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Perceived Fairness of Non-Material Recognition toward Employee Commitment

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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

Fairness in distributing non-material recognition shapes how employees perceive organizational values and influences their decision to remain committed. This study examines how fairness perceptions in non-monetary awards affect employee commitment. A qualitative literature review method was employed following systematic procedures for article identification and thematic synthesis. The analysis reveals that procedural and distributive justice in recognition programs build foundations for affective commitment through social exchange mechanisms. Employees who perceive recognition as fair develop stronger trust in management and greater emotional attachment to the organization. Authentic and ethical leadership enhances fairness perceptions by modeling transparent recognition processes. Effective communication about recognition criteria and procedures reduces perceptions of unfairness and strengthens commitment. Non-material recognition that is perceived as fair strengthens intrinsic motivation and organizational citizenship behavior. Organizations that neglect fairness in recognition face challenges in retaining talent and building positive organizational culture. Recognition programs designed with attention to perceived justice deliver higher returns through improved retention and performance. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track changes in fairness perceptions and commitment over time across different organizational contexts and cultural settings.

INTRODUCTION

To retain talented employees amidst increasingly fierce talent competition, various recognition programs are designed to acknowledge employee contributions and strengthen emotional bonds with the organization (Chauhan et al., 2024). Non-material rewards such as public recognition, expressions of gratitude, certificates of appreciation, and award plaques serve as commonly used instruments. Employee well-being that receives adequate attention likewise contributes to the enhancement of organizational performance, as found in public sector organizations serving the public (Gautama et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these rewards heavily depends on how employees perceive fairness in their distribution. Colquitt et al. (2001) demonstrate that procedural and distributive justice exert a stronger influence on employee attitudes compared to the magnitude of the reward itself. Employees who feel that the reward-granting process is transparent and evaluation criteria are fair will exhibit higher commitment. Appropriate human resource management strategies in building a conducive work environment are proven to play an important role in enhancing employee organizational commitment (Rojak et al., 2022). Conversely, perceived injustice can trigger withdrawal behaviors and a decline in productivity (Hewett & Leroy, 2019). Understanding how employees interpret fairness in non-material rewards becomes crucial for organizations.

Justice in the context of non-material rewards possesses different dimensions from justice in financial compensation. Non-material rewards are frequently symbolic in nature, and their meaning is highly subjective for each individual (Paul & Wilson, 2019). Employees who feel ignored in the reward-granting process will develop negative perceptions regarding the organization's value toward them. Support perceived by employees within a diverse work environment constitutes an important factor shaping their perceptions of organizational treatment (Hariani et al., 2021). A study by Greenberg (1990)

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identifies that interpersonal justice, namely how employees are treated by superiors during the reward-granting process, is just as important as distributive justice. An employee may receive an award yet still feel it is unfair if the process does not involve clear communication and respect for their contributions. Attention toward employee well-being during the performance evaluation process likewise determines the extent to which employees feel fairly valued by the organization (Eddine et al., 2021). This perception of injustice can erode trust toward management and weaken a positive organizational culture (Khajavi, 2023). Organizations need to pay attention not only to who receives the award, but also to how the award is given and communicated.

Employee commitment to the organization is a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional attachment, awareness of exit costs, and a sense of obligation to remain. Allen and Meyer (1990) developed a three-component model of commitment distinguishing between affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment. Fair non-material rewards exert the greatest influence on affective commitment, which is an employee's emotional bond with the organization. When employees feel valued through sincere and fair recognition, they develop a sense of pride in being part of the organization. Sound knowledge management accompanied by adequate quality of work life is also proven to strengthen employee commitment to the organization (Eddine et al., 2023). High affective commitment drives employees to provide extra effort beyond what is required in their job descriptions. Conversely, injustice in rewards can damage this emotional bond and reduce employees' intrinsic motivation. Employees may continue working due to continuance commitment, namely because there are no better job alternatives, yet their contributions will not be optimal (Abbas & Ahmed, 2023). Human resource management oriented toward organizational sustainability likewise exerts a positive impact on overall company performance (Hariani et al., 2022).

Employee narratives regarding their experiences with non-material rewards provide valuable insights into how justice is perceived and how such perceptions influence commitment (Scott, 2018). Every employee brings unique experiences that shape their expectations regarding recognition from the organization. An individual's cognitive processes in interpreting work experiences likewise shape how such perceptions eventually develop into shared views within work groups (Darmawan, 2024). Robbins and Judge (2019) explain that perceptions of justice are formed through social comparison, wherein employees compare the rewards they receive with rewards received by coworkers in similar situations. Perceived injustice frequently arises when employees observe a mismatch between the contribution provided and the reward received compared to others. This social comparison occurs continuously in daily interactions at the workplace. Organizations unaware of this dynamic may inadvertently create perceptions of injustice through opaque reward programs (Kim et al., 2019). Understanding employee narratives becomes important to design fairer and more meaningful reward programs.

The primary issue in non-material reward programs lies in the subjectivity of evaluating employee contributions. Unlike financial rewards, which are frequently based on clear quantitative metrics, non-material rewards such as public recognition or certificates are often given based on supervisors' subjective evaluations. Employees may not understand what criteria are used to determine who deserves an award. The application of total quality management principles in human resource management can help establish more measurable assessment standards and reduce that element of subjectivity (Arifin et al., 2022). Konovalova (2021) observes that employee recognition programs frequently fail to achieve their goals due to a lack of clarity in criteria and selection processes. When employees do not understand the basis for granting rewards, they tend to suspect favoritism or bias. This suspicion damages trust in management and reduces the effectiveness of reward programs as motivational tools. This problem is exacerbated when organizations lack mechanisms to gather feedback from employees regarding reward programs. The integration of management information systems into strategic decision-making can serve as a solution to collect and process employee feedback more systematically (da Silva & Darmawan, 2023).

Another equally significant issue is the lack of consistency in granting non-material rewards across various units or departments within an organization. Employees from different departments may possess vastly different experiences with reward programs. Different managers may possess varying styles and criteria in granting recognition to their subordinates. The application of situational leadership styles tailored to team characteristics is considered capable of assisting managers in handling these differences more effectively, particularly in organizations with diverse employee backgrounds (Gardi et al., 2024). Consequently, employees working under managers who are generous in granting recognition will possess more positive experiences compared to employees working under managers who are sparing in appreciation (Sookhai, 2024). This inconsistency creates perceptions of injustice at the organizational level. Employees who feel that coworkers in other departments receive rewards more frequently or more meaningfully will develop feelings of unfairness. This situation can trigger interdepartmental conflicts and weaken an integrated organizational culture. The application of value-based management is considered effective in bridging differences of this sort, especially in organizations operating cross-culturally with various work units (Hariani & Mardikaningsih, 2021). Organizations need to develop consistent standards for granting non-material rewards across all units.

The necessity for a study on perceptions of justice in non-material rewards and employee commitment is underpinned by the changing expectations of the new generation regarding workplace recognition. Millennials and Generation Z hold different expectations toward rewards compared to previous generations. They value more frequent and informal feedback over ceremonial annual rewards. Krishnan (2024) demonstrates that millennials and Generation Z are more motivated by intrinsic rewards such as recognition and learning opportunities rather than solely extrinsic rewards. The gamification approach in employee training is proven capable of enhancing engagement and learning effectiveness, making it relevant to meet the preferences of the current worker generation (Eddine & Darmawan, 2022). Nevertheless, justice remains a prerequisite for reward effectiveness, regardless of its form. Without a deep understanding of justice perceptions from the employee's perspective, organizations cannot design reward programs that meet the expectations of the new generation. The synthesis of findings from various studies becomes crucial to provide evidence-based guidance for practitioners.

The objective of this research is to construct a conceptual framework explaining the relationship between perceptions of justice in non-material rewards and employee commitment, as well as identifying the factors moderating this relationship. This research provides a theoretical contribution in the form of extending organizational justice models into the domain of non-material rewards, which has thus far received insufficient attention. Its practical contribution is a guide for human resource managers to design non-material reward programs that are fair and effective in building commitment. Companies can use this framework to evaluate their reward programs from the perspective of justice perceived by employees.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative literature study approach with a systematic procedure to identify, evaluate, and synthesize findings from various written sources. This approach was chosen because the topic of perceptions of justice in non-material rewards and employee commitment is multidimensional and involves complex constructs. According to Jones (2004), qualitative literature studies can utilize narrative as a review method itself, wherein narrative is used as an inductive analytical method to generate in-depth understanding. The research process begins with the formulation of clear questions regarding the relationship between perceptions of justice and employee commitment. The bibliographies of identified articles are also examined to uncover additional relevant studies through the snowball method.

Data analysis in this literature study applies the thematic synthesis method combining an inductive narrative approach with systematic procedures. The first stage of analysis is open coding, where each statement in the articles concerning reward justice and commitment is assigned a descriptive label. The resulting codes are subsequently grouped into broader categories such as dimensions of justice, forms of rewards, components of commitment, and moderating factors. The second stage is the development of analytical themes, wherein the researcher moves beyond the content of individual studies to generate new propositions regarding the relationships among the constructs studied. Kitchenham et al. (2010) emphasize the importance of quality evaluation in systematic literature reviews, particularly when comparing studies differing in design and quality. 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 pre-established operational definitions. This study does not aim to test hypotheses statistically, but rather to develop a conceptual framework that can be tested in subsequent quantitative or qualitative research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Perceptions of justice in the distribution of non-material rewards influence employees' affective commitment through social exchange mechanisms (Balassiano & Salles, 2012). Abbas and Ahmed (2023) find that the relationship between rewards and commitment is mediated by the quality of the exchange relationship between employees and the organization. When employees perceive that the organization treats them fairly through appropriate rewards, they feel an obligation to reciprocate with higher commitment. Positive psychological factors such as feeling valued and recognized are also proven to enhance work engagement as well as employee commitment toward the tasks they undertake (Darmawan & Mardikaningsih, 2022). Robbins and Judge (2019) explain that social exchange theory posits that individuals will reciprocate positive actions from others with equivalent positive actions. In the context of rewards, employees who feel treated fairly will respond with increased emotional attachment. Conversely, perceived injustice triggers an imbalance that drives employees to reduce commitment or even seek alternative employment options. Perceptions of justice serve as a signal regarding whether the organization genuinely values employees or merely utilizes them. This signal is particularly powerful in non-material rewards due to their personal and direct nature (Balassiano & Salles, 2012).

Procedural justice in granting non-material rewards influences employee commitment through the formation of trust toward management (Haynie et al., 2016). Al-Amin (2017) demonstrates that transformational leadership applying transparent processes in granting rewards will enhance employee engagement. Fair procedures encompass clear criteria, consistency of application, and opportunities for employees to provide input. The organization's capability in processing data accurately likewise supports decision-making related to rewards so that they become more objective and accountable (Khairi & Darmawan, 2022). When employees understand how reward decisions are made and possess the confidence that such procedures are fair, they will develop greater trust in the organization. Crane and Hartwell (2018) emphasize that employee development through transformational leadership requires fair and transparent processes. Trust formed from fair procedures serves as a foundation for long-term commitment. Employees who trust the integrity of the reward process will be more likely to internalize organizational values. Unfair procedures, such as rewards granted based on personal relationships, will damage trust and diminish commitment.

Non-material rewards granted fairly can serve as a powerful signal regarding the organization's value toward employees, which ultimately influences continuance commitment (Newman & Ford, 2022). Xueyun et al. (2023) observe that supportive organizational conditions, including fairness in rewards, significantly influence employee intentions to remain. Employees who feel their contributions are acknowledged fairly will develop a sense of ownership toward the organization. Communication strategies designed appropriately in organizational change processes likewise help maintain information clarity regarding applied reward policies (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2022). Darmawan et al. (2020) find that human resource quality and job performance correlate positively with employee loyalty. Fair rewards constitute one of the factors enhancing the quality of the employee-organization relationship. Sustainable human resource management is also proven to contribute toward strengthening organizational commitment while encouraging employee innovative behavior (Mardikaningsih, 2024). Loyal employees do not merely remain because there are no other choices, but because they genuinely want to be part of the organization. This loyalty stems from positive experiences with rewards perceived as fair and meaningful (Smarżewska, 2019). Organizations failing to provide fair rewards will lose talented employees.

Non-material rewards perceived as fair can influence employees' normative commitment through the internalization of organizational values (Afshari & Gibson, 2015). Allen and Meyer (1990) define normative commitment as a sense of obligation to remain within the organization. Employees with high normative commitment feel that they owe it to the organization for the investments provided. Fair and personal non-material rewards strengthen this sense of indebtedness. Narratives and cultural symbols constructed consistently within organizations likewise play a role in shaping and maintaining a shared identity internalized by employees (Kurniawan et al., 2021). Employees who feel supervisors genuinely care about their contributions will develop a sense of obligation to reciprocate. Michalak and Zochorek (2024) demonstrate that incentive systems integrated with organizational values can strengthen commitment. Non-material rewards aligned with proclaimed values will reinforce the internalization of those values. Employees who internalize organizational values will exhibit behaviors consistent with those values even without supervision. Strong normative commitment serves as a foundation for sustainable organizational citizenship behavior.

The role of leadership in influencing perceptions of justice in non-material rewards is highly significant. Sainz et al. (2021) find a relationship between authentic leadership and organizational dehumanization, wherein authentic leaders tend not to deconstruct humans through impersonal processes. Authentic leaders grant rewards in a personal manner that respects employee dignity. Rojak and Darmawan (2021) explain that ethical leadership and social responsibility in managerial practices create an environment where justice is upheld. Ethical principles in business decision-making likewise constitute an important reference for leaders in maintaining the sustainability of relationships with employees and other stakeholders (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2022). Ethical leaders ensure that rewards are granted based on fair and transparent criteria. Al Hakim and Hariani (2021) find that transformational leadership styles influence organizational commitment and job performance. The application of flexible and adaptive situational leadership is also considered effective in enhancing employee engagement and supporting team development (Rojak & Darmawan, 2023). Leaders who inspire subordinates to transcend self-interest create a culture where rewards are viewed as recognition for collective contributions. A leader's behavior in granting rewards serves as a model for the entire organization regarding what is valued and how employees ought to be treated.

Fair non-material rewards possess the potential to reduce employee intentions to leave the organization voluntarily (Hitotsuyanagi et al., 2014). Newman and Ford (2022) explain how organizations signal their loyalty to employees through actions such as rewards and recognition. When employees perceive that the organization is loyal to them through fair rewards, they reciprocate with greater loyalty. Clear legal mechanisms in handling work relationship tensions likewise help prevent the escalation of conflicts that could drive employees to leave the organization (Khayru, 2024). Kase et al. (2025) examine the impact of pay dispersion and relative pay position on employee mobility. Non-material rewards can serve as an important complement to financial compensation to reduce employee mobility. Employees who feel valued through fair recognition will be more reluctant to leave the organization despite more lucrative offers. Miller and Hill (2017) emphasize that deep employee engagement requires attention to their success at a profound level. Fair and personal non-material rewards achieve this depth by acknowledging the unique contributions of every individual. Organizations succeeding in building fair reward programs enjoy higher retention rates.

Fairly perceived non-material rewards influence employees' intrinsic motivation through the reinforcement of autonomy and competence (Landry et al., 2020). Ozkeser (2019) finds that proper training enhances employee motivation to participate actively, and non-material rewards can function as acknowledgment of the competence that has been developed. When employees receive recognition for their skills or contributions, their sense of competence is reinforced. Mittal (2019) emphasizes that employee empowerment through recognition of their contributions enhances engagement and motivation. Work experience, ability, and motivation possessed by employees jointly prove to play an important role in determining their performance levels (Sinambela & Ernawati, 2021). Rewards perceived as fair acknowledge not only outcomes but also effort and the learning process. Employees who feel their competence is recognized will be more motivated to continue developing themselves. High intrinsic motivation drives employees to work out of enjoyment and satisfaction derived from the work itself, rather than from external pressure. Darmawan (2024) identifies factors enhancing organizational effectiveness, including motivation as one of the key factors. Fair non-material rewards become one of the ways to build sustainable intrinsic motivation.

Perceptions of justice in non-material rewards also influence employees' prosocial behavior toward coworkers and the organization as a whole (Collins & Mossholder, 2017). Danaher et al. (2020) find that the tactical use of rewards can enhance loyalty program effectiveness, indicating that timely and fair rewards can influence behavior. Employees who feel treated fairly tend to exhibit helping behaviors toward coworkers and contribute to a positive work environment. Appropriate communication strategies in managing conflict within culturally diverse teams likewise strengthen cohesion and cooperation among team members (Marsal & Darmawan, 2022). Qin (2024) finds that building a positive corporate culture enhances employee sense of belonging, and fair non-material rewards form part of that culture. Employees possessing a strong sense of belonging will care more about the well-being of the organization and coworkers. Understanding communication practices in managing cross-cultural teams also serves as an important asset for organizations operating globally to maintain effective collaboration (Sajjapong & Irfan, 2022). Prosocial behaviors such as helping overwhelmed coworkers or sharing knowledge strengthen team cohesion. Strong team cohesion creates a positive cycle where employees support and appreciate one another. The experience of justice in rewards serves as a catalyst triggering prosocial behaviors that spread throughout the organization.

Fairly perceived non-material reward programs can serve as an effective tool for building a positive and inclusive organizational culture (Sookhai, 2024). Nasir (2022) discusses how to build an authentic reward culture in the workplace through sincere and fair recognition. An authentic reward culture acknowledges the contributions of every employee regardless of position or background. Annas et al. (2024) demonstrate that rewards and promotions possess sustainable value in post-pandemic efforts. Fair non-material rewards constitute part of the strategy for recovery and the rebuilding of employee trust. Digital-based human resource management practices in remote working systems likewise pose a distinct challenge in maintaining perceptions of reward fairness for employees working from a distance (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2022). A culture that values justice in rewards will attract employees who value fairness and openness. New employees joining this culture will bring expectations aligned with organizational values. Adaptation strategies considering social and cultural perspectives are also relevant to apply so that reward programs remain fairly acceptable to employees with diverse backgrounds (Oluwatoyin & Mardikaningsih, 2022). Putra et al. (2022) observe that employee experiences in the digital workplace encompass cultural aspects influencing their perceptions. Even within remote work environments, fairness in rewards remains a primary concern for employees.

The effectiveness of non-material rewards in building commitment heavily depends on how those rewards are communicated to employees (Bannay, 2020). Reese (2020) develops employee recognition programs promoting organization-wide learning by emphasizing the importance of clear and timely communication. Rewards granted without adequate communication regarding the reasons and value of contributions will lose their meaning. Konovalova (2021) observes that successful employee recognition programs are those integrated with organizational communication. Effective communication regarding rewards encompasses explanations of criteria, processes, and the specific contributions of recipients. Employees who understand the reasons behind awards will appreciate their meaning more. Mardikaningsih and Darmawan (2022) emphasize that digital human resource practices in remote working systems require special attention to reward communication. In virtual environments, clear and personal communication becomes even more critical to ensure that rewards are interpreted correctly.

CONCLUSION

Perceptions of justice in the distribution of non-material rewards exert a significant influence on employee commitment through social exchange mechanisms, trust formation, and the internalization of organizational values. Procedural and distributive justice in rewards build the foundation for employees' emotional attachment to the organization. Fairly and personally perceived non-material rewards strengthen employees' intrinsic motivation and prosocial behavior. Authentic and ethical leadership plays a crucial role in creating an environment where reward justice is upheld. Effective communication regarding reward criteria and processes enhances employee understanding and reduces perceptions of injustice. Fair non-material rewards can serve as a powerful tool to build sustainable affective and normative commitment. Organizations failing to pay attention to justice in non-material rewards will face challenges in retaining talent and building a positive organizational culture. Reward programs designed with attention to perceptions of justice provide higher returns on investment through increased employee retention and performance.

The theoretical implication of this research is the necessity to integrate organizational justice theory with organizational commitment theory in understanding the effectiveness of non-material rewards. Researchers are advised to develop measurement instruments capturing perceptions of justice in non-material rewards more specifically. Its practical implications encompass recommendations for human resource managers to communicate reward criteria transparently, involve employees in the reward-granting process, and grant rewards in a personal and sincere manner. Companies are advised to regularly evaluate reward programs from the perspective of justice perceived by employees and use feedback for continuous improvement.

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