darmawan, 2024). Well-designed reward programs become investments in retention that yield returns through reduced turnover.

Rewards bestowed publicly carry distinct dimensions of meaning compared to those delivered privately because they involve observers and social dynamics (Frey & Gallus, 2016). Nasir (2022) discusses how to build a culture of reward within the manufacturing industry through public recognition of employee contributions. Public rewards deliver recognition not only from the organization but also from peers, which reinforces the recipient's social status within the group. Nonetheless, public rewards can equally trigger jealousy or feelings of unfairness among employees who fail to receive awards. Trninic et al. (2018) find that productive disagreement within learning communities fosters critical thinking, indicating that differing opinions regarding rewards can form part of healthy team dynamics. Miller and Hill (2017) emphasize that deep employee engagement requires attention to their successes at a profound level. The implementation of cross-functional training can strengthen team collaboration to minimize social tensions when public recognition is bestowed (Fared & Darmawan, 2021). Public rewards delivered in a manner respecting all team members can reinforce cohesion rather than create division. The key to success lies in ensuring that public rewards are perceived as fair by all who witness them.

The material dimension of rewards, such as their physical quality and design, conveys meanings regarding how seriously organizations value recipients. Poorly designed or cheap rewards may be interpreted as symbols that organizations do not genuinely appreciate employee contributions (Danso et al., 2013). Conversely, well-designed and high-quality rewards communicate sincere respect and appreciation. Putra et al. (2022) observe that employee experiences within digital workplaces encompass physical and technological aspects influencing their perceptions. Even within digital environments, physical symbols such as rewards delivered via mail carry deeper meanings than digital recognition. Effective hybrid working models require a combination of physical and digital appreciation to maintain employee performance and engagement (Eddine & Darmawan, 2023). Gani and Darmawan (2023) discuss human resource readiness for Generation Alpha entering the digital workplace, wherein expectations regarding forms of recognition may differ. Reward designs reflecting organizational brand identity strengthen the association between awards and organizational values. Investments in the physical quality of rewards constitute investments in symbolic meanings that will be interpreted by employees.

Reward programs designed with employee participation tend to produce more resonant meanings compared to programs engineered in a top-down manner by management (Wei et al., 2012). Eddine et al. (2023) find that knowledge management and the quality of work life influence employee commitment. Employee involvement in designing reward programs enhances their quality of work life through a sense of ownership. Mittal (2019) emphasizes that employee empowerment through involvement in decision-making increases their commitment. The optimization of data management (big data) can be utilized by management to accurately absorb employee aspirations in strategic decision-making regarding recognition programs (Ali & Darmawan, 2023). Employees involved in determining criteria and forms of rewards will appreciate such programs more profoundly. The implementation of agile project management likewise enables the adaptive and participatory design of reward programs in alignment with dynamic business environment conditions (Darmawan, 2021). Rojak and Darmawan (2021) explain that ethical leadership and social responsibility within organizational managerial practices create environments supportive of participation. Well-targeted HR strategies prove capable of creating conducive work environments while simultaneously enhancing organizational commitment sustainably (Rojak et al., 2022). Putra et al. (2021) demonstrate that organizational social capital and team collaboration mutually support one another. Collaboratively designed reward programs reinforce social capital by generating a sense of fairness and shared ownership. Employees who feel they possess a stake in reward programs will display greater acceptance and appreciation toward the rewards bestowed.

Organizational change influences the meaning of rewards because the context in which rewards are bestowed changes (Hassan, 2021). Alvesson and Sveningsson (2024) discuss organizational culture change as ongoing cultural work. During periods of change, rewards can function as anchors providing continuity and stability for employees. Rewards conferred during times of change communicate that employee contributions remain valued despite organizational transitions. Darmawan (2024) identifies factors enhancing organizational

effectiveness, including rewards as a motivational factor. Within changing organizations, rewards consistent with new values help accelerate the adoption of those values. Nevertheless, rewards tied to obsolete values may lose their meanings or even become symbols of resistance against change. Kase et al. (2025) examine the impact of wage dispersion and relative pay positions on employee mobility. Non-financial rewards can serve as vital complements to financial compensation, particularly when wage dispersion runs high. The meaning of rewards demands special attention from management.

The success of reward programs in shaping employee behavior depends on the extent to which such rewards are perceived as authentic and meaningful (Newman et al., 2024). Nasir (2022) emphasizes the importance of building an authentic reward culture in the workplace. Rewards bestowed routinely yet without sincerity will lose their motivational effect. Konovalova (2021) observes that successful employee recognition programs are those integrated with organizational culture rather than operating as isolated activities. Authentic rewards reflect a profound understanding of what is genuinely valued by the organization. Reese (2020) adds that reward programs must promote organization-wide learning, rather than merely recognizing past achievements. This approach transforms rewards from simple recognition into development tools. Miller and Hill (2017) stress that deep employee engagement requires attention to their successes at a profound level. Authentic and meaningful rewards achieve this level of depth by acknowledging the unique contributions of every individual. Organizations successfully building authentic reward programs enjoy higher levels of engagement and loyalty.

CONCLUSION

Rewards within organizations function as symbols carrying meanings regarding the values esteemed by the organization. Employees interpret the meaning of rewards through a complex process influenced by criteria clarity, the physical form of rewards, distribution frequency, leadership, culture, and organizational context. Rewards distributed fairly, transparently, and consistently with proclaimed values will build employee trust and commitment. Conversely, rewards lacking clear criteria or remaining inconsistent with organizational practices will induce cynicism and diminish motivation. The interpretation of reward meanings varies across individuals and groups based on cultural backgrounds, generations, and personal preferences. Organizations need to account for these variations when designing effective reward programs. Authentic and meaningful rewards possess the potential to strengthen organizational culture, enhance retention, and encourage desired behaviors. Reward programs designed with employee participation tend to be more resonant and effective. Investment in meaningful reward programs yields returns through enhanced employee engagement and loyalty.

The theoretical implication of this research is the necessity of treating rewards as cultural symbols whose meanings are socially negotiated, rather than as motivational instruments whose effects can be universally predicted. Researchers are advised to employ qualitative approaches that capture subjective interpretation processes in reward studies. Practical implications encompass recommendations for managers to communicate reward criteria transparently, involve employees in program designs, and deliver rewards in personal and sincere ways. Recommendations for subsequent research entail conducting ethnographic studies to explore how reward meanings are negotiated within daily social interactions. Cross-cultural research is required to understand how national cultural values influence the interpretation of rewards.

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